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The Digital Encyclopedia of British Sociability in the Long Eighteenth Century

Kit-Cat Club

FIELD Ophelia



Mots-clés

Friendship

Merchants

Patronage

Whigs

Résumé

The Kit-Cat Club (c.1690s-c.1720) was one of the earliest and most influential London gentlemen's dining clubs. It kickstarted the English craze for eighteenth century clubbing and was the first to turn membership into a social credential. With members drawn exclusively from one Whig faction, yet with foundations in the literary world, it became a hub of patronage along lines of intellectual friendship rather than kinship, an informal venue of political opposition, and a prototype for Dr Johnson's Club, among many others.

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from one Whig faction, yet with foundations in the literary world, it became a hub of patronage along lines of intellectual friendship rather than kinship, an informal venue of political opposition, and a prototype for Dr Johnson's Club, among many others. The Kit-Cat, and the 'polite' norms that its members fashioned and then disseminated nationwide through journals such as *The Spectator* (1711-12, 1714), profoundly shaped the course of British sociability and national identity.

The dates of the Kit-Cat's foundation and dissolution are uncertain, as no official records of its meetings or membership survive. A semi-reliable contemporary recorded that it was first convened at the Cat and Fiddle Tavern on Gray's Inn Lane, owned by a pastry-maker named Christopher (Kit) Cat (or Catling) and that the meetings dined on mutton pies known as 'Kit-Cats'.¹ It is also certain that one of its founders and its first chairman (or 'secretary') was the publisher-bookseller Jacob Tonson (1656-1736), who gathered his poets and playwrights together with wealthy noblemen – initially, the bibliophile jurist John Somers (1651-1716) – in order to create a patronage network that was bound at either end to his firm. An all-male club, growing to consist of authors, peers, MPs, military figures and connoisseurs, the Kit-Cat never convened without Tonson's presence.

The Kit-Cat Club was unlike any previous London club in that it combined cultural, political and professional purposes within a single entity. Previously, social centres of the literati, such as Dryden's Witty Club, were distinct from centres of political subversion or factional organisation. As it grew, the Kit-Cat exploited this combination of aims, understanding that it was helpful for a political party to create a cultural climate in its own favour, while its cultural agenda inversely made partisan clubbing a respectable pastime. By the 1700s, it had developed an agenda to direct English arts and letters, with a particular emphasis on journalism and opera.

The practices of the Kit-Cat Club were relatively formalised. It met on Thursday afternoons to dine, converse, read literary efforts aloud, and toast absent ladies with short complimentary verses. The only female known to have been invited to join a meeting, on one unique occasion in 1695, was the seven-year-old daughter of a member who was proposed as a toast (later the brilliant correspondent, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu). At some point these verses were inscribed onto the wine glasses themselves. There was some overlap in membership with a contemporaneous club called The Toasters, the two clubs joint funding at least one theatre production in January 1700. Addison described the Kit-Cat as a club 'founded upon Eating and Drinking',² many members were corpulent, and its revels sometimes extended until three in the morning.³ It met primarily in private upstairs rooms of taverns in central London or Hampstead, which locates the Club's sociability between the public and private spheres. However, starting in 1703, at a property leased by Tonson in Barn Elms, it was the first club to furnish a clubroom specifically for its own use. The Kit-Cat was a space of exclusive membership, designed to build social capital, yet of open conversation on the basis of a pretended equality between men of vastly differing ranks and fortunes.

At some stage, a cap was set of thirty-nine members, however the Kit-Cat's longevity meant there were several membership generations, following deaths and expulsions, making a known total of fifty-five.⁴ A key criteria for membership, certainly until 1714, was political allegiance to the 'Whig Junto' – a grouping of Whig leaders, three of whom were Kit-Cats themselves. The three Kit-Cat Junto members were John Somers, 1st Baron Somers, Thomas Wharton, 1st Marquess of Wharton, and Charles Montagu, 1st Earl of Halifax.⁵ Whiggery and beauty were the key criteria for the choice of toasted ladies.⁶



John James Baker, 'The Whig Junto', Tate, T15046, 1710.

