

KIT-CAT VENUES

(Web Appendix to *The Kit-Cat Club* by Ophelia Field, 2008)

One of the first questions the curious ask about the early 18th century Kit-Cat Club is where it met. There is no one simple answer, and no surviving building on which to lobby for the erection of a blue plaque. Pre-twentieth century antiquarians and historians have been responsible for a fair amount of confusion about the Club's venues, and even some of the primary sources are contradictory. The following therefore sets out my understanding of this nomadic Club's various meeting places, dispelling a few myths on the subject.

Introduction

There is no doubt that this was a London club, its urbanity an essential aspect of its collective character. With one known exception (see number 8 below), the Club did not meet in members' townhouses, despite the fact that its aristocratic members owned some of the most spacious and impressive properties in central London, including Montagu House (now the site of the British Museum) and Somerset House. Members often dined in smaller groupings, as friends, at one another's homes – the account books of Lord Wharton, for example, show how frequently the playwright William Congreve and other Kit-Cats were dinner guests at his Dover Street townhouse – but these were not Club meetings per se.

Instead, the Kit-Cat Club seems to have met predominantly in the upper rooms of various taverns, none of which survive today. This distinguishes it from some of its immediate predecessors, which met primarily in coffee houses. Dryden's 'Witty Club' – a non-partisan literary circle – met only at Will's Coffee House in Covent Garden, for example. The fact that the Kit-Cats met in more private spaces, where their conversation could not be joined – as in a coffee house's main room – by anyone willing to pay a penny on entrance, points to the more exclusive nature of their enterprise. Whereas coffee houses were places to gauge public opinion, the Kit-Cat was interested in shaping it. Whereas coffee houses, as one Restoration pamphlet complained, were plagued by arguments lacking discernment, and sensationalist story-tellers rather than reasoning philosophers, the Kit-Cat Club tried to exclude the uneducated, irrational or annoying. Quacks, religious enthusiasts, 'bawlers', pedants, 'projectors' and (a derogatory term) 'critics' were among the pitfalls of entering a coffee house unaccompanied by a shield of friends. At the Kit-Cat Club, behind the closed door of a tavern's private room, among a select gathering, these risks were – in theory – avoided. Only one primary source – a Tory newspaper called *The Plain Dealer* – states that the Kit-Cat Club met regularly in a coffee house during 1712 (see number 7 below).¹

No primary evidence suggests that the Kit-Cat Club ever convened at a location any more rural than Barn Elms or Hampstead (see numbers 3 and 4 below). Oral tradition among garden historians that the Kit-Cats met in the Belvedere Tower built by Sir John Vanbrugh at Claremont, for example, is without supporting primary evidence. Kit-Cat members' country estates were among the most impressive in the land – Petworth, Chevening, Bushy House, Boughton House, Claremont, Nottingham Castle, Houghton, Chatsworth, Castle Howard, Kimbolton, Rousham, Stowe and Knole, to

name but a few – and many were closely linked the Kit-Cat Club in cultural terms, yet none were Kit-Cat meeting venues as far as we are aware.



Left: Scene in a private tavern room, from *The Dispensary*, a poem by Dr Samuel Garth (Kit-Cat member), published by Jacob Tonson (Kit-Cat chairman).

1. The Cat and Fiddle, Gray's Inn Lane, 1690s-1702

The earliest Kit-Cat venue, in the mid to late 1690s, appears to have been the Cat and Fiddle tavern on Gray's Inn Lane. This is reported by Edward (Ned) Ward, a contemporary writer (despised by his contemporaries as a hack, and prone to mix fact with fiction), who referred to the Club first meeting at an alehouse owned by Mr

Christopher (Kit) Cat (or Catling), a pastry chef, and called the Cat and Fiddle.² Alexander Pope, who knew many Kit-Cats well, similarly told the contemporary historian Joseph Spence that 'The master of the house where the club met was Christopher Katt...'³ This is further corroborated by an eighteenth century manuscript source – a letter from Philip Lempriere of Bath to William Baker of Bayfordbury, dated 13 February 1777. Lempriere was only born in 1710 and so was not a contemporary of the Club, however he was married to Ann Tonson, great-niece of publisher Jacob Tonson (founder of the Club), and Lempriere reported this information about the place of the Club's foundation as direct family oral history:

