



UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

**Discussion Papers in
Economic and Social History**

Number 28, April 1999

LONDON CLUBS IN THE LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY

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Economic and Social History**

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Abstract

London clubs provided a means of establishing gentlemanly status and of making useful connections. Their number and membership was large. The paper begins with a quantitative overview of gentlemen's clubs in London in the late nineteenth century using information contained in contemporary almanacs. The number of clubs and club members were characterised by two periods of intense growth, most significantly during 1860 to 1900, when total membership rose fourfold. This expansion, which exceeded that of the middle-class, was stimulated by the extension of democracy and the general political mobilisation during the Irish crisis in the 1880s. Political clubs became the largest type of club, and their characteristics and importance are examined in detail. A random sample of 200 individuals in *Who's Who* sheds light on the frequency of club membership among the elite. The growth of clubland was exhausted by the end of the century, in part because clubs devalued their own worth as a signal of 'gentlemanliness'.

LONDON CLUBS IN THE LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY¹

by Antonia Taddei

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1: Introduction

London clubs developed from the coffee-houses which sprang into existence in the late seventeenth century, and they quickly came to play an important role in the social life of the city. In the mid-seventeenth century the area around St James Palace became urbanised. Pall Mall, Piccadilly, and St James Street and Square were fashionable locations, and many coffee-houses and taverns were established there. One of the most prestigious, White's Chocolate House, decided around the turn of the century to reserve some rooms for the exclusive use of its more elegant clientele, its popularity having started to attract people with whom the aristocrats did not necessarily want to mix (especially for gambling, an aristocratic addiction in the eighteenth century). Other eighteenth century clubs – Boodle's, the Cocoa Tree, Brooks's and Arthur's – also transformed their coffee-houses into club-houses.² After the end of the Napoleonic wars the institution of the club assumed its full identity with the foundation of the United Service (1815), the Travellers' (1819), the Union (1822), and the Athenaeum (1824). Such clubs may be characterised by two main features: their luxurious premises, offering a large range of services from dining facilities to libraries, and their well-defined procedures for the selection of members.

These clubs were part of the evolution of London Society. They are mentioned by novelists from Trollope to J. Verne, and also in many social and political histories, but they have not been the object of a close historical study. Even the review by Morris contains only a paragraph on the West End clubs of the eighteenth century.³ The only other publications are books written to satisfy the general public's interest in the London clubs, and individual histories of clubs, often commissioned for the commemoration of an anniversary of the foundation.

This paper attempts to provide a quantitative overview of gentlemen's clubs in London in the late nineteenth century using information given in contemporary almanacs. These publications give lists of clubs from 1850, but details on membership and fees are available only from 1869. Hence, I focus primarily on the period from the 1860s to the beginning of the First World War. The growth of clubs was not continuous, but was characterised by periods of greater or lesser intensity. A first wave of creation started after the Napoleonic wars to mid-century, while a second wave went from the 1860s to 1900, during which time the total membership grew nearly fourfold. An examination of what categories of clubs were the most popular provides some information on the upper and middle classes, while an investigation of membership fees sheds light on the nature of the institution. The evolution of the London clubs may be explained by their characteristics and roles. Finally, I discuss the quantitative importance of political clubs, by far the largest category after 1880.

¹ This discussion paper is derived from an Oxford M.Sc. dissertation supervised by James Foreman-Peck and Avner Offer, and was edited by Avner Offer and David Stead.

² A. Lejeune, *White's: the First Three Hundred Years* (1993), pp. 4-13.

³ R.J. Morris, 'Clubs, Societies and Associations', *The Cambridge Social History of Britain 1750-1950*, Vol. 3 (1990), pp. 395-443.

2: Statistical Trends

This section attempts to draw a quantitative picture of the gentlemen's clubs. The sources are lists of the principal London clubs published in the *British Almanac* (BA, from 1850), *Who's Who* (WW, from 1850), *Whitaker's Almanac* (W, from 1869) and *Hazell's Annual* (HA, from 1889). The first series of WW, published from 1849 to 1893, did not give individual biographies but listed members of the aristocracy, bishops, members of parliament and so on. From 1850 WW had a list of clubs, but this ended after the 1880s. A second series started in 1897 and was comprised of two parts. The first was the same as before, with biographical entries added to the second part. After 1902 WW reduced the first part to include just members of the Royal family, and concentrated on the biographies. WW is therefore useful for the early period. BA contained club lists from 1850 to 1870 but then no list until 1889, while W introduced its first list in its first edition in 1869. Not only did W enlarge its list very substantially in the first decade (there were 20 clubs in the 1869 list and 85 in the 1880), but it also improved its information, adding to the club's name its foundation date, address, number of members, fees, and a valuable short description.

From 1890 there is a club list in every almanac, but the longest detailed series is in *Whitaker's*. It will therefore be our principal reference; however, when the W list diverges from the other almanacs we will compare them, and for the period before 1869 we shall use BA and WW. The almanac and *Who's Who* listings are selections of fashionable, prestigious clubs. My concern with high-standing clubs justifies the use of these publications as a source. These selections differed only marginally (for 1890, 1900 and 1910 about 90 per cent of the clubs listed in the *Whitaker's* and *Hazell's* are the same). The fact that a club was mentioned in different publications tends to confirm its reputation and the most prestigious clubs should be listed in all three almanacs – I shall call them the '3 star' clubs. During the 1850s it seems that there was only a very slight rise in the number of prestigious clubs, since the list of clubs in BA did not increase, and WW's list increased only by an average 1.94 per cent per annum. By contrast the 1860s saw a very large increase in the number of clubs (with a growth of 4.6 per cent per annum in BA and of 6.76 per cent in WW), and this sustained growth continued in the 1870s (see table 1). For the 1880s we only have information from W, whose list rose substantially during that decade, albeit by less than in the preceding one.

Table 1: Number of clubs in the three almanacs and in WW.

Year	British Almanac	Hazell's An.	Whitaker's	Who's W.
1850	32			33
1860	32			40*
1870	50		36	75 (1871)
1880	No list for 1871-88		85	
1890	80	101	103	
1900	72	109	98	
1910	81	100	106	

* I could not obtain any WW between 1857 and 1863. There were 40 clubs in 1857 and 41 in 1863, so I took 40 to be an approximation for 1860.

During the 1890s and 1900s BA, W and HA followed a different course, but in each case the variations in the number of clubs is not as large as in the two previous decades. Since the BA list is more

restrictive than the others, I will also study the intersection of the W and HA lists (W.HA). Table 2 indicates that the ‘3 stars’ and the W.HA lists have a remarkable stability of numbers. Hence, it appears that the growth of the prestigious clubs ended after the 1890s.

Table 2: Number of clubs.

Year	3 Stars	W.HA	W	HA	BA
1890	67	87	102	100	80
1900	68	88	96	106	72
1910	66	89	105	96	81

Although the number of clubs stabilised, this was achieved with many clubs disappearing from the lists over time while others were introduced. That a club was withdrawn from a list does not necessarily imply that it no longer existed. Perhaps it was not considered sufficiently prestigious to be listed: this is a sort of status ‘death’ (see table 3). The high rate of turnover was apparently due to the intense competition for prestige among clubs.

Table 3: Status ‘deaths’.*

	Whitaker’s death	3 stars death	W.HA death
1870/1880	2 (5.5%)		
1880/1890	22 (25.9%)		
1890/1900	24 (23.3%)	13 (19.4%)	20 (23%)
1900/1910	15 (15.3%)	13 (19.1%)	11 (12.5%)

* Number of clubs that were in the list of the first year and not in that of the second year. Brackets indicate what proportion of the clubs listed in the previous list it represents. Of the 24 clubs that disappeared from the W list between 1890 and 1900, none were listed in the BA of 1900, and only 2 were listed in the HA of the same year. We observe a similar situation for those clubs that disappeared from W between 1900 and 1910 – only one of them was listed in the two other almanacs.