The Kit-Cat's patriotic cultural agenda sprang from rivalry with France. The Kit-Cats saw themselves as promoting Britain's cultural reputation on the international stage in the context

of the War of the Spanish Succession (1701-14).⁷ They also saw themselves as educators of the 'middling sort', funding several translations of Greek and Latin classics into English, or the production of 'native' operas with English themes and English-language libretti.⁸

A remarkably consistent Protestant Whig aesthetic emerged, based on modification (as they saw it, 'moderation') of neoclassical Continental models by elements loosely taken from English history, romance or folk tradition – such as long Jacobean galleries, medieval gothic ruins or old castellar features added to baroque architecture (cf. Kimbolton Castle) or garden design (cf. Stowe Gardens). Meanwhile, through Tonson's scholarly editions of Shakespeare, Spenser and Milton, the *Spectator* essays of Joseph Addison (1672-1719) on literary criticism, and the production of patriotic verse in epic mode, they bolstered the self-confidence of English literature. This patriotic aesthetic must be inferred in the absence of a manifesto, and was shared by some non-Kit-Cats, but the Club worked especially tirelessly, and collectively, to fund and popularise it.

Evolution

Initially, the Club emerged out of several overlapping friendship groups, centred on Tonson. First Lord Somers, as already mentioned, then William Congreve (1670-1729) who was Tonson's author and lodger by 1693, then John Vanbrugh (1664-1726) who met Congreve and Tonson after the success of his first play at the Theatre Royal in 1696. Through Charles Sackville, 6th Earl of Dorset (1643-1706), Tonson was then introduced to the poets Matthew Prior (1664-1721), George Stepney (1663-1707) and Charles Montagu (1661-1715). These three were products of the rapid expansion in educational opportunity during the late seventeenth century, creating bonds between school and university friends which they felt to be as important as blood relations and which they sought to maintain via adult sociability. They enjoyed a setting that put them on an equal intellectual footing, such as that they had experienced at Westminster and Cambridge, while simultaneously offering advancement. This applied too to Dr Samuel Garth (1661-1719), who knew Stepney at Cambridge, and to Joseph Addison and Richard Steele (1672-1729), whose friendship began at Charterhouse school and who joined the Club c.1704-5.

During the Whig Junto's political adversity at the start of Anne's reign, the Kit-Cat Club became a forum for political organising. Satires were published during this period which depicted the Club as a gang of hubristic conspirators.⁹ They sought alignment with the military commander John Churchill, 1st Duke of Marlborough (1650-1722), toasting his daughters and admitting his military colleagues as members, even as he himself remained aloof from membership.

In 1703, the Kit-Cat moved to The Fountain tavern on the Strand and the Upper Flask tavern in Hampstead for summer meetings. By 1704 Anne's attitude was softening towards the Junto, yet the Club continued to grow increasingly political. The following year, one Tory wrote that 'from turning Critics upon Wit, [the Kit-Cats] are fallen into Criticisms upon

Policy; I might say AGENTS in it'.¹⁰ A new Kit-Cat member, Robert Walpole (1676-1745), was one of the leaders of a Commons grouping called the 'Kitlings', and in June 1705 four Kit-Cats travelled together to Hanover to visit the Electoral family.

Late 1707 saw a brief pause, when the Club split between two Whig factions (Junto Whigs versus Treasurer's Whigs) but the party and the Club were soon reunited. Kit-Cat politicians then continued to support the Duke of Marlborough's campaigns, even as the War lost support and the Junto were accused of prolonging it for their own gain. This image was not helped by the Kit-Cat admission of Sir Henry Furnese (1658-1712), a 'money man' deeply invested in the War who hosted a celebratory dinner at a City guild hall.

After the Whig fall in 1710, Kit-Cat dinners once again operated as an informal centre of opposition. They saw their gatherings as sustaining rights of free expression and association that they believed a French-backed Jacobite restoration would extinguish, and on the eve of Anne's death were involved in planning military resistance in case of Jacobite invasion. Their fortunes were reversed with the safe arrival of George I: only four of the Club's thirty-nine members did not hold some Government or Court Office in late 1714, and the younger generation of Kit-Cats monopolised Georgian power for decades afterwards.