Jacob Tonson the latter end of the Stuarts lived in Gray's Inn passage where he continued till Queen Anne's reign... They [wits and poets] used to meet at a Public House in Gray's Inn Lane, the sign of the Cat. The man who kept it was called Kit...⁴

Lempriere's testimony is inaccurate on one count – tax records show that Tonson moved to live in a house on Fleet Street (with his author William Congreve as lodger) in 1693, a full nine years before Queen Anne's reign. However, Lempriere may merely be confusing Tonson's residence and place of business, since Tonson did run a printer's/book shop in the Gray's Inn area until 1710, when he moved to a new shop at the sign of the Shakespeare's Head, on the south side of the Strand, opposite Catherine Street, then cutting across today's crescent-shaped Aldwych.⁵ This minor confusion does not, therefore, discredit Lempriere as a source regarding the venue of Kit-Cat meetings being a tavern on Gray's Inn Lane.

Lillywhite's, a reference book for London's taverns and coffee houses during this period, places the Cat and Fiddle tavern on Shire Lane, near Temple Bar (see Lillywhite's No.4514), while another Victorian source also claims that 'according to

local antiquaries' the Cat and Fiddle was on Shire Lane, later becoming the Trumpet tavern described in Richard Steele's *Tatler*.⁶ Both these statements, however, appear to conflate the Cat and Fiddle with the Trumpet or the Fountain (see number 2 below).

2. The Fountain, The Strand, 1702-10

The contemporary poet Richard Blackmore described the Kit-Cat Club as meeting at the Fountain tavern, 'settling, or perplexing, Points of State', complimenting one another's parliamentary orations, while running down their Tory rivals:

In Pleasure here they pass the wearing Night,
And the hard Labours of the Day recite...⁷

This poem was published in 1708 but originally written around 1704, so this location presumably remained valid between the dates of composition and publication.

Mr Cat moved his pastry shop sometime in 1702-03 from Gray's Inn to Shire Lane, a street that no longer exists but which used to run down to the Strand through the middle of what is today the Royal Courts of Justice. Mr Cat at this same time seems to have sold the Cat and Fiddle and become keeper of the Fountain, which was on the Strand, at around number 101-104.⁸ This became the new venue for the Club, which had expanded in membership and needed a larger room and cellar.⁹ Blackmore's poem specified that, at the Fountain, 'High o'er the Gate he [Mr Cat] hung his waving Sign, / A Fountain Red with ever-flowing Wine'. Ned Ward in 1709 similarly reported that, through Jacob Tonson's assistance, Mr Cat moved 'to keep a pudding-pie shop' within convenient distance of the Fountain tavern, but that the Club now met at the tavern, 'it being wisely agreed by the whole board, that a noble cellar of wine was a better foundation for a society of wits than a baker's oven.' Ward adds that they continued to feast on Kit-Cat pies ('[T]hough they changed their residence they preserved their customs...') and the Club remained at the Fountain 'for a succession of years; till they were, at last, burnt out of their dear Parnassus, where they had so long been settled'.¹⁰

The Fountain definitely had a private dining room large enough for such a gathering, since, in the 1680s, it had hosted a famous weekly feast of all the Leicestershire gentlemen in London, who met to socialise and raise money for their county poor.¹¹ The Fountain was also a meeting place of Whig conspirators prior to 1688,¹² a subversive history that may have increased its appeal for the Kit-Cats in 1702 as they entered an indefinite phase of political opposition to another Tory-leaning Stuart.

