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The West Indian Club Ltd: An early 20th century West Indian Interest in London

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Introduction

The West Indian Club Ltd, incorporated in 1898 and active until the 1970s, was a gentlemen's social club, made up of members from London, elsewhere in Britain, the West Indies and beyond, who shared an interest in the West Indies. The club provided a social space for members, regular luncheons and dinners with invited speakers and guests, as well as promoting sports activities, including early cricket tours, to and from the West Indies. This paper explores some aspects of the early history of the Club, its activities and membership.

In November 1897 the *Times* reported the first meeting for the purpose of forming a West Indian Club, under the title "A Club for Anglo-West Indians".

The founding purposes and objects of the West Indian Club were:

- (1) To bring persons interested in the West Indies and British Guiana together in order to promote the discussion and consideration of questions affecting those colonies
- (2) To further the interests of the West Indies and British Guiana by providing headquarters for associated activities

- (3) To afford facilities for organising, in connection with the West Indies and British Guiana, annual cricket matches and other kindred amusements recognised by our English Universities and Public Schools.
- (4) The doing of all such things as are incidental or conducive to the attainment of the above objectives
- (West Indian Club, 1901)

Some years after the club was established the West Indian Committee's newsletter described the origins of the Club:

...the experiment of establishing a social headquarters for West Indians in England was regarded as a doubtful one. Many attempts had been made to maintain clubs for visitors from various parts of the King's Dominions, but all had failed. The West Indian Club, however, was established on eminently sound lines. (West India Committee, 1917)

Premises and Facilities

Premises and facilities were an important part of any London club. The West Indian Club was originally based in rooms rented in the Howard Hotel, Norfolk Street, on the Victoria Embankment and remained there for fifteen years. With a steady growth in membership it is unsurprising that Annual Reports began to discuss moving to more suitable premises as early as 1900.

Developments at the premises at the Howard Hotel included the engagement of a permanent attendant in 1903, and in 1904 the institution of a library (starting with over one hundred books, and subscriptions to the *Times*, *Standard*, *Graphic*, and *Sphere*, the *West India Committee Circular*, many West Indian newspapers and all the official West Indian Gazettes), provision of a complete set of West Indian maps, a telephone and a registered telegraphic address. In 1909 two new rooms were added to the premises at the Howard Hotel and an additional attendant engaged.

In 1912 the Club moved into new premises at 4 Whitehall Court. Facilities included smoking, card, billiard, and dining rooms. The critical change for the club was its evolution into a

residential club, and at the time it was the only organisation representing any one portion of the British colonies, which had its own residential headquarters.

Activities

Sporting activities were an integral part of the West Indian Club's activities from its formation. The Club's Sports Committee was initially chaired by the renowned cricketer Lord Hawke. In its first year the club commenced an annual cricket match against Richmond Cricket Club and started planning for a representative West Indian cricket team to tour England in 1900 with the "object of forwarding West Indian questions, and bringing them before the public in a useful manner". (West Indian Club, 1899) The Club continued to promote cricket contact between England and the West Indies, with an English team touring the West Indies in 1902 and the arrangement for another West Indian Cricket team to visit England in 1906.

"Other kindred amusements" included shooting, billiards, tennis, and golf. A West Indian Rifle team was brought to England for the Bisley Rifle Competition in 1904, and again in 1908. From 1910 the West Indian Club supported an inter-colonial Rifle Challenge Cup and in 1913 a Tennis Challenge Cup was offered for annual competition between various parts of the West Indies. The Club ran its own annual billiards tournament handicap for members, from 1904, and in 1928 formed a West Indian Golfing Society.

Luncheons and Dinners

As with most such clubs, regular luncheons and dinners were an important part of the Clubs activities. Despite the club describing itself as a "purely social association", (West Indian Club, 1900) these functions often touched on matters of the day.

The first recorded dinner was held in 1899 for Sir Cuthbert Quilter MP and Sir Nevile Lubbock on their return from a visit to the West Indies. From 1901 regular club dinners were held fortnightly, coinciding with the day of departure of mail steamers for the West Indies. While attendance varied over the years of the club, in 1902 up to eighty members and guests were present at some of these dinners.

Dinners were commonly held for members and other notable persons returning from or departing to the West Indies. In 1903 these included Sir Frederic Hodgson, the Governor of Barbados; Mr A.M. Ashmore, the Colonial Secretary for British Guiana; the Archbishop of the West Indies; Dr G.B. Mason on his departure for Antigua; the Archbishop of Port of Spain; and Sir Henry K. Davson on his receiving the honour of knighthood.

At times special dinners or banquets took place, such as the 1903 dinner in honour of the Lord Mayor and Sheriff of London, to express gratitude for the assistance rendered to sufferers in the volcanic disasters of 1902 (St Vincent) and for the various funds raised by Mansion House during times of calamity in the West Indies; also the 1905 banquet held for Lord Alverstone, the Lord Chief Justice of England, and others concerned with the British Guiana and Venezuela Boundary Arbitration; and the 1906 dinner held at the Imperial Restaurant in honour of Members and ex-Members of Parliament who had displayed an interest in the West Indies.

