

## A VERY GREEK CLUB IN LONDON

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About ten summers ago I was in the UK for work attending a trade show over the weekend. On my day off my host, the late Dr. Gerald Graham, invited me to ride down with him to his club in London. When the underground reached Piccadilly Station in St. James we came up the subway system's stairs to the sight of the Ritz Hotel in Mayfair. We had roughly a 10 minute walk to our destination for our noon appointment, but with the distractions of Richard Green Galleries, Peter Finer's Arms and Armour Store, and Farlows Fly fishing shop we gave ourselves an hour of leeway.

We walked up the steps of an impressive Neoclassical style building at the corner of Pall Mall and Waterloo Place and we were greeted by a porter who instantly recognized my host. *"Good Afternoon Dr. Graham. We have your reservation for lunch today."* We were led to the coatroom where we gave our umbrellas to the attendant.

One cannot enter this institution without being mesmerized by the large formal staircase where many famous people had stood at its base to meet their guests for nearly the last 200 years. My host was a regular at the club and had his own routine of first looking at the bulletin board immediately right of the porter, who stands constantly at the door facing towards the street. The bulletin board displays the schedule of upcoming club lectures. Next, I see my host heading toward the large drawing room at the Pall Mall end of the building to the left of the porter to look up the Times articles of recently departed club members.

I instead did the thing that all non-member guest do upon arrival. Standing at the base of the stairway I look upwards at the large entrance hallway and the grand staircase with the statue of Apollo at the top. To my right is a painting depicting two figures in the very spot in which I am standing. The two figures are William Makepeace Thackeray and Charles Dickens shaking hands and reconciling their differences after a long, complicated standoff. My imagination tries to capture that event from the mid-nineteenth century. Then I turn back toward the painting and notice numerous formal portraits that one can see at the base of the stairway.

My host beckons me to the drawing room where he shows me a Times obituary that he pulled from a dark thick folder with information of an esteemed club member who had passed away that summer. He told me that it was common practice for members to check this box before heading into the dining room. The folder was kept very up to date and is one of the oddities the club is known for. My host, a renaissance man, updated me on what he saw on the club bulletin board just a few minutes ago. He mentioned that he particularly liked the science lectures and was a regular lecture attendee and that most of the lectures took place on the floor below us. In my five following visits to this club I noticed this same systematic pattern of my host in the first few minutes upon arrival. This might be a quick way to see who the members and who the guest are of the club that day.

The Dining room is at capacity for lunch – over 150 people attired in very formal business suits. The Maitre d' (the same gentleman each

time whom I can still visually picture to this day) personally greets Dr. Graham and escorts us to our table. The lunch menu has under 10 entrees with no price. The whole experience is the height of British formality. After finishing the entrée the waiter brings a dessert cart by that was hard to pass on.

After lunch (again, the same routine as in past visits) we walk up the stairs past the statue of Apollo to the Coffee Room. At the top of the stairs I look at Nobel Prize book. Rudyard Kipling's signature is featured in a glass case commemorating his receipt of this award. The Coffee Room has silver trays with coffee and tea offerings and several formal trays with small desserts and is run on the honor system. My host being a little elderly, decides to take a half hour rest after our lunch and he chooses a leather chair in the corner of this room that was once considered the longest room in all England.

The room is full of bookcases and newspaper racks and magazine selections. Each bookcase is adorned by a bust from one of the Pantheon of notables of English literature. Each end of the long room has an impressive clock and despite being a dark room it is very well lit by the large windows. It is quiet and other members are relaxing after lunch as well. As my host rests it gives me time to explore the Coffee Room and other rooms with libraries. I notice a door to a library that says 'Member's Only'. I looked in the dark room and I saw the famous table that Sir Richard Burton spent several long months translating the Arabian Nights from Arabic to English. There is also an invalid's chair in the room that was used by Charles Dickens. Although it is tempting to walk in, I restrain myself and walk back towards my host.