In around 1716, with Tonson's retirement, Thomas Pelham-Holles, Earl of Clare and Duke of Newcastle (1693/4-1768) took over as the Club's chair and central patron. He tried to heal a rift within the Whigs over foreign policy by hosting a meeting of the Club at Newcastle House in March 1717. The Club, however, failed in this case to forge political cohesion through sociability, instead fading away by 1720 thanks to various founders' deaths, rural retirements, and late marriages. Private house parties took on the Kit-Cat's political functions,¹¹ while elderly members such as Congreve and Tonson continued to exchange their mutual affection and nostalgia for the Club's hey-day in letters and posted gifts.

Modus Operandi

The Kit-Cat was part of a re-centring of British culture and sociability away from the Court in the pre-Georgian period. Their patronage was usually by means of aristocratic officeholders dispensing sinecures, licences, honours, and other jobs – for example, populating various European embassies and Irish colonial offices – rather than direct financial support. Six of Vanbrugh's main architectural patrons were fellow members, however, and on one occasion the Club collected a gift of 800 guineas for the actress Mrs Bracegirdle.

Reflecting the semi-mercantile nature of the Whig party, the Kit-Cat Club took a semi-mercantile approach to patronage of the arts by reliance on subscriptions. In 1703, for example, the building of the Queen's Theatre on the Haymarket was funded by Kit-Cat subscription in order to create a 'cradle and forcing-ground' for opera in England.¹² Tonson, meanwhile, used Kit-Cat dominated subscription lists to fund his publication of *Caesar's*

Commentaries (1712), the first collected volume of essays from *The Tatler* (1710), and Steele's bestselling pamphlet *The Crisis* (1714). He treated the Club's literary members as an informal editorial board for his series *Miscellany Poems* and used the Club's hospitality to fix author's royalties prior to the 1709 Copyright Act. Several literary productions were also direct collaborations between Kit-Cat authors.¹³ They conceived of literature as sociable – something to be composed collaboratively or inspired by conversation, then to be read, heard, or otherwise consumed collectively.

Alongside subscriptions, the Kit-Cat Club made other self-publicising gestures: paying collectively for Dryden's funeral in 1700, a musical talent competition based around *The Judgement of Paris* in 1701, and, more ideologically, a banned demonstration planned for 17 November 1711 including burning effigies of the Devil, Pope and Pretender. The Kit-Cat Club's fame is evidenced by works such as Richard Blackmore's *The Kit-Cats: A Poem* (1708) as well as numerous post-1710 Tory ballads lambasting the Club, which reached even uneducated public audiences.

A series of portraits were painted of the Kit-Cats between 1702-21 by Sir Godfrey Kneller (1646-1723), of which forty-three still survive. These were a visual memorial of sociability with their three-quarter format and choice of attire creating an innovative informality and intimacy with the viewer. Their individuality yet similarity expresses the egalitarian spirit of the Club, and from 1704 onwards, they were hung as each was completed in the Barn Elms clubroom.

Impact

The Club's impact was felt in Britain's culture, politics and practices of sociability. Despite its focus on catalysing a cultural renaissance, however, many of its efforts to that end – such as English *opera seria* or Vanbrugh's architecture – had little influence on generations immediately following, and they failed to foresee the advent of less sociable forms of literature such as the novel or Romantic lyric.

Politically, the Club's impact was far greater, albeit hard to separate from that of the Whig party as a whole and other sub-groupings. The Hanover Club, for example, was an adjunct to or satellite of the Kit-Cat Club, largely comprised of Members of Parliament concerned with protecting the Hanoverian succession during 1712-14, and without any cultural agenda. We can be certain, however, that the Kit-Cat Club galvanised partisan loyalty and rhetoric. Its well-coordinated 'whipping' of the Commons and electoral campaigning impacted many major events between 1704-15. If the political stability of England in this period was due to 'a sense of common identity in those who wielded economic, social and political power',¹⁴ then the Kit-Cat Club was the crucible of that common identity. Walpole thus learned at the Kit-Cat how to wield power through patronage, the press and partying.

