

INDOOR CRICKET, THE QUEEN MUM, AND SAUDI SUPERCARS

Buck's Club, London

by Lew Toulmin



We ate dinner at and toured Buck's Club in August 2017. The club is located at 18 Clifford Street, a short block west of Savile Row and two short blocks east of New Bond Street, in the eastern part of Mayfair.

HISTORY

Buck's began in June 1919, when various cavalry officers, led by Captain Herbert John Buckmaster of the Royal Horse Guards, realized that the gentlemen's clubs of the time were not meeting their needs. They wanted a less stuffy atmosphere, an American-style cocktail bar, and cheaper dues. They got what they wanted, and today Buck's, named for its founder, is more exuberant than its competitors. For example, we were told that on many evenings after official closing, younger members will play an enthusiastic game of cricket in the bar-room (!), using a standard cricket bat and a tennis-type whiffle ball. This practice is so enshrined that three wickets are painted on the front of the bar, as the target for the bowler. The barmen are apparently not too happy with this ancient practice, since all the bottles behind the bar must be put away to protect them from flying balls.



Buck's is famous for developing the "Buck's Fizz" drink in 1921. This concoction is similar to a mimosa, and uses orange juice and champagne, plus a "secret ingredient" according to the bartender, who would not unravel the mystery.

Buck's is also famous for being one of the inspirations for the fictional Drone's Club of P.G. Wodehouse's novels. Wodehouse was not a member, but did eat at Buck's on occasion. It should be noted though, that the main focus of the Drone's Club was on a group of young civilians getting engaged and un-engaged to various young ladies,

drinking, and avoiding work. By contrast, the real Buck's at the time was largely made up of military officers.

MEMBERSHIP

Full membership in the Club is still restricted to men, by invitation only. There are no parts of the club that are closed to women, and female reciprocal members may come and go freely. Membership is no longer largely connected to the cavalry, although young members of the Household Cavalry and other military officers are encouraged to join. Discounted rates are given in four tiers to members up to age 40. Current members include bankers, solicitors, fund managers, shipbrokers, members of Lloyd's of London, architects, property landlords, management consultants, chartered surveyors and other business and social leaders.



As of several years ago the club membership stood at 585 members who paid a standard rate of about 1000 pounds a year, somewhat less than most similar clubs. This has now (2017) reportedly increased to about 1400 pounds, at or slightly above the average. The joining fee was previously 1000 pounds, but was reportedly dropped entirely in about 2013. Current members average 53 years of age, and the

average age of new members is 40.

Famous members of Buck's have included Winston Churchill (who seems to have been a member of almost every London club); Sir John Major (Prime Minister from 1990 to 1997); Captain Mark Phillips (British Olympian and former husband of Anne, Princess Royal); actor Nigel Bruce (the cheerful Dr. Watson to Basil Rathbone's Sherlock Holmes); and actor Sir Christopher Lee (of Dracula fame).

Patrons of the club have included HM King George VI, Prince Philip, and HRH The Duke of Kent, the current patron.

The Club Secretary is Rupert Lendrum, former Major in the Life Guards, and former equerry to Prince Charles. The club chef is Steve Tuck, formerly head chef at the Regency Hotel.



The Queen Mother was not a member of

Buck's -- and as a woman could not have been. But she did enjoy slipping in to Buck's and watching the telly, having a drink, and chatting with members, after shopping at her dressmaker's just down the street on Savile Row.



FACILITIES AND DRESS CODE

The Club has a rather plain and anonymous looking corner building. The lobby is quite small and the entire facility is more like a very nice townhouse than a grand club. This is quite appropriate, since Captain Buckmaster actually lived in the house during its early years. Facilities include a small library, smoking deck off the library bar, dining room, several meeting rooms, and three bedrooms on the top floor. Unfortunately these bedrooms are not available to reciprocal members, since they are in such high demand. There are no discount relations with nearby hotels.

The dress code is always coat and tie for men and the equivalent for women. Electronic devices must be turned off in the club.

Club activities include having an active polo team (which at one point included Prince Charles), attending polo games, pursuing unusual dining experiences such as seasonal gull's eggs, socializing, and of course indoor night-time cricket.

FOOD

We had dinner at Buck's and were impressed with the service and friendliness of the staff. An amiable group of 30-something Household Cavalry officers and their girlfriends were at the table next to us.



Our meal started with a Rainbow Beetroot

Carpaccio, 9.50 pounds, an "A," and a leek and potato soup, 5.00 pounds, a "B." My Buck's Pie of the Day (16.95 pounds) was rather bland, a "B," and my wife's Grilled Calves Liver was quite good, an "A" at 18.50



pounds. My dessert of a chocolate brownie with vanilla ice cream was good, an “A-“ at 5.50 pounds, while my wife’s Buck’s Fizz sorbet and Passion Fruit sorbet was excellent, an “A” at the same price. All these prices are low by London standards.



Various savory “desserts” such as Scotch Woodcock, Herring Melts, and English, Welsh or Irish Rarebits were on offer at 5.75 to 6.25 pounds, but as sweet-toothed Americans we did not try these – and never will!

The wine cellar is reportedly excellent, but wine is wasted on us, so we did not order any.

As we left the club we were startled by several supercars – a Ferrari and a Lamborghini, both with Saudi license plates – racing noisily down the street. We had been told in the club that during August numerous such cars are flown in from the Persian Gulf area and are driven around and around the streets of Mayfair at night. Watch your step!

