

# **GREAT PUBLIC SPACES, SMALL BEDROOMS, MI5, NO BUM-FREEZERS ALLOWED**

**The Oxford and Cambridge Club, London**

by Lew Toulmin



We stayed at the Oxford and Cambridge Club in September 2017 for four nights. The club is located at 71 Pall Mall, on the south side of the street, near St. James Palace.

## **HISTORY**

At the beginning of the 1800s there were only about six clubs in London, with perhaps a total of 1200 members. A century later there were at least 200 clubs with over 200,000 members! Three of these were the United University Club, founded in 1821; the Oxford and Cambridge University Club, 1830; and the University Club, 1864. All these and two smaller clubs amalgamated through 1973 to become the Oxford and Cambridge Club (the O-C), in its present location.

Original members of the United University Club included the Chancellors of Oxford and of Cambridge, three dukes, forty-eight other peers, about fifty knights, the Archbishop of Canterbury, 248 other clergy (including the Bishop of Llandaff, famous for being the last person in England to be robbed by a highwayman, in 1799), the Secretary at War, the Home Secretary and several other members of the Cabinet, various professors and scholars, numerous lawyers, and virtually all the heads of the most distinguished public schools (i.e., private high schools) in the country. Over time ten Prime Ministers were members. Fees were set at ten guineas.

During World War I some 1414 Britons lost their lives to aerial bombardment from Zeppelins or Gotha bombers, but only one of the various O-C clubs was damaged, and that by friendly fire. One member complained that because of a bombing raid in 1917, he was not served his dinner, and demanded that his two shillings be refunded. The request was granted.

During World War II club members industriously put out numerous threatening incendiary bombs, but the only real damage was a mysterious possible bullet hole in one of the Club mirrors. Rumor had it that this was actually caused by a bored page boy who shot at his own reflection, rather than by enemy action. Surprisingly the quality of club food was not much diminished, with members commenting favorably on the pigeon pie.

But the quality of the wine cellar suffered, since club military strategists had not anticipated the fall of France, and had not stocked up.

One famous member who lived at the club for most of the war was Nevil Shute, author of the apocalyptic novel *On the Beach*. He wrote three of his novels at the club, in bedroom number 8, and his *A Town Like Alice* (about emigration to Australia) had several scenes set at the club.



During the 1960s and '70s, the club became the favorite watering hole of MI5, the Security Service. One MI5 member spent the day interrogating a man suspected of spying for the Russians, then retired with his fellow interrogators to



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## MEMBERSHIP

Eligible applicants must have a degree, an MA, Ph.D., or an honorary degree from Oxford or Cambridge Universities, or be on the faculty or staff of one of the institutions. Currently enrolled students also qualify. Applicants must have support from two existing members, their relationship to the two universities is verified and a committee considers the case and posts the name for about a month, and then the committee decides.

Members can be expelled, and have been on occasion for severe drunkenness, non-payment of debts or bounced checks. In 1877 a notice was filed in *The Times* of an upcoming internal Club court and vote to consider the case of a member who had accused a fellow member of “being no gentleman” and “a damned snob.” (Geez, I thought that was the whole point!) The offender was expelled by a vote of 220 to 5.

For many years the various clubs later amalgamated into the O-C had “lady associates” who were not full members. This changed in 1996 when an overwhelming vote was taken to admit women as full members. The first woman elected was Queen Margrethe II of Denmark.

Annual Club subscription rates vary from 1250 pounds for a member 32 years old or more living within 100 miles of the clubhouse, to 312 pounds for a person 24 or younger living within 100 miles, to 833 for an adult “country” member (over 100 miles away), to

417 for an overseas retired member. The current entrance fee is one half of the applicable annual subscription rate.

Various famous Club members have included King Edward VII, Prince Philip, the Duke of Wellington, T. S. Eliot, Stephen Fry and Prime Minister Clement Attlee.

## **LOCATION, ARCHITECTURE, FACILITIES AND ACTIVITIES**

The Club is located about a half mile from the Green Park tube station, which is on the Piccadilly Line out to Heathrow Airport, and which has sequential elevators to the street level. So it is possible to roll your luggage the entire way to Heathrow, without carrying it up or down stairs. The alternate Piccadilly tube station has steps that cannot be avoided via elevator.