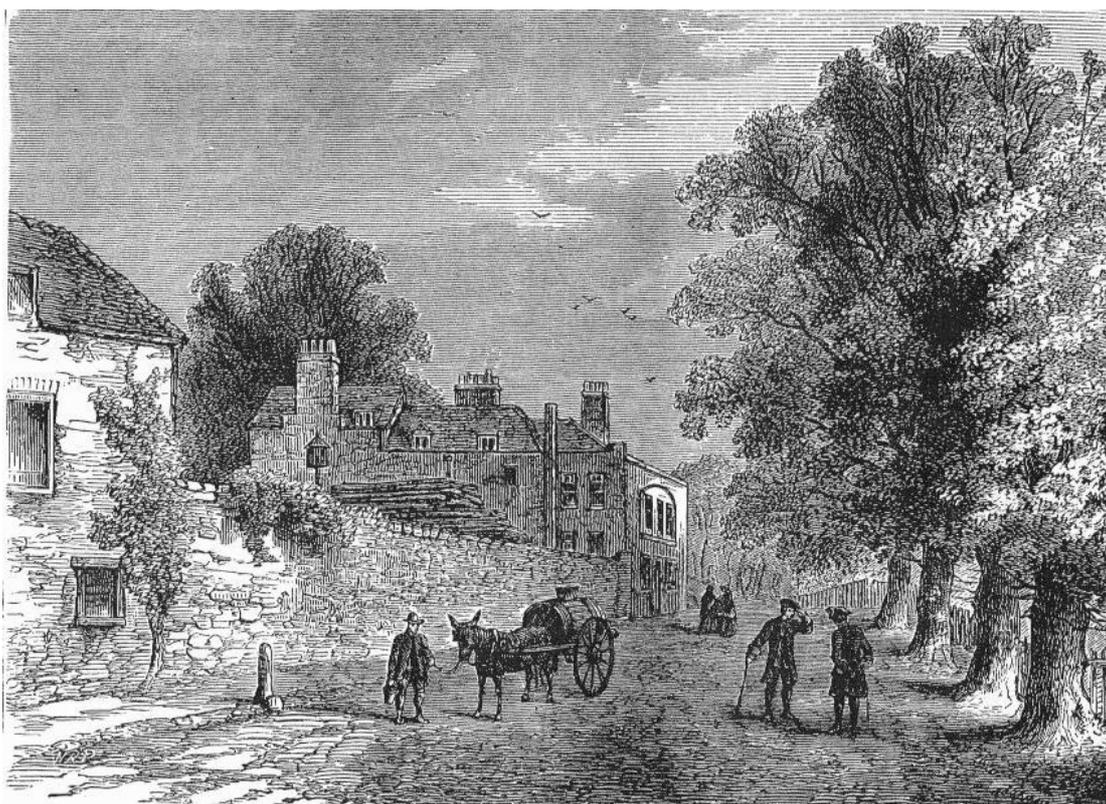
After the Kit-Cat's demise, the Fountain appears to have been a venue for other, similar clubs. The Fountain Club, for example, became a headquarters of the opposition to Sir Robert Walpole (a former Kit-Cat), including William Pulteney's followers (another former Kit-Cat). On other evenings, between 1723 and 1731, the Fountain was used as a Masonic lodge. After 1739, the Society of Dilettanti held meetings there. When Mr Cat died is unknown, so it is uncertain whether he was involved with any of these later gatherings as the tavern's keeper.

A number of not-quite-contemporary sources appear to confuse the Fountain with the Trumpet, halfway down Shire Lane at its widest part (near Mr Cat's residence).¹³ This is likely due to the fact that Richard Steele was a Kit-Cat and also the creator of the imaginary Trumpet Club in *The Tatler*. John Dryden's biographer, Edmund Malone, for example, wrote that the Kit-Cat Club was 'said to have first met at an obscure

house in Shire Lane',¹⁴ contradicting Ward's claim of an earlier venue in Gray's Inn. Similarly, the son of a Kit-Cat contemporary referred to his father visiting an [unnamed] Whig club at the Trumpet tavern on Shire Lane.¹⁵ Following these sources, several nineteenth century authors claimed that the Kit-Cat Club's earliest venue was either the Trumpet or 'an obscure pastry-cook's (in Shire Lane, near Temple Bar) entitled CHRISTOPHER CAT'.¹⁶

G.M. Trevelyan, with more circumspection, placed the Club in 'the tavern of Christopher Katt, near Temple Bar'.¹⁷ Other candidate taverns besides the Trumpet and Fountain possibly used by the Club during Anne's reign include the Devil and the Rose. Lempriere is again the source who claimed that, when Anne came to the throne in 1702, the Kit-Cat Club 'removed to the Devil or the Rose Tavern, Temple Bar' because 'all the great People of the Whig Party came'.¹⁸ The Devil was the old haunt of Ben Jonson's club, revered by the Kit-Cats for its Elizabethan literary associations, while the Rose was the venue for the Whig Rose Club, which existed in parallel to the Kit-Cat as a kind of political ally-club. Neither is impossible is a venue, but no second source corroborates Lempriere.

