

*The Montgomery Sentinel*

## Travel Tales

# THE TRAVELLERS CLUB, LONDON: BEAUTY AND CONFLICT



by Llewellyn Toulmin

For the past several months I have been reviewing some of the most fascinating and secretive destinations in Britain: the private clubs of London. Today I will conclude this series by discussing the famous Travellers Club -- one of the city's most beautiful clubs, currently riven by conflict over admitting women members.

The Club was founded by Foreign Secretary Lord Castlereagh in 1819 in the aftermath of the Napoleonic wars, to enable gentlemen to meet distinguished visitors from overseas. The Club evolved into the club of choice for British foreign service officers and foreign ambassadors in London. Annual dues are about 1100 pounds (\$1500 USD).

The clubhouse was built in 1829 by Sir Charles Barry, designer of the Houses of Parliament, later a Club member. His inspiration was the Palazzo Pandolfini in Florence by Raphael. The Club is located at 106 Pall Mall, near the Palace of St. James, National Gallery, Sotheby's, and Piccadilly.



The Club is smaller than other nearby clubs, but the public rooms are gorgeous, and feature original art by Sir Thomas Lawrence, RA FRS (member of the Royal Academy of Arts and Fellow of the Royal Society). The library is deservedly called one of the most beautiful rooms in London.

The striking red and white frieze above the library books is a smaller version of the famous 410 B.C. Bassae Frieze from the Temple of Apollo in Greece. The original is 90 feet long and two



feet high, and is housed in the British Museum. It was excavated by Charles R. Cockerell, a founding member of the Club.

The public rooms include a bar, smoking room, two dining rooms, library and several meeting rooms.

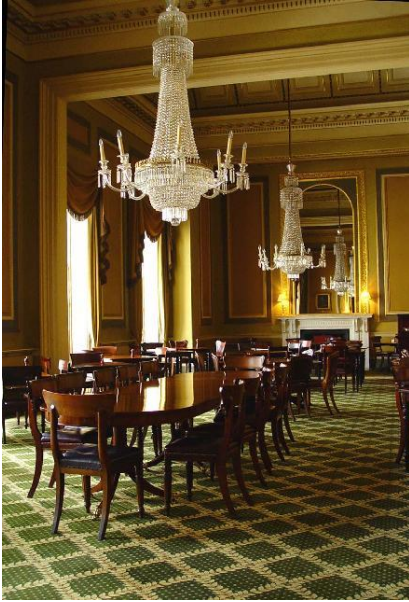
Early Club members included Charles Maurice, 1<sup>st</sup> Prince of Tallyrand (the French ambassador), the Duke of Wellington, Lord Palmerston, Prime Minister Arthur Balfour, and Lord Raglan -- who ordered the disastrous charge of the Light Brigade in the Crimea.

The most distinguished recent member was likely Sir Wilfred Thesiger, CBE DSO FRAS (Companion of the Order of the British Empire, Distinguished Service Order, Fellow of the Royal Asiatic Society). He was an amazing traveler, explorer, writer, member of the elite SAS special forces regiment, and expert on the Marsh Arabs of southern Iraq and the Empty Quarter of Saudi Arabia.

In 2001 the Club was the site of an historic eight-hour meeting between representatives of Col. Gaddafi of Libya and members of the British Foreign Office and MI6, resulting in an agreement that Libya would not pursue weapons of mass destruction.

The royal patron of the Travellers Club is the Duke of Edinburgh. Prince Charles, the Duke of York, the Earl of Wessex, and Prince Michael of Kent are honorary members.

Club membership is open to men only, and this is a source of serious controversy. The "Evening Standard" of London recently published a secret 6000 word report by Antony Layden, Club Chairman and former British ambassador to Morocco and Libya, on this issue. The report stated that 60 percent of the members vigorously oppose women membership, while 40 percent somewhat favor women. Those against change describe their club as a "refuge" compared to mixed clubs, which have "far less enjoyable themes of conversation" and "shrill voices" which reduce the "clubby" nature of their experience.



This is a debate that cuts across many clubs. Of the 53 London clubs listed in Wikipedia, 24 admit women as members, 14 do not, 14 are unknown, and one admits only women. Three clubs, including the prestigious White's and Brook's, do not even allow women to visit! The Travellers allows women to enter, visit, and use the facilities including the bedrooms. But they cannot enter two male-preserved rooms.

Travellers Club members must have traveled at least 500 miles from London, a requirement left over from the time when that was a major achievement. It seems apparent that there just might be a few women in London who qualify! And as one member argued in the secret Layden report, "we are depriving ourselves of the talents and company of many distinguished travellers."

My wife and I toured the Club and ate there in September 2017. We found the public rooms, especially the library, to be absolutely gorgeous. There are 17 bedrooms at the Club, and we saw most of them. As reciprocal members from the Cosmos Club in Washington, DC, we could have stayed in the Traveller's bedrooms, and may in future.

All bedrooms were re-decorated in the last two years, are regularly updated, and all now have air conditioning. Décor varies from plain to charming, but in general the rooms are not quite as attractive as at the Savile, RAC and East India clubs. The best value room, number 15, is a queen bed room costing 250 pounds (\$356 USD) double occupancy during the week and 190 pounds (\$270) on the weekend.

For lunch my wife Susan had the lemon sole, which she rated an "A," at 21 pounds. Her trifle dessert was a trifle too liquid; hence a "B" at 4.5 pounds. I had peppered mackerel (an "A"), roast chicken ("B+") and chocolate sponge pudding ("A-"), all for 21 pounds. The total was 53.60 pounds (\$76), with no tipping allowed under Club rules.

As an inveterate world traveler, I consider the Traveller's Club to be a beautiful temple to my interests. I would probably try to become a member – but only if they allow women to join in the fun!

Lew Toulmin lives in Silver Spring and has visited or stayed in over 50 private clubs around the world.

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Words in the story and bio above: 925

Photos, captions and credits:

1. Sir Wilfred Thesiger, CBE DSO FRAS, a recent highly distinguished explorer and member of the Travellers Club.
2. Sir Charles Barry, designer of the Travellers Club, its garden, and also of the Houses of Parliament.
3. A typical bedroom at the Travellers Club – acceptable but a bit plain and expensive during the week.
4. The “Coffee Room” at the Club – actually the main dining room.
5. The beautiful library at the Club, with the famous plaster reproduction Bassae Frieze from the Temple of Apollo above the books.
6. The glorious reading room at the Travellers Club.
7. A typical meeting room at the Club.
8. The exterior of the Travellers Club, located in Pall Mall, London.
9. The exterior of the Travellers Club, located in Pall Mall, London.
10. A night view of the exterior of the Travellers Club, in Pall Mall, London.

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