

THE ORIGIN OF SNOOKER : THE NEVILLE CHAMBERLAIN STORY

by Peter Ainsworth



Neville Chamberlain
in 1883

The game of snooker was invented by Neville Chamberlain in 1875. Everyone knows that. Or to be more precise, this is today's commonly accepted theory. But prior to 1938 there was an equally accepted theory that the game been introduced by a "Colonel Snooker" of the Royal Artillery. Then came the momentous day when Sir Neville Francis Fitzgerald

Chamberlain at last responded to the umpteenth letter speculating on the game's origins and staked his own claim, which was published in *The Field* on 19th March 1938. This was apparently provoked by another claim in the same magazine, that the game had been invented at "The Shop", a term used to describe the Royal Military Academy at Woolwich.

Neville Chamberlain waited for an amazingly long time before revealing himself as the Father of the game. Despite unremitting speculation on the subject since the game became popular in England in the late 1880's, Chamberlain waited until he was in his 83rd year to reveal that he created the game of snooker in 1875, some 63 years previously!

However, there are some serious inconsistencies in the account provided by Chamberlain which could benefit from closer examination.

The Earliest References

The earliest contemporary reference which can be accurately dated and gives a detailed account of the game of "Snookers" appears in a letter written on 2nd February 1886 by Captain Sheldrick from Calcutta. This ancient mariner describes a game already popular at his club in Rangoon (Burma), which was directly under the control of the British Army in India at that time. He describes the game as follows:

"At our club in Rangoon we play a game called Snookers a first rate game, any amount of fun in it, especially if one of you get snookered <sic>. The way it is played is the same as Shell-out but you put in the Yellow, Brown, Green & Black balls, if you take the Yellow it is double the ordinary life, if the Brown treble, if the Green four times, & if the Black 5 times as much as the ordinary life, of course you must pot a red ball in before you can play on one of the other beggars but some times you run in of <sic> one of them and got to pay up the price of the ball it is 2, 3, 4th or 5th ball. You ought to start that game old man it will take first rate I should think with lots of young

fellows, it is just the same as shell-out only these other balls are put on the spots up the centre of the table."

The gambling element involved in Sheldrick's game gives a clue to the reason for its rapid rise in popularity. Imagine playing a game of four-handed snooker where for every point you scored, you were paid £1 by each of the other players! The variation in the value of the balls appealed to both the skilful and the lucky in a way which could not be matched by any other Pool game being played on a billiard table at that time. Even this strange version has characteristics which clearly link it to the modern game having a pyramid of reds to which was added Yellow, Brown, Green & Black balls which were "put on the spots up the centre of the table". There are additional references which appear to take Captain Sheldrick's game back to 1884 when it was being played elsewhere amongst the British Army in India.

The first reliable reference to the game of snooker being played in England comes in the columns of the *Sporting Life* in 1887 and further details appear two years later in a book by Maj-Gen A. W. Drayson who, in addition to instruction on the game of billiards, describes a variation of the game of "Snooker's Pool", which is easily recognisable as the modern game. Drayson says "This game, which is not as yet generally known, or much played, is an amusing extension of the game of pyramids." He mentions in his book that the copyright to the rules of the game belonged to the billiard table manufacturer, Burroughes & Watts.

From other sources, there is also a reference to a set of rules being developed by John Dowland, a minor professional in the mid-1880s. He was also credited by some early writers with the game's invention, but hard facts regarding this claim are difficult to discover, and even though Dowland was known to be connected with the firm of Burroughes & Watts prior to his death in 1901, no evidence exists of his involvement with snooker which pre-dates that of Neville Chamberlain.

Chamberlain's Game

The similarity of the above games to the version played today is important, because the game described in Chamberlain's letter to *The Field* is not even remotely similar to modern snooker. Describing events in the Officers' Mess of the 11th Devonshire Regiment, at Jubbulpore in 1875, he says:

"One day it occurred to me that the game of black pool, which we usually played, would be improved if we put down another coloured ball in addition to the black one. This proved a success, and, by degrees, the other coloured balls of higher value followed suit."

