

CLUB LIFE OF  
LONDON WITH ANECDOTES OF THE  
CLUBS, COFFEE-HOUSES AND TAVERNS  
OF THE METROPOLIS DURING THE 17th, 18th,  
AND 19th CENTURIES.

BY JOHN TIMBS, F.S.A.

See **Beef-steak Society**, p. [143](#).

IN TWO VOLUMES.—VOL. I.

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**PREFACE.**

Pictures of the Social Life of the Metropolis during the last two centuries are by no means rare. We possess them in Diaries, Memoirs, and Correspondence, in almost countless volumes, that sparkle with humour and gaiety, alternating with more serious phases,—political or otherwise,—according to the colour and complexion, and body of the time. Of such pictures the most attractive are Clubs.

Few attempts have, however, been made to *focus* the Club-life of

periods, or to assemble with reasonable limits, the histories of the leading Associations of clubbable Men,—of Statesmen and Politicians, Wits and Poets, Authors, Artists, and Actors, and "men of wit and pleasure," which the town has presented since the days of the Restoration; or in more direct succession, from the reign of Queen Anne, and the days of the *Tatler* and *Spectator*, and other Essayists in their wake.

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The present Work aims to record this Club-life in a series of sketches of the leading Societies, in which, without assuming the gravity of history or biography, sufficient attention is paid to both to give the several narratives the value of trustworthiness. From the multitude of Clubs it has been found expedient to make a selection, in which the Author has been guided by the popular interest attached to their several histories. The same principle has been adopted in bringing the Work up to our own time, in which the customary reticence in such cases has been maintained.

Of interest akin to that of the Clubs have been considered scenes of the Coffee-house and Tavern Life of the period, which partake of a greater breadth of humour, and are, therefore, proportionally attractive, for these sections of the Work. The antiquarianism is sparse, or briefly descriptive; the main object being personal characteristics, the life and manners, the sayings and doings, of classes among whom conviviality is often mixed up with better qualities, and the finest humanities are blended with the gladiatorship and playfulness of wit and humour.

With a rich store of materials at his command, the Author, or Compiler, has sought, by selection and condensation, to avoid the long-windedness of story-telling; for the anecdote should be, like the viand,—"'twere

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well if it were done quickly." Although the staple of the book is compiled, the experience and information which the Author has gathered by long familiarity with the Metropolis have enabled him to annotate and illustrate in his own progress, notwithstanding the "lion's share" of the labour is duly awarded to others.

Thus, there are grouped in the present volume sketches of One Hundred Clubs, ranging from the Mermaid, in Bread-street, to the Garrick, in Covent Garden. Considering the mixed objects of these Clubs, though all belonging to the convivial or jovial system, strict classification was scarcely attainable: hence chronological sequence has been adopted, with the advantage of presenting more connected views of social life than could have been gained by the former arrangement.

The Second Volume is devoted to the Coffee-house and Tavern Life, and presents a diversity of sketches, anecdotes, and reminiscences, whose name is Legion.

To the whole is appended a copious Index, by which the reader may readily refer to the leading subjects, and multitudinous contents of the Work.

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# CLUB LIFE OF LONDON.

## ORIGIN OF CLUBS.

The Club, in the general acceptation of the term, may be regarded as one of the earliest offshoots of Man's habitually gregarious and social inclination; and as an instance of that remarkable influence which, in an early stage of society, the powers of Nature exercise over the fortunes of mankind. It may not be traceable to the time

"When Adam dolve, and Eve span;"

but, it is natural to imagine that concurrent with the force of numbers must have increased the tendency of men to associate for some common object. This may have been the enjoyment of the staple of life; for, our elegant Essayist, writing with ages of experience at his beck, has truly said, "all celebrated Clubs were founded upon eating and drinking, which are points where most men agree, and in which the learned and the illiterate, the dull and the airy, the philosopher and the buffoon, can all of them bear a part."

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For special proof of the antiquity of the practice it may suffice to refer to the polished Athenians, who had, besides their general *symposia*, friendly meetings, where every one sent his own portion of the feast, bore a proportionate part of the expense, or gave a pledge at a fixed price. A regard for clubbism existed even in Lycurgan Sparta: the public tables consisted generally of fifteen persons each, and all vacancies were filled up by ballot, in which unanimous consent was indispensable for election; and the other laws, as described by Plutarch, differ but slightly from those of modern Clubs. Justus Lipsius mentions a bonâ fide Roman Club,

the members of which were bound by certain organized rules and regulations. Cicero records (*De Senectute*) the pleasure he took in frequenting the meetings of those social parties of his time, termed confraternities, where, according to a good old custom, a president was appointed; and he adds that the principal satisfaction he received from such entertainments, arose much less from the pleasures of the palate than from the opportunity thereby afforded him of enjoying excellent company and conversation.<sup>[1]</sup>