All the clubs that dropped out the ‘3 stars’ set still belonged to one of the three almanacs. This tends to show that the ‘3 stars’ status clubs were relatively stable, since the clubs that lost this status never lost sufficient social recognition so as to disappear from all three almanacs.

Table 4 indicates that between 1870 and 1910 the total membership of the clubs listed in W increased more than fourfold.

Table 4: Club membership.

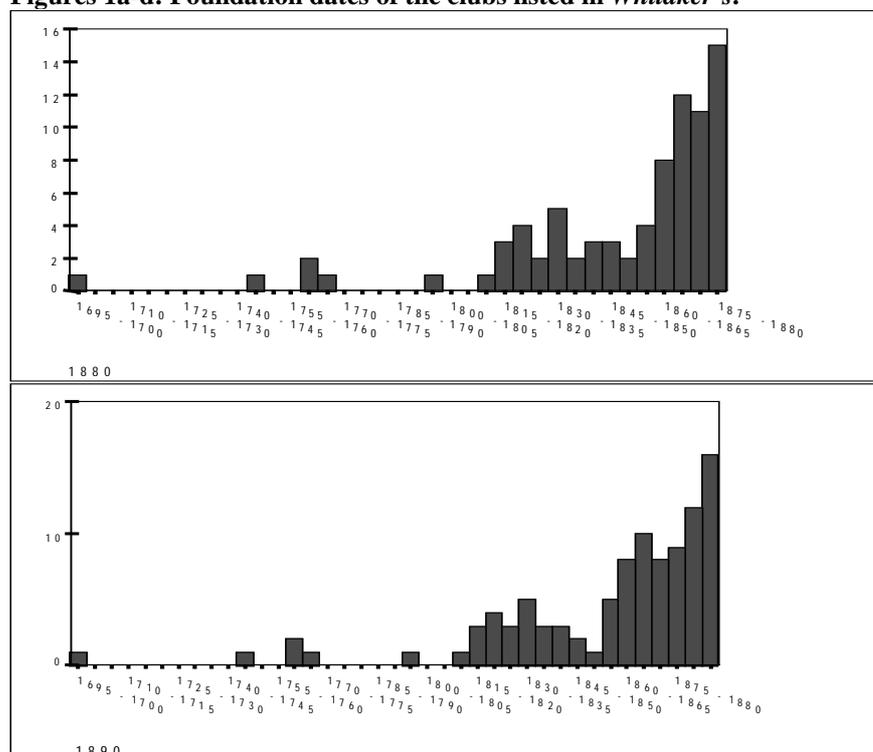
Years	Whitaker’s		W.HA		3 stars	
	Total	Mean	Total	Mean	Total	Mean
1870	30,765	879				
1880	63,026	840*				
1890	109,939	1,195	91,219	1,140	69,903	1,110
1900	114,292	1,299	106,692	1,301	80,775	1,303
1910	129,434	1,307	111,409	1,326	86,619	1,375

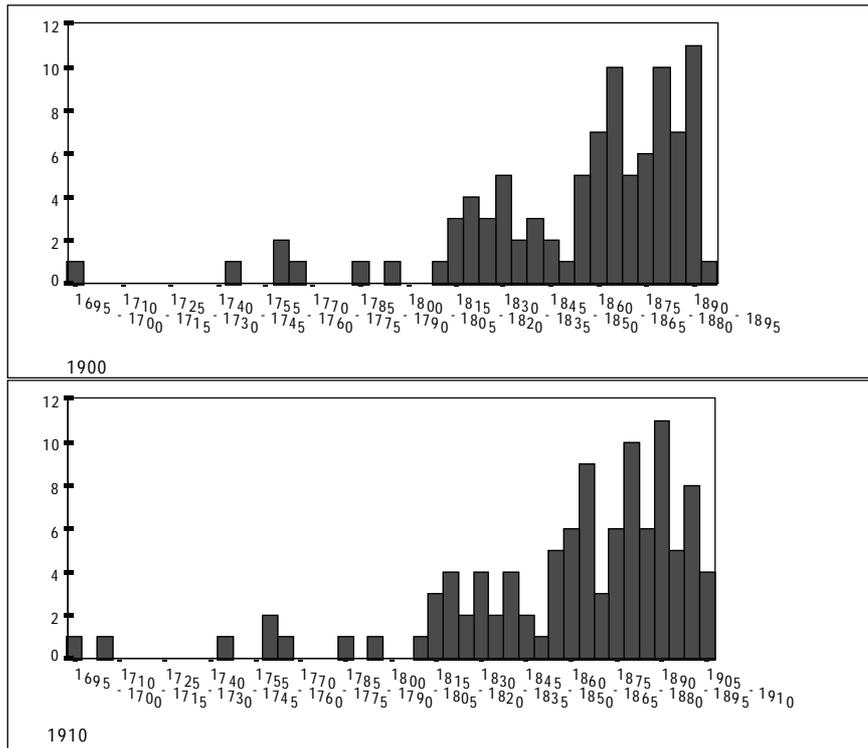
* The average membership of the clubs already mentioned in the 1870 list increased between 1870 and 1880, therefore the decrease observed in the Whitaker’s list for that decade is due to clubs introduced in the list of that decade.

However, the number of clubs in W for 1870 underestimates the number of fashionable clubs in that year, since only 32 clubs were listed, while BA had a list of 50 and WW of 75 for the year 1871. There was a sharp increase between 1860 and 1900 which was followed by a deceleration in the first decade of the century of the total as well as the average membership. Therefore the fourfold rise in membership seems to have occurred between the 1860s and the 1900s. We shall see that the different club categories followed different courses

The series of foundation dates for each decade gives an approximation of the different waves of creation of club (it is not a direct measure since the series of the foundation dates are for clubs that survived). The histograms of the foundation dates exhibit two clusters: 1815-1850 and a second one 1855-1895 (with two peaks in 1865-70 and 1890-95), with a lower level of creation afterwards. The first cluster of club creation is clear in all four histograms while the second one, being contemporaneous to the listings, appeared only progressively. In figure 1a, the 1880 listing for clubs founded after the 1850s, younger clubs are more represented than older ones, with the exception of 1865-70 which seems to have been an intense period of club creation. Figure 1b, the histogram for 1890, contains the same pattern. Figures 1c and 1d display the end of the second cluster (1855-1895), the average number of club formation being lower over 1895 to 1910 than during 1865 to 1895. The appearance from the 1890s of a negative relation between the age and the number of clubs represented suggests that it became more difficult over time for new clubs to join the ranks of the most prestigious.

Figures 1a-d: Foundation dates of the clubs listed in *Whitaker's*.





Did club membership increase at a higher or lower rate than the numbers of potential members, the middle class? I use as a measure of this class the number of taxpayers with an income over £160 estimated by Stamp. Table 5 compares these figures with total club membership and the membership of clubs with entrance fees over 10, 20 and 30 Guineas. Between 1880 and the mid-1890s, club membership grew faster than the number of persons with an income over £160, the ratio of the former to the latter increasing from 10 to 15 per cent. This corresponds to a substantial increase in the relative importance of club membership. In the following 15 years the situation was reversed as the ratio fell to 12 per cent.

Table 5: Total club membership as percentage of tax payers with an income over £160 as a percentage of, and of membership of clubs with an entrance fee over 10, 20 and 30gns. (%).

Year	Total	Ent. fee ≥ 10 gns.	Ent. fee ≥ 20 gns.	Ent. fee ≥ 30 gns.
1880	9.9	7.8	4	3.2
1895	15	8.3	4.8	3.15
1910	12	6.9	4.3	2.7

From *Whitaker's & Stamp* (1927), p. 448.