My host awakes and we walk up another set of stairs to the club's third floor employee's offices. The club archivist has been informed in advance that I was visiting that day. During my past visits with the archivists, I have had the chance to see club member and former president of the Royal Art Academy, Sir Alfred J. Munnings sketches of racehorses he donated to the club. The next year I was allowed to handle Sir Richard Burton's club election ballot with a surprisingly high number of blackball votes. Despite being so controversial, he became a noted member of the club. In addition, I saw William Makepeace Thackeray's pool cue and held some notes from club member Charles Darwin's research. It is a tradition of the club for noted members to donate something related to their field of specialty.

After our visit with the archivists, we leave the building and head towards Piccadilly street. I had just spent three hours inside one of England's most revered institutions – The London Athenaeum.

The Athenaeum has a storied history with members from the Sciences, Poets and Writers, the Arts, Politics, Military and even the Clergy. It has a reputation of being a mecca for Nobel prize winners. Tonight, I will provide you with three different aspects that make the London Athenaeum the premiere club in the UK. First, I will give you a history of the club and its formative years. Second, I will reference some of the notable members. Third, I will touch upon the Athenaeum's important collections. I hope to convey to you the significance and importance of this revered institution.

## A. FOUNDING

The early 19<sup>th</sup> century was a time of great world wars and a desire to glorify the Grecian era. On June 18, 1815 the Duke of Wellington defeated Napoleon at the Battle of Waterloo. There was a bold movement at the time that revered all things Greece. Fourteen years prior to the Battle of Waterloo Lord Thomas Bruce, The Earl of Elgin, was the Ambassador to Constantinople. He removed parts of the Acropolis and sold them to Parliament in 1816 only a year after the Battle of Waterloo. Elgin was paid 35,000 pounds and the Elgin Marbles were placed in the British Museum. Lord Elgin justified his actions by stating that the French would have taken them if he had not done so. The acquisition of the Elgin marbles set a precedent for acquiring more antiquities excavated from Greece. The nascent Athenaeum continued the theme of London as the 'New Athens'.

The Athenaeum was founded in 1824 and the architect was Decimus Burton. Two years later in 1826 at age of only 26, he was commissioned to design the building for the Club. Burton contacted John Henning to copy the frieze from the Parthenon and have it situated right above the porch. Henning was quoted as saying, "*No better subject than the Parthenon frieze could have been chosen for this haven of liberal and learned conviviality.*" One should note that Oxford University and Cambridge's Fitzwilliam Museum al had similar friezes incorporated to their structures in the 1830s as well.

The Athenaeum is named after Athena, the Greek goddess of wisdom and patroness of learning and the arts. As one looks at the Athenaeum

from Pall Mall street there is a beautiful gold statue of Athena by Edward Hodges Baily outside the building above the portico at its entrance. Athena holds out her prone hand as if welcoming worshipers to her temple. Above her statue is the bas relief frieze inspired by the Parthenon. The frieze depicts many Greek horsemen in a battle scene. Because of the timing of its construction – just over ten years since Napoleon’s defeat – the frieze incorporates an ancient comparison to the British cavalry at Waterloo.

Renown British portrait painter, Sir Thomas Lawrence designed the Club’s seal which consists of the head of Athena inside an oval surrounded by the legend, *Athenaeum Club Pall Mall*. The club has the original watercolor of the seal done by founding member Sir Thomas Lawrence. William Wyon, the chief engraver at the Royal Mint was chosen to create the club’s official copy of this image.

The founding father of the Athenaeum in 1824 was John Wilson Crocker. Mr. Crocker was Secretary of the Admiralty and editor of James Boswell’s, The Life of Samuel Johnson. Crocker’s goal was to keep the club with professional members and not to become a commercial operation. On March 1, 1824 he wrote, *Persons eligible to the Club should be individuals known for their Scientific or Literary attainments. Artists of eminence, in any of the Fine Arts and noblemen and gentlemen, distinguished liberal patrons of Science, Literature and the Arts*. Later he expanded this to gentlemen who have published some literary or professional work or a paper in the Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society.

Crocker was much involved with the construction of the building and its frieze. Originally there were only two stories with the third and fourth stories added later. In the building's early plans in pre-refrigeration days, an ice house was to be part of the building scheme. Crocker resisted this attempt and thus evolved the rhyme, *I'm John Wilson Crocker. I do as I please. Instead of an ice house I give you a frieze.*

Sir Humphry Davy was the first President and Chairman of the Athenaeum. Michael Faraday was the first Secretary. Both of these gentlemen were members of the Royal Institution and the Royal Society. The club had a staff of 7 men, 3 boys and 5 women and a total membership of 506 individuals.

