

# The London Season

By Michelle Jean Hoppe

The London Season coincided with the sitting of Parliament. This could begin any time after Christmas, depending upon the success of the hunting season in the country. The season usually began in earnest after Easter session break, since many families remained in country until midwinter or even as late as March.

May signified the 'official' start of the season with an annual exhibition at the Royal Academy of Art. Thus began a whirlwind of court balls and concerts, private balls and dances, parties and sporting events.

The Derby, an event for the masses, was held in May or June. Parliament adjourned for this race. Ascot was more exclusive, and attended by the upper classes. The season peaked in the June fortnight between Derby and Ascot. July hosted the Henley Regatta and cricket contests, with particular attention given to school rivals Oxford and Cambridge, and Eton and Harrow.

Parliament always adjourned on August 12, the opening of the grouse season. Everyone went north and the fashionable deserted London come August.

On a typical day in the season, families would rise early to go riding in Hyde Park. Rotten Row, a sandy track, was the preferable place to be seen, or the Ladies' Mile for the gentler set. Ladies trained throughout their girlhood to become experts in mounting, riding gracefully while still in command of the horse, shaking hands with friends from the saddle, and dismounting. They also learned to control their horse so as to avoid accidents in crowds.

After riding came breakfast. Ladies then went shopping or took care of household chores like paying bills. They would only make morning calls on those they knew extremely well. A well-bred person never called on casual acquaintances in the morning. After lunch, men would go to Parliament or the club. Ladies paid more calls, thus filling the hours between 12p.m. and 5p.m. Calls did not exceed 1/2 hour in length, and from 10 to 20 minutes was considered adequate. If others arrived while paying a call, the first caller would politely leave.

No low-necked dresses nor short sleeves should be seen at day receptions, nor white ties or dress coats. Elegant jewelry and laces were also reserved for the evening.

Dinner was at 6p.m. or 7p.m., followed by a soiree or opera. At the opera, a gentleman always escorted his lady in, walking side by side with her unless the aisle was too narrow. She took the inner seat, he the outer. A gentleman would never leave his lady's side from the beginning to the end of the performance. If she did not wish to join the promenade at intermission, he remained with her in their seats.

Balls and dances started at 10p.m. and went as late as 3 a.m. The ensemble

played an equal number of waltzes and quadrilles, with one or two other dances. Programmes listed the schedule of dances. Balls normally opened with a waltz, followed by a quadrille. Gentleman could be introduced to ladies at a ball solely for the purpose of dancing, but could not presume to further the acquaintance afterward.

At a ball, the hostess provided dressing rooms for ladies and gentlemen, with at least one servant in each to handle guests' needs. A complete set of toilet articles was supplied in the dressing rooms for emergencies.

London became a virtual marriage market during the season. Never were so many people in so small a place looking for a spouse, and all within a few month's time. Girls had to be presented to the Queen before being able to enter society. She had to be presented by a lady of higher rank, whether family member or friend. A young lady was not considered approved for the marriage market until she was presented at court. All titled ladies were eligible to be presented to the Queen, along with the wives and daughters of these professions: clergy, military and naval officers, physicians and barristers, (which were considered aristocratic professions,) but not the wives or daughters of General Practitioners or solicitors.

Once presented, a prospective bride could reasonably attend 50 balls, 60 parties, 30 dinners and 25 breakfasts all in one season. If she didn't marry within two or three seasons, she was considered a failure, and at 30 a hopeless spinster.

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