

Gentlemen's club

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A **gentlemen's club** is a members-only private club originally set up by and for British upper class men in the 18th century, and popularised by English upper-middle class men and women in the late 19th century and early 20th century. Today, some clubs are more accommodating about the gender and social status of their members. Many countries outside the United Kingdom have prominent gentlemen's clubs, mostly those associated with the British Empire, in particular, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh have enthusiastically taken up the practice, and have a thriving club scene.



The Reform Club, set up in the early 19th century in London

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History

The original clubs were established in the West End of London. Today, the area of St James's is still sometimes called "clubland". Clubs took over the role occupied by coffee houses in 18th century London to some degree, and reached the height of their influence in the late 19th century. The first clubs, such as White's, Brooks's and Boodle's, were aristocratic in flavour, and provided an environment for gambling, which was illegal outside of members-only establishments.

The 19th century brought an explosion in the popularity of clubs, particularly around the decade of the 1880s. At their height, London had over 400 such establishments. This expansion can be explained in part by the large extensions of the franchise in the Reform Acts of 1832, 1867, and 1885. Each time, hundreds of thousands more men were qualified to vote, and it was common for them to feel that they had been elevated to the status of a gentleman, thus they sought a club. The existing clubs, with strict limits on membership numbers and long

waiting lists, were generally wary of such newly enfranchised potential members, and so these people began forming their own clubs. Each of the three great Reform Acts corresponded with a further expansion of clubs, as did a further extension of the franchise in 1918. Many of these new, more "inclusive" clubs proved just as reluctant as their forebears to admit new members when the franchise was further extended.

An increasing number of clubs were characterised by their members' interest in politics, literature, sport, art, automobiles, travel, particular countries, or some other pursuit. In other cases, the connection between the members was membership of the same branch of the armed forces, or the same school or university. Thus the growth of clubs provides an indicator as to what was considered a respectable part of the "Establishment" at the time.

By the late 19th century, any man with a credible claim to the status of "gentleman" was eventually able to find a club willing to admit him, unless his character was objectionable in some way or he was "unclubbable" (incidentally, a word first used by Samuel Johnson).^[1] This came to include professionals who had to earn their income, such as doctors and lawyers.

Most gentlemen had only one club, which closely corresponded with the trade or social / political identity he felt most defined him, but a few people belonged to several. Members of the aristocracy and politicians were likely to have several clubs. The record number of memberships is believed to have been with Earl Mountbatten, who had nineteen in the 1960s.

Public entertainments, such as musical performances and the like, were not a feature of this sort of club. The clubs were, in effect, "second homes" in the centre of London where men could relax, mix with their friends, play parlour games, get a meal, and in some clubs stay overnight. Expatriates, when staying in England, could use their clubs, as the East India Club or the Oriental Club, as a base. They allowed upper- and upper-middle-class men with modest incomes to spend their time in grand surroundings. The richer clubs were built by the same architects as the finest country houses of the time, and had similar types of interiors. They were a convenient retreat for men who wished to get away from female relations. Many men spent much of their lives in their club, and it was common for young newly graduated men who had moved to London for the first time to live at their club for two or three years before they could afford to rent a house or flat.

Gentleman's clubs were private places that were designed where men can relax and create friendships with other men. In the 19th and 20th centuries, clubs were regarded as a central part of elite men's lives. They provided everything a regular home would have. Clubs were created and designed for a man's domestic needs. They were places to relieve stress and worries. They provided emotional and practical needs. They provided spaces such as dining halls, library, entertainment and game rooms, rooms for sleep, bathrooms and washrooms, and a study. In many ways they resembled a regular home. Clubs had separate entrances for maids and the help. They were usually located on the side of the house that was not easily seen to the public eye. Many clubs had waiting lists, some as long as sixteen years. There is no standard definition for what is considered a men's club. Each club differed slightly from another.^[2]