There is a fundamental problem here which requires an understanding of the types of game played on a

billiard table at that time. Next to billiards, the most popular game on a billiard table would have been "Pool". This game actually derives from the earliest form of billiards which had only two balls (no red) and the players would each take a ball and try to pot each other. Pool was (in 1875) a game which would regularly involve up to a dozen players, each having their own cue-ball and taking turns to try and pot each other in a fixed rotation. Those potted would lose a "life" and pay a monetary forfeit. After losing a number of "lives" a player was eliminated from the game. To differentiate between each player's ball, they were first numbered (in pencil) then coloured by staining with a dye. The range of coloured balls, and the sequence they were played, were initially: White, Red, Yellow, Green, and Brown. The Blue, Pink and Black balls were subsequently added to this series, and would have been available around this time. Additional players could be added to the game by starting this colour rotation again with balls marked by a "cross" or "spot". A number of variations of essentially this same game were played. Amongst these was the "Black Pool" mentioned by Chamberlain. This varied from the basic game only in that the black ball was neutral. It was placed on the centre spot and a player would be entitled to shoot at it only after he had potted his allocated ball.

It becomes apparent from this, that there are two major problems with Chamberlain's description of the birth and development of the game of "Snooker". Firstly, there is no single cue-ball used, with each player using one of the balls on the table as his own, and secondly there is no reference to a pack of red balls. It may be assumed that the reds were added later had not Chamberlain said that the balls added were of a "higher value" and significantly, the red ball was already established in the sequence of the Pool, being the very first colour to be used in the standard sequence.

The Pyramids Variation

There were many other variations of Pool games being played in 1875, which were distinguished by the basic principle of each player using his own cue-ball. However, there was also a completely different game called "Pyramids". This involved 15 red balls being placed in a pyramid formation in the same position as modern snooker, and the players shared a single cue ball in trying to pot the reds. The same game was sometimes called "Shell-out" when more than two players were involved and it is this game which Captain Sheldrick mentions in his letter. Pyramids, or shell-out, has the two basic features missing from Chamberlain's game—the single cue-ball and the pack of reds. There can really be no doubt that the game evolved from this source and not Black Pool.

The Compton Mackenzie Connection

So why was Chamberlain's claim not questioned more closely at the time it was first published?

The answer is that it received some very influential support from the famous author and playwright, Compton Mackenzie.

Shortly after Chamberlain's letter appeared in *The Field* Mackenzie wrote to *The Billiard Player* reproducing the claim and leaving it in no doubt that it carried his full support, describing it as "incontrovertible evidence". The letter which appeared in the April 1939 issue of the magazine, received a similar endorsement by the Editor, Harold Lewis, so effectively closing the discussion. It will be noticed that Mackenzie had seen it prudent to change the words in Chamberlain's original letter to *The Field* so that instead of Chamberlain adding "*other coloured balls of higher value*" we are now given to understand that "*others of different values were gradually added*". It is not inconceivable that Mackenzie knew exactly what he was doing in making the change, the only passage in Chamberlain's original account which was altered.



Compton Mackenzie

Mackenzie had a good knowledge of pool games, having his own table at his home on the Isle of Barra in the Hebrides, where he regularly entertained friends with a game of "Indian Pool" more commonly known as "Slosh". He must surely have researched the story and been satisfied with its authenticity? Well, perhaps, but if so, he certainly didn't devote much time to the exercise. His autobiography tell us that Mackenzie only learned of the claim in the early part of 1939 when details were given to him by Mr John Bisset, the Chairman of the Billiards Association & Control Council. Chamberlain had apparently written to the BA&CC to register his claim and the papers had lain on Bisset's desk for some time while he was wondering what to do with them. In January 1939, Bisset invited Compton Mackenzie to present the trophy to the winner of the World Professional Snooker Championship at Thurston's Hall on 4th March 1939 and shortly afterwards passed on Chamberlain's letter which he felt would provide Mackenzie with some interest for his speech.

There is a suggestion that Mackenzie may at least have spoken with Chamberlain. He says in his autobiography, "I was able to promise the old veteran that I would give the true facts". However, this momentous meeting with one of the most famous people in England has not passed into the family history. Enquiries with modern-day descendents of the Chamberlain line revealed that although they are aware of his claim to have invented Snooker, the story of a meeting with Compton Mackenzie, if it took place at all, has now been lost.

