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Samuel Pepys

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Abstract

Samuel Pepys (1633-1703) made a remarkable social ascent to become a powerful naval administrator with ear of two successive kings. His calculated approach to sociability was factor in this success. While mindful of how well-judged sociability could serve his ambitions, Pepys also enjoyed making the most of the leisure opportunities and meeting places of Restoration London. His diary of the 1660s and other papers reveal his relationships with a wide range of Londoners, along with his changing patterns of sociability across his life.

Samuel Pepys's impressive social rise, chronicled in his diary of the 1660s, owed much to his strategic approach to sociability. Pepys had been born the son of a London tailor in 1633 and became Clerk of the Acts to the Navy Board in 1660, thanks to the patronage of his first cousin once removed, the Earl of Sandwich. On this he observed to a friend that 'chance without merit brought me in, and that diligence only keeps me so'.¹ He set himself to master the business of the Navy Board, which was responsible for maintaining and supplying the navy. He did so through long hours at the office and through diligent sociability – he had a talent for making connections and gathering information that helped make him indispensable. Pepys's sociability prompted by his working roles was accompanied by a tremendous enthusiasm for what England's capital had to offer when it came to leisure pursuits. As a result, his diary and other papers offer a wide-ranging and detailed picture of one man's socializing across venues and ranks in Restoration London.

When he began his diary in January 1660 Pepys could claim to be a gentleman, if not by birth, then by education, profession, and appearance. Having won a scholarship to Cambridge, he worked as a clerk in the Exchequer at Whitehall and as man-of-business to Sir Edward Mountagu (later to become the Earl of Sandwich). In the diary's first pages, Pepys noted that the genteel persona he presented did not reflect reality: he was 'esteemed rich, but indeed very poor' (*Diary*, I, 2). In 1660, much of his time was spent in alehouses and taverns, meeting fellow clerks and local City officeholders. Drinking and gaming were fun ways to pass the time, but Pepys was also collecting news to send to his patron Mountagu, who was in the country. In the turmoil of early 1660, with riots in streets and no stable government at Westminster, the opinions of London's citizenry carried weight. Alehouse and taverns were places for Pepys to sound out the public mood, offering a drink in tacit return for an acquaintance's views. Always curious about the latest ideas, Pepys also put himself among the 'great confluence of gentlemen' who joined James Harrington's Rota Club at the Turk's Head coffeehouse (*Diary*, I, 14). This club was debating republican models of government, but it proved short lived, dissolving as the political tide turned in favour of Charles II's restoration.

Following Charles's return, Mountagu procured Pepys the role of Clerk of the Acts. The job came with a new house (at the Navy Office close to the Tower of London) and new colleagues, who were also new neighbours. This provided a ready-made circle of gentlemen with whom to socialize and with whom to feud – increasingly so, as Pepys's confidence in his new role and his taste for sometimes disruptive home-improvements grew. To master his new job and bolster his social position, Pepys set about making himself 'known' in London's principal forums. He was already a very familiar face in Westminster Hall. Part of the Palace of Westminster and adjoining the Houses of Parliament, the Hall was a venue for well-off Londoners to shop and exchange political news. There Pepys would visit the bookseller Ann Mitchell, to buy newsbooks and chat about their families and other stallholders. Since in the 1660s Pepys was having affairs with Betty and Doll Lane, two sisters who ran linen stalls at the Hall, he also worried about his activities becoming too well known to the stallholders. As he became established in his navy role, Pepys was increasingly keen to talk to MPs, tracking the House of Commons' attitude towards navy finances and preparing to fend off criticism of

the Navy Board's actions.

Simultaneously Pepys also worked to establish himself at Whitehall Palace, in the galleries where gentry and nobles walked and socialized. Pepys regularly visited the Palace on business, but it took some time for him to become comfortable interacting with courtiers, without fear of his presence being challenged. It was, however, a great place to learn the latest court scandal, and being seen there among nobles and statesmen implicitly raised his status. Across London, at the Royal Exchange in Cheapside and in the surrounding [coffeehouses](#), he was also busy making himself known among the merchants who supplied the navy. This was often a rather tricky negotiation: as a navy novice, Pepys wanted to master the details of trade and to make alliances with powerful merchants, such as William Warren – these alliances came with the benefit of substantial kickbacks. Yet he was wary of being misled and exploited by these men. Picking his own allies among the merchants also meant facing-off against colleagues on the Navy Board, who had their own favourite merchants when it came to awarding navy contracts.

