

The Cosmos Club—History and Standards

Title 307

The first coffee house in London was established in 1652. Also in Europe these pleasant meeting places for gentlemen to drink their then exclusive beverage, flourished in the 17th century. They became centres of political, social, literary and eventually business influence. In such North American cities as Boston, New York and Philadelphia, coffee houses became popular towards the end of the 17th century. They were precursors of the 'Gentlemen's Clubs' which were first established in England when in 1764 Samuel Johnson founded 'The Club' in London. A century later, many other clubs had opened in London and in North America, such as the Savile Club, established in London in 1868, ten years before the Cosmos Club was founded.

"Like attracts Like" and this principle operated strongly in the exclusiveness and growth of London Clubs. White's Club elected only members of the Aristocracy, the Athenaeum only Bishops, Fellows of the Royal Society and Aristocracy, at least at the beginning—until financial necessity forced the Club to be less selective. In North America, the Union Clubs preferred Military Men as their members, and the Ivy League Universities founded Clubs primarily for their graduates. All Clubs are extremely selective, in order to perpetuate by stringent election procedures their high standards and their own class of men and—only in recent years—also of women. It was a lengthy battle for example for women to become members of the Cosmos Club, but not yet of the Savile Club in more conservative London.

A graduation applies to Clubs, and almost like hotels, one might award them a row of stars from one to five, according to location of premises in the city, the sumptuousness and comfort of their rooms and furnishings, their gastronomic standards, parking facilities and in hotter climes, presence of a swimming pool and other outdoor sporting areas, like tennis courts. Entrance fees and annual membership dues will vary accordingly.

But above all, one must feel that one is among one's intellectual peers. Any gentleman or lady, before allowing his or her name to be put forward for election, should make certain that their own standards are neither higher nor lower than those of the existing members, a judgment that should primarily be exercised by the sponsors of new members.

In the course of time, four- and five-star Clubs have found it to be of advantage to arrange for reciprocal hospitality with other Clubs of equal standing in distant cities, so that members can avoid the hustle and bustle of commercial hotels and, even when away from their 'home' club, enjoy the presence of their peers in select surroundings. These hospitality arrangements often bring financial advantage to those able to enjoy them in the corresponding Clubs throughout the world.