The bar at the Savile Club, 69 Brook Street, London



A Club of Gentlemen by Joseph Highmore c. 1730

Clubs were created in a time where family was considered one of the most important aspects of a man's life in the 19th century. A man's home was his property and should have been a place to satisfy most of his needs but for elite men this was not always the case; it was not always a place that provided privacy and comfort. An explanation for this might be because the home of elite families often entertained guests for dinners, formal teas, entertainment, and parties. Their lives were on display and often their lives would be reported in local papers. A gentleman's club offered an escape from this family world. Another explanation would be that men as boys were brought up in all male environments in places like schools and sports pastimes and they became uncomfortable when they now had to share their lives with women in a family environment. A gentleman's club offered an escape.^[2]

Men's clubs were also a scene of gossip. The clubs were designed for communication and the sharing of information with each other. By gossiping, bonds were created which were used to confirm social and gender boundaries. Gossiping helped confirm a man's identity both in their community and within society at large. It was often used as a tool to climb the social ladder. It revealed that a man had certain information others did not have. It was also a tool used to demonstrate a man's masculinity. It established certain gender roles. Men told stories and joked. The times and places a man told stories, gossiped, and shared information were also considered to show a man's awareness of behaviour and discretion. Clubs were places where men could gossip freely. Gossip was also a tool that led to more practical results in the outside world. There were also rules that governed gossip in the clubs. These rules governed the privacy and secrecy of members. Clubs regulated this form of communication so that it was done in a more acceptable manner.^[3]

Women also set about establishing their own clubs in the late nineteenth century, such as the Ladies' Institute, and the Ladies' Athenaeum. They proved quite popular at the time, but only one, The University Women's Club, has survived to this day as a single-sex establishment.

Until the 1950s, clubs were also heavily regulated in the rooms open to non-members. Most clubs contained just one room where members could dine and entertain non-members; it was often assumed that one's entire social circle should be within the same club. Harold Macmillan was said to have taken "refuge in West End clubs ...: Pratt's, Athenaeum, Buck's, Guards, the Beefsteak, the Turf, [and] the Carlton".^[4]

The class requirements relaxed gradually throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. From the 1970s onwards, some single-sex clubs opened to both sexes as guests and as members, partly to maintain membership levels.

Current status

Although traditional gentlemen's clubs are no longer as popular or influential as they originally were, many have seen a significant resurgence in popularity and status in recent years. Some top clubs still maintain distinctions which are often undefined and rarely explained to those who do not satisfy their membership requirements. After reaching the top of a long waiting list, there is a possibility of being blackballed. In these circumstances, the proposer of such a person may be expected to resign, as he failed to withdraw his undesirable candidate. More often, the member who proposes an unsuitable candidate will be "spoken to" at a much earlier stage than this, and he will withdraw his candidate to avoid embarrassment for all concerned.

Today gentlemen's clubs exist throughout the world, predominantly in Commonwealth countries and the US. Many clubs offer reciprocal hospitality to other clubs' members when travelling abroad.

In Britain and particularly London, there is a continuum between the original gentlemen's clubs and the more modern but otherwise similar private members' clubs such the Groucho Club, Soho House and Home House. All offer similar facilities such as food, drink, comfortable surroundings, venue hire and in many cases

accommodation. In recent years the advent of mobile working (using phone and email) has placed pressures on the traditional London clubs which frown on, and often ban, the use of mobiles and discourage laptops. A new breed of business-oriented private members' clubs, exemplified by One Alfred Place and Eight in London or the Gild in Barcelona, combines the style, food and drink of a contemporary private members' club with the business facilities of an office.

United Kingdom

There are perhaps some 25 traditional London gentlemen's clubs of particular note, from The Arts Club to White's. Many other estimable clubs (such as the yacht clubs) have a specific character which places them outside the mainstream, or may have sacrificed their individuality for the commercial interest of attracting enough members regardless of their common interests. (See article at club for a further discussion of these distinctions.) The oldest gentleman's club in London is White's, which was founded in 1693.^[5]

Discussion of trade or business is usually not allowed in traditional gentlemen's clubs, but increasingly politicians and businesspeople hire club premises for debates and conferences on current affairs. For example, the Commonwealth Club in London counts former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, former Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo, and former Australian Prime Minister John Howard as influential people who have spoken there. The use of such establishments for public discussion and debate is in its infancy, as many of the larger and more established clubs strictly enforce their rules on such matters.