This apparent lack of investigation into the claim does not totally discredit the Mackenzie account, but it

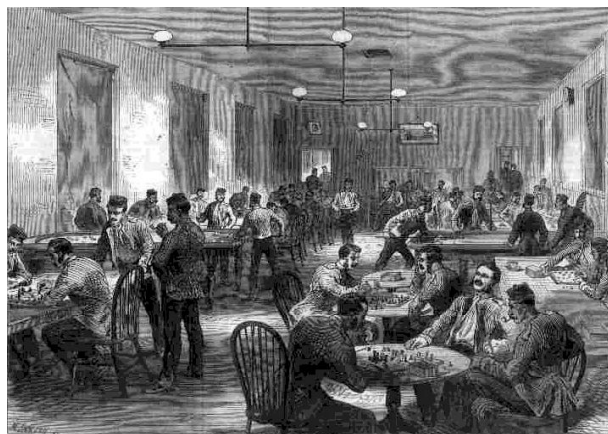
certainly raises some questions as to just how “incontrovertible” his evidence can be considered.

Chamberlain’s New Game

Part of Mackenzie’s evidence, presumably amongst the documents passed to him from John Bisset, were a number of letters supporting Chamberlain’s claim from military personnel, obviously with similarly long memories.

The strange thing about these letters, which refer to the period between 1884-86, is that they state that Chamberlain was promoting a game of Snooker which appears to be essentially the same as the one described by Captain Sheldrick during his visit to Rangoon in 1886. Here is a transformation from the “Black Pool” variation to the “Pyramids” based game, and Chamberlain is connected with both!

It is crucial to accept at this stage that the original game could not have evolved into the new one, and the more one studies the differences in these games, and the associated billiard table games at that time,



A typical military mess in the 1870’s

the greater will be the conviction that this statement must be true. There is also supporting evidence for this from the references supplied by Chamberlain himself.

In 1873, he had joined the 11th Devonshire (Foot) Regiment, which was based at Simla, and was under the command of his uncle. Two years later the regiment was moved to Jubbulpore, and it was coincidental with this move that Chamberlain, still just 19 years-old, first christened his game. Within months of this momentous event, in 1876, he had moved to the 1st Central India Horse and stayed with this regiment until the outbreak of the Afghan War in 1878. If we are to believe Chamberlain’s account, his variation of Black Pool became immediately popular. He wrote “Officers in other regiments at Jubbulpore followed suit with the game in their messes”. Surely this is where the changes to the game took place?

Apparently not. One of the references produced by Chamberlain in 1938 came from Major General W. A. Watson, Colonel of the Central India Horse, who says, “I have a clear recollection of you rejoining the Regiment

in 1884. You brought with you a *brand new game*, which you called Snooker or Snookers.” Not, you will notice, “when you first joined the regiment in 1876”. The game of “Snooker”, despite Chamberlain’s claim to have invented it in 1875—and for it to have been readily adopted throughout the region—was apparently unknown to his old regiment before 1884!

It is clear that at some point Chamberlain discarded his Black Pool game, which appears to have been so unsuccessful that it was quickly eradicated from the memory of the Central India Horse, and embraced another, giving it the same name. The question now becomes, did he invent this game as well, or did he adopt and rename a game which already existed?

Chamberlain in India

We can make a reasonable guess at when this change is most likely to have happened by looking at Chamberlain’s military career in India. Chamberlain was certainly well connected in military circles following an established family tradition in his choice of career.

Although billiard tables were quite common in India, most regiments having one in their officers’ mess, they were not supplied by the British Army. Rather, it was left to the officers of a regiment to obtain and pay for such items themselves. Something that most were prepared to do in order to alleviate the boredom of their assignments. However, this did not extend to taking them along on military campaigns, and the first of these presented itself to Chamberlain in 1878 when he was involved with the outbreak of hostilities in Afghanistan, which bordered India to the North.