The connections Pepys established at the Royal Exchange, Whitehall, and Westminster Hall were networks which supplied him with a wealth of foreign, local, court and city news. This allowed him to widen his influence in the navy, to make himself respected as a source of news, and to be valued as entertaining company among a range of groups. One such group that attracted Pepys was the newly formed Royal Society, which received its first royal charter in 1662. With the King's backing, empirical science was a fashionable pursuit for gentlemen. Pepys joined in February 1665, having been nominated by Thomas Povey, a colleague. Many of Pepys's acquaintances were already members, while the Society's president Lord Brouncker, had recently joined the Navy Board. It made political sense to join the Society, but Pepys was also intrigued. The Society's interests were wide-ranging: from exploring manufacturing techniques, to gathering information on foreign lands, to speculation about comets. He enjoyed attending demonstrations of experiments, and hearing talks of new theories, both in formal meetings and when smaller gatherings of members and non-members met in taverns and coffeehouses. The [Royal Society](#) became a life-long affiliation: in the 1670s he would become a member of the society's governing council and from 1684-86, when he was at the height of his career, its president.

Pepys sought to ensure that his sociability was enjoyable, justifiable, and not detrimental to his standing. This was, of course, not always possible. He experienced considerable tension between what he called 'fallow[ing] my business' and 'fallowing of my pleasure' (*Diary*, II, 208; VIII, 527). Following his business meant doing, and crucially being seen to do, his duty as a member of the Navy Board and as a gentleman – this took in various forms of sociability that served those ends. 'Fallowing of my pleasure' included less justifiable social pursuits that he saw as acceptable in moderation, but which would threaten his position if he indulged in them too much, such as repeated trips to the theatre with his wife or friends; wine-drinking; and making sexual advances to women and girls. Pepys's concern about these types of social pursuit was less moral than practical: they wasted money and time; he felt they distracted him from work; and might damage his status. He controlled himself by taking vows against them, which involved paying a fine to charity if broken: in 1665, for example, he tried unsuccessfully to limit himself to one trip to the theatre per month (*Diary*, V, 2-3).

Pepys's strategic approach to sociability meant he deliberately maintained ties to a wide range of people because of the information they could, or might, provide. He was explicit that this included cultivating those whom he regarded as annoying, embarrassing, and/or dangerous. On 5 December 1662, for example, Pepys invited Will Swan, a discontented Nonconformist, to an alehouse and paid for the drink, stating in his diary that this hospitality was 'to see how things stand with him and his party' (*Diary*, III, 275). This was prudent given that the Nonconformists' reaction to renewed government persecution could prove a major threat to the state. Pepys explained his readiness to keep up connections with some of his relatives in similarly instrumental terms. He was happy to socialize with certain kin on his father's side, who were gentry and followed professions such as the law. He was often less keen when it came to his mother's kin, who were tradespeople. His cousins Kate and Mary Fenner had married Anthony and William Joyce, tallow-chandlers who had considerable business and property holdings. Pepys found Anthony and William's company aggravating and, in many respects, felt they were beneath him. This was the case even at the start of the diary, when both were financially better off than he was.² However, as with Will Swan, it was worth investing in the Joyces through hospitality. On 6 August 1663, after attending a party to celebrate the christening of Mary Joyce's son, Pepys offered to pay for double his share of the food, and then took Anthony and Kate to attend a puppet play: 'I thinking it convenient', he wrote, 'to keep in with the Joyces against a bad day' (*Diary*, IV, 265). As is the case here, Pepys's explanations for his strategic socializing and expenditure sometimes have the ring of retrospective justification for things he wanted to do anyway (this had proved a very enjoyable day). Also relevant in this instance was being seen to fulfil his obligation as kin and as – by 1663 – the most influential male on his mother's side of the family. He saw cause for self-reproach when the exchange of reciprocal hospitality broke down because of his unwillingness to socialize with his humbler kin. In one such episode he failed to go with his father, sister, and wife to dine with the poorest of his cousins Sarah Giles of Whitechapel, 'where I should have been, but my pride would not suffer me' (*Diary*, VII, 174).