The cognomen Club claims descent from the Anglo-Saxon; for Skinner derives it from *clifian*, *cleofian* (our cleave), from the division of the reckoning among the guests around the table. The word signifies uniting to divide, like *clave*, including the correlative meanings to *adhere* and to separate. "In conclusion, *Club* is evidently, as far as form is concerned, derived from *cleave*" (to split), but in *signification* it would seem to be more closely allied to *cleave* (to adhere). It is not surprising

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that two verbs, identical in form (in Eng.) and connected in signification, should sometimes coalesce.<sup>[2]</sup>

To the Friday-street or more properly Bread-street Club, said to have been originated by Sir Walter Raleigh, was long assigned the priority of date in England; but we have an instance of two centuries earlier. In the reign of Henry IV., there was a Club called "La Court de bone Compagnie," of which the worthy old poet Occleve was a member, and probably Chaucer. In the works of the former are two ballads, written about 1413; one, a congratulation from the brethren to Henry Somer, on his appointment of the Sub-Treasurer of the Exchequer, and who received Chaucer's pension for him. In the other ballad, Occleve, after dwelling on some of their rules and observances, gives Somer notice that he is expected to be in the chair at their next meeting, and that the "styward" has warned him that he is

"for the dyner arraye

Ageyn Thirsday next, and nat is delaye."

That there were certain conditions to be observed by this Society, appears from the latter epistle, which commences with an answer to a letter of remonstrance the "Court" has received from Henry Somer, against some undue extravagance, and a breach of their rules.<sup>[3]</sup> This Society of four centuries and a half since was evidently a jovial company.

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Still, we do not yet find the term "Club." Mr. Carlyle, in his *History of Frederick the Great*, assumes that the vow of the Chivalry Orders—*Gelübde*—in vogue about A.D. 1190, "passed to us in a singularly dwindled condition: Club we now call it." To this it is objected that the mere resemblance in sound of *Gelübde* and *Club* is inconclusive, for the Orders of Templars, Hospitallers, and Prussian Knights, were never called clubs in England; and the origin of the noun need not be sought for beyond its verb to *club*, when persons joined in paying the cost of the mutual entertainment. Moreover, *Klubb* in German means the social *club*; and that word is borrowed from the English, the native word being *Zeche*, which, from its root and compound, conveys the idea generally of joint expenditure, and specially in drinking.<sup>[4]</sup>

About the end of the sixteenth or the beginning of the seventeenth century, there was established the famous Club at the Mermaid Tavern, in Bread-street, of which Shakspeare, Beaumont, Fletcher, Raleigh, Selden, Donne, &c., were members. Ben Jonson had a Club, of which he appears to have been the founder, that met at the Devil Tavern, between Middle-Temple gate and Temple Bar.

Not until shortly after this date do we find the word Club. Aubrey says: "We now use the word *clubbe* for a sodality in a taverne." In 1659, Aubrey became a member of the Rota, a political Club, which met at the Turk's Head, in New Palace Yard: "here we had," says Aubrey, "(very formally) a *balloting box*, and balloted how

things should be carried, by way of Tentamens.

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The room was every evening as full as it could be crammed."<sup>[5]</sup> Of this Rota political Club we shall presently say more. It is worthy of notice that politics were thus early introduced into English Club-life. Dryden, some twenty years after the above date, asks: "What right has any man to meet in factious Clubs to vilify the Government?"

Three years after the Great Fire, in 1669, there was established in the City, the Civil Club, which exists to this day. All the members are citizens, and are proud of their Society, on account of its antiquity, and of its being the only Club which attaches to its staff the reputed office of a chaplain. The members appear to have first *clubbed* together for the sake of mutual aid and support; but the name of the founder of the Club, and the circumstances of its origin, have unfortunately been lost with its early records. The time at which it was established was one of severe trials, when the Great Plague and the Great Fire had broken up much society, and many old associations; the object and recommendation being, as one of the rules express it, "that members should give preference to each other in their respective callings;" and that "but one person of the same trade or profession should be a member of the Club." This is the rule of the old middle-class clubs called "One of a Trade."

The Civil Club met for many years at the Old Ship Tavern, in Water-lane, upon which being taken down, the Club removed to the New Corn Exchange Tavern, in Mark Lane. The records, which are extant, show among former members Parliament men, baronets, and aldermen; the chaplain is the incumbent of St. Olave-by-the-Tower,

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Hart-street. Two high carved chairs, bearing date 1669, are used by

the stewards.