In this year Chamberlain was assigned to the personal staff of Field Marshal Sir Frederick Roberts, who was Commander-in-Chief of the combined British forces in Afghanistan. Chamberlain’s position on the staff was as an Orderly Officer who came under the aide-de-camp Captain Pretyman of the Royal Artillery. This is an important connection to which we shall refer later. We can say with some certainty that during the 2½ years of this campaign Chamberlain would not have seen a billiard table, much less played upon one. The entire Army, including the commanding officers, lived in tents during this period and would not have transported such items with them even if it was feasible to do so. Additionally, the Afghan Nation was of the Muslim religion and as Field Marshal Roberts tells us “possessed of a fanatical hatred of all things European”. So even when the Army captured and based themselves in the Afghan capital, Kabul, they would have been unlikely to discover any billiard tables waiting to provide them with entertainment.

Chamberlain received a “slight wound” on 1st September 1880 at the decisive battle of Kandahar which concluded the Afghan campaign. The forces under Roberts disbanded almost immediately after this and returned to their regiments. Chamberlain should have returned to the Central India Horse, but it is known

that he did not in fact rejoin this regiment until 1884. The only alternative was for him to have been in hospital with his "slight wound" and/or have taken some extended leave back in England. The probability for the latter being the case is increased because we know that his Commander-in-Chief, Field Marshal Roberts, and another member of his staff, George Pretyman, did exactly this.

We next find a reference to Chamberlain in 1881 when he resumes his duties on the personal staff of Roberts who by this time had been promoted to Commander-in-Chief of the Madras Army. Roberts' staff also included Lieutenant-Colonel George Tindal Pretyman, R.A., (Assistant Military Secretary), and Captain Ian Hamilton, the Gordon Highlanders, (Aide-de-camp).

Roberts and Pretyman arrived back in India on 27th and 28th November 1881 respectively, and made their way to the new headquarters in the hill station of Ootacamund (generally abbreviated to "Ooty"). During the next three and a half years Roberts and his personal staff used this location as the base for extended tours of inspection, which as Roberts says were to "acquaint myself with the needs and capabilities of the men of the Madras Army". This included all the regiments under his command throughout Southern India, which at that time also included Burma, which adjoins India to the East.

Chamberlain would have arrived at Ooty at the same time, finding the hill station specifically equipped for recreation. The climate at Ooty had already established it as a great attraction for both the British Army personnel and civilians, being almost identical to that found in England. Lavish parties and a high status social life were the order of the day, and with the Commander-in-Chief of the Madras Army now based there, it saw many visitors during the pleasant summer months.

Ian Hamilton did not join Roberts' staff at the same time as the others, his ship arrived at Bombay in June 1882 and he travelled to the hill station shortly afterwards. Significantly, Chamberlain, with whom Hamilton became "bosom friends" as he describes it,



Lord Roberts & Staff at Ooty in 1883: L-R (Standing) Col. Stewart; Maj-Gen Godfrey Clerk Adjutant-General; Lt. Neville Chamberlain ADC; Cat. Ian Hamilton ADC; Col. du Caine RA. (Seated) Sir Fred Roberts; Lt.-Col. George Pretyman, Military Secretary.

seems to be of the opinion that the game was already established when he arrived. A letter he wrote to the Field in 1938 contained the following passage: "I have never doubted that my old friend, Sir Neville Chamberlain, invented the game of snooker. I was at Ootacamund in 1882-84, and there must still be some of that very crowd left who can testify to the belief then current, that snooker owed its birth to Neville Chamberlain's fertile brain." This letter was in response to a suggestion that the rules were drafted by Lord Kitchener, however, his support of Chamberlain's claim does not read as though it was based on any first-hand knowledge. From this, we can not only confirm that the birth of the game was some time before his arrival, but also, and importantly, discount any involvement by Hamilton in this process.

Could the game have existed at Ooty even before Chamberlain's arrival, just waiting for him to discover it and give it a new name? This is certainly a possibility. Chamberlain acknowledges that a game based on "Pyramids" was formalised there, writing about his later travels in India he says: "We were constantly asked on our travels to show how the game was played. It took but little time to demonstrate this, for everywhere they knew how to play Pyramids, so we showed them how to add the other coloured balls, and told them the simple rules for the game, which had been prepared by our committee at Ootacamund, in 1882."