Types of clubs

From the brief descriptions given in *Whitaker's*, it is possible to classify the clubs into different categories: artistic, literary, theatrical, political, military, occupational, sporting, university, social and others. Many clubs fell into more than one of these categories. The most problematical category is the social clubs. Almost all the clubs listed are social clubs, but many of them are described by what differentiates them, for example a hobby, some necessary qualification for membership, or education in a particular public school. Only a few clubs are described as only social (the maximum was 15 in

1880). The different categories of clubs acquired very uneven proportions of the membership, and their development followed radically different trends (see tables 6-8).

Table 6: Different categories of clubs: number, membership and entrance fees.

	All categories			Social only			Social & other		
	No.	Members	Fee (gns)	No.	Members	Fee (gns)	No.	Members	Fee (gns)
1870	36	30,765	21.8	5	2,600	17.7	10	4,750	17.1
1880	82	61,026	16.3	15	11,900	19.2	28	20,475	16.1
1890	101	109,939	14.2	13	8,950	18	37	29,160	13.3
1900	94	113,692	14.5	12	7,275	22.7	36	34,470	14.2
1910	105	129,434	15.1	15	9,325	20.5	40	41,879	16

Table 7: Different categories of clubs (cont).

	Political clubs			Military clubs			Sporting clubs		
	No.	Members	Fee (gns)	No.	Members	Fee (gns)	No.	Members	Fee (gns)
1870	6	6,550	20.8	6	9,472	32.2	0	0	–
1880	11	11,533	21	7	8,649	25.7	6	1,490	8
1890	20	51,350	14.9	9	12,415	25.9	9	5,500	6.7
1900	17	42,370	16.2	9	15,200	28.1	14	17,250	8.3
1910	16	34,650	19.4	11	19,100	23.6	15	21,950	12

Table 8: Different categories of clubs (cont).

	Occupational clubs			University clubs			Artistic and/or literary*			Theatrical*		
	No.	Members	Fee(gns)	No.	Members	Fee(gns)	No.	Members	Fee(gns)	No.	Members	Fee(gns)
1870	5	3,100	17	1	3,270	23.7	1	1,200	30	2	1,000	12.5
1880	10	5,075	11.1	7	4,780	26.5	7	3,080	9	3	1,400	9.7
1890	10	5,330	9.8	14	5,830	18.5	14	6,000	6.9	3	1,050	8.7
1900	9	4,867	10.3	10	5,830	28	10	4,555	5.9	3	1,250	9.3
1910	12	7,645	7.2	6	5,770	20.3	9	5,660	9.3	7	4,950	6.1

* Clubs that were literary and theatrical have been classified as theatrical.

Military clubs had the largest membership in 1870. They were the first new clubs to be created at the beginning of the century, with the foundation of the Guards (1813) and the United Service (1815). They lost the leadership (in terms of membership) to the political clubs in the 1880s, but still experienced a substantial growth, with total membership more than doubling from 1870 to 1910. The most exceptional growth was that of the political clubs in the 1880s, with a fourfold increase of their membership during just that decade. In 1890 they represented some 47 per cent of the total club membership and in 1910 they still held on to 27 per cent. There was a boom in sporting clubs from the

1890s. There were none in the 1870 list, but they had almost 22,000 members in 1910, and their growth contributed almost the entire increase of total club membership from 1890 to 1910.

The growth of the artistic and literary clubs preceded that of the theatrical clubs that boomed at the beginning of the twentieth century. However this category represents a small share of the total club population. 'University clubs' is used as a generic term when education at certain universities or public schools was required for membership. Those clubs had a relatively small membership with 3,270 members in 1870 and only 5,770 in 1910, which corresponds to a decline in their proportion of the total club membership from 11 to 4 per cent (although there may have been other clubs that were not prestigious enough to be listed). Finally, occupational clubs were not an important proportion of total clubs, but their share was not negligible in 1870 with about 10 per cent of total club membership. In the following decades, they hardly grew until the 1900s when they experienced a relatively substantial increase in membership.

Entrance fees

The cost of membership in most clubs was composed of an entrance fee and an annual subscription. Because these two fees were correlated, I concentrate on entrance fees. Throughout the period, military clubs had the highest average entrance fees, followed by university clubs. From 1890, purely social clubs came third; before the 1880s they were preceded by political clubs. Purely social clubs tended to have higher entrance fees than clubs with a specific purpose such as sporting, artistic, literary or theatrical clubs. This suggests that the entrance fee played a role in the selection process. In a literary club, for example, the reputation of the club rests on the literary competence or knowledge of its members; therefore the entrance fee should not be prohibitive. With no such selection criteria, social clubs had a higher entrance fee, which operated as a first selection through an individual's wealth. Given this, it is worth emphasising the high level of entrance fee of the political clubs before the 1880s. From the 1880s, new political clubs with low entrance fees and large memberships were created, and the average entrance fee was lower than for clubs as a whole.

In 1870 the 3 clubs with the highest entrance fees were all military clubs: the United Service with 38 gns., then the Army and Navy and the Junior United Service both with 33 gns. Of the 8 remaining clubs with an entrance fee above 30 gns., there were 3 university clubs (the United University, the Oxford and Cambridge, and New University), 2 political clubs (the Reform and the Conservative), the Union, the City of London (chiefly businessmen's clubs; the Union founded in 1822, consisted of political, professional and mercantile men) and the Athenaeum. The major change in the following decade was the increase in number of purely social clubs charging a high entrance fee. In 1880, 4 out of 19 social clubs charged an entrance fee over 30 gns.: Boodle's, the Marlborough, the Oriental and the Turf; otherwise the pattern generally remained the same as before (4 military, 3 political, and 3 university clubs). In the two following decades this pattern hardly altered, with the exception of the appearance of 2 sporting clubs in 1910: the Bath and the Ranelagh.

The number of clubs charging an entrance fee over 30 gns. rose at the same rate as the total number of clubs between 1880 and 1910 (both by about 28 per cent). The highest entrance fee was 40 gns. which was relatively low for the wealthy people of the day. The most prestigious clubs had long waiting lists and presumably could have increased their fees more, so it is significant that they remained at a relatively low level. This suggests that the role of entrance fees in the selection process was limited, the essential element instead being the elaborate mechanism of admission.

The majority of the clubs with an entrance fee over 30 gns. were founded between 1815 and 1840. Quite a few of them were created in the 1860s, but no other generation is represented with the notable exceptions of the Bachelors (1885) and the sporting clubs already mentioned.

To complete our study of the entrance fee, we compare it with an index of prices. Table 9 presents the average entrance fee of the clubs in the *Whitaker's* and a price index. The ratio of entrance fee to the price index gives some idea of the evolution of the real entrance fee.

Table 9: Nominal and real entrance fees.

Year	Average Ent. fee	Rousseaux Index*	Entrance Fee/ Rousseaux Index*100
1870	21.787	110	19.8
1880	16.305	102	15.98
1890	14.193	87	16.31
1900	14.547	91	15.98
1910	15.085	97	15.55

* Wholesale price index, 1848=100. From Mitchell: *British Historical Statistics* (1988), pp. 722-24. Entrance fees from *Whitaker's*.

The highest level for the average entrance fee was reached in 1870, but this is partly due to the excessively restrictive character of the *Whitaker's*' list for that year. Indeed, if we consider only the clubs that were listed in the 1870 *Whitaker's*, their average entrance fee increased between 1870 and 1880. Therefore, the decrease of the average entrance fee in the table for that decade is due to the introduction of clubs that were not listed in 1870. Hence, it is difficult to say if the decrease in the entrance fee between 1870 and 1880 is very significant. On the whole, between 1880 and 1910, the average entrance fee did not change much in nominal or in real terms.