What Walpole learned politically, Addison and Steele learned in terms of social norms. Neither essayist appears to have been members of any other club prior to 1711, therefore Bickerstaff's club in *The Tatler* (1709-11) and The Spectator Club in *The Spectator* can both be seen as fictional variations upon their own experiences at Kit-Cat dinners (and in coffee-houses), which in turn were imitated by many clubs that these journals' readers established across Britain and the British empire. A particular ideal of an English gentleman – 'clubbable' and cultured, 'polite', tolerant and urbane, articulate 'with the help of a Glass at their Mouths'¹⁵ – was cultivated by the Kit-Cat authors, all of whom saw Lord Somers, Kit-Cat founding member, as this ideal's archetype.¹⁶

Remnants Today

None of the original venues of the Kit-Cat Club remain. Markers and memorials of various kinds, however, remain to be found at Stowe House and Gardens, at The Savoy Hotel on the Strand (former location of The Fountain Tavern), at 89 Holly Bush Steps, Hampstead (relatively near the former site of the Upper Flask Tavern), and there is a Kit-Cat toasting glass in the collection of the Christ Church Picture Gallery in Oxford. The Kneller portraits of the Kit-Cat members are displayed at the National Portrait Gallery, London, and at Beningbrough Hall in North Yorkshire.

1. Edward (Ned) Ward, *The Secret History of the Clubs* (London: 1709)
2. *The Spectator* (vol. 1, no.9, 10 March 1711)
3. George Stepney to Jacob Tonson, 24 March 1703, in *The Gentleman's Magazine* (vol. 8, July-Dec 1837), p. 362-364.
4. For the full list, see Ophelia Field, *The Kit-Cat Club: Friends Who Imagined a Nation* (London: HarperCollins, 2008), p. 425-426
5. See below the group portrait by a studio assistant of Kneller: James Baker, 'The Whig Junto', Tate, T15046, 1710, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/baker-the-whig-junto-t15046>
6. For a full transcript of surviving toast verses, see PDF available for download from www.opheliafield.com
7. Mentioned as 'the Patriots that saved Britain' by Horace Walpole, quoted in *Memoirs of the Celebrated Persons Composing the Kit-Cat Club* (London: Hurst, Robinson & co, 1821), p. iii.
8. Promoting the opera *Rosamund* with a libretto by Kit-Cat member Joseph Addison, for example, fellow Kit-Cat Richard Steele reported that 'our English poets have not been behind hand with our English Heroes in reducing the French Wit to as low a state as their Arms'. Richard Steele, *The Muses Mercury* (25 January 1707).
9. *The Golden Age Revers'd* (London: 1703)
10. *The Tackers Vindicated; or, an Answer to the Whigs New Black List* (London: 1705), p. 6.
11. Such as those of Walpole at Houghton and Eastbury, or those of Sir Richard Temple, Viscount Cobham (1675-1749) and his anti-Walpole faction at Stowe.
12. Michael Foss, *The Age of Patronage: The Arts in England 1660-1750* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1972), p. 148. Subscription music recitals were similarly organised at the Drury Lane and Lincoln's Inn theatres during 1703-04, and Kit-Cat subscription funded a revival of three plays at the Queen's Theatre in early 1707.

13. A play titled *Squire Trelooby* (1704) by four members of the Club, a ballad on the victory at Oudenarde in 1708, and a lavish edition of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (1717).
 14. J.H. Plumb, *The Growth of Political Stability in England 1675-1725* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), p. XVII.
 15. *The Spectator* (vol. 1, no.53, 1 May 1711)
 16. See Somers' obituary by Joseph Addison, *The Freeholder* (no. 39, 4 May 1716); see also the description of the ideal English character as 'a Compound' in Joseph Addison and Richard Steele, *The Guardian* (20 April 1713).
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Citer cet article

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Richard Blackmore, The Kit-Cats ([1708](#))

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