3. The Upper Flask, Hampstead



At around the time the Club moved south from Gray's Inn to the area of Temple Bar (probably to the Fountain on the Strand), the Kit-Cats also raised a subscription fund to build a summer clubhouse or 'convenient reception' in the fresher air of Hampstead Heath. The original proposal is dated 15 May 1702, and lists 13 members of the 'Kitcat Society' who each promise to contribute ten guineas towards the cost.¹⁹ The proposal was for the building in Hampstead to be finished by the following spring of

1703, and stated that if the Club did not find Hampstead the best location, the money should go towards building a similar clubhouse elsewhere.²⁰

There is no primary evidence that such a building was ever erected, though Blackmore's 1708 poem does refer to the Kit-Cats dining on Hampstead's 'airy Head' in the summertime. Hampstead Hill is compared to Mount Parnassus and Tonson leads his tribe there.²¹

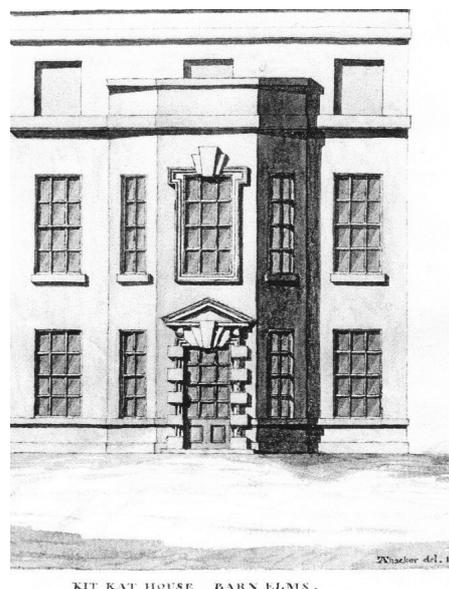
Oral tradition has it that the Kit-Cat Club met in Hampstead at the pre-existing Upper Flask tavern, known for its 'races, ruffles [raffles] and private marriages'.²² The village of Hampstead was then visited for its proximity to the Bellsise (today Belsize) Gardens – pleasure gardens like those in Kilburn, Vauxhall and St Pancras where Londoners could escape to enjoy music, dancing, gambling and groping the opposite sex in the shrubbery.²³

In 1702, the Upper Flask stood on the edge of the Heath, where the top of Heath Street intersects with East Heath Road and where Queen Mary House, a 'Care of the Elderly Unit', stands today.²⁴ Later in the eighteenth century, the Upper Flask became notorious as the inn to which the villain Lovelace takes the heroine in the novel *Clarissa*, and was said to be where Dr Johnson began writing *The Vanity of Human Wishes*.²⁵ One biographer writing in the 1930s when the building was still standing described it lyrically as having 'three roofs surmounting it like steps, and with a garden wall on either side. From across the road, four old oaks, reaching over, dusted the higher windows...and under an ancient mulberry tree beyond a pool in the garden the Kit-Cat gathered, took mutton pie and wines, toasted the reigning beauty, and sat out the twilight of the long summer evenings.'²⁶ A nineteenth century newspaper records this oral tradition that the Upper Flask was the Kit-Cat venue in Hampstead.²⁷

Today one unexplained relic of the Club remains in Hampstead – a house just down the hill from the former site of the Upper Flask, at 89 Holly Bush Steps, which declares itself 'Kit Cat House A.D.1745' above its doorway. Since the Club ceased to meet by 1722 at the very latest, this inscription is a mystery.

4. Barn Elms

In early 1703, Jacob Tonson leased a 'country villa' at Barn Elms, on the south side of the Thames, just west of Putney. This was not the grand manor house there but a more modest residence to the north of the manor, possibly its former dairy. Tonson took the house for himself and as a summer venue for the Club, and may have been permitted to use the Kit-Cat subscriptions monies that had been collected the previous year for building a clubhouse in Hampstead, apparently never built. Tonson hired Vanbrugh to renovate the house's interior, and a number of Kit-Cat members took an interest in its progress while Tonson was abroad during 1703.