By contrast, the distribution of the entrance fees did change a great deal over the period. In the *Whitaker's* list of 1870, clubs with high entrance fee are the most numerous, with 14 clubs out of 34 with an entrance fee above 30 gns. Otherwise, there is no particular clustering of entrance fees, but a remarkable absence of entrance fees below 5 gns. In 1880, the pattern started to change for low entrance fees, with 9 clubs below 5 gns and the most frequent entrance fees charged are those between 5 and 15 gns (30 clubs). However the number of clubs with an entrance fee above 30 gns is very important and still represents a quarter of all clubs and almost a third of the total membership. In the following decade, even more clubs charged low entrance fees and the distribution shows a negative relation between the number of clubs and entrance fees of less than 30 gns., and still the share of the high entrance fee clubs did not decrease. In 1900 and 1910 the distributions are similar with a decrease in the number of clubs with an entrance fee between 15 and 29 gns, which emphasised the two clusters of high and low entrance fees.

The increase in the low entrance fee clubs reflects the impact of competition from the creation of new clubs. For high entrance fee clubs there was no such price competition, perhaps because a decrease in their entrance fees would have sent a negative signal, and also because they competed on other criteria.

3: Frequency of Club Membership

I have randomly drawn 200 individuals from the *Who's Who* of 1900. For each individual I recorded his principal occupation, titles (if any), and finally club membership. Table 10 indicates that 60 per cent of the sample belonged to at least one club and on average these individuals were members of two clubs. There were important variations by occupation. MPs were *all* members of at least one club (2.3 on average). Military men, diplomats, members of the administration, lawyers, and businessmen had a very high proportion of membership (73 per cent). Clergymen had the lowest level with 21 per cent, followed by academics with 30 per cent; writers and physicians only had about 40 per cent. Finally, titled individuals belonged to more clubs than the average: 75 per cent were members of at least one club (there were 44 individuals with a title in the sample).

Table 10: Details of the sample from *Who's Who*.

	Category	Number
1	Military	34
2	Academic, librarian	33
3	MP and ex-MP*	29
4	Writer: journalist, novelist, author, dramatist	16
5	Administration, diplomats, Empire administration	15
6	No occupation	15
7	Clergymen	14
8	Artist: painter, sculptor, musician, actor	14
9	Barrister, solicitor, recorder, judge of county court, Queen's Counsel	14
10	Physician, surgeon, veterinary and engineer (1)	10
11	Business	5

* Anybody who was or had been an MP was assigned to this category. Presumably many ex-MPs that joined clubs when they were in Parliament or before, would have kept their membership even though they were not MPs. Moreover, many ex-MPs were still active in politics.

Remarkably, 71 London clubs were listed at least once in the biographies: one may have expected a higher concentration of club membership. This tends to confirm that there was a large number of fashionable clubs. The most frequented club was the Travellers with 18 members, followed by the Carlton (16), Brooks's, the Athenaeum, the Bachelors and the National Liberal (all having at least 10 memberships). Given the large number of different clubs, table 11 regroups them into six types following a classification derived from *Whitaker's*.

It is interesting to examine the frequencies of multiple club membership. Table 12 indicates that about a quarter of the individuals were members of at least one political club; and many members of political clubs were members of other clubs as well. The second most frequented clubs were the purely social clubs, which is very remarkable given the small total membership of these clubs. Since it seems reasonable to assume that, on average, individuals listed in the *Who's Who* had a higher status than the average member of clubs listed in the almanacs, this result indicates the high standing of the purely social clubs. Besides, it is worth noting that members of social clubs tended to be members of many clubs and, interestingly, up to a third of them were members of at least 2 social clubs.

Table 11: Frequencies of the different types of clubs.

	No. of members of at least 1 club of a given type	No. of clubs listed per type*
Political	52	68
Artistic**	22	30
Military	28	29
Professional	11	11
Social***	30	41
University	5	5
Other	3	44

* The second column differs from the first because some individuals are members of more than one club of a given type. ** Including literary, theatrical, musical, and scientific clubs. *** Social clubs are those which are described as such in *Whitaker's*.

Table 12: Multiple membership of clubs.

	Political	Artistic	Military	Profession.	Social	University
Political	13					
Artistic	4	5				
Military	6	1	1			
Profession.	3	3	3	0		
Social	5	7	7	2	10	
University	2	0	0	0	0	0

How to read this table: The diagonal: there were 13 individuals members of at least 2 political clubs, 5 individuals members of at least 2 artistic clubs and so on. Outside the diagonal: there were 4 individuals members of at least one political club and one artistic club, 6 individuals members of at least one political club and one military club and so on.

4: Role of the Clubs

Most London clubs had luxurious premises offering a large range of facilities including dining, reading, and games rooms. But above all a club was defined by its members. Not only did the club offer social intercourse, but also a unique opportunity for easy access to its individual members by providing a meeting place. This explains the importance of a careful selection process. The accessibility that clubs provided was coupled with the prestige that selective clubs conferred on their members. After discussing the characteristics and functions of the club, we shall see how they might explain the expansion from the 1860s, and the slowdown at the end of the century. For that purpose, we will require some more insight into social changes within the upper and middle classes who constituted the club population.

Club creation and membership selection

There were two sorts of clubs: the ordinary club, in which the members owned the club and were solely responsible for its creation, its management and its dissolution; and the proprietary club, in which members depended for their sitting-room and dinner on a person who was not a member. To create an ordinary club, the first step was to get a certain number of people to guarantee to find the sum

necessary to meet the preliminary expenses.⁴ The guaranteeing members formed a provisional committee that decided upon the purchase of premises and drafted a prospectus. If the club succeeded, a general meeting of members was held to pass rules, appoint a committee, and accept responsibility for debts. Upon the adoption of a written constitution, the association achieved the status of a fully-fledged club.

A proprietary club, on the other hand, was the result of a private speculation. The proprietor advanced the money, and if the club was successful he gained income from entrance fees and subscriptions. He was simply a private person acting on his own behalf, with no fiduciary rights against any club members, unless they had authorised him to incur some expenses for them individually.

The formal procedure for the selection of members was a distinctive feature of the club. The process of election varied a great deal from club to club. In proprietary clubs the committee usually were responsible for the election and sometimes even the proposal of members. Presumably this was to assure the proprietor that the quality of the club would be maintained at a high standard. Some proprietary clubs actually set as a criterion of eligibility that prospective members already possess membership in one of a list of prestigious clubs (drawn up by members of the committee).⁵ It is as if they delegated their selection process to those clubs that had established a high reputation.

In some clubs, the general ballot of all members was abandoned and delegated to the committee because of excessive blackballing. At White's, personal animosity between some members had caused so many blackballs that there was an alarming erosion of club membership, and in 1833 the system of election of candidates was changed at a general meeting of the club.⁶ The general ballot of all members was still preserved at Arthur's, Brooks's, the Oxford and Cambridge, the Reform, the Devonshire and others, and the rule generally prevailed that one blackball in every ten votes was enough to exclude a candidate. In clubs where the committee elected, two out of five excluded a candidate (Boodle's), and at the Carlton three out of 12.⁷ At the Athenaeum, interestingly, there were two mechanisms by which members were selected. Ordinary members were chosen by general ballot, while up to nine eminent members per year were selected directly by the committee.

In all cases, there was a process of pre-selection since every candidate for membership had to be presented and seconded by two members of the club. The influence of the supporting members was important for selection. There were even cases in which members resigned or threatened to resign to enforce the election of their candidate. Nevill thought this 'unreasonable, for a club is in reality a republic, where everyone is equal, and no one has any right to level a pistol at the heads of his fellow-members, or of his committee.'⁸ The presentation of candidates by existing members led in some clubs to the quasi-monopoly of the most influential members over the selection process, most notably (as we shall see) at Brooks's.

⁴ There is a good account of club creation in A. Leach *Club Cases. Consideration on the Formation, Management and Dissolution of Clubs* (1879), pp. 11-14 (this section is largely inspired by Leach's work).

