

Robert Whitelaw 7 March 2023

The Australian (1838) and Union (1857) clubs:
the great survivors of 185 years of Sydney clubland

Robert gave us an outstanding summary of the history of that very British phenomenon, the member-owned gentlemen's City Club, from their emergence in London and Australia, and their history in Sydney since, with particular emphasis on the The Australian Club and the Union Club (which became the Union University & Schools Club)

He delved into the origins in London in the 1820-30s. Prior to then, the nobility had established houses in London, used to accommodate them when visiting the city from their country estates. However around then, modern-day political and professional classes were emerging, and looking to meet and fraternise with like-minded gentlemen, fulfilling both business and social needs, as well as a place to stay in the city when needed.

One of the earliest was the Union Club in London, formed in 1821 and "open to respectable gentlemen of all professions" (but noting that solicitors were not considered suitable for admission until 1904). The clubhouse was in a stately edifice on the corner of Pall Mall and Trafalgar Square. This set the tone for several similar clubs, mostly in the same area of London within the next 15 years, including Athenaeum, Oxford & Cambridge, City of London, Carlton, Reform clubs. The template soon spread globally, notably including the Union Club of New York in 1836.

The first such member-owned gentlemen's club in Australia was the Union Club, Hobart which began by leasing rooms in an existing hotel in 1834, thus complete with bar, dining, reading rooms and accommodation. This flourished for a few years when Tasmania was booming until the severe depression in the 1840s forced its closure. It was resurrected as the Tasmania Club in 1861, and continues today.

Meanwhile to the North, the Australian Club was formed in 1838, buying the best hotel in Sydney at that time, the Pulteney Hotel in Bent St, very close to the then Government House site (Bridge & Phillip St). Its membership was largely drawn from the "old pioneer families and pastoral elite", and later associated with the Tory side of party politics. After just surviving the 1840s depression, the club prospered in the subsequent agricultural recovery, the new wealth of the Gold Rush and the lively arrival of party politics when self-government was granted to NSW in the late 1850s. It remained in that clubhouse 53 years until 1891, when it moved up Bent St to its current site at the corner of Macquarie St, where a large special new building was constructed, with substantial financing by the University of Sydney (which was flush with funds from the Challis bequest, at a time of further economic recession). In 1969, it was decided to demolish this clubhouse and construct the existing building, which incorporates the then innovative structure of combining the club with commercial office floors. This structure has been highly successful financially for the club. During the 3 years construction, the clubhouse moved temporarily to the former NSW Club (with whom there had been a merger). Fascinating historic photos were

shown of each of these buildings, and also of other Sydney clubs, as subsequently covered.

In the late 1850s and subsequent couple of decades, a few other gentlemen's clubs of various political shades were formed, having seen the Australian Club prosper in that decade, to service the needs arising from leaders of the City professions plus newer politicians-from around the state assembling at Parliament in Macquarie St as well as the post-Gold Rush growth of Sydney

In 1857, the Union Club Sydney was created with the intention of being a "quiet oasis for gentlemen, away from Tory and Reform Party politics" (though this apolitical optimism was soon discarded). Initial premises were a hotel (later called the Imperial Hotel) on the new Wynyard Square (created on former army site before that moved to the current Victoria Barracks, Paddington). After only 2 years there, the Union Club moved to Bligh St into the Francis Greenway-designed mansion, previously owned by Robert Campbell Jnr, with an extensive garden, carriage way etc, (and close to the Australian Club). This was variously demolished and extended over 100 years into a classic Palladian-style club house on the corner of Bent and Bligh Sts. In 1957, much of this land was sold to Qantas for construction of the Wentworth Hotel (later renamed Sofitel) and office buildings. The Union Club retained its current site at the corner of Bent and Phillip Sts, and built the existing clubhouse, designed by the eminent architects of the day, Stephenson & Turner.

Meanwhile in early 1900s, the previously successful but ageing Athenaeum Club was in decline and a group of young University graduates considered joining. However, they decided to reject the merger, and in 1905, this latter decided to go it alone and form The University Club, to provide a place to meet and share common interests. Initially almost all were graduates, especially drawn from legal and medical professions who were then commonly based in Phillip or Macquarie Streets nearby. It was decided to be open to graduates of any university (noting many in Sydney had attended British universities, though it took until 1967 before UNSW graduates and 1978 when women graduates were permitted for membership – a few years earlier some wives had become members). Initial clubhouse was at 13 Castlereagh St, then after 3 years moved next door into purpose-built leased premises. It grew fast, with 1,000 members by 1916. In 1930, it moved to 70 Phillip St, where it incorporated dining, meeting, accommodation, and roof top squash courts.

Also before WWI, a group of civic-minded citizens promoting that Sydney should grow to over 1 million residents, formed the Millions Club, later to become the Sydney Club. In the early 1920s, old boys from leading schools formed clubs, and then some combined to form the Schools Club, based initially on the 5 protestant GPS schools. The 1930s depression, wartime and varying member needs over the following decades provided many challenges for all city clubs, leading to some mergers. Catholics were permitted to join the Schools club in 1970, and then in 1977 the merger took place to form the University & Schools Club, based at the Phillip St clubhouse. Soon afterwards the Sydney club (formerly Millions club) sold its Rowe St premises and also merged with University & Schools Club, without further name change. In 1983, the 70 Phillip St building was demolished and redeveloped.

In 2007, the next major merger took place, forming the Union University & Schools Club (UUSC). The Union Club clubhouse at 25 Bent St remains the focal point of dining, meeting rooms, library and accommodation. In addition at the redeveloped 70 Phillip St building, the USSC has its Health Club, with heated swimming pool, 2 squash courts, gym etc.

There has been close cooperation and friendly rivalry between The Australian Club and Union/UUSC Club, with annual sporting contests. Robert described the horse drawn carriages called Drags, crammed with members, one for each club, who would have a race down Macquarie St, Oxford St, Anzac Pde to Royal Randwick in the late 19th century. This is a rather different use of the term “drag” than now applies to Mardi Gras along part of that route in contemporary Sydney. He also described how the Australian Golf Club had its genesis in 1882 from Union Club members wanting to play this sport which gained popularity here in the late 19th century (prior to that a few Scots used to hit around the swampland in Victoria Park).

Over the 185 years of such member-owned gentlemen’s clubs within the central city of Sydney, aside from some of those mentioned above, the once-important Reform, Athenaeum, Warrigal, Victoria clubs closed, most of which were based on Macquarie St or nearby.

Sydney women set up their own versions of the City club (the Women’s 1901, the Queen’s 1912, the Lyceum 1914, and the Macquarie 1922 clubs). Queen’s Club was initially formed mainly by the wives of Union Club members at the corner of Macquarie & King St, opposite St James Church. This land and building was resumed in 1961 to form the Law Courts, so moved the Club to its existing site by buying the then St James Hotel on the corner of Elizabeth & Market Sts, opposite David Jones. Leasing of ground floor commercial space to upmarket global boutiques has provided a firm financial foundation for this club.

Robert also provided some copies of the hardback historical volume produced for the centenary of the University & Schools Club. If any member missed out and would like a copy, Peter James has a couple of extra copies, so contact him.

Robert also produced a splendid summary of some of the extraordinary artworks and memorabilia on the various floors of the UUSC, enabling Probus members to take a self-guided tour after lunch of available rooms, with kind cooperation of UUSC management.

After a lively and interesting Q&A, Adrian Pilton thanked Robert for such a fascinating presentation, with such excellent photos, facts and historical context that extended our knowledge of the evolution of clubs over such a long period as Sydney developed.

PJ