Historians have noted that, over the course of his diary, Pepys took to socializing less in drinking houses and preferred to entertain at home, a practice he saw as more likely to win him esteem.³ Following much deliberation and expense, he and his wife now had a finely decorated dining room and a closet (or study) each, which they could share with visitors. After his diary ended in 1669, Pepys had the growing means, and often strong incentives, to restrict his sociability. In 1673 he became Secretary to the Admiralty Commission and, in 1684, King's Secretary for the Admiralty: these roles made him one of the most powerful administrators in the kingdom. He now had the ability to make others come to him, and the demands on his time made it harder to flit around the capital. He also was frequently attacked for his loyalty to James, Duke of York (erstwhile Lord High Admiral and the future James II) – this included time spent in the Tower in 1679 after being falsely accused of treason. These onslaughts were periods when Pepys had to navigate public hostility and when he often had cause to acknowledge the moral and financial support of '[my friends](#)'.⁴

Pepys's diary suggests he had allies, but no very close friends during the 1660s. Later in life, however, his surviving correspondence shows he cultivated a group of friends who provided

him with joy and unwavering support - ranging from delightful trips to the theatre to standing bail for him. These included both kin and those Pepys came to call surrogate kin. Elizabeth, Lady Mordaunt (d. 1687) and her sister Jane Steward (d. 1705), were cousins by marriage on Pepys's father's side. Meanwhile James Houblon (1629-1700) and his family of wealthy [Huguenot](#) merchants became 'cousins' by affection, rather than kinship. Will Hewer (1642-1715), who had first been employed in 1660 as Pepys's clerk, continued to work with and sometimes live with Pepys. In his old age Pepys shared Hewer's fine home in Clapham, and he described Hewer in his will as having behaved like a 'son'.⁵

Another enduring relationship recorded in Pepys's papers was his connection to the virtuoso John Evelyn, whom he came to know through his naval work in 1665. Pepys and Evelyn were both active members of the Royal Society and they shared a love of music, book collecting, and art. In the 1690s, having been forced to retire from the Admiralty after James II was overthrown, Pepys took refuge in virtuoso pursuits. In this, Evelyn was his eager abetter, encouraging him to develop his book and print collections – collections which became renowned enough to attract visitors to Pepys's home. Evelyn was also a member of the informal club that Pepys hosted on Saturdays from 1692 until around 1701. Other members of the 'Saturday's Literati' included Pepys's cousin by marriage Thomas Gale (a fellow antiquarian), the classicist Richard Bentley, and Hans Sloane (Pepys's doctor and a man whose own collections would go on to form the basis of the British Museum). Eventually Pepys's ill health and his move to Hewer's home in Clapham put an end to the gatherings and curtailed visits. He and Evelyn, each suspecting death was near, consoled each other with talk of reading and philosophy. In his last surviving letter to Pepys, on 20 January 1703, Evelyn wished his friend 'the Old man's life' which he had found described in a Latin couplet: 'books, home, garden, bed, friend, wine, relaxation, passion, sense of humour, piety'.⁶ These were words which spoke to the constraints of Pepys's socializing in his final years, but also to its delights.

1. The Diary of Samuel Pepys, ed. Robert Latham and William Matthews (London: HarperCollins; Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), 11 vols, VI, p. 285.

2. Kate Loveman, 'Women and the History of Samuel Pepys's Diary', *Historical Journal* (2022), pp. 20-21. doi:10.1017/S0018246X21000716

3. Markman Ellis, *The Coffee House: A Cultural History* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2004), p. 57; Karl E. Westhauser, 'Friendship and Family in Early Modern England: The Sociability of Adam Eyre and Samuel Pepys', *Journal of Social History* (vol. 27, no. 3, Spring, 1994), pp. 524-5.

4. For example, *The Letters and Second Diary of Samuel Pepys*, ed. R.G. Howarth (London: Dent, 1932) pp. 86, 89, 106.

5. London, The National Archives, PROB 1/9, Will of Samuel Pepys, 1703.

6. *Particular Friends: The Correspondence of Samuel Pepys and John Evelyn*, ed. Guy de la Bédoyère (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1997), p. 295.

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Further Reading

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[Pepys Diary \(1662/1663\)](#)

[Pepys Diary \(1667\)](#)