⁵ This is the case for two clubs listed in the *Club Directory* in 1879: the Raleigh and the United Whist (see Ivey, *The Club Directory* (1879)).

⁶ A. Lejeune, *White's* (1993), pp. 123-4.

⁷ A. Griffiths, *Clubs and Clubmen* (1907), p. 259.

⁸ R. Nevill, *The London Clubs* (1911), p. 166.

The club and social intercourse

For provincial or London members who could not afford the cost of entertaining at home, the club provided a convenient means for reaching the individual members of the club. For the more fortunate, the club was a semi-private premises that played the role of a social regulator, club acquaintance being an intermediate level of relationship that required less commitment than invitation to another's home. For country members, many clubs provided overnight accommodation. Even for those who had their own house in London, the club was a focal point that facilitated the functioning of the Season. For people living abroad, the club was a means to rejoin society when they returned. This last consideration was the main motivation for the foundation of the Oriental in 1824.⁹

The club simplified substantially the process of building up a circle of acquaintances. To appreciate its importance, recall the complex code of etiquette among the aristocratic and middle classes. Leonore Davidoff's *The Best Circles* describes in detail its different stages. The first step was to be introduced; preferably the person with the higher status would have first been asked if he or she wished to be introduced. The next step was generally calling and leaving one's cards to which visit the hostess would answer whether or not she was 'At Home'. These calls between acquaintances took place in the middle of the afternoon with the time depending whether it was a ceremonial, semi-ceremonial or intimate call. Etiquette prescribed that calls should be short, about fifteen minutes, during which time the callers kept on their outdoor clothing. The calls might then be followed by an invitation to dinner. 'Frequently absences could be used to change an individual's or family's social milieu, sometimes radically, for instance by going abroad. On returning from such an absence, the choice of *whom* to call on could be used to form a new social set.'¹⁰

In contrast to the complex social dance described above, club can be viewed as a pre-made 'social set'. By choosing a club, an individual chose a particular society. He could change it by changing clubs, or enlarge it by joining many clubs, provided that he was admitted and could pay the entrance and membership fees each time. Once an individual joined a club, he often had some power over the selection of new members through his nomination and voting rights. Eventually, he might even create his own club, and manage it according to his own desires. Thus, club membership provided a ready-made means for social intercourse, an information network, and a source of societal status. It is possible to distinguish different but interdependent functions played by the club as a 'social set'.

Individuals' aims, tastes and interests differed a great deal, as did the type of company they appreciated. Clubs existed for almost any interest, from flyfishermen (the Flyfishers) to pigeon hunters (the Gun club) and amateur linguists (the Polyglot). Other individuals joined clubs that would permit intercourse with people who had different interests or occupations from their own. One early nineteenth century observer preferred these last clubs because they relieved individuals from the stress of competition with their peers, allowing them to appear at their best.¹¹ For some, however, the company of their peers made them feel more 'at home', and they would then enjoy spending time either at a university club or one for persons of their own occupation.

⁹ D. Forrest, *The Oriental* (1968).

¹⁰ L. Davidoff, *The Best Circles* (1973), pp. 41-45.

¹¹ C. Marsh, *The Clubs of London* (1828).

The club as a network of information

For politicians, civil servants, businessmen, and lawyers, clubs facilitated the development of a network of mutually profitable semi-professional acquaintances. The club provided a place to exchange opinions, analysis of current events, and other information. It was a place in which one could expect to find people, which was especially useful in the pre-telephone period. It was partly for that reason that most clubmen had regular days and times when they could be found at their club. For these purposes political and occupational clubs were most useful, but other clubs, notably the most prestigious, may have also played this role. Membership in many clubs made it possible to extend contact networks.

It seems reasonable to assume that every individual recorded in *Who's Who* could have been elected to a fashionable club. The *Who's Who* sample reveals that MPs, lawyers and businessmen had a much higher proportion of club membership than artists, physicians and academics. Since networking would have been more important to the former group, clubs must have attracted them for that reason. MPs, lawyers and businessmen also had a higher average number of clubs, which again confirms the significance of clubs for networking.

The club and prestige

Membership of a good club conferred prestige, and it appears that this function of the club as a status good became almost formalised, with club membership becoming a pre-requisite of 'gentlemanliness'. To understand why clubs ended up playing this role we need first to see what was meant by the term 'gentleman' in the nineteenth century. I shall argue that clubs as a status good contributed to the redefinition of status between the middle and upper classes, and I will indicate how the evolution of these classes may explain club development.

'Gentleman' defined an ideal of conduct as well as a social rank. The social status of 'gentleman' was imprecise, and emphasis was increasingly placed on norms of value and behaviour: a gentleman was brave, loyal, courteous to women, a natural leader, invariably gentle to the weak, and talented at all manly sports. But no one was quite sure who was a gentleman and who was not; many people used the term in such a way that did not exclude themselves.¹² Insofar as being a gentleman was essentially a public quality of character it necessitated being recognised as such by others. The existence of a formal selection mechanism for becoming member of a club may explain why membership became a signal of gentlemanliness: to have been elected meant that one had been recognised as a gentleman by some representatives of this group. It was accepted that all gentlemen were not equal, but not all clubs were equal either. What is remarkable here is that this process of social classification went through a 'club market', the prestige of a club being related to the prestige of its members.

Since the characteristics of a gentleman were essentially defined by norms of value and behaviour, the club became a place that helped to formulate and establish these norms. Moreover, in public schools, colleges and clubs, people interacted in similar ways. Inasmuch as one may enjoy re-creating aspects of childhood and youth, it is not surprising that individuals educated in public schools joined clubs once they grew up. A direct way of doing so was to join a club in which only public

¹² M. Girouard, *The Return to Camelot* (1981), pp. 260-66. The Empire stimulated a revival of chivalry, and its code of conduct with prescriptions of fairness, loyalty and courage contributed to strengthen the gentleman's ideal (see *ibid*; P. Mason, *The English Gentleman* (1982)).

school or university educated people were admitted; but in any case, clubland had the charm of well-known territory.

Given the role of the West End clubs in conferring status, we might partially explain their evolution by means of the changing pattern of status distribution. In other words, the club expansion may reflect the enlargement of the highest status group due the rise of the middle class (reinforced by the decline of the aristocracy) in the second half of the nineteenth century.

The great financiers and merchants of the City stood at the top of the middle-class and were socially very close to the aristocracy. They went to the same public schools, lived in the same districts of London (Belgravia and Mayfair), shared a similar life style, and frequently mixed in marriage.¹³ The growth of the City led to the foundation of new clubs there, including the New City (1862), the City Carlton (1868) and the City Liberal (1874). The social standing of the City men was also reflected by their accelerated entry into the West End clubs in the seventies, although this new generation of clubmen did not always share the same tastes as the previous ones.¹⁴

Just after the great bankers and merchants of the City in terms of prestige came the professions. Their position was consolidated from the middle of the century, with a great deal of self-organisation and backing from the state. This evolution was not coupled with their democratisation: the cost of professional education was high; practitioners considered this as desirable for it gave a monopoly rent to its members though restricted entry to the profession.¹⁵ In 1879, the author of one club directory wrote: 'Membership of a Club is now accepted as a guarantee of the position of gentleman of various professions.'¹⁶ Once this was established as a social rule, not to join meant to relinquish this social rank for those whose claim was not secure (as it was for clergymen and academics, who had a low level of club membership).¹⁷ This logic seems to have spurred the high rate of growth of clubs from the 1860s: 'New political clubs, new professional clubs, new social clubs, sprang into existence, till what was a luxury for the few became a comparative necessity for the many.'¹⁸ This may explain why club membership grew faster than the middle-class until the mid-1890s.