The membership eventually grew to 1,000 individuals. The building cost went overbudget and this resulted in a deficit of 20,000 pounds. Because of this deficit, two hundred supernumerary members were elected in 1832 to restore finances. Six years later in 1838 the Club was again in a financial bind. The club was one of the first to use gas lighting and this caused some damage to the building. 160 supernumeraries were admitted to ordinary membership and an additional forty were brought forward from the waiting list. These 40 people were known as the '40 thieves' and included future prestigious members Charles Dickens and Charles Darwin. At one time in the 19<sup>th</sup> century due to high interest in joining the club by 1,600 potential members - the waiting list was a lengthy 16 years.

## B. PRESTIGE

During the member election process the blackball procedures were commonly used. It is said that, *“To be blackballed at the Athenaeum represented a comprehensive rejection, social, political and intellectual.”* Club member Ronald Knox once said, *“We can’t have heaven crammed.”* Some famous people who were blackballed from the Athenaeum include; Sir Charles Fox, contracting engineer for Chrystal Palace (1867), John Walter, Proprietor of the Times (1878) and John Braham, opera signer and composer. William Makepeace Thackeray was blackballed in 1850 and he admitted that he was more at home at the Garrick Club. However, under Rule II, Thackeray was immediately elected to the Athenaeum.

By the 1880s membership to the Athenaeum had become almost a yardstick of establishment status. Hazhir Teimourien said, *“The Times, it seemed published a copy of you merely because you have been allowed past the front door of the club to pay homage to a member.”* Playwright and member Noel Coward was once told, *“You ought never have joined the Athenaeum Club, it has made you too pompous.”* Noel Coward replied to the comment, *“It can’t have, I’ve always been too frightened to go into it.”*

### C. MEMBERS

Several artists have been members of the Athenaeum. Sir Thomas Lawrence, Joseph Mallord William Turner, Sir Edwin Landseer, and Sir Alfred J. Munnings. Several of these members donated their artwork to the club’s collection. Surprisingly several did not, which I will go into more detail when I speak about the Club’s collections.

Several poets and writers have been members of the Athenaeum including; William Blake, Alfred Lord Tennyson, Robert Louis Stevenson, Robert Browning, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, William Butler Yeats, Rudyard Kipling, Charles Dickinson, William Makepeace Thackeray and journalist Alistair Cooke. Both William Butler Yeats and Rudyard Kipling were Nobel prize award recipients. Kipling was the first English language recipient. Nobel Prize recipients is something that the Club is noted for that I will touch upon shortly.

Politicians who have been members of the Athenaeum includes eight Prime Ministers; Winston Churchill, Neville Chamberlain, Clement Attlee, Stanley Baldwin, Benjamin Disraeli, Duke of Wellington and Sir Robert Peel. Future British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli dared to enter the club uninvited to speak to his father Isaac Disraeli and was promptly asked to leave. Benjamin Disraeli had to wait 30 years later until he could cross the Club's threshold at will.

Scientist who have been members of the Athenaeum include; Humphry Davy, Michael Faraday, Sir John Herschel, Charles Babbage, Lord Kelvin, Charles Darwin and Isambard Kingdom Brunel. It is rumored that the food at the club was not as good as it is today – leading to the suggestion that *“All the arts and sciences are understood at the Athenaeum except gastronomy.”*

Permit me for a moment to tell you a little bit more about Isambard Kingdom Brunel. This is a personal aside, since I was not aware of this scientist before my first visit to the Athenaeum and my host took time to educate me on his achievements. Brunel was an engineer and he

created the first tunnel under a navigable river. He built the SS Britain, which was the first iron clad propeller driven ocean-going ship of which I had the good fortune of touring a few years ago during my visit to Bristol, England. He built Clifton Suspension Bridge in Bristol, England over the river Avon. At the time of its construction, it was the longest suspension bridge in the world and it still stands today with over 4 million cars crossing it each year. He built the Great Western Railway with broad gauge tracks. In 1866, his Great Eastern ship laid the first lasting telegraph line across the Atlantic Ocean. In 2002 the British Broadcasting Corporation placed Mr. Brunel second in a public poll of the “100 greatest Britons”. It is no surprise that London Athenaeum member Winston Churchill was voted #1.

