

In Weekend
Latin lessons in the park



Trees off: Robbie Richardson (far left, in striped top) crofing with friends and family at Ugbrooke House

Hear the hool truth

Since its launch last year, the game of crof has really taken off. **Anna Tyzack** reports



Do you have a crof course in your garden? Since its launch in *The Daily Telegraph* Gardening pages last summer, the game has really taken off and the first British Open Crof Championships are taking place in the gardens of Ugbrooke House in Devon, next weekend.

When "Capability" Brown designed the layout for the gardens and parkland at the home of the Lords Clifford of Chudleigh in the mid-18th century, little did he know that the lakes, lime avenues and ha-ha would provide the perfect setting for a taxing six-hole crof course.

The game, which is an intriguing cross between croquet and golf, is designed to make the most of an English garden – by compelling players to go to areas they would not necessarily visit. It is played using hand-carved wooden hammers, slightly larger than a croquet mallet, and heavy wooden balls that produce a satisfying "thwack" when walloped across a lawn. Unlike croquet, the six hools (three hoops in a triangular formation) are positioned around the garden; like golf, a tee-off is marked by a pin. Players must reach each hool within a certain number of shots (the "par") and they move around the course as a group.

According to Robbie Richardson, who invented crof, "the grass shouldn't be so long that you can't hit a ball through it. Other than that, a course can take any route you like."

Richardson came up with the idea while playing croquet on the lawn at Ugbrooke. "I thought it was a shame that we were confined to such a small area. It's such a beautiful garden and it is sad not to make use of it," he says. Crof can be played individually or in teams and a handicap system, akin to golf, enables different ages and standards to play competitively. There are no stragglers as everyone plays each hool at the same time.

"People who have said they can't and won't play ball games can be excellent at crof," says Richardson. "Really good golfers are not necessarily the best. It takes 10 minutes to be an expert, and the handicap system means small children can potentially win against the most devious of croquet players."

His own garden now features a six-hole, 36-par crof course. "It's opened up our garden," he says. "Now we see it in a totally different light. Friends arrive on a summer evening for a glass of wine and a few hools – it's a fun thing."

Next week's British Open Championships, on the other hand, will be attended by seasoned crofers with

personalised hammers. "There are some serious players now," says Richardson. "Members of the Carwithen Club, based at Ugbrooke, could be in for a rough ride on Saturday as there are teams coming from all over the country. These players bought their crof sets after the *Telegraph* launch last year and as yet we haven't seen them play. One player purports to have a six-and-a-half-acre crof course."

Richardson stars in the BBC television comedy, *Jam and Jerusalem*, and is a blacksmith who works with zebras at Paignton Zoo. He was astonished at the demand for crof – and has consequently spent much of the year in his workshop. "Golf figures are down this year and I think it must be because so many people are taking up crof," he says.

Crof smacks of English eccentricity; the hammers, hools and pins are tidily secured on a wooden trolley with a parasol. "It's much easier to move around the garden than a croquet set and it's built to last," Richardson says. "It's totally winter-proof. I want my grandchildren to find it in the garage and be able to play." The handmade sets include four hammers, four wooden balls, six pins and the Laws of Crof. "There are only nine. The most

Rule One: any dispute may only be settled by the toss of a coin

important is that any dispute must be settled by a toss of a coin."

This is not the first inspired idea to have been formed at Ugbrooke; it is thought the poet John Dryden (1631–1700) wrote *The Hind and the Panther* and completed his first translation of Virgil's *Aeneid* at Ugbrooke. As he sat quietly by a grove of beech trees, he would not have had to contend with the sound of a crof match in the distance.

"Crof means dogs, children and noise. It's an excuse to exercise and it's so much fun," says Richardson. "It's just not croquet."

✦ The gardens at Ugbrooke are open from July 13 until September 11 on Sundays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Thursdays and bank holiday Mondays, 1pm–5.30pm. Private tours can be arranged (01626 852179; www.ugbrooke.co.uk).

