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The Digital Encyclopedia of British Sociability in the Long Eighteenth Century

West End of London

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Mots-clés

- Aristocracy
- Consumption
- Clubs
- Elite
- Gambling
- Gender
- Opera

Résumé

The West End of London generated new forms of networking and sociability. This entry argues that the West End was shaped by both patrician society and a vigorous and often obscene popular culture that was evident in the pubs and brothels of Covent Garden. The West End created centres of male association, particularly the gentleman's club, the coffee house and the casino whilst locations such as the King's Theatre on the Haymarket were places where female aristocrats could regulate entry to high society.

‘The West End of the Town‘ (as it was usually known in the long eighteenth century) generated new forms of connection and association that we associate with the urban renaissance. The area of London from the Strand over to St James's became an embryonic pleasure district, distinctive for locations that served the leisure and retail needs of the elite. This allowed the Mayfair-based aristocracy who shaped the area to define itself. Yet West End locations for elite sociability co-existed with a vigorous popular culture, located in pubs, sites of curiosity, print shops, coffee houses and brothels. The patent theatres in Drury Lane and Covent Garden were patrician but also plebeian spaces. The early modern West End became a place that shaped the public sphere through sites of discussion, encounter and the dissemination of print culture.1

Following the Restoration of 1660 (and the construction of squares and town houses for the elite in the West End) shopkeepers in St James's Street, the Strand and Old Bond Street began to offer the best fashions from Paris and to inform women what was in and what was out. The top shops in the Georgian West End became places to be seen in; their products were markers of distinction. Some shops would offer parlours where customers could take refreshment.2 Booksellers and art auctions became common sights on the Strand in the eighteenth century, spaces that helped construct an intelligentsia.3 The promotion of luxury was augmented at the beginning of the nineteenth century by the construction of Regent Street and of upmarket arcades (such as the Burlington Arcade on Piccadilly) where the elite could both window shop and sample luxury goods. The forms of display in the area allowed for the construction of identities such as the fop and, later the dandy (exemplified by figures such as Beau Brummell).

Unlike on the continent, court life in London was relatively weak which meant that even the monarchy went out in search of entertainment. Opera, in particular, was integral to elite sociability. Aristocrats felt obliged to purchase annual subscriptions for a box at the King's Theatre on the Haymarket (also known during the period as the Queen's Theatre, depending on who was on the throne). Its high prices maintained exclusivity. As well as music it was a space for courtship, for flirting and, above all, for gossip. People would move between boxes which were a site for female sociability: patronesses used the space to exert control over high society and discern the quality of newcomers. Down in the pit there were wide aisles which allowed men to congregate (hence it became known as ‘Fop's Alley‘). Audiences would focus on the great arias whilst feeling free to interact with each other during other parts of the performance. The theatre was built so that the boxes faced one another rather than the stage (see illustration). Opera glasses could be used to take in the performers but also to view other members of the audience. In 1824 there were rumours that Harriet Arbuthnot was having an affair with the Duke of Wellington as he often sat with her at the opera. It was only in the period between 1820 and 1850 that the practice of moving between boxes ended and the lewdness associated with the pit (frequented by prostitutes) came to an end. Sociability at the opera declined to be replaced by a focus on appreciating the music.4

The forms of clothing and conspicuous consumption evident when aristocratic people promenaded in Piccadilly (or rode in Hyde Park) were integral to the making of elite power. The possession of a high quality address in Mayfair or St James's, where one could receive visitors, was important but so was the development of manners, deportment and a form of self-fashioning based upon appreciation of art, literature and music. Like the opera, balls and dinner parties underpinned an elaborate marriage market that allowed the elite to renew itself. As Hannah Greig shows, sociability in the West End was particularly shaped by the elite group who called themselves 'people of fashion' or the '*beau monde*'.5 They showed up for the aristocratic season and were the people to be seen with.

Gentlemen began to pursue life in the clubs of St. James's. The first of the West End clubs was White's, founded in a chocolate house on St James's Street in 1693. It became a centre for masculine company but also for gambling, drinking and gossip. It was followed by Boodle's which was established on St. James's Street in 1762, catering particularly for gentlemen from out of town who needed a London base.