The main Club building at 71 Pall Mall is a Grade II listed structure in the Greek Revival style, and was designed for the Club in 1838 by the well-known architect Sir Robert Smirke, a Club member. He was famous for designing the British Museum. The next-door building at 77 Pall Mall was incorporated into the Club in 1952. It was formerly the home of Princess Marie Louise, the grand-daughter of Queen Victoria.



The Club is around the corner from the little-known but lovely Queen's Chapel, a part of St. James Palace designed by Inigo Jones, and open to the public for church services on Sundays, usually during the summer. Royals and relateds often use it for weddings. The Club is also an excellent location for participating in Open House London, the fabulous September weekend where hundreds of London landmarks, buildings and houses are open to the public for free. ([www.openhouselondon.org.uk](http://www.openhouselondon.org.uk)) The O-C is very near the Open House locations of the Royal Society, Marlborough House (the Commonwealth HQ), Clarence House (home of the Prince of Wales), the Queen's Chapel, etc.



Many of the Oxford and Cambridge Club's public rooms are extremely attractive and opulent, and are one of the main features of the club.

The club amenities include 40 bedrooms, three

library rooms (one silent) with a librarian and 20,000 volumes, two bars, smoking room (but no smoking is allowed!), various beautiful meeting and function rooms, formal dining room (oddly called the “Coffee Room”), a billiards room, two squash courts (with an unprotected observation deck with tables and chairs), a business/work area, roof terrace, good WiFi, and reciprocal relations with about 153 clubs in 36 countries.



Club sports activities include bridge, snooker, billiards, chess, backgammon, golf and squash. Lectures by distinguished writers and persons are often held. Recent lecturers included HM King Harald V of Norway, the Earl Spencer, the Mayor of London, Stephen Fry (a member), HM Queen Margrethe II of Denmark (a member), and other notables. Each year the club organizes an overseas trip to locations such as Paris, St. Petersburg, the Nile and Sicily. Various special interest groups exist to follow pursuits such as military history, art history and literature.



## **BEDROOMS**

The Oxford and Cambridge Club has 40 bedrooms, many of which have been redecorated and have air conditioning. Many of the rooms are quite small, however. Our king-bed bedroom (number 307, photo left) was only about 8 by 11 feet, with a small half desk that was unusable because there was not enough room for its chair. The room was so small that there was hardly space for our luggage. The AC was efficient, the bathroom with shower was reasonably large, and the bed was comfortable. The shower leaked water onto the bathroom floor and the bathtub was narrow. There was a flat screen TV, free Wi-Fi, ironing board and iron, and coffee-making facilities. The décor was attractive, with off-white ceiling, brown wall-to-wall carpeting, and taupe and patterned walls. There was only one outlet available to charge computers or other devices. There was no view except of a fire escape.



Our room cost 270 pounds per night, including a Continental breakfast and VAT. We felt that the price per square foot was too high and the room too small, and will likely only use this club as a backup in the future. Many of the other bedrooms are apparently quite similar to ours. However, there are a few rooms (such as number 309; photo left) which are priced somewhat higher (300 pounds) which are larger and have a view of Marlborough House.

Other reciprocal prices for bedroom classes are: three different suites: 440-530 pounds per night; twin with AC: 255; single with AC: 182.

## **DRESS CODE**

The current dress code general rule is coat and tie for men and the equivalent for women. However, “before 11 am on weekdays and 6 pm at weekends, less formality is required.” (Never heard that one before!) Also, “during this period, smart jeans are permitted, but shorts, t-shirts and trainers are never acceptable.” (Unfortunately, currently in London there are no “smart jeans” for young women, only hundreds of thousands of jeans with the knees intentionally torn out!) Although not mentioned in the rules, on the way to/from the bedrooms, business casual is clearly acceptable.

In the past, various forms of dress have been banned or looked down upon, including dinner jackets (known as “bum-freezers”), bicycle costume (consisting of knickerbockers and stockings), flannel trousers and sweaters, and “wearing hats in the dining room.”

## **FOOD**

The club offers breakfast, lunch and dinner seven days a week – rare in clubland. Our included Continental breakfasts were acceptable but not great, with only modest choice and some minor service deficiencies. Full breakfasts were similar.





Our late lunch in the informal Gallery Bar (open quite late; photo left) included a very good burger (12 pounds), a tomato, avocado and feta salad (acceptable) and a pecan pie with vanilla ice cream (very good, 5 pounds).

More photos of the Oxford and Cambridge Club are shown below.





Sarah Churchill, Duchess of Marlborough



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