At the time of the Revolution, the Treason Club, as it was commonly called, met at the Rose tavern, in Covent Garden, to consult with Lord Colchester, Mr. Thomas Wharton, Colonel Talmash, Colonel Godfrey, and many others of their party; and it was there resolved that the regiment under Lieutenant-Colonel Langstone's command should desert entire, as they did, on Sunday, Nov. 1688.<sup>[6]</sup>

In Friday-street, Cheapside, was held the Wednesday Club, at which, in 1695, certain conferences took place under the direction of William Paterson, which ultimately led to the establishment of the Bank of England. Such is the general belief; but Mr. Saxe Bannister, in his *Life of Paterson*, p. 93, observes: "It has been a matter of much doubt whether the Bank of England was originally proposed from a Club or Society in the City of London. The *Dialogue Conferences of the Wednesday Club*, in *Friday-street*, have been quoted as if first published in 1695. No such publication has been met with of a date before 1706;" and Mr. Bannister states his reasons for supposing it was not preceded by any other book. Still, Paterson wrote the papers entitled the *Wednesday Club Conferences*.

Club is defined by Dr. Johnson to be "an assembly of good fellows, meeting under certain conditions;" but by Todd, "an association of persons subjected to particular rules." It is plain that the latter definition is at least not that of a Club, as distinguished from any other kind of association; although it may be more comprehensive than is necessary, to take in all the gatherings that in

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modern times have assumed the name of Clubs. Johnson's, however, is the more exact account of the true old English Club.

The golden period of the Clubs was, however, in the time of the *Spectator*, in whose rich humour their memories are embalmed. "Man," writes Addison, in No. 9, "is said to be a sociable animal; and as an instance of it we may observe, that we take all occasions and pretences of forming ourselves into those little nocturnal assemblies, which are commonly known by the name of Clubs. When a set of men find themselves agree in any particular, though never so trivial, they establish themselves into a kind of fraternity, and meet once or twice a week, upon the account of such a fantastic resemblance."

Pall Mall was noted for its tavern Clubs more than two centuries since. "The first time that Pepys mentions Pell Mell," writes Cunningham, "is under the 26th of July, 1660, where he says 'We went to Wood's (our old house for clubbing), 'and there we spent till ten at night.' This is not only one of the earliest references to Pall Mall as an inhabited locality, but one of the earliest uses of the word 'clubbing,' in its modern signification of a Club, and additionally interesting, seeing that the street still maintains what Johnson would have called its 'clubbable' character."

In *Spence's Anecdotes (Supplemental,)* we read: "There was a Club held at the King's Head, in Pall Mall, that arrogantly called itself 'The World.' Lord Stanhope, then (now Lord Chesterfield), Lord Herbert, &c., were members. Epigrams were proposed to be written on the glasses, by each member after dinner; once, when Dr. Young was invited thither, the Doctor would have declined writing, because he had no diamond:

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Lord Stanhope lent him his, and he wrote immediately—

"Accept a miracle, instead of wit;  
See two dull lines with Stanhope's pencil writ."

The first modern Club mansion in Pall Mall was No. 86, opened as a subscription house, called the Albion Hotel. It was originally

built for Edward Duke of York, brother of George III., and is now the office of Ordnance, (correspondence.)

## THE MERMAID CLUB.

This famous Club was held at the Mermaid Tavern, which was long said to have stood in Friday-street, Cheapside; but Ben Jonson has, in his own verse, settled it in *Bread-street*:

"At Bread-street's Mermaid having dined and merry,  
Proposed to go to Holborn in a wherry."

*Ben Jonson, ed. Gifford, viii. 242.*

Mr. Hunter also, in his Notes on Shakspeare, tells us that "Mr. Johnson, at the Mermaid, in Bread-street, vintner, occurs as creditor for 17s. in a schedule annexed to the will of Albain Butler, of Clifford's Inn, gentleman, in 1603." Mr. Burn, in the *Beaufoy Catalogue*, also explains: "the Mermaid in Bread-street, the Mermaid in Friday-street, and the Mermaid in Cheap, were all one and the same. The tavern, situated behind, had a way to it from these thoroughfares, but was nearer to Bread-street than Friday-street." In a note, Mr. Burn adds: "The site of the Mermaid is clearly defined from the circumstance

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of W. R., a haberdasher of small wares, 'twixt Wood-street and Milk-street,' adopting the same sign 'over against the Mermaid Tavern in Cheapside.'" The Tavern was destroyed in the Great Fire.