There was an explosion of high culture based on the promotion of professional artists, writers and musicians. The elite became increasingly defined by the cultivation of refinement and the senses. Thus the West End became a stage where the delights of high culture could be sampled. The Royal Academy of Arts was founded in 1768 and initially offered exhibitions in Pall Mall (its move to its current home in Burlington House on Piccadilly took place in 1868). The Pantheon on Oxford Street was completed in 1772 to offer concerts, masques, masquerades and balls to those who could afford to pay. Men and women of the elite thus had a variety of locations in which to interact with one another.

Male sociability was shaped by the provision of alcohol and drinking. Hence masculine society high and low was based around the tavern, generating a sociability based around song and obscenity. Wealthier men also met in coffee houses. The best known included the Grecian off the Strand and Will's off Covent Garden.6 The Grecian became a meeting place for opposition Whigs in the early eighteenth century.7 Artists would meet up at Old Slaughter's in St Martin's Lane where there was a distinctive cosmopolitan atmosphere. Elsewhere coffee houses (h as Will's) were notable for the presence of many literary and artistic luminaries.8 Such institutions often produced dining clubs where men could enjoy a spirit of conviviality.

The West End was paradoxical. It proclaimed the values of monarchy and aristocracy. Thus, even during the Civil War and Interregnum, John Holden's bookshop on the Strand featured works by royalist authors and right up to 1832, the death of Charles I was commemorated by the closure of theatres.9 Yet Covent Garden (designed originally as a space for the elite) also produced a bustling plebeian culture based upon low life pleasures. Samuel Pepys saw his first Punch and Judy show there in 1662 (Gatrell 46). The vulgarity of Covent Garden and its neighbourhood caused the Quality to move out. The Fleet Street end of the Strand, for example, was overrun with coffee shops, taverns, chop houses and prostitutes. This was a distinctly urban popular culture shaped by an appreciation of lewdness. Sexuality was an

integral part of sociability. Drury Lane was notorious not only for the poverty of its inhabitants but also for prostitution. In 1725, there were 107 ‘pleasure houses‘ on the street and ‘Drury Lane ague‘ was a term for syphilis (Gatrell 40-42).10 Further west, the May Fair, created by Hyde Park (which then gave its name to the district) in 1688, became notorious for rowdy and licentious behaviour by the lower orders but also people further up the social scale who relished its gaming booths.

At the patent theatres (the Theatre Royal Drury Lane and Covent Garden) the traditional repertoire of Shakespeare, Ben Johnson, Beaumont and Fletcher were performed but also new plays began to reflect the dynamic qualities of town life. Only the very poor were unable to get in. The Old Price riots of 1809 at the Theatre Royal Covent Garden (caused by the decision to increase prices to pay for its recent rebuilding) were as much about the belief that the building was a community asset and its audience needed to be respected. Theatre was thus an integral part of London popular culture.

In the West End, there were different kinds of sociability based upon class and gender but they also shaped new kinds of distinctly urban culture. New forms of sociability emerged around the networks offered by luxury entertainment and retail. Pierce Egan's novel *Life in London* (1821) expressed the way in which the West End offered spaces for the man about town. Egan described a lifestyle he knew well. Protagonists could enter exclusive institutions such as the King's Theatre but also slum it in the song and supper rooms of Covent Garden. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, it was clear that the West End was increasingly being populated by the middling sort who found their way into the attractions provided by the area. In the years after 1850, the West End became less a space that attracted high and low (though this persisted in the area's music halls) but one that sought to satisfy the dreamworlds of the bourgeoisie.

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3. Clemens Zimmermann, ‘The Productivity of the City in the Early Modern Era: The Book and Art Trade in Venice and London‘, in Martina Hessler and Clemens Zimmermann (eds.), Creative Urban Milieus: Historical Perspectives on Culture, Economy and the City (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 2008), p. 59.

4. Jennifer Hall-Witt, Fashionable Acts: Opera and Elite Culture in London, 1780-1880 (Durham, NH: University Press of New England, 2007), p. 4-5, 24, 61.

5. Hannah Greig, The Beau Monde: Fashionable Society in Georgian London (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

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7. Jonathan Harris, ‘The Grecian Coffee House and Political Debate in London, 1688-1714‘, The London Journal 25 (2000), 1-13.

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10. Ian McIntyre, Garrick (London: Allen Lane, 1999), p.1.

Citer cet article

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