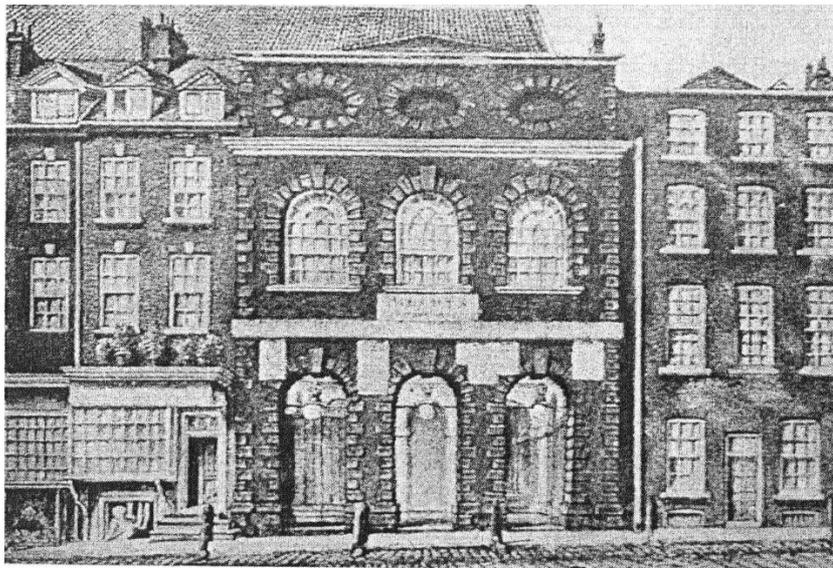
This house was where the Kit-Cat portraits by Sir Godfrey Kneller were first displayed, but only after Tonson's death and the Club's demise, in the 1730s, did his nephew, who had inherited the property, build the special gallery for them that was later described as the Club's abandoned clubhouse (and which the above sketch shows).



Left: The Barn Elms Manor House (as shown in a nineteenth century print).

5. The Queen's Arms, Pall Mall

There are two contemporary references to the Kit-Cat Club meeting in a tavern of London's newly rising West End during Anne's reign: the Queen's Arms in Pall Mall, which later became the King's Head during the Georgian period. The first reference is to the Club meeting there to dine before attending the opening of the theatre they had subscribed to build on the Haymarket (the Queen's Theatre), just around the corner, in April 1705. The second reference is to them meeting in a private 'Velvet room' at the Queen's Arms on the evening of 16 November 1711, in order to plan for an anti-Catholic demonstration they were funding the following day.²⁸



View of the Front of the Old Opera House, Haymarket

Built by Sir John Vanbrugh

From an original drawing by Capon. made in 1783

6. A Guild Hall, City of London

Sir Henry Furnese hosted a special dinner of the Kit-Cat Club to celebrate his 'promotion' in the Club (probably meaning his admission to it). A merchant and banker, Furnese promised to 'carry the Club into the City, and give such an entertainment as never was seen there'.²⁹ This dinner is known to have taken place as planned, but its exact venue – likely one of the guild halls – is unknown.

7. North's Coffee House, Covent Garden

There is one contemporary (Tory) reference to the Kit-Cat Club meeting in 1712 at North's Coffee House, owned by one 'Mr Oliver J-nes', on King's Street, Covent Garden.³⁰ King (not King's) Street, Covent Garden, remains at the northwest corner of the market, where today an early eighteenth century building has recently been restored into a complex of luxury flats and shops.

The Book of Days and William West's 1825 reference work states that Mr Cat kept a tavern (NOT a coffee house) on King Street, Westminster (not Covent Garden), and that that was the site of the Club's meetings.³¹ It is unclear whether this was the King Street that still runs off the west side of St James's Square or whether this tavern was on Whitehall, then known as King(s) Street.

8. Newcastle House, Lincoln's Inn Fields



residence.

On 30 March 1717, the young Duke of Newcastle, Thomas Pelham-Holles, attempted to heal the rift in the Whig party and hence the Kit-Cat Club by hosting a special meeting of the Club at Newcastle House, the northernmost house on the west side of Lincoln's Inn Fields, in central London.³² This house was formerly called Powys (or Powis) House, and had been occupied by a founding father of the Kit-Cat Club, Lord Somers, as a gift from King William in the 1690s, then given by order of Queen Anne to the French Ambassador, at which time it was burned down by an arsonist as an act of political protest. After George I's accession, when the Whigs were back in power, Newcastle had it remodelled by his fellow Kit-Cat, Vanbrugh, and used it as his primary London

The back of the house was destroyed to make way for Kingsway in the 1900s and Lutyens made alterations to the front of it in the 1930s.