The Burma connection

Along the same line of thought, another possible source of the game's origin suggests itself. We know from Captain Sheldrick that snooker was being played in Rangoon in February 1886 – could it have originated here and been discovered by Chamberlain, who subsequently renamed it and took it back to Ooty?

Rangoon, although not exactly isolated, could certainly have harboured the game without discovery for a longer period than the popular hill station of Ooty. It was one of the furthest outposts of the British in India and the garrison stationed there would not have had a great number of visiting officers from other regiments. Typically, the trip from Ooty to Rangoon would have taken at least 10 days (seven days and nights by train and three days by ship from Madras)

Ian Hamilton suggests that snooker was being played at Ooty in June 1882. Significantly, Chamberlain would have had time to have brought the game back from Rangoon during his first visit to Burma in February 1882, and to have firmly established it at Ooty before Hamilton's arrival.

The problem with this theory is that the game being played in Rangoon in 1886 was clearly being called "Snookers" and if it had existed there under a different name, then they would surely still have been playing it under that name.

Incidentally, there is a fascinating possibility related to the game described by Captain Sheldrick in his letter of 2nd February 1886 in which he states: "I played

[snooker] the other night and very soon tumbled into it they thought they had a mug. I think that before we finished playing I had “snookered” them for 14 rupees, almost 25 bob. They didn’t ask me to play snookers again that evening.” Now, it is known that Field Marshall Roberts, to whom Chamberlain was attached, arrived in Rangoon on 5th February 1886 for his second visit to the country, so it can safely be assumed that Chamberlain was in the area at that time. If he had been sent in advance to make preparation for the arrival of his commander, it would be entirely possible that Chamberlain was actually one of those players who had taken Sheldrick for a mug!

However, to return to the story, it is known that Chamberlain could not have started to promote the Pyramid version of the game before the end of his involvement in the Afghan War, around November 1880, and he next appeared at Ooty at the end of 1881 where the rules for this version of the game were drawn up shortly afterwards. This gives us a period of approximately one year—most of this time we can assume with some confidence, he spent in England. Could Chamberlain have invented, or seen the new version of his game while in England?

England: the birthplace of Snooker?

Prior to Chamberlain staking his claim in 1938, there had been plenty of speculation in the English press on the subject of Snooker’s origins, most of them pointing to the inventor being a “Colonel Snooker” of the Royal Artillery—although the rank of this officer is also sometimes described as “Captain” or even “Major”—and the birthplace was commonly referenced as being the Royal Military Academy in Woolwich. If these reports are to be believed, the game was being played in London well before Chamberlain’s return in 1881, in fact at least one claim says it must have existed there as early as 1865.

However, in his book ‘The Shop’. The Story of The Royal Military Academy, Capt. F. G. Guggisberg recalls that the first billiard table was installed there in 1868. Although this still gives plenty of time for the game to have been established, the book, published in 1900, does not mention Snooker being amongst the games played. It does however confirm that this was the name



“The Shop” - The Royal Military Academy, Woolwich

given to the first term cadet by the older cadets “who were apt to despise them.”

Based on the popular growth of the game after it’s first definite reference in *The Sporting Life* in 1887, it seems highly unlikely that the game could have remained hidden in the heart of London for any length of time, and certainly not long enough to have predated the claim of Chamberlain.

It is possible that Chamberlain developed the game at some serviceman’s club whilst in England in 1881. In later life he was known to have been a member of “Naval and Military Clubs” and this would be just the type of establishment which is likely to have seen the first game of “Snookers” in London. But the odds are against Chamberlain having been the person to introduce it during a period of leave after the Afghan War. In Chamberlain’s letter to The Field he mentions that “In the eighties rumours of the new game had reached England”. A strange statement if he had personally introduced it to his London club in 1881.

In fact we know from the letter of Captain Sheldrick that the game was still not well-known in England in 1886, while it had become well established in India. This seems to confirm that the game did not start in England.

What is a snooker?