The expansion of the prestigious clubs was permitted (or at least facilitated by) the enlargement of High Society from the late 1870s onwards. Indeed the dynamic that I have just described concerned the demand for membership of prestigious clubs, which accelerated as individuals became aware of the status benefits that clubs conferred. However, since the prestige of a club rests on that of its members, the supply of prestigious clubs is determined by the size and openness of the highest status group, that is the group's desire to mix with individuals from lower circles. Thus, the increase in number and membership of prestigious clubs grew with membership in High Society.

For much of the century, the landed nobility and gentry were at the top of the status hierarchy. By the end of the 1870s they probably owned more land than ever before and, despite the industrial revolution, they constituted the wealthiest economic group. Their political power was evident at the

¹³ Y. Cassis, *La City de Londres 1870-1914* (1987), pp. 155-62.

¹⁴ See for example R. Nevill, *op. cit.*, pp. 138-39.

¹⁵ W. Reader, *Professional Men* (1966), pp. 71, 120-23.

¹⁶ G. Ivey, *The Club Directory* (1879), p. iii.

¹⁷ Cf. the rate of membership of the different clubs in the *Who's Who* sample.

¹⁸ R. Nevill, *op. cit.*, p. 156.

local and national levels.¹⁹ From the 1880s, however, their position was undermined due to a combination of their economic decline and the extension of the vote. With the onset of the agricultural depression, landed society saw a sharp decrease in its wealth. Meanwhile, new fortunes were made from trade and industry. Thus, if during the mid-Victorian period even a small landowner could compete with most British manufacturers, by the end of the century only a very small minority of the greatest magnates could rival with these new and colossal fortunes.²⁰ As a result, 'by the 1880s the basis of the London Society membership [began] to widen ...[as] the amount of wealth became as important a criterion to entry to Society as its source.'²¹

The deceleration of the growth of clubs is explained by the idea that clubs were essentially a status good, their expansion eroding their own value. According to Nevill, writing in 1911:

People of every rank of life have their club, and the social distinction which was formerly attached to membership of a number of these institutions has in consequence sustained a considerable decline, even fashionable West End clubs having lost much of their prestige. [...] Clubs into which admission could only be gained, twenty or thirty years ago, by those whose names had been on the candidates' book for nine, ten, or even twelve years, are now obliged to elect members put down only a year or two before.²²

However, if there was a deceleration of *growth* with the turn of the century, absolute club numbers did not themselves decline. There was still intense club activity: a High Society magazine called *Clubland* began in 1910, specialising in reporting and announcing events in West End clubs, although it seems to have disappeared soon after its foundation.²³ The less prestigious clubs may have lost standing with the expansion, but the best kept a high position and even today confer a mark of distinction on their members.

5: Political Clubs

By 1890 political clubs represented around 47 per cent of total club membership. The first wave of clubs in the nineteenth century, the Travellers, the Union, and the Portland, explicitly claimed no party allegiance. The Reform Bill of 1832 stimulated the creation of new political clubs; according to figure 2, this was followed by a long period of fallow.²⁴ A second wave of club foundations started in the 1860s and reached its height in the 1880s. The growth in membership was spectacular between 1880 and 1890, when membership increased by more than four times (see table 13). After the 1890s almost no new political clubs were created, and the membership of existing ones declined.

Chronology

The 1832 Reform Bill enlarged the traditional electorate by including a large proportion of the middle-class. The Conservatives, who generally represented the landed interest, were severely defeated in the

¹⁹ D. Cannadine, *The Decline and Fall of the British Aristocracy* (1990), pp. 8-16.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

²¹ L. Davidoff, *op. cit.* (1973), p. 59.

²² R. Nevill, *op. cit.*, p. 157.

²³ P.G. Bamber (ed.), *Clubland* (1910). I could locate only Vol. 1, nos. 1-3.

²⁴ These are clubs that existed in 1870-1910. There may have been other political clubs that did not survive.

first General Election held under the new franchise. Following this defeat the party perceived an acute need for reconstruction to respond to the new political configuration. To assist in that aim, the Carlton Club was created.²⁵ Since there was little formal political organisation, it played an important political role at least until the late 1860s as ‘a meeting place, a convenient social setting for the very personal business of party management.’²⁶

Figure 2: The foundation of political clubs.

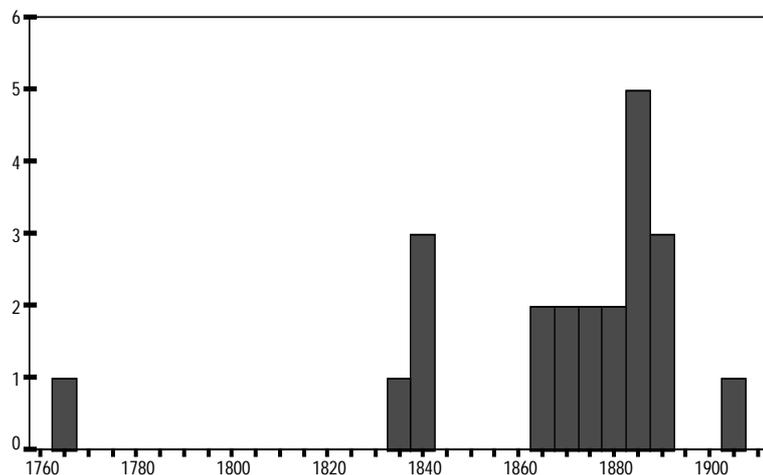


Table 13: Membership of political clubs.

	Total	Mean
1870	6,530	1,091
1880	11,533	1,153
1890	49,350	2,597
1900	42,370	2,492
1910	34,650	2,165

An equivalent institution was created by the Liberals in 1837: ‘The existence of this new club (The Carlton), larger than Brooks’s, Boodle’s or White’s, more overtly political in nature and less exclusively limited to territorial grandees, inspired the Radicals to think that something similar should be done for the party of reform.’²⁷ The initial plan was for an institution that would embrace both Whigs and Radicals. Some prominent members of Brooks’s supported the idea but the less progressive Whigs were opposed. Little progress was made until the Radicals decided to set up their own club which the Whigs were free to join. Eventually members of Brooks’s felt an important opportunity was being lost in not participating in the foundation of the new club, and dispatched representatives to negotiate terms. At the opening of the Reform Club in May 1836, there were twenty Radicals and fifteen Whigs on the committee, most of the Cabinet members, and even the more recalcitrant grandees such as Lansdowne joined soon after.²⁸

²⁵ A. Lejeune, *White’s* (1993), p. 122.

²⁶ J. Cornford, ‘The Transformation of Conservatism in Late 19th Century’ (1963), p. 42.

²⁷ P. Ziegler, *Brooks’s of the Reform Bill* (1991), p. 56.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 56-57.

Table 14: Foundation dates, membership and entrance fees of political clubs.

Name	Fou.	Membership					Entrance fees (gns)					Description
		1910	1900	1890	1880	1870	1910	1900	1890	1880	1870	
Brooks's	1764	650	600	600	600	600	30	25	15	9	9	Liberal, social
Carlton	1832	1,800	1,800	1,600	1,633	950	38	29	29	19	19	Conservative
Reform	1837	1,450	1,400	1400	1,400	1,400	38	38	38	30	30	Strictly Liberal
International	1838			2,000								Political, social
Conservative	1840	1,300	1,300	1,200	1,200	1,200	30	30	30	30	30	Conservative
Jnr. Carlton	1864	2,100	2,100	2,100	2,000	2,000	37	37	37	27	27	Strictly Conservat.
Cobden	1866	700	950	960	300		0	0	0	0		Free trade, peace
City Carlton	1868	1,000	1,000	1,000	500	400	10	21	15	15	10	Conserv. & Union.
St. Stephen's	1870	1,150	1,250	1,500	1,500		10	10	20	30		Conservative
City Liberal	1874	800	920	1,070	1,150				20	20		Liberal
Devonshire	1875	1,200	1,200	1,500	1,250		15	15	30	30		Liberal
Beaconsfield	1879				0							Conservative
Eighty	1880		600	400				1	1			Strictly Liberal
National Lib.	1882	6,000	6,000	7,000				0	10			Liberal
Palace	1882		250	220				0	0			Conservative
Constitutional	1883	6,500	6,500	6,500			15	15	10			Political, Constit.
National Cons	1886			2,600					10			Conservative
Primrose	1886	350	5,500	6,500								Conservative
Jnr. Constitut.	1887	5,000	5,500	10,000			10	6	4			Unionist
Nat. Union	1887			1,200					0			Unionist
Jnr. Conserv.	1889	3,000	5,500									Conserv. & social
United Empire	1904	1,650					0					Tariff Reform.