Conclusion

Despite many contradictions, the following path of migration of Kit-Cat venues appears most likely: The Club first met during the reign of William & Mary in Gray's

Inn, probably at the Cat and Fiddle on Gray's Inn Lane, then moved south in 1702 to a larger tavern near Temple Bar, probably the Fountain on the Strand. This was the Club's venue during the long winters when parliament was in session, while during the summers after 1703 the Club met in Hampstead, at the Upper Flask, or in Barn Elms. During the theatre season, the Queen's Arms in Pall Mall was also sometimes used, and when the Club was in the political wilderness after 1710, or under particular stress (as during the Whig Schism of 1717), it held meetings at other venues as well.

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¹ The Plain Dealer (12 April 1712ff). Issue IV (Saturday 3 May 1712), about the war having pursued for private gain under guise of pretended principles, ends with an ‘Advertisement’: ‘These are to give Notice, That the Kit-Cat-Club having taken into their serious consideration the Merits, eminent Services and unjust Persecution of their Pious Brother and Fellow-Labourer Oliver J---nes, at N---th’s Coffee-House, have resolved, for the further Encouragement of him the said J---nes, to hold their Assembly once a week at the said Coffee-House. The first Meeting on Thursday Night next, at Six a Clock precisely.’

² Edward (Ned) Ward, *The History of the London Clubs* (1709).

³ Singer, S.W. ed., *Joseph Spencer Anecdotes* (London, 1964), pp.196-7.

⁴ Tonson Papers, NPG. Letter from Philip Lempriere of Bath to William Baker of Bayfordbury, 13 February 1777.

⁵ Evidence of the 1710 move of Tonson’s shop includes an advertisement in *The Spectator* of 14 October that the old shop was to be let, and the appearance of the new address in adverts for books and on title pages from that date. According to the rate books for 1736, these premises were actually on the corner of Dutchy Lane and the Strand, the former being the second turning south to the river if walking west from the old Somerset House. Catherine Street was therefore roughly, not directly, opposite Dutchy Lane and the corner where Jacob set up shop, but it was still used as the marker in the address because it was the main pedestrian thoroughfare up from the river, and the busy Somerset Watergate, towards Covent Garden. Years later, after the Kit-Cat Club’s lifetime, that Tonson’s great-nephew (Jacob the Third) shifted the shop to a more prominent position on the north side of the Strand. See J. Paul de Castro, ‘Over Against Catherine Street in the Strand’, *Notes and Queries*, 12th series, VII (October 23, 1920), p.321. According to Covent Garden rate books, the Tonsons also rented a separate house for the printer John Watts at 141 Bow Street, Covent Garden, from about October 1705.

⁶ Thornbury, Walter ed., *Old and New London*, 6 vols. (London, 1879), Vol 1, p.70.

Steele’s imagination lodged his narrator in *The Tatler*, Mr Isaac Bickerstaff Esq., at the top of Shire Lane, the street on which Mr Christopher Cat then lived. Bickerstaff spends much of his time with his small club of friends at the Trumpet on Shire Lane.

⁷ The Kit-Cats, A Poem, by Sir Richard Blackmore (London, 1708)

⁸ Lillywhite’s *London Signs* puts the Fountain at No.421, near the Savoy and near Fountain Court. Lillywhite’s *London Coffee Houses* (1963) suggests that this was half tavern, half coffee house, used also by the Society of Antiquaries as a meeting venue in 1709. It lists it as burning out in 1742, before which it stood on Numbers 103 and 104 (or possibly 101 and 102) The Strand, on Horwood’s 1799 Map.

⁹ Geduld, Harry M. *Prince of Publishers: A Study of the Work and Career of Jacob Tonson* (London 1969), p.159 n.37.

¹⁰ Edward (Ned) Ward, *The History of the London Clubs* (1709). By 1882, the Fountain was gone but there is a reference to the Fountain in the Strand being ‘now occupied by the Cigar Divan, as is denoted by the name of Fountain Court’ – see Ashton, J., *Social Life in the Reign of Queen Anne*, 2 vols. (London, 1882), vol. 1, p.242.

¹¹ Clark, Peter, *British Clubs and Societies, 1580-1800: The Origins of an Associational World* (Oxford, 2000), p.281-3.

¹² Papali, George Francis, *Jacob Tonson, Publisher: His Life and Work* (New Zealand, 1968), p.93.