It is generally accepted that the term “Snooker” as applied to the game, came from a name given to a first-year cadet at the Royal Academy at Woolwich. This would appear to have been in use in the early 1870s, Chamberlain having first been made aware of it in 1875. But where did this term actually originate? Dictionaries tell us that the use of the phrase “Cock a Snook” first appeared in print as early as 1791 and it has been suggested that the novice recruits earned their name by their habit of cheekily “cocking a snook” at their non-commissioned officers. This “carry-on” image of the army at this time hardly bears scrutiny.

Another offering was made by Lt.-Col. G. L. H. Howell, late R.A. who stated in a letter to the “Billiard Player” published in 1939 that the term was: “time’s corruption of the original word for a newly-joined cadet, which was ‘Neux’.” A rational deduction perhaps, but there is also an intriguing, and certainly more colourful alternative.

In the 1850s there was a comedy duo called “Hooker and Snooker” who were performing in the London theatres during the earliest days of the Music Hall variety acts. Could it be that Mr. Snooker’s character was sufficiently inept that his persona was sarcastically applied by one of the older cadets to a hapless junior at Woolwich, and the name stuck? Unfortunately, this can be little more than guesswork, as extensive enquiries reveal nothing more about Messrs. Hooker and Snooker other than a few newspaper reviews. Still, there remains the faintest chance that this now unknown thespian gave the world a legacy which far transcends the fame he achieved in his own lifetime.

India's Claim to Fame

As the alternatives are eliminated, we are left with the Hill Station of Ooty as the most credible birthplace for the game of "Snookers". From the other evidence available to us, we can also date this event almost precisely as being in the last month of 1881, while Chamberlain and his fellow officers enjoyed Christmas before starting their first tour of inspection with Roberts in January 1882.

For the same reasons as we eliminated the Royal Military Academy in Woolwich as secretly harbouring the game, so we must dismiss the thought that the game was already established at Ooty when Chamberlain arrived. This was not a hidden outpost, but a facility which was regularly visited during the summer months by officers of the Madras Army. If Snooker had existed for any length of time before Chamberlain's arrival, it would certainly have already spread from this source, under whatever name it may have been called.

This is what Chamberlain had to say of this period: "Each summer that delightful hill station had many visitors, either to hunt with the 'Ooty' pack of hounds or for a change of climate. Among them were officers from such big garrisons as Bangalore, or Secunderabad, as well as cheery planters of Mysore or Coorg, who rode up for a few days of gallops over 'The Koondas,' or a time of good cheer. Snooker soon became a speciality at the club, and, in due course, the news of it was carried far afield, and to billiard players throughout India."

Significantly, Chamberlain also clearly states that the game was introduced at the time of his arrival, and not by him alone, but with the assistance of others. He writes, "I had the great privilege of being on his [Roberts] personal staff, and, with other members of it, we soon introduced the game at the club at Ooty."

The "other members" who are credited by Chamberlain as being involved with this introduction were, as previously stated, Lieutenant-Colonel George Tindal Pretymann, R.A., and Captain Ian Hamilton.

Ian Hamilton discounts himself from any involvement by his own writings, so from Chamberlain's statement



The clubhouse at Ootacamund

it would seem that the "introduction" of snooker at Ooty was by himself and George Pretymann.

It will be remembered that Chamberlain and Pretymann had become acquainted during the Afghan War when both were members of Roberts' staff. If the game of "Snookers" had existed at Woolwich, albeit with a different name, then Pretymann would presumably have known of it. Could Chamberlain have married the name of Snooker to a game known to Pretymann? The main problem with this theory is that Pretymann graduated from the Academy back in 1865, three years before the first billiard table was installed! Similarly, if the pair had discussed and agreed the format of the new game during the Afghan War, then surely Chamberlain would have taken the opportunity to try it at the London clubs while back in England.

With the duo setting off for a tour of Burma with Roberts in mid-January 1882, the most likely scenario is that Chamberlain and/or Pretymann, developed the game during their first month at Ooty. Which one of them actually first thought of adding pool balls to the pyramid set we will probably never know, but we can be certain that Chamberlain was involved to some extent, if only to give it the name he had first coined in 1875.