None of the political clubs from the almanacs' lists were founded between 1840 and 1864. This is remarkable and might be related to the absence of political reform and serious change in political organisation over this period. Throughout this time the distinction between the Conservatives and the Liberals was vague. This was due in part to the adjustment of the Conservative Party to the enfranchisement of the urban middle class. Indeed, reforms previously perceived to be of Liberal interest such as the repeal of the Corn Laws and other free-trade measures took place under the ministry of the Conservative Peel (1841-46).²⁹

Then followed a period largely dominated by Liberal and Whig governments. Nevertheless, there was no political reform (that would have to wait until the late 1860s) but only some more economic reforms. These reforms were the results of the action of pressure groups organised in voluntary associations, most notably the Anti Corn Law League, founded in 1839. Those from the middle-class who had gained political recognition in 1832 did not create their own separate political party but rather identified largely with the Liberals, even though the Parliamentary Liberal party had still in the 1860s a 'massive and homogeneous landed right wing, amounting for about half its members in England.'³⁰ Indeed, given the small share of the middle-class in the population and the electorate, a parliamentary party of their own may not have served them better. Pressure groups were the best institutions for them to implement the reforms for which they were seeking.³¹ Also, it was not in the

²⁹ Characteristically, the only political club in our list created during this period is the Conservative (1840) (see C. Petrie, *The Carlton Club* (1972), p. 78).

³⁰ J. Vincent, *The Formation of the Liberal Party* (1966), p. 4.

³¹ H. Perkin, *The Origins of Modern English Society 1780-1880* (1969), p. 365.

interests of the enfranchised middle-class that the electorate should be further enlarged to include members of the working class with whom they had little common interest. These circumstances may explain why there was little progress in the organisation of politics and hence why no political club was founded over that period.

The political clubs founded in the 1860s and 1870s were all either Junior Clubs (the Junior Carlton and the Devonshire) or clubs founded for their proximity to the City (the City Carlton and the City Liberal) or Parliament (St. Stephen). In both cases they can be viewed as offshoots of existing clubs designed to respond to specific needs. Their membership and entrance fees were very similar to those of the clubs founded in the 1830s; this generation of clubs was more of an enlargement of the previous one, rather than the introduction of a genuinely new type of institution. The Cobden Club was an exception. Even though it was listed together with the other clubs in the almanacs, it was of a different kind in having no clubhouse. The club was founded in 1866, a year after the death of Cobden, by his friends, and its object was the promotion of free trade by the means of publication, debates, and awards of prizes to academic works.³²

The first junior political club was the Junior Carlton. It was created in 1864 with the support of the Carlton in order to relieve its waiting list, so as to prevent Conservative sympathisers becoming frustrated from having to wait too long for membership.³³ The entrance fee of the Junior Carlton was 42 per cent *higher* than that of the Carlton in 1870 and 1880, although in later decades the gap decreased. Since the most influential members of the Conservative Party were members of the Carlton, a high entrance fee was one way to select from among the sympathisers who were not influential enough to be easily eligible to the Carlton.

In the Liberal camp, the Devonshire was founded after the defeat at the General Election of 1874. At that moment, ‘the only West End Liberal club-house of repute was the Reform, with a prestige of forty years’ existence and a long waiting list. [...] The proposed new club was intended to be a sort of “chapel-of-ease” to the Reform; a junior but a more aggressive institution.’³⁴

The foundation of clubs in the City indicates its increased importance in political life. The City Carlton was founded in 1868. Here again the Conservatives led, the City Liberal being founded in 1874. The entrance fee of the City Carlton was relatively low (15 gns), and interestingly it was 5 gns cheaper than the entrance fee of the City Liberal in 1880 and 1890.³⁵ The growth of the London clubs was accompanied by the establishment of new political clubs in the provinces, usually through local initiative.³⁶

The generation of the 1880s

In order to respond to the enlargement of the political base, during the 1880s a new type of political club was created, with very large membership and low entrance fees. The National Liberal (1882), the

³² G. Jackson, *The Cobden Club* (1938), p. 31. Another club created during that period is the Beaconsfield, founded in 1879. However it is listed only in 1880, not in later decades.

³³ C. Petrie, *op. cit.*, pp. 89-90.

³⁴ H.T. Waddy, *The Devonshire Club* (1919), pp. 11-14.

³⁵ The entrance fee of the City Liberal was suspended in 1900 (cf. *Hazell's Annual*), and in 1910 there is no more entrance fee (cf. *Hazell's*). But this certainly related to the decline of the Liberal Party after the mid 1880s.

³⁶ H. Hanham, *Elections and Party Management* (1959), p. 102.

Constitutional (1883), the Primrose (1886), the Junior Constitutional (1887), and the Junior Conservative (1889) all had a membership of at least 5,000 members, while the biggest political club that existed before that time was of only 2,100 members.³⁷ Hanham writes that ‘a whole range of political clubs was created in London, of which the National Liberal and the Constitutional were the more important, designed specifically to provide provincial political leaders and clubmen with a club away from home in London.’³⁸ The National Liberal was the first club to acquire very large numbers (it had 7,000 members in 1890). The Constitutional was the Conservative equivalent to the National Liberal. It is significant that this time the Liberals, rather than the Conservatives, created a new form of political club.

From the 1880s onwards the question of Irish Home Rule lay at the heart of political life. The decline of the Liberal Party after the party’s split on the Irish question is clearly reflected in the absence of new Liberal political clubs and the decrease in the membership of the existing Liberal clubs during a period where more Conservative clubs were created. The importance of the Irish question is also exemplified in the creation of two new Unionist clubs in 1887 (The Junior Constitutional and the National Union). After the 1880s no new political clubs were created apart from the United Empire for the promotion of Free Trade in 1904. Instead, there was a decrease in the membership of political clubs (from a total membership over 50,000 in 1890 to about 35,000 in 1910). This relative decline may be related to a series of circumstances, even though it is not possible to establish direct causal links.

After the major political crisis on the question of Ireland passions calmed down, and no other political issue caused such a general fervour. In addition, ‘men seemed to have lost that sense of personal identification to their leaders which had been so important since 1832.’³⁹ Instead, politics became more professional and party organisation was developed to deal with mass politics. The most dynamic organisations became once again extra-parliamentary pressure groups, notably the trade unions and later the suffragettes. These changes in the scale and organisation of politics diminished the power of the London political élite, and the decrease of their influence may have led to a weaker attraction of the London political clubs. However, none of the clubs founded before the 1860s saw a decline in their membership. The older generation of clubs that contained the most important members of the party still played an important role by providing a place to meet and discuss the daily management of politics.

The reaction of the different generation of clubs to each other is instructive. The most remarkable feature is the reaction of the existing clubs to the new generation of the 1880s. The membership of clubs established prior to 1880 barely increased in the 1880s. New clubs were created to respond to the enlargement of the electorate, but the existing ones kept their position although did not enlarge their memberships. The older clubs increased their entrance fees very substantially between 1880 and 1890. This seems to be the result of a strategic action to differentiate themselves from the new generation rather than a response to financial conditions, since there was no increase in their *annual* fees over that period. An increase in the entrance fee was no cost to the existing members, and permitted them to reinforce their position by making it more difficult for future members to join. By

³⁷ Two other political clubs were founded over that period: the Eighty, and the Palace. Both had a small membership; however they are not listed in 1910. Besides, the Eighty had no clubhouse.