Other initiatives included annual musical evenings, and in 1908 the first West Indian Garden Party, held in the gardens of the Royal Botanic Society, Regents Park, where over 500 members and friends gathered to meet the Earl of Crewe, Secretary of State for the Colonies. The Annual Report described the party as “the largest gathering of West Indians that has probably ever taken place in this country”. It was repeated in 1909 with the Duke of Argyll as principal guest, along with delegates to the Imperial Press Conference and several members of the British Antarctic Expedition, but in 1910 was abandoned owing to the death of the King.

The outbreak of war affected both activities and membership. Fortnightly Club dinners were no longer held, though informal luncheons remained exceptionally well attended. Honorary or temporary membership was offered to those coming home from the West Indies to join His Majesties Forces, to officers serving in the Canadian and Newfoundland Expeditionary Forces, and to West Indians in West Indian Contingents and this was “keenly appreciated” the Annual Report noting that the Club was “a pleasant meeting place for the majority of those from the West Indies who, in all parts of the British Empire, are now taking their part in the existing struggle”.

In 1917 the *West India Committee Circular* noted that: “Whilst many London Clubs have found themselves in difficulties since the outbreak of war, the experience of the West Indian Club has been altogether different. It is... in quite a flourishing state”. (West India Committee, 1917)

Membership began to increase again in 1917 and activities slowly revived after the impact of war. Notable events in the 1920s included the large number of visitors coinciding with the 1924 British Empire Exhibition at Wembley, and various dinners, including one in 1926 in honour of delegates to the West Indian Conference (jointly hosted by the West India Committee). Club activities and dinners continued through to the end of the 1960s, with notable events for visiting and touring cricket teams, Governors and Governor-designates, Under-Secretaries for the Colonies, delegates to various international conferences, and celebrations to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the Club in 1948.

Tragedy struck the West Indian Club in November 1969 when scaffolding in Whitehall Court collapsed and fell on a car, killing Sir David Rose, the Governor-General of Guyana, who had been lunching at the Club. The 1970s were a particular hard time generally for London Clubs. Many found it difficult to keep members and subscriptions coming in, and costs down. Casualties of these times included the Marlborough, Bachelors’, New Oxford and Cambridge, Conservative, United Service, Devonshire, and Junior Carlton Clubs. (Graves, 1963; Forrest, 1979)

The West Indian Club also suffered financially, and just short of its twenty-fifth anniversary, in March 1971 closed its doors for the last time at Whitehall Court, re-opening within the Royal Commonwealth Society. There, the club had its own bar and shared the use of all the Society’s facilities. (West Indies Chronicle, 1971, 163) However, the Club failed to receive continued support from members and this move led to the end of the separate identity and activity of the Club. (West India Committee. Executive Committee, 1971)

Membership

The way in which membership quickly grew in the early years of the club show that the experiment of establishing the club had been a successful one. Of note is the significant

increase in Colonial and Foreign members in these years, from fourteen in the Club's first year, rising to sixty-two a year later and then nearly doubling the following year.

In 1901 there were 102 London and Country members; and 148 Colonial and Foreign, largely coming from British Guiana where there were 49 members and Barbados where there were 32, but also including 19 from Trinidad, 12 from St Vincent, six from Grenada, five from Jamaica, two each from St Kitts, St Lucia and St Tomas and single members residing in Antigua, British Honduras, Dominica, Sierra Leone and New York.

In 1910 membership reached 815 in total, 247 from the British Isles, 496 from the West Indies and 72 from the rest of the world. At a luncheon that year in honour of Sir Nevile Lubbock, chairman of the club since 1903 he linked the success of the club with economic conditions in the West Indies, saying that "since the abolition of the bounties, the condition of the West Indies had improved, and, like the West Indies, the West Indian Club was also prospering".

Membership peaked in 1912 at a total of 904 members, and then fell following the increase in subscriptions. Membership fell again in the war years, but by 1918 was back up to 659 and began a steady increase again.

Analysis of individual members can help reveal the nature of the West Indian interest and the networks of interest the Club represented. The founding members of the Club, were largely British, predominantly London-based and represented a range of interests and connections to the West Indies.

The Club's initial Vice-Presidents included the Governors of Barbados, Jamaica, Trinidad and British Guiana; the 5th Earl of Harewood, Henry Ulick Lascelles, the Vice-President of the West India Committee and still at the time a large landowner in Barbados; the Right Hon. Lord Stanmore, who had been Governor of Trinidad from 1866 to 1870; and Lord Hawke, whose connection in the West Indies stemmed from his leading one of the 1896 cricket tours to the region.