Similar clubs exist in other large UK cities, such as New Club in Edinburgh, The St James's Club in Manchester, and the Ulster Reform Club in Belfast. The Liverpool Athenaeum was founded in 1797 by art collector and social reformer William Roscoe and friends, and contains a notable library of rare books. The Clifton Club in Bristol was founded in 1818 and occupies an imposing building. St Paul's Club was formed in 1859 in Birmingham, the first in the Midlands. Jersey and Guernsey in the Channel Islands, although outside the UK proper, each have their own *The United Club*, founded, respectively, in 1848 and in 1870.

Modern day clubs include Blacks and Groucho Club.

United States

Most major cities in the United States have at least one traditional gentlemen's club, many of which have reciprocal relationships with the older clubs in London, with each other, and with other gentlemen's clubs around the world. The oldest existing American clubs date to the 18th century; the five oldest are the South River Club in Annapolis, Maryland (c.1690/1700), the Schuylkill Fishing Company in Andalusia, Pennsylvania (1732), the Old Colony Club in Plymouth, Massachusetts (1769), The Philadelphia Club in Philadelphia (1834), and the Union Club of the City of New York in New York City (1836).^[5] The five oldest existing clubs west of the Mississippi River are the Pacific Club in Honolulu (1851), the Pacific-Union Club (1852), Olympic Club (1860), and Concordia-Argonaut Club (1864), all in San Francisco, and the Arlington Club in Portland, Oregon (1867).



The Yale Club of New York City, founded 1897, the largest gentlemen's club in the world

Today, gentlemen's clubs in the United States remain more prevalent in older cities, especially those on the East Coast. Only twelve American cities have five or more existing clubs: Atlanta, Boston, Chicago, Cincinnati, Denver, Los Angeles, New Orleans, New York City, Philadelphia, San Francisco, Seattle, and Washington, D.C. New York City contains more than any other American city. The Yale Club of New York City, comprising a

clubhouse of 22 stories and a worldwide membership of over 11,000, is the largest traditional gentlemen's club in the world.^[6]

In the United States, the term "gentlemen's club" commonly is used to refer euphemistically to strip clubs. As a result, traditional gentlemen's clubs often are referred to as "men's clubs" or "city clubs" (as opposed to country clubs) or simply as "private social clubs" or just "private clubs".

Canada

At Montreal, the Beaver Club was founded in 1785 and some of its members continued their traditions by establishing the still extant Canada Club at London in 1810. The Montreal Hunt Club, founded in 1826, is the oldest extant fox hunting club in North America. Montreal's Golden Square Mile is home to several of the city's clubs, including the St. James', which was founded in 1857. At the end of the nineteenth century, twenty of its most influential members felt that the St James was becoming 'too overcrowded' and founded the smaller Mount Royal Club in 1899. Overnight it became the city's most prestigious club,^[7] and in 1918, Lord Birkenhead commented that it "is one of the best clubs I know in the New World, with the indefinable atmosphere about it of a good London club".^[8] In 1908 the University Club, affiliated with McGill, opened.



Mount Royal Club, Montreal

Quebec City has the its Literary and Historical Society (1824); the Stadacona Club (1860); and the Garrison Club, founded by officers of the Canadian Militia and opened to the public in 1879.

Toronto is home to The Toronto Club (1837), The National Club (1874), Albany Club (1882) and York Club (1909). The Rideau Club was founded in 1865 at Ottawa. In 1908, the Frontenac Club was established at Kingston. In 1913 The Waterloo Club was created by letters patent.