The list of members includes many military figures such as co-founding member The Duke of Wellington whose mounting block for boarding his horse is in front of the club. The inscription on the block reads, “This horse block was erected by the desire of the Duke of Wellington in 1830.” Allegedly across Pall Mall street at one time was the Senior Club with a mounting block that read, “This horse block was erected by the desire of the Duke of Wellington in 1830.”

A quick aside if I may. The Senior Club and the Athenaeum were both founded around nearly 200 years ago. The Athenaeum had a mounting block made to honor the the Duke of Wellington – so not to be outdone, the Senior Club directly across the street, installs a mounting block at its club in his honor as well. The Senior Club closes down in 1978, today the Athenaeum flourishes. This did not happen by accident. Because of the Athenaeum’s commitment to having the finest members, an outstanding physical structure and its treasured

possessions – it has endured the test of time. The Athenaeum is arguably the finest club in all of England.

During lunch at the Athenaeum, my host, Dr. Gerald Graham, told me about the significant number of clergy that were members of the club. Despite John Wilson Crocker's pre-requisite of members having articles published in the journals of the Royal Society, Bishops and other members of the clergy were admitted. During the formative years of the club the clergy was encouraged to join the Athenaeum and other prestigious clubs of London as well. During Victorian times London cab drivers often referred to the Athenaeum as 'Bishopsgate.'

In the Drawing room of the Athenaeum there is a painting of the club's election night in 1892. Roughly 20% of the members are depicted in red robes in the painting indicating they were clergymen. Today the number of clergymen at the Athenaeum is nominal. However, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century the clergy were very well paid and could afford membership status. A founding member of the Athenaeum, clergyman William Wilberforce, worked from 1797-1833 to repeal slavery in England.

Since the founding of the Nobel Prize, the Athenaeum has attracted more Nobel Prize awards than any other club/group in the world. There is an anecdote about Alcon Capisarow of the Athenaeum who was showing the new Nobel Prize book at the top of the stairs to Leif Leifland, the Swedish ambassador. Athenaeum member Mr. Capisarow said, *before we elect a candidate to the Club we make sure that he has won the Nobel Prize.* Leifland, the Swedish Ambassador immediately

replied, *Ah, before we select a Nobel Prize winner, we always make sure that he is a member of the Athenaeum.*

Only a few Americans have been elected to membership status at the Athenaeum. Washington Irving, Henry James and President Eisenhower are a few of the names of prominent Americans who were members.

#### D. THE ATHENUAEM AS AN OFFICE

Several Libraries are housed inside the Athenaeum and are filled with historical objects. William Makepeace Thackeray dictated portions of the History of Henry Esmond to Eyre Crowe at the roundtable here. John Morely, the editor of the Pall Mall Gazette sat in the same chair daily in the library to rest after completing his editorial work.

Anthony Trollope did most of his writing in the Drawing room. One day while Trollope was in the South library he overheard two bishops discussing his Barchester Towers voicing considerable distaste for one of the characters, Mrs. Proudie. Trollope confronted the two bishops and said, *"I'll go and kill her this afternoon."* Sadly, the end of Mrs. Proudie is a loss that most of his readers came to regret. Ever since this incident between Trollope and the Bishops, the South Library's rules changed to enforce strict silence.

Charles Dickens did much of his writing while in the library at the Athenaeum. An invalid's chair that he used while writing Edwin Drood at the club is in the South Library today. A plaque on the chair reads,

*“This chair was used when writing by Charles Dickens, author of the Pickwick Papers.”*

For many months Sir Richard Burton sat in the library of the Athenaeum with a snuff box by his side and translated Arabian Nights from Arabic into English. The roundtable where he sat has a plaque commemorating his work and is a treasured possession of the Athenaeum.

Sir Richard Burton was a very interesting and controversial figure. Earlier in this paper I mentioned the opportunity I had to hold his ballot card from his election at the Athenaeum. He spoke 29 languages which helped make him a good translator for Arabian Nights. While serving in the Army he kept a menagerie of tame monkeys in hopes of learning their language. He is perhaps most known for finding the source of the Nile River.

