

LOVABLE LOCATION, AWFUL ARCHITECTURE

The New Club, Edinburgh

by Lew Toulmin

We stayed at the New Club in September 2017 for three nights. The club is located at 86 Princes Street, two blocks west of the main Edinburgh Waverly train station.



HISTORY

The New Club was founded quite early, in 1787. Previous private clubs in London and Edinburgh had been mostly about joking and drinking in taverns, with clubs like the Facer Club requiring all members to gulp down their entire drinks, or have the remainder thrown in their face! Some early drinking clubs were rather radical, like the Begger's Benison club, which focused on "the obscene celebration of the idea of free sex" and the Easy Club, devoted to "ye Dissolution of the British Union." A few early carousing groups, like the Golden Fleece, required their members to answer only to pseudonyms, such as Sir Timothy Addleplate or Sir Boozy Prate-all. But by the late 1700s, somewhat more serious clubs like Brook's, Boodle's and the New Club were founded by gentlemen who wanted to network, demonstrate their elevated class status, and socialize in their own private clubhouses instead of in public taverns.



Sir Walter Scott (right) and his polite society male friends were early members of the New Club

The New Club in Edinburgh was founded by an earl, three knights, four generals, a colonel, and eleven other gentlemen of quality. According to the club history, the vague goal was celebrating the new "polite society" of the upper ten percent of Scottish society, as opposed to the "ignorant rabble" of the other ninety percent.

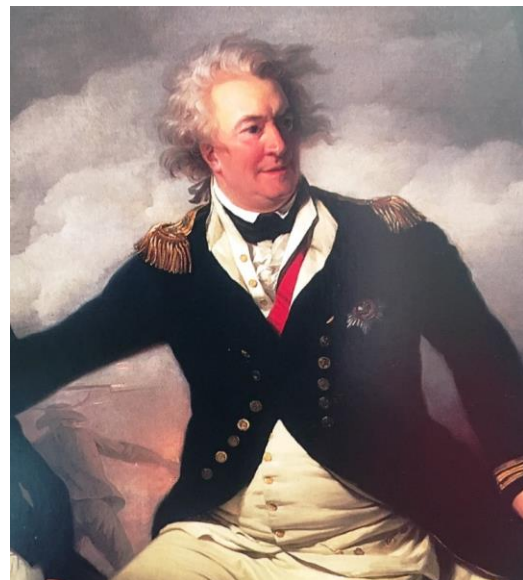
As society evolved, the New Club accepted new gentlemen, including doctors (between 1760 and 1860, Scotland out-produced England in medical doctors by 40 to 1), military officers (in the late 1700s forty percent of Britain's regimental colonels were Scots), and engineers and civil servants (the Honourable East India Company was a "Scottish fiefdom").

In 1864 the University Club was founded in Edinburgh for graduates of UK or foreign universities. In 1953, due to on-going financial losses and post-war hardship, the New Club and the next-door University Club merged, and since have been financially successful.

MEMBERSHIP

Full membership in the Club is open to men and women, by invitation only. Two existing members must support the nomination, then club managers review the application, and then the name is posted for membership review for two months. The main membership criterion is "clubbability." Full members living or working within 25 miles of the Club must pay an entrance fee of 1040 pounds and an annual fee of 830 pounds. Discounts are available for youthful members, out of towners, and foreign members.

Distinguished members over the years of the New Club (and the University Club) have included author/poet Sir Walter Scott (the inventor of the historical novel), Henry Dundas, Viscount Melville (the powerful "uncrowned king of Scotland"), historian Thomas Carlyle, philosopher John Stuart Mill, Archbishop of Canterbury Randall Davidson, Conservative Prime Minister Arthur Balfour, Labour Prime Minister Ramsay Macdonald, Liberal Prime Minister Lord Rosebery, Rajah Sir James Brook (ruler of Sarawak), Admiral the Viscount Camperdown (see photo, victor over the Dutch at the 1797 battle of



Camperdown), Field Marshall Sir Douglas Haig, Governors-General of New Zealand, Jamaica, Canada and India, many members of the Royal Bodyguard for Scotland, various dukes, marquises and earls, and numerous judges, lawyers and sheriffs of Scotland.

Ladies were admitted as full members beginning in 2002. As of 2003, there were 2160 members in total.