The Halifax Club was founded in 1862. In New Brunswick, the Union Club in Saint John was founded in 1884 through the merger of two earlier clubs, and the Fredericton Garrison Club was founded in 1969 by associate members of the area headquarters officers' mess.

The Manitoba Club is Western Canada's oldest club, founded in 1874 at Winnipeg. The Union Club of British Columbia was founded in 1879 in Victoria. The Vancouver Club was founded in 1889 in Vancouver .

Australia

Australia has several gentlemen's clubs. Sydney has the Union, University & Schools Club, the Royal Automobile Club of Australia and the Australasian Pioneers Club. Melbourne has the Melbourne Club, the Savage Club, Alexandra Club and the Athenaeum Club (named after its counterpart in London). The Australian Club exists a separate club in each of Sydney and Melbourne. Adelaide has the Adelaide Club and the Naval, Military and Air Force Club of South Australia. Brisbane has Tattersalls Club, the Queensland Club, the Brisbane Club and the Brisbane Polo Club (housed in the heritage listed Naldham House in the centre of the central business district). Perth has the Weld Club and the Western Australian Club. Canberra has the Commonwealth Club; Hobart, The Tasmania Club, The Athenaeum Club; Newcastle, the Newcastle Club. The Commonwealth Club, Canberra Club, Newcastle Club, Brisbane Polo Club, the Kelvin Club in Melbourne, and both Royal Automobile Clubs mentioned above allow women to enjoy full membership.

South Africa

South Africa is home to the Rand Club in downtown Johannesburg, the Cape Town Club and the Owl Club in Cape Town, the Durban Club in Durban, founded in 1852 and the Kimberley Club in Kimberley, founded in 1881.

South America

Lima (Peru) has several traditional gentlemen clubs still in functions such as the Club Nacional (1855), Club de la Unión (1868), The Phoenix Club (1879), and the Club de la Banca y Comercio (1951).

Buenos Aires (Argentina) is home to the Club del Progreso (1852; the oldest gentlemen's club in South America), the Jockey Club (1882) founded by Carlos Pellegrini, and the Club Universitario de Buenos Aires (1918). The Club 20 de Febrero was founded (1858) by General Rudecindo Alvarado in the city of Salta. The name is in honor to the Battle of Salta on February 20, 1813, during the Argentine War of Independence.

Santiago (Chile) houses the Club de la Unión (1854), originally a rich men's only club. Viña del Mar has the Club de Viña del Mar (1901).

New Zealand

There are active gentlemen's clubs in Nelson (Hope), Auckland, Hastings, Wellington, Christchurch and Dunedin.

Romania

There is an active gentlemen's club in Bucharest (Romania).

Quirks of membership

While many clubs have requirements of entry, often including financial requirements or collegiate affiliations — The Yale Club and Penn Club of New York City are typical of university clubs: they are open to all who have a connection with their respective universities (in this case Yale University or the University of Pennsylvania) — some clubs have highly specific membership requirements.

The Caledonian Club in London requires "being of direct Scottish descent, that is to say, tracing descent from a Scottish father or mother, grandfather or grandmother" or "having, in the opinion of the Committee, the closest association with Scotland."

The Travellers Club, from its foundation in 1819, has excluded from membership anyone who has not met a very specific travelling requirement. Rule 6 of the club's constitution states that *"no person be considered eligible to the Travellers' Club, who shall not have travelled out of the British islands to a distance of at least 500 miles from London in a direct line"*.^[9]

The Reform Club requires its potential members to attest that they would have supported the 1832 Reform Act, whilst certain members of the East India Club must have attended one of its affiliated public schools.

Clubs also require high membership fees, which, along with the ongoing cost of meeting dress code, bar tabs and dining bills, keeps membership exclusive to individuals with high wealth.^[10]

See also

- Social club
- Country club
- Dining club
- List of American gentlemen's clubs
- List of India's gentlemen's clubs
- List of London's gentlemen's clubs
- Freemasonry
- Membership discrimination in California social clubs

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