³⁸ H. Hanham, *The Reformed Electoral System in Great Britain 1832-1914* (1968), p. 21.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

contrast, in 1870 and 1880 the most prestigious clubs were not those with the highest entrance fees. For these clubs, the entrance fee was not the main instrument of selection of members. The best example is that of Brooks's which was perhaps the most exclusive club, but had the second lowest entrance fee in 1870 and 1880.

It is significant that the old generation of clubs did not find it necessary to increase their entrance fees in the 1870s, even though new political clubs were created during that decade. On the contrary, clubs founded in the 1860s and 1870s had a higher entrance fee on average than the older generation of clubs (the most striking case is that of the Junior Carlton which had an entrance fee 42 per cent higher than the Carlton). The most influential members of a party, by definition, would be admitted to the most prestigious clubs. Among the remaining applicants, it was more difficult to know how to select in order to build up the reputation of the club. A high entrance fee permitted a first selection of potential members by wealth.

Another striking feature is that Liberal clubs tended to have higher entrance fees than Conservative ones. The Reform was, throughout the period, the political club with the highest entrance fee. This was about 50 per cent higher than the Carlton's in the 1870s, but the gap decreased with the general increase of entrance fees of this generation of club after the 1880s. A remarkable exception is the Conservative Club that had (with the Reform) the highest entrance fee in 1870 and 1880. One could speculate that, since the Conservative was in part a dissident Conservative club, it was also confronted with the problem of defining criteria of selection, which it solved in part with a high entrance fee.

Conservative versus Liberal clubs

Table 15 suggests that Conservative clubs were more developed than the Liberal ones, with a larger number of clubs and total membership, even before the 1880s.

Table 15: Members of Conservative, Liberal and Unionist clubs.

	Conser.	Union.	Liberal
1870	4,150 (4)	400 (1)	2,000 (2)
1880	6,333* (6)	500 (1)	4,700 (5)
1890	22,220 (11)	12,200 (3)	12,930 (7)
1900	24,200 (10)	6,500 (2)	11,670 (7)
1910	21,000 (10)	6,000 (2)	10,800 (6)

From *Whitaker's*. Number of clubs in parentheses. * This figure does not include the members of one club that did not have a limit to membership, and consequently of which we do not know the number of members. Since this club was Conservative (The Beaconsfield Club), this figure tends to underestimate the total number of Conservative members.

With the exception of the creation of the National Liberal (1882) that preceded the foundation of the Constitutional (1883), the Conservatives took the lead in founding of political clubs. The Carlton (1832), the Junior Carlton (1864) and the City Carlton all preceded the creation of the Devonshire (1875) and the City Liberal (1874). These political clubs also seem to have played different roles for the two parties:

The Carlton is used equally by the official leaders, the patrician chiefs of the [Conservative] party, and by the rank and files of their followers. [...] every Conservative has a club acquaintance – and for the

most part a club acquaintance only – with his accepted chieftains. There is no such comprehensiveness or homogeneity as this about in the Liberal clubs. The ordinary members of the Liberal party are members of the Reform [...] The leaders of the Liberal party go to Brooks's. The Carlton is in fact what it pretends to be: a politico-social institution, the accepted rendez-vous and head-quarter of the accredited representatives of a party. The Reform Club lacks political unity among its members and the pervading consciousness of a political purpose.⁴⁰

This may have been because even though the social make up of the two parliamentary parties did not differ much, the Liberal camp was still more heterogeneous. The first source of heterogeneity came from the alliance between the Whig aristocracy and the Liberal middle-class, which was institutionalised in the existence of two clubs, Brooks's and the Reform; in contrast the Conservatives only had the Carlton. The Whigs were reluctant to mix with their political allies. Their fief was Brooks's, where a handful of members controlled its entry procedures. This is shown by the fact that the same names recur regularly among those who proposed or seconded new members.⁴¹ Despite (or because of) its aristocratic exclusiveness, Brooks's political influence in the Liberal party was considerable (if the number of Cabinet ministers that belonged to the club can be regarded as an indicator), and it remained high at the end of the century even if it had declined.⁴² The existence of Whig and Liberal clubs highlighted the weakness of the alliance. This was stressed by Glyn, the Liberal Chief Whip, in a letter to Gladstone: 'I wish Brooks Club was shut up – it does positive harm.'⁴³

From 1886, the slower development of the Liberal clubs was primarily due to the split of the party on the Irish question. When this matter of disagreement ceased to exist the party, even though weakened, could recover some unity. But the political cohesion of the Liberal clubs was more irreversibly compromised: some of their members not only became Unionist but even sat on the Tory side of the Commons and participated in Conservative governments without resigning their club membership.⁴⁴

6: Conclusion

This paper attempts to explain the proliferation of clubs in the late nineteenth century. Club expansion rested on two interdependent functions. Firstly, membership in a club gave access to a set of individuals. This accessibility had a spatial dimension, with the club constituting a physical place where one could find and meet its individual members. This spatial role partly explains the geographical concentration of clubs in the St James area. Saving time in making acquaintances and contacts, the club played the role of an information hub. The possibility of easy access to people was valuable in a society in which social conventions were very formal. The principle of equality among

⁴⁰ T.H. Escott, *England, Its People, Polity, and Pursuits* (1885), pp. 344-45.

⁴¹ P. Ziegler, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

⁴² In Lord Russel's ministry 1846-52: 13 Cabinet ministers out of 15 were members of Brooks's; in the Palmerston Cabinet of 1855: 11 out of 14; in that of 1859: 8 out of 15; in the first Cabinet of Gladstone in 1868: 10 out of 15; in the second in 1880: 9 out of 14 in his third in 1886: 8 out of 14; and still in the Cabinet of 1892: 8 out of 17, see R. Blake, *Victorian Brooks's* (1991), p. 60.

⁴³ Glyn to Gladstone, 4 Sept. 1868, quoted in Vincent, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

⁴⁴ W.J. Fisher, *Liberal Clubs and the Liberal Party* (1904), p. 129.

members of a club weakened the constraints imposed by social etiquette and simplified intercourse between individuals.

Secondly, club membership provided an important and increasingly necessary source of status. As a member of a high-ranking club, an individual gained prestige from being seen as someone worthy of belonging to that club; he also gained privileged access to the club's other prestigious members. This explains why membership of these clubs was so much sought after. Some stratification operated because not all clubs possessed the same status. The process of selection led to a hierarchy of clubs with the reputation of each depending on its success in attracting prestigious members. But these divisions were not tight and there were different degrees of exclusivity, since influential individuals commonly joined more than one club.

Club expansion grew even faster than the middle class, as the number of 'gentlemen' increased with the shifting relative position of the upper and middle classes. The large number of clubs led to tough competition for prestige resulting in a large turnover, with clubs rising and falling frequently. The core of the top clubs was more stable, however: the old generation of clubs, particularly those created before 1840, maintained a high position, as did some clubs founded in the 1860s.

The growth of clubland was stimulated by the extension of democracy and by the general political mobilisation during the Irish crisis in the 1880s. Its growth was exhausted by the end of the century. Just as clubs in their heyday provided much needed information networks and personal access, it is perhaps no coincidence that their decline corresponded with the introduction and spread of new communication and transport technologies: the telephone, the electric tram, the automobile and the electrification and extension of the Underground. Finally, there is reason to think that the pursuit of status goods is a self-defeating enterprise, and that the growth of clubs thus ultimately devalued their own exclusivity.

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