¹³ See Alsop, J.D., ‘The Trumpet Tavern and the Kit-Cat Club’ in *The Scriblerian and the Kit-Cats*, Vol. XXVIII (Autumn 1995 and Spring 1996), p.125-128. Mr D. Yeo Bruton was the last publican of the Trumpet, who wrote 14 letters to Steele’s biographer George Aitken in 1885-1889 (now held at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas, Austin – The Aitken-Addison and Aitken-Steele MSS). In Bruton’s first letter, he wrote: ‘The Trumpet stood about half way up [Shire Lane] between Temple Bar and Carry Street, at the widest and best part of the Lane, and remained almost entirely in its original state till demolished to make way for the site upon which the new Law Courts now stand. It had the old sign of the Trumpet to the last, the same as is figured in one of our oldest illustrated magazines, Limbard’s Mirror where it appeared side by side with a view of the house in Fullwood Street Holborne where papers for the Spectator were taken in.’ This tavern appears to have altered its name back and forth during the nineteenth century. In 1865, the Duke of York tavern on Shire Lane applied to resume its original name of The Trumpet, citing the claim that it had once hosted the Kit-Cat-Club in its application (*The Era*, Sunday 12 March 1865, issue 1381). Nine years later, *The Graphic* (Saturday 18 February 1874) mentioned that the Duke of York had changed its name back again from the Trumpet to the Duke of York. This, therefore, was probably its name when it was demolished to make way for the Law Courts.

¹⁴ Malone, Edmond, ed., *Critical and Miscellaneous Prose Works of John Dryden*, 3 vols. (London, 1800), Vol. 1, part 1: Life and Writings of the Author, p.525 n.6.

¹⁵ Story told by John Hoadly (son of Benjamin Hoadly) (ASS MS 32,329, folio 50 – source.) Bond, Donald F. ed., *The Spectator*, 5 vols. (Oxford, 1965), vol. 2, p.237-8, n.1.

¹⁶ Caulfield, James, *Memoirs of the Celebrated Persons Composing the Kit-Cat Club; with a prefatory account of the origin of the association, illustrated with forty-eight portraits from the original paintings by Sir Godfrey Kneller* (London, 1849).

¹⁷ Article by G.M.Trevelyan – ‘Kit-Cat Club Portraits, Famous Collection for the Nation, Critical Phase in British Social and Political History’, *The Times*, Saturday March 10, 1945.

¹⁸ Tonson Papers, NPG.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Blackmore, Richard, 'The Kit-Cats: A Poem' (1708).

²² Timbs, John, *Clubs & Club Life in London* (London, 1908), p.51.

²³ Baker, Thomas, *Hampstead Heath* (1706) depicted it as a recreation ground linked to the immorality of the playhouses.

²⁴ Thornbury, Walter ed., *Old and New London*, 6 vols. (London, 1879), Vol. 5, p.459. Wade, Christopher, *The Streets of Hampstead* (London, 2000) p.63: States that the tavern was on the site of what is today No.124 Heath Street.

²⁵ After about 1750, it became the 'handsome' private residence of Mr George Steevens, a Shakespearean scholar. Brewer's History of London and Middlesex.

²⁶ Connely, William, *Sir Richard Steele* (London, 1934) p.203.

²⁷ *The Examiner*, Saturday 20 March 1869, issue 3190.

²⁸ Anon., *The Kit-Cat Clubs Lamentation for the loss of the Pope, the Devil and the Pretender; that were taken into custody on Saturday last by the Secretary of State. Written by Jacob Door-holder to that Society* (London, 1711): 'Our Landlord therefore that hangs out her arms May let our Velvet room on any Terms'. And footnote that the Queens Arms in the Pall Mall was where the 'Club was kept'.

²⁹ BL Add MS 9118, f.150. This letter is misdated as 1708 by William Coxe and this error is repeated in its printed form: Sarah Churchill, *The Private Correspondence of Sarah Duchess of Marlborough* (London, 1838), vol. 1, pp. 159–60.

³⁰ See endnote 1.

³¹ *The Book of Days* quoted in Timbs, John, *Clubs & Club Life in London* (London, 1908) p.49; West, William, *Tavern Anecdotes and Reminiscences of the Origin of Signs, Coffee Houses etc.* (London, 1825) p.128.

³² BL Add MS 5145C, Steele to Lady Steele in South Wales, 30 March 1717 (Blanchard no. 525).