Here Sir Walter Raleigh is traditionally said to have instituted "The Mermaid Club." Gifford has thus described the Club, adopting the tradition and the Friday-street location: "About this time [1603] Jonson probably began to acquire that turn for conviviality for

which he was afterwards noted. Sir Walter Raleigh, previously to his unfortunate engagement with the wretched Cobham and others, had instituted a meeting of *beaux esprits* at the Mermaid, a celebrated tavern in Friday-street. Of this Club, which combined more talent and genius than ever met together before or since, our author was a member; and here for many years he regularly repaired, with Shakspeare, Beaumont, Fletcher, Selden, Cotton, Carew, Martin, Donne, and many others, whose names, even at this distant period, call up a mingled feeling of reverence and respect." But this is doubted. A writer in the *Athenæum*, Sept. 16, 1865, states: "The origin of the common tale of Raleigh founding the Mermaid Club, of which Shakspeare is said to have been a member, has not been traced. Is it older than Gifford?" Again: "Gifford's apparent invention of the Mermaid Club. Prove to us that Raleigh founded the Mermaid Club, that the wits attended it under his presidency, and you will have made a real contribution to our knowledge of Shakspeare's time, even if you fail to show that our Poet was a member of that Club." The tradition, it is thought, must be added to the long list of Shakspearian doubts.

Nevertheless, Fuller has described the wit-combats

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between Shakspeare and Ben Jonson, "which he beheld," meaning with his mind's eye, for he was only eight years of age when Shakspeare died; "a circumstance," says Mr. Charles Knight, "which appears to have been forgotten by some who have written of these matters." But we have a noble record left of the wit-combats in the celebrated epistle of Beaumont to Jonson:—

"Methinks the little wit I had is lost  
Since I saw you; for wit is like a rest  
Held up at tennis, which men do the best  
With the best gamesters: what things have we seen  
Done at the Mermaid! heard words that have been  
So nimble, and so full of subtile flame,

As if that every one from whence they came  
Had meant to put his whole wit in a jest,  
And had resolv'd to live a fool the rest  
Of his dull life; then when there hath been thrown  
Wit able enough to justify the town  
For three days past, wit that might warrant be  
For the whole city to talk foolishly  
'Till that were cancell'd: and when that was gone  
We left an air behind us, which alone  
Was able to make the two next companies  
Right witty; though but downright fools, mere wise."

## THE APOLLO CLUB.

The noted tavern, with the sign of St. Dunstan pulling the Devil by the nose, stood between Temple Bar and the Middle Temple gate. It was a house of great resort in the reign of James I., and then kept by Simon Wadloe.

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In Ben Jonson's *Staple of News*, played in 1625, Pennyboy Canter advises, to

"Dine in Apollo, with Pecunia  
At brave Duke Wadloe's."

Pennyboy junior replies—

"Content, i' th' faith;  
Our meal shall be brought thither; Simon the King  
Will bid us welcome."

At what period Ben Jonson began to frequent this tavern is not certain; but we have his record that he wrote *The Devil is an Ass*, played in 1616, when he and his boys (adopted sons) "drank bad wine at the Devil." The principal room was called "the Oracle of

Apollo," a large room evidently built apart from the tavern; and from Prior's and Charles Montagu's *Hind and Panther Transversed*, it is shown to have been an upper apartment, or on the first story:—

"Hence to the Devil—

Thus to the place where Jonson sat, we climb,  
Leaning on the same rail that guided him."

Above the door was the bust of Apollo; and the following verses, "the Welcome," were inscribed in gold letters upon a black board, and "placed over the door at the entrance into the Apollo:

"Welcome all, who lead or follow,  
To the *Oracle of Apollo*—

Here he speaks out of his pottle,  
Or the tripos, his Tower bottle;  
All his answers are divine,  
Truth itself doth flow in wine.  
Hang up all the poor hop-drinkers,  
Cries old Sim the king of skinkers;

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He that half of life abuses,  
That sits watering with the Muses.  
Those dull girls no good can mean us;  
Wine it is the milk of Venus,  
And the Poet's horse accounted:  
Ply it, and you all are mounted.  
'Tis the true Phœbeian liquor,  
Cheers the brain, makes wit the quicker,  
Pays all debts, cures all diseases,  
And at once three senses pleases.  
Welcome all, who lead or follow,  
To the *Oracle of Apollo*."

Beneath these verses was the name of the author, thus inscribed—  
"O Rare Ben Jonson," a posthumous tribute from his grave in Westminster Abbey. The bust appears modelled from the Apollo Belvedere, by some skillful person of the olden day, but has been

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