

Celebrating 130 years of high

Michael Meadowcroft, honorary librarian and archivist,



The dining room on a sunny morning. © Helene Thierry 2012 www.helenethierry.com

The year 1882 was a good one in which to establish a prestigious Liberal club in the nation's capital. Gladstone had embarked on his third ministry following the Liberal victory at the election two years earlier and there was great enthusiasm for political activity. However, the immediate stimulus for a new club was more mundane: it was the long waiting list for membership of the Reform Club, London's leading club for Liberals for almost 50 years. Remarkably, this had been the catalyst for the establishment of the Devonshire Club in 1874, yet still the Reform Club was hugely oversubscribed!

The moving force was a barrister, Arthur J Williams, later Liberal MP for South Glamorgan, who convened meetings in May 1882 and put together a list of Liberal notables to form an initial committee. Such was the enthusiasm that the list of "original" members was closed in December 1882 with more than 2,500 names. A temporary clubhouse was established on the corner of Northumberland Avenue, facing Trafalgar Square; the membership list was reopened, reaching almost 4,000 within a year. An inaugural banquet was held in Westminster, with 1,900 diners. The National Liberal Club's first president, Mr Gladstone, "... had an overwhelming reception and

delivered a great oration." The clubhouse was the second-largest such building in London.

The present fine site was obtained and a leading architect of the day, Alfred Waterhouse, appointed. He had designed the Natural History Museum in South Kensington, opened in 1881, and Manchester Town Hall, opened in 1877. The foundation stone was laid on 4 November 1884 and the clubhouse formally opened on 18 June 1887. It was paid for by forming a limited liability company with a share capital of £200,000 in £5 shares. Only £70,000 was subscribed by this means and the rest was raised by mortgage debentures.

By the time of the opening of the clubhouse, the Liberal party had been

Victorian style and elegance

explores the club's history



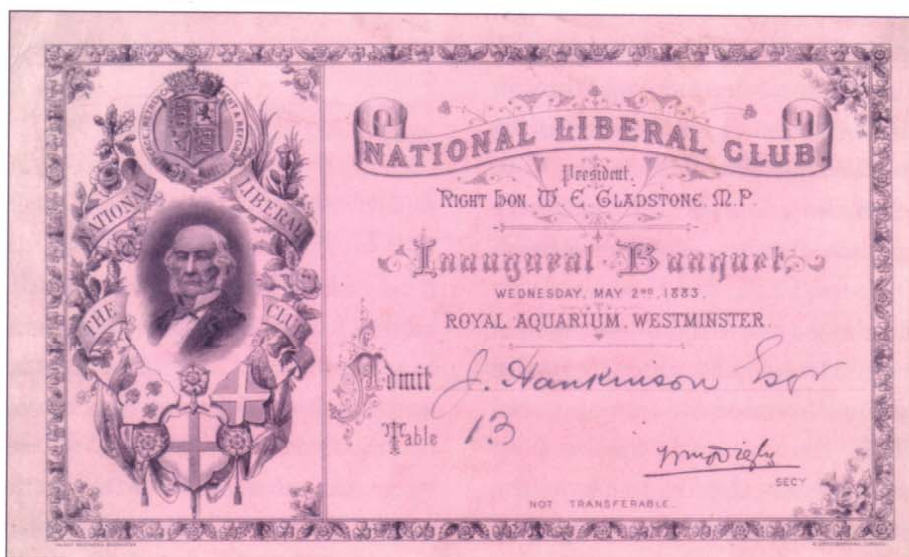
William Gladstone keeps a watchful eye on anyone entering the smoking room. © Helene Thierry 2012

split by Gladstone's policy of Home Rule for Ireland and the Liberal Unionists who were opposed to Irish independence were in a majority on the club's trustee board. A somewhat uneasy truce was maintained, just as it was later over the Lloyd George-Asquith split, and, right into the 1950s, with the secession of the Liberal Nationals. Throughout this period, the club continued to be open to individual Liberals, as opposed to members of a particular party, so long as they did not use their membership for activities contrary to Liberalism.

The highest point of club membership came in 1889 when it reached almost 6,500. Non-political membership was

introduced in 1932 when it particularly provided the opportunity of membership for

Liberals who, by reason of their employment, such as judges, military officers or senior civil



The invitation to the banquet that launched the National Liberal Club

servants, were not permitted to divulge their politics. The last surviving original member of the club, Theodore Taylor, died in 1952 at the age of 102, after almost 70 years of club membership. He was a West Riding woollen manufacturer with a passion for employee share ownership and had been for 18 years the Liberal MP for Farnworth.

The clubhouse was requisitioned by the government from 1916 to 1919 for billeting Canadian troops, with the club moving to temporary premises in Northumberland Avenue. Canadian officers were grateful

and presented a moose's head which was for many years hung in the basement billiards room!

On 11 May 1941, the club was almost obliterated by Luftwaffe bombing which destroyed the central staircase. The £150,000 reconstruction was partly financed by the War Damage Commission.

The club's story is to be continued in future newsletters; in the meantime, much of its history can be read in the recent publication, *A Guide to the Works of Art of the National Liberal Club*, complete with many colour plates, available from the front desk at the bargain price of £13 (£15 for non-members).



The staircase. © Helene Thierry 2012