The Reluctant Hero

Why did Chamberlain wait so long to announce his claim? Many would say that this suggests that he had a limited involvement in actually inventing the modern version of the game. By all accounts he was certainly an enthusiastic advocate for the game between 1882 and 1886. We know from the references produced by Compton Mackenzie that he was credited with personally introducing the game to at least four different regiments in the Madras Army, between these dates.

In 1885 he was happy to claim to be the inventor of Snooker, having been introduced in that capacity to an English professional player who happened to be visiting Calcutta in that year. This makes his later reluctance to reveal his involvement all the more mysterious.

After leaving the personal staff of Roberts in 1884, Chamberlain's military career really took off. He became a Lieutenant-Colonel in 1889 and the following year was appointed Military Secretary to the Kashmir Government, responsible for reorganising the Kashmir Army. In 1899 he left India and followed Field-Marshal Lord Roberts to South Africa where he was again part of his personal staff. The following year Chamberlain left the Army and moved a little closer to home when he was appointed Inspector General to the Royal Irish Constabulary, a position he retained until his retirement in 1916. During this time he maintained a residence in Ireland at Castleknock, Co. Dublin.

It could be that during this period he hardly noticed or cared about the growth in snooker and the questions being asked about its origins, but after retirement he moved to Ascot in Berkshire where he remained until

his death on 28th May 1944. Here he must surely have been aware of the game's growth. Even as a member of "Naval and Military" clubs which he admitted to frequenting, he must have seen the game being played with increasing frequency.

However, it should be remembered that the other likely candidate, George Pretyman, also remained silent on the subject. Pretyman left India and returned to England in November 1894 where he remained for five years on the "unemployed list", then at the outbreak of hostilities in South Africa he again took up an appointment under Lord Roberts. He retired from active service in 1907, and died ten years later at the age of 72. This gave him plenty of opportunity to join the debate had he wished to do so.

The Australian Connection

Almost as an aside to this story comes a tantalising prospect that we may have uncovered from Chamberlain's account, the source of the game's introduction to Australia.

In his letter to *The Field* he references a meeting one evening "I think it was in 1885" with an English professional to whom he explained the rules of the game, saying "I regret I do not remember his name; he was probably a contemporary of John Roberts and W. Cook." Shortly afterwards Mr. F. H. Cumberlege also wrote to *The Field* to say that "the professional must have been John Roberts himself who came out to Calcutta in 1885." Although Chamberlain seems unsure of the exact date, it would seem to be a reasonably accurate guess as he was unlikely to have been in Calcutta after 1886 at which time he joined the Burma campaign, and thereafter he was based in Kashmir.

The idea that the person to meet Chamberlain was the Champion himself seems to have been readily accepted, but unfortunately Mr. Cumberlege's memory seems to be faulty. There is no record of John Roberts being in India in 1885, or the years either side of this date. Nor would Chamberlain be likely to forget being introduced to a player who was not only famous, even in India, but also bore the same name as his commander-in-chief. Additionally, anyone who has studied the career of John Roberts would know that

having obtained such a marketable commodity he would have promoted it with vigour. Yet Roberts never even mentions the game of Snooker, and there is certainly no record of him playing it until many years after it had become established in England.

In fact the earliest connection between John Roberts and snooker comes from his son, John W. Roberts, who wrote to the *Billiard Player* in 1938 saying that his father had been introduced to the game whilst touring America towards the end of 1893. He says of the American game "the balls were of the usual American size, round about 2½ ins. or 2 5/8 ins., the six coloured balls (ivory) were numbered on both sides of the white portion, the middle of the balls having deep coloured bands' yellow 2, green 3, brown 4, blue 5, pink 6 and black 7. The usual 15 red and the player's ball included the set." He continues, "My father was so taken up with this game that he not only brought over a set of these balls to England, but he also brought over three American players, Slossen being one of them; I think Ives was another. The first game of snooker which I witnessed by these American players caused some little sensation at the time, but what delighted the audience most were Slossen's trick shots." This surely removes any thoughts that John Roberts had discovered the game in India eight years previously, although where the curious American snooker game originated and what happened to it, is yet another mystery. However, we know that by November 1893, when Roberts returned from America, the English version of snooker was already established in London.

