

# FIVE CLUBS FOR THE PRICE OF ONE

## The East India Club, London

by Lew Toulmin

We stayed at the East India Club for three nights in August 2017. The club is housed in a beautiful large Georgian building in St. James Square.

Organizationally it is a whole-even-bigger-than-the-sum-of-its-parts club, being an amalgamation of the East India, Devonshire, Sports, Public Schools, and



Eccentrics clubs! Called the East India Club or EIC for short, it has a super location just a few hundred yards from St. James Palace, very close to terrific shops on Jermyn Street, and about three short blocks from Piccadilly Square and its tube station.

Members joke that the club symbol shown above is a “lion in search of somewhere to hang his crown.”

### HISTORY

The EIC began about 1841 when officers of the Honourable East India Company realized the need for lodging rooms and an association in London for men on leave. Annual dues were only two guineas, with no entrance fee! The Club was formally founded in 1849 with the acquisition of its current clubhouse at No. 16 St. James Square.

The Square was created in 1662 by Henry Jermyn, the Earl of St. Albans, and a large house was erected in 1676. The first occupant at this location was a duelist and rake who fought a duel in the square, and was killed in a duel in Leige at the age of 24.

In 1815 news of the great victory at Waterloo was brought to the address by Major Henry Percy, since the Prince Regent (later George IV) was attending a party there. Percy laid two captured French gold regimental eagles and flags at the feet of the Prince, and an



announcement was made from the balcony of the victory to the excited crowd outside. The two French standards are still retained by the Club, and are placed on either side of a portrait of the Prince Regent.



St. James Square was re-numbered in 1884 by the Board of Works, so that the Club address was legally changed from No. 16 to No. 14. The Club fought this hated re-numbering valiantly for 22 years, refusing to surrender and install the new number until 1906!

In World War II the Square was bombed and the Club somewhat damaged. Other nearby clubs were destroyed, and their members were immediately offered accommodations and services at the EIC. The Club also provided lodging for American officers stationed in London during the war. One such officer was famously asked what he thought of London. “It’s the a\*\*hole of Europe!” was the answer. “Ahh, you’re just passing through, are you?” was the quick, barbed reply.

In a cautionary tale, the EIC’s magazine notes that in 2014 a club staffer had an on-line gambling problem, and “mis-appropriated” substantial funds from the club. Partial recovery is still in process, with the staffer’s pension to be forfeited, and recompense from the bank involved (who should have detected the illicit transactions) being sought. This bank is described as having “disgraceful and arrogant...behaviour” towards its customers. Perhaps a warning to all persons involved in club management.

## **MEMBERSHIP**

Full membership in the Club is still restricted to men, although there are no parts of the club that are closed to women, and female reciprocal members may stay, come and go freely. Membership is no longer connected to the India or the East, but rather to distinction in one’s profession and the support of at least two existing members. There are 5216 members, a very substantial number.

About 40 percent of these members entered under the interesting “J7” scheme, which was inherited from the Public Schools Club when that was amalgamated. Under this scheme a top graduate of any of 250 public (i.e., private) schools may be nominated by his headmaster, and he will then only pay a one-time fee of 480 pounds, and no yearly dues, between the ages of 18 and 25. At 25 dues begin to kick in gradually, reaching the standard fee of 1120 pounds for London members over 35 years of age, 800 pounds for members over 35 living more than 50 miles away, and 625 pounds for members living

overseas. The public schools in the scheme include famous schools such as Eton, Harrow and Rugby; the oldest school involved is the King's School at Canterbury, founded in 597 A.D.! Shields of the 250 schools in the scheme are displayed on the walls of the club in the entry hall.



Distinguished members over the years have included Prime Minister Winston Churchill, Field Marshall Bernard Montgomery, Field Marshall Frederick Roberts (Victoria Cross, relief of Lucknow during the Indian Mutiny, captured Kabul, relieved Kandahar, Commander of British Forces worldwide, etc.), Lord Herbert Kitchener (captured Khartoum, Commander-in-Chief of the

Army in India, Secretary of State for War, etc.), explorers Sir Richard Francis Burton and John Hanning Speke, and many others.



## FACILITIES AND DRESS CODE

The Club has a very imposing building fronting on St. James Square with another perpendicular wing behind. Facilities include the American Bar, the Canadian Room, the main dining room, a library, numerous other meeting rooms, a small basement gym, a large room devoted to the “World Rugby Hall of Fame,” and numerous lovely portraits



and works of art relating to the East. Visitors can purchase Club polo shirts for only 28 pounds, as well as various other souvenirs such as cuff links, ties, blazers, mugs, umbrellas, buttons, history of the club, etc. from the front desk.

The dress code for all meals including breakfast is jacket and tie for men and dresses or trousers for women. The Club has reduced activities on the weekend, but the dress code is still in force.

Members and reciprocals need not observe the dress code when going in or out of the club directly to/from their rooms.

The EIC has about 114 reciprocal clubs around the world, including the hard-to-secure Travellers Club in Paris. Club activities include observing or participating in numerous sports, including polo, sailing, rowing, shooting, rugby, horse racing, cricket, backgammon, chess, classic car rallies, etc. Lectures on military and international affairs are regularly offered, as are tours of foreign battlefields.



## **FOOD**

We had dinner on a Sunday night and three breakfasts at the club. The reduced Sunday menu consisted of only one starter, one entrée, and three desserts. The mushroom soup starter was excellent, an “A,” but the entrée of watery chicken was only a “B-.” We asked for one of the listed desserts, ice cream, but were told a confusing tale of how the chef was not available to make the dish, and it could not be served. We insisted, and received strawberry and lemon ice cream instead of the requested strawberry and vanilla.

The EIC boasts that it has “the best breakfast in London.” It is very good, especially since it is included in the room rate, but in our opinion is not outstanding.

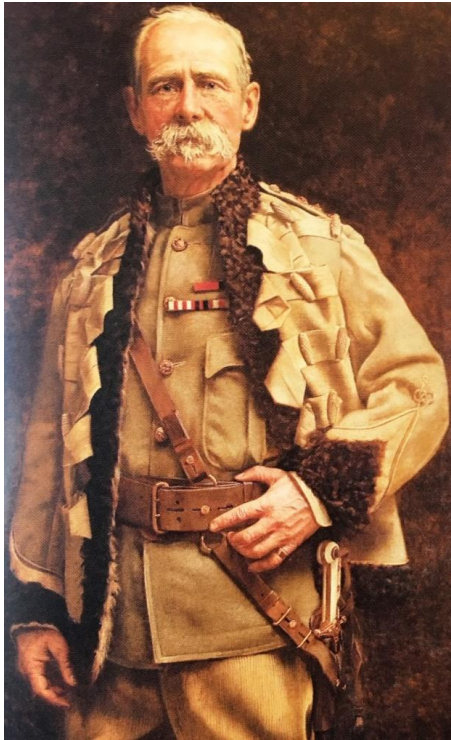
Food and front desk service was friendly but communication problems created some issues.

## **BEDROOMS**

There are 67 bedrooms at the Club, all air-conditioned. Our en-suite king bedroom was about 15 x 15 feet, large for London. It had an attractive décor, effective AC, modern TV, good included WiFi, writing desk, safe and armoire. As a reciprocal we paid 208 pounds per night. While we stayed on the second floor the third floor was being re-furnished and hence there was some construction noise between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m. The window opened on to a large airshaft, with no view.

Of all the six London clubs we have stayed in or inspected, this bedroom provided the best combination of good size, effective AC and reasonable rate.

Other photos of the club are shown below.



Lord Roberts



Lord Kitchener



-30-