Committee members included Algernon Aspinall, Secretary of the West India Committee; Mayson Beeton, who had visited the West Indies in 1896 as Special Correspondent for the

Daily Mail to report on the sugar industry, and the following year was appointed Secretary of the Anti-Bounty League; John Goodridge, a retired member of the Indian Civil Service who had reached the post of judge and Commissioner in the Central Provinces, and was born and brought up in Barbados; Arthur Nevile Lubbock; Sir Charles Walpole, retired Chief Justice of the Bahamas, W.P.B. Shephard; a barrister and another member of the West India Committee and Anti-Bounty League, who had family estates in Barbados; Robert Rutherford, President of the Anti-Bounty League and partner in the merchant firm of Wilkinson and Gaviller; along with other members connected with the West India Committee – G.H.H. Pile, the Hon Arthur Ponsonby, Joseph Rippon, General Manager of the Direct West India Cable Company, Captain C.R. Harris, retired from the Royal Navy, and Dr G.B. Mason, the club's founder and at the time a recently qualified surgeon and physician and a member of the West India Committee, who from 1903, worked in various medical officer posts across the West Indies. One member remains less easily connected - Major Roper Parkington, much interested in European affairs, notably French and Montenegrin, and a leader in the London wine trade.

The remaining ordinary members included members of the West India Committee, those born in various parts of the West Indies, Members of Parliament, West Indian landowners, and other who had worked in the West Indies through the colonial and related services or had other connections, as well as a small number of members based in the West Indies.

I want to look in more depth at some of these individual members.

G.H. Hudson Pile was one of the founders of the club, at the age of 27, and sat on its committee until his death in 1938. He was a member of a family that had settled in Barbados for many generations and the only son of the Hon. A.J. Pile, CMG, a member of the Executive Council and Speaker of the House of Assembly of Barbados. While he practiced law for some years, he later became a member of a firm of West Indian merchants, before returning to legal practice. For a time he was a member of the Executive of the West India Committee, and a keen Freemason he was at one time master of the Caribbean Lodge.

Henry Katz Davson was another member of the West India Committee and an ex-member of the Court of Policy of British Guiana, where he was an extensive landed proprietor and estate

holder, with interests in sugar, cattle and timber. One of his four sons, Edward was also a founding member of the Club.

Other members with familial connections included William Eversley, barrister and Recorder of Sudbery, Suffolk, who had been born in Barbados, and the Rev Dr William Jackson, Rector of Exeter College, Oxford, the son of William Jackson, Bishop of Antigua, who had been born in Trinidad and educated at Codrington College before going up to Oxford.

Dr Daniel Morris had a professional connection having been Director of the Botanic Department in Jamaica 1879-86, before being appointed Assistant Director of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, 1886-98. His interest in the West Indies continued with his research and writing, and various scientific missions and appointments; including Scientific Advisor to the West India Royal Commission 1896-97 and following the establishment of the Club, Imperial Commissioner to the West Indian Agricultural Department 1898-1908; he was President of the West Indian Agricultural Conferences 1899-1908 and a member of the Royal Commission to inquire into closer Trade Relations between Canada and the West Indies, 1909-10.

Harry Smith-Turberville's connection was through sporting links. He was a member of the MCC and St Johns Wood Cricket Club, owned racehorses and played golf and had been a member of R.S. Lucas' cricket team to the West Indies in 1894-95. Lord Hawke, Lord Stamford and Nevile Lubbock (all later West Indian Club members) had provided assistance for this tour.

Lord Stamford had been a professor of Classics at Codrington College in Barbados from 1878 to 1883 and was a noted free trader. Another member Walter Monnington, a barrister at Inner Temple, had been best man at his wedding and Monnington's son would later marry the daughter of Walter Henry Knights, a sugar merchant. Howard Marsh and Duncan Stewart, the later a member of the West India Committee, each ran companies manufacturing sugar machinery.

Some members have proven difficult to trace. All we currently know of Alexander McDowell-Nathan is that he died in the 1907 Jamaica earthquake. Connections are still

unknown for Captain L.T. Cave, Colonel John Elliot, C.B. Harris, W. Parratt, Captain L. Lewis Pile, and Laurence Rostron.

Finally, I want to introduce you to Mrs Whitfield. Mrs Whitfield was the only woman amongst the founding members and the only member with an Irish address. She was also the largest founding donor, giving £5 on the formation of the Club. Mrs Whitfield, who also had a residence in London, was the widow of George Whitfield, Esq., JP of Modreeny, county Tipperary, Ireland, who died aged 71, in London, in 1892. In 1870 his estate at Modreeny was 443 acres. We know that Mrs Whitfield donated £20 to the West Indies Mansion House Hurricane Fund in 1889, and that her children married well: her eldest daughter Jessie marrying Frederick Clifton Briggs, Captain of the Devonshire Regiment and youngest son of the late Hon. Augustus Briggs, of Barbados; her youngest daughter Kathleen, marrying Sir Francis Osborne, Baronet, and her son George, marrying Violet Stoney, daughter of the late Deputy Surgeon General of Frankford, Ireland.

Conclusion

Research into the West Indian Club has highlighted a range of relationships with the West Indies, among an upper-middle and upper class elite. Further research aims to investigate further the membership and relationships within the London and UK based members as well as developing a picture of the Colonial and Foreign membership. It is hoped that gaps in the official record of the Club can be filled, particularly after 1920.

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