LOCATION, ARCHITECTURE, FACILITIES AND ACTIVITIES

The Club location is superb, and is its major attraction. It is two short blocks from the main Edinburgh train station (Waverly), from whence most visitors arrive, half a block from the Scottish Royal Academy (modern art), one block from the Scottish National Gallery, four blocks from the Scottish National Portrait Gallery, and a 15 minute walk uphill to Edinburgh Castle. The club faces Princes Street, one of the major shopping and transit streets of the city.

The club was housed for 130 years in one of the finest Victorian facades on Princes Street (see the photo at the end of the review). The building was in need of major repair, with no running water in the bedrooms, and a bullet still lodged in the wall of one bedroom after a member committed suicide!

Unfortunately, rather than renovate the building, in 1964 the members voted 720 to 10 to a developer's scheme to raze the building, give the club a hefty fee, build a new modern monstrosity, and allow the club a small street entrance and modern rooms in the upper floors in a shopping complex. The result is a strange hodge-podge of ugly modern exteriors and interiors, with beautiful antique portraits, prints, mirrors and tapestries.



The gem of the club in terms of architecture is the formal dining room (see the photo) with its numerous portraits, some nine feet high, most worthy of the National Portrait Gallery of Scotland. This room with its beautiful wood-paneled walls was preserved from the previous club building. Sadly the ceiling is 1960s blah. (Does anyone anywhere doubt that the 1960s and '70s marked the lowest point of mankind's architectural creations since we crawled out of the primordial slime?)

The club has a bar, various meeting rooms, a small gym, parking garage, and hotel wing.

Club activities include curling, golf (of course, since it was invented in Scotland), lectures on Scottish history and issues, and events celebrating Scottish poetry, literature and history.

BEDROOMS

The New Club has 22 bedrooms, including four suites, seven doubles, four twins (all en-suite), and seven single bedrooms, sharing four bathrooms. All rooms have TV, radio, coffee-making facilities and WiFi. None have air conditioning, which can be a problem in the occasional modern heat wave. A few bedrooms have views of Edinburgh Castle.



Our bedroom (see photo) was a twin, rather small, about 9 x 12 feet, with acceptable but somewhat dated décor.

Without AC, we were reliant on the open window and a small electric fan, but these were sometimes inadequate to overcome the internal heat of the building. The window also sometimes let in a few peculiar smells from the back

alley. Our twin was 145 pounds per night (reciprocal rate), including a substantial Continental breakfast. The supplement for a full breakfast was 8 pounds. Double occupancy suites for reciprocals vary from 155 to 195 pounds, depending on the season.

The only public elevator from the reception area up to the various residential floors was out of order for a month for repairs when we visited. So to get our luggage up and down the three flights to our room, we had to be assisted and escorted through the service elevator in the kitchen. We walked the main stairs to dine and leave the building.

Parking for reciprocals is 15 pounds per night in an underground garage.

The New Club has a list of 30 reciprocal clubs in London, 15 elsewhere in the UK, 40 in the USA, and 111 in 35 other countries, for a total of 196 clubs – an impressive number.



DRESS CODE

The dress code is coat and tie for men and the equivalent for women in the formal dining room for dinner and in the formal meeting rooms on the side facing Edinburgh Castle. Business casual wear is acceptable at breakfast and when going to and from one's room.

FOOD

The New Club has an unusually active kitchen schedule, with breakfast, lunch and dinner being provided seven days a week. There are two dining rooms and two bars. A special five-course tasting menu is available on Friday and Saturday nights.

Our (included) Continental breakfasts were good, although the hot chocolate was a little watery. On one morning the croissants were superb, but dropped down to good on two other days.

My wife's dinner started well, with an outstanding chicken liver parfait (an "A+" at 6 pounds, very smooth). However, my starter of a marbled game terrine had little taste, and hence was rated a "B-" at 6.50 pounds. Our dinner entrees included a seared Angus rib eye steak (a "B" at 21.50 pounds) and saddle of Sutherland venison (also a "B" at 15.50 pounds). For dessert we shared elderflower sorbet and strawberry ice cream (another "B").

More photos of the New Club are shown below.



The club's balcony door; note Edinburgh Castle in the distance



Edinburgh Castle as seen from the club balcony



The even stranger interior entrance



The strange club street entrance; cash is at the ready



The old club, now razed and replaced with...



...this glorious example of 1960s architecture



Viscount Melville (1742-1811), the “uncrowned king of Scotland” and member of the New Club. He would have happily had the architect of the new building hanged, drawn and quartered.

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