So who was it that Chamberlain met in India in 1885? The only leading professional who could have been in India anywhere near the time in question was Fred Shorter who left England in May 1885 bound for Australia. He was suffering from tuberculosis and had been advised to take a long sea voyage, ironically it appears, by John Roberts himself. Shorter had toured India before (1880), and would probably have stopped there briefly during the voyage. He may therefore have had the opportunity to make this contact with Chamberlain. It is known that he arrived in Melbourne, Australia, around June 1885 where, despite his illness, he was sufficiently well to play a number of public matches promoted by Henry Upton Alcock the famous billiard table manufacturer.

Did Shorter carry a copy of the rules of Snooker with him and give these to Alcock? or possibly to Frank Smith, who was at that time the leading billiards player of that country and under contract to Alcock? Indeed, Smith was known to have claimed that he and Henry Alcock had invented snooker "at the request of members of the Indian army" who visited the Victoria Club in Melbourne in "about 1887".

Frederick James Shorter did not last long after his arrival in Australia, eventually succumbing to his illness on Saturday 22nd August 1885 at Deniliquin, New South Wales, where he seems to have spent his last days with relatives, but the links are temptingly close to credit him with the introduction of the Chamberlain's game to Australia.



Did John Roberts (left) meet with Chamberlain in 1885, or was it perhaps Fred Shorter (right)

Conclusions

The good news for those supporting the claim of Neville Chamberlain as the inventor of the game of snooker, is that despite some extensive research on the subject, I have yet to find any credible evidence which supports the existence of the game before the timescales offered by Chamberlain, or being played in any other part of the world other than India until well after these dates.

The main problem however is that there appears to have been two completely separate versions of game. The idea that one evolved naturally from the other is too much to accept as a credible concept and it is my firm opinion that they must have been devised independently.

Of course, Sir Neville Chamberlain may have been the sole author of both, and he certainly seems to have been involved with promoting first one, then the other version. The evidence, as supplied by Chamberlain himself, appears to be quite strong that he invented a "Black Pool" version in 1875, but is much more tenuous when it comes to the Pyramids version (the modern game) which we can trace back with reliable evidence only as far as 1882.

The weight of probability suggests that the metamorphosis between the two versions—at least as far as Chamberlain was concerned—actually took place towards the end of 1881 at the Indian Hill Station of Ootacamund. It was almost certainly complete by January 1882. Chamberlain himself does not claim that he was solely responsible for introducing the game to "Ooty" also crediting by implication, Lieutenant-Colonel George Tindal Pretymán, R.A.

It is tempting to link George Tindal Pretymán to the early stories which attribute the game to a "Captain" or "Colonel Snooker" of the Royal Artillery although not all of the pieces fit comfortably in this theory. Pretymán certainly meets the key link with the Artillery,

having been a graduate of the Royal Military Academy in Woolwich. He was a Colonel at the time we think the game first appeared, although neither he nor Chamberlain would fit the rank of "Captain Snooker" within the three years that either of them were at Ooty. He would have been travelling with Chamberlain and Hamilton as their senior officer, visiting the same regiments, until 1884 when



George Pretymán:
"Colonel Snooker?"

he left Field Marshal Roberts' staff and thereafter could have promoted the game independently. But even if George Pretymán turned out to be the fabled "Colonel Snooker" this would just establish a connection with the game of which we are already aware, and not give us any new evidence that he was the inventor.

Was Chamberlain telling the whole truth about the extent of his involvement with the game? We must assume so. He was 82 years-old at the time he eventually wrote his letter to *The Field* and it is difficult to think that he had any incentive other than to relate all the facts as he knew them.

All the available evidence points to it being either Neville Chamberlain or George Tindal Pretymán who took the game of pyramids and suggested adding pool balls with different values. Which one, we will probably never know. We can however be reasonably confident that the name of "Snooker" was adopted from a suggestion by Chamberlain.

So perhaps Colonel Sir Neville Francis Fitzgerald Chamberlain deserves a place in history as the inventor of the modern game of Snooker, but there are still some unanswered questions in this story.

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