

White's Club

Whilst most Georgian and Regency sites have long since been torn down, White's Club still exists. The Gentleman's Club stands in St. James's Street, in all its Regency splendour and when in London, I took the opportunity to do "on-site" research in the Street. The picture at right shows the facade of the Club, as well as its famous Bow Window, in which Beau Brummell sat holding court. The following is a brief history of the Club. Located at Nos. 37-38 St. James's Street, White's is the oldest and most splendid of the St. James's clubs, White's has its origins in White's Chocolate House, which opened in 1693 in premises which would later become Boodle's Club, on the west side of its present site. In 1711, the house was destroyed by a fire which began in the gaming room, known as Hell. In that same year, Francis White's widow, Elizabeth, allowed a gentleman called Heidegger to use the premises as a centre for the sale of tickets to his ridottos, masquerades and balls, which were fashionable amongst 18th century society. So heavy was the gaming at White's Chocolate House that the Earl of Oxford, Robert Harley, who died in 1724, never passed by White's without bestowing a curse upon it, calling it "the bane of half the English nobility." In 1736, White's began to operate as a private club, rather than a public chocolate house.

The earliest records date from 1763, when White's moved back into its premises, rebuilt after the fire. At that time, the club had eighty-two members, with the first entries made into the infamous Betting Book dating from the same year. A few of the original members were the Duke of Devonshire, the Earls of Cholmondeley, Chesterfield and Rockingham, Sir John Cope, Bubb Dodington and Colley Cibber. By 1775, membership had been limited to one hundred fifty-one, with annual subscription set at ten guineas. In 1781, membership was raised to three hundred members and the club moved to a larger house in St. James's Street. In 1797, membership was again raised, this time to four hundred, and a few new club rules were added, such as the one which set the price of dinner at ten shillings and sixpence per head, with dinner to be "on the Table at Six O'clock, the Bill to be brought at nine." In 1811, the bow window was constructed by a chap named Martindale and set into the middle of the club's facade, the front door being moved to the left.



The Bow Window

It was in this window that Beau Brummell sat and held court until his downfall in 1816, passing judgement on passersby, with his inner circle seated beside him - the Duke of Argyll, Lords Alvanley, Sefton, Worcester and Foley, "Poodle" Byng, "Ball" Hughes and Sir Lumley Skeffington. Whilst everyone who passed the window could be seen by this group, so could they, in turn, be seen by the passersby. However, Brummell's stringent rule made the recognition of, or greeting of, any passerby a breach of his personal etiquette.

In 1812, the club was taken over by George Ragget, who made his fortune there. In 1814, the number of members was five hundred, with the waiting list of potential members growing steadily. When not gaming, eating or setting fashion trends, the members of White's penned their entries into the Betting Book, wagering on everything from matters of life and death to such triflings as whose wife would be the first to beget an heir, who would marry or die first and which young lady would succumb to the charms of various club members.

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