

# Who founded the East India Club?



# East & West

There has long been an assumption that the East India Company founded the club. This is probably not correct. The exact origins of the East India Club are indistinct. Several versions of our founding exist.

A report in *The Times* of 6 July 1841 refers to the East India Club Rooms at 26 Suffolk Street, off Pall Mall East. It says that the rooms are open for the accommodation of the civil and military officers, of Her Majesty's and the Hon. East India Company's service, members of Parliament, and private and professional gentlemen. The clubrooms seem to have been in use for some time because the report also exhorts Major D D Anderson, Madam Fitzgerald, Captain Alfred Lewis, Mr M Farquhar from Canada, Lieutenant Edward Stewart, and another Stewart Esquire to come and pick up their unclaimed letters. This is supported by Sir Arthur Happel, Indian Civil Service (1891 to 1975) who says that the club grew out of a hostel for East India Company servants maintained in London to help them with leave problems.

The records of the East India United Services Club date from 1851. An article of July 1853 cited in *Foursome in St James's* states that the club as we know it was born at a meeting held at the British Hotel in Cockspur Street in February 1849. The consequence was the acquisition of No 16 St James's Square as the clubhouse, and the holding of an inaugural dinner there on 1 January 1850.

Edward Boehm – who owned the house in 1815 when Major Percy presented the French Eagles to the Prince Regent after the Battle of Waterloo on 21 June – went bankrupt, and a Robert Vyner bought it from him. In 1825 Vyner, sold it to the whig politician Lord Clanricarde who let the house for a time to the Marquess Wellesley (the famous Duke's older brother Richard.) In 1849, the East India United Services Club Committee signed a lease with Lord Clanricarde and subsequently bought the house in 1863.

The inaugural dinner on New Year's Day 1850 was documented and the earliest surviving rulebook of 1851 clearly sets out the qualifications for membership including subscription fees. The "donation," as the subscription was named, was fixed at £10 + £1 for the library fund. Those joining while on furlough [the long leave from service in India, usually at least six months) only paid £5, plus an annual subscription paid in two halves, the second half falling due on their next furlough or at retirement. Committees for recruiting members were set up in Bombay, Madras, and Agra, which managed to sign up about 3,000 men.

A different account of the club's formation occurs in *Club Makers and Club Members* by T H S Escott, published in 1914. This suggests that Sir Thomas Pycroft was on a visit home from service in India when a conversation with several of his colleagues led to the idea of forming a club. "Finance, architecture and domestic management were all equally in Sir Thomas Pycroft's way. The prompt conclusion of all preliminaries, the selection of a suitable building and the changes necessary for its adaptation to its new purpose were all his work."

Sir Thomas was an original member. However his name does not appear until 9 January 1870 when he was elected to the committee after which he was active as chairman 1873 to 1875, and 1877 to 1880. *Foursome in St James's* author Denys Forrest reckons that Sir Thomas had little to do with the foundation of the East India United Services Club because there is no record of his being in London at the time. The *Madras Almanac* says that although Pycroft was on furlough in 1848, he was in the Nilgiri Hills.

Evidence – both primary and circumstantial - points to the founding of the club proper in 1848 or 1849 with the opening of the clubhouse in January 1850. This is supported by two further written records.



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The first is an article from The Illustrated London News dated 21 April 1866. This notes that the East India United Services Club took on its new clubhouse and refers to the formation of the club in 1848. This article was written 18 years after the date in question and, from the detail of other information, the writer could have had access to the club secretary or members at that time. The second is the rulebook, published in 1851, which sets out the qualifications for membership of the club as “East India Company’s servants, clerical, civil, military, naval and medical of all the presidencies, including those retired and all commissioned officers of Her Majesty’s Army and Navy who have served in India, members of the bar and legal profession and gentlemen who have been captains in the Company’s late maritime service.”

If the Club grew out of the hostel provided by the Company for its servants to help them with leave problems in London, the Company was involved in the hostel. However the hostel catered for people other than East India Company employees. There is no evidence of corporate involvement of the East India Company, either financial or administrative, in the founding of the club. Many of the early members would have been employed by the East India Company but, as many members, would have been in Her Majesty’s Army and Navy, or the law. The overriding connection was India, so that members could be sure of being among their peers who lived and worked in the sub-continent.

This is supported by discussions and ballots among members about names for the club. These include General Service Club, Indian Service Club, General United Service Club, Military and Naval Club, Royal and Indian Service Club, Civil and Military Service Club, Home and Foreign Service Club, New Service Club, India Club, Indian and General Service Club, India United Service Club, Imperial Service Club, New United Services Club, East India and United Service Club, the Wellesley, the Clive Club, and the Imperial Service.

The East India Company was effectively abolished in 1858 so, by the end of the 19th century, there would have been few members of the club who would have worked for the Company.

Over the course of the 20th century, the East India Club merged with four other clubs, and has toyed with merging or acquiring many more. In 1939, the Sports Club moved in with the East India, as did the Public Schools Club in 1972. In 1976, the Devonshire Club joined. By 1979 the Club was named the East India, Devonshire, Sports, and Public Schools Club. As Lejeune writes: “A name, like an archaeological inspection pit, reveals successive layers of clubland ruins”. In 1986, 100 members of the Eccentric Club joined.

Each of the clubs that joined the East India has brought something new. The Sports Club brought its heritage through its founder St John Astley, the Public Schools Club brought the J7 membership scheme for young men leaving public schools, the Devonshire Club brought a large sum of cash from the sale of its building, and the Eccentrics the popular Lord Mayor of London’s luncheon. Above all, each has brought a new range and depth of people in character to the East India Club. Where clubs profess not to like change much, the East India Club has coped with four tidal waves of new members. The members might not like change but they do like people.

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