Earlier in his career he disguised himself so he could visit Mecca at a time that Europeans were forbidden to visit by pain of death. During his visit he was ‘discovered’ and escaped an attack of by over a hundred Arab horsemen and camel riders sent by Mohammed Rashid Pasha – the Governor of Syria. Burton later wrote in a memoir recounting the event, *“I have never been so flattered in my life to think it would take 300 men to kill me.”*

Earlier in my paper I referred to a painting in the Athenaeum’s collection of Charles Dickens and William Makepeace Thackeray reconciling their differences at the foot of the stairs inside the

Athenaeum. The feud began in 1858 when a 26 year old member of the Garrick Club, Edmund Yates wrote in Town Talk, a scornful impression of Thackeray. *“His bearing cold and uninviting, his style of conversation neither openly cynical nor affectedly good-natured and benevolent; his bonhomie forced; his wit biting; his pride easily touched...”* Upon reading this Thackeray sent Yates a scornful letter in protest. The Garrick Club asked Yates to apologize or resign. Yates refused since there was no reference to the Garrick Club in his column.

Dickens advised Yates on the matter since Yates was a friend and an editor for him. Dickens tried to console Thackeray, but Thackeray was obdurate. A little while later Dickens and Thackeray met at the bottom of the staircase of the Athenaeum. Dickens extended his hand which was eagerly seized by Thackeray therefore ending the infamous standoff.

## E. COLLECTIONS

The Athenaeum Collection by Hugh Tait and Richard Walker is a 242 page book relating to the collections that it houses that were gifts from former members. The last painting that Sir Thomas Lawrence finished just a few hours before he died is visible in the entrance of the Club and the subject was King George IV. In 1873 John Everett Millais presented a faded watercolor of the Chateau de Chillon on Lake Geneva. JMW Turner, considered to be the greatest landscape painter ever, never presented the Athenaeum with one of his paintings. He was a noted recluse at the club and often sat in the southwest corner of the Coffee Room and dined alone. After dinner he would order the candles to be

taken away so that he might consume in darkness a bottle of port by himself.

Other paintings of notable members of the club which are on display are a satirical portrait done in 1901 of Rudyard Kipling by Boston artist W. Cushing Loring. A painting of Charles Darwin hangs above the staircase. Another notable portrait done in 1803 of the chemist, Humphrey Davy (a copy) by Henry Howard is in the Athenaeum's collection.

In the title of this lecture and earlier in my paper, I referenced the strong influence of all things Greece that was a popular theme at the time of the founding of the club. At the top of the famous stairway of the club is a statue of Apollo. In the morning room is a marble statue of Psyche. The club has numerous other examples of art with Grecian themes including statues of Diana and Venus.

Artifacts from the Club's history include, William Makepeace Thackeray's pool cue which was used from 1851-1863. It hung for a long time in the billiards room that has now been demolished. Another club relic is the wheelchair in which Michael Faraday died. This wheelchair was presented to the club in 1908 by John Rudd Leeson with a plaque that reads, "*Michael Faraday died in this chair August 25, 1867.*"

## F. CONCLUSION

There are many similarities of the London Athenaeum to the Cincinnati Literary Club. Both clubs have libraries with literary works that have been donated by members. Both clubs have paintings and artifacts have been donated by past members. Both institutions are academically inclined and have stood the test of time (the Athenaeum is 25 years older than our Cincinnati Literary Club). Finally, both institutions have interesting histories and published books about the club and its members.

Fellow Cincinnati Literary Club member, Ducky Wadsworth once told me he was in London in the 1960s and witnessed a group of Englishmen following behind Fred Astaire in St James. Astaire was wearing a straw boater, blue blazer and summer trousers. At the front steps of the Athenaeum, Astaire hopped up the steps tapping the bottom of his cane to his right heel as he rhythmically mounted each step. At the top of the steps he paused and then he tapped his cane on the front door of the Athenaeum. When the porter opened the door, Astaire turned around to the crowd on the street level, tipped his hat and turned back around facing the door and proceeded into the club. I can think of no better place to witness such a sight.

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