

1 Introduction to Clubs

P rivate clubs have existed for as long as people have desired to gather in groups to do things together. It has been suggested that private clubs (and their predecessors) date to the Roman baths but probably pre-date even those. It is doubtful that the Roman baths represented the first time people congregated in groups to socialize, discuss commerce, politics, or just engage in a mutually agreeable activity.

Certainly, most agree that the ‘modern’ clubs (in the English speaking world) originated in England, were limited to ‘gentlemen’ and organized for social, political, business and/or pleasure reasons. The concept was then ‘exported’ along with ex-patriots all around the world. Clubs have since evolved to the point where they exist in countries around the world although they are embraced to a greater or lesser extent in different places. Examples of private clubs can be found in such countries as England (and the greater UK), Ireland, the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, South Africa, Switzerland, Hong Kong, India, Pakistan, Japan, Singapore, and the UAE. Perhaps no country has adopted the idea of clubs as much as the USA, where they have evolved into a veritable industry, are protected by law, and number into the thousands.

Humans, being social creatures, long to spend quality time with others – ‘others’, historically, representing those of their own kind. Perhaps it is for this reason that clubs have, rightly or wrongly, developed a reputation for being discriminatory. People generally find benefits from spending time with others. These benefits may accrue in many forms, including personal, professional, and political.

While much of the hospitality industry is defined and characterized by its offering ‘public accommodation’, to willing, paying customers, clubs are different. Clubs exist to serve a limited membership. They are, by definition, limited to members only. This is true, even though the word ‘club’ is often used indiscriminately. There is no rule governing how the word is used but suffice it to say that not all organizations or businesses that use the word to describe themselves, are clubs by our definition. A true club is premised on a selective membership and there is a process of admission (which will be discussed later). However, it is important to know that membership is selective and may be based on a number of factors,

including one's personal and professional connections, one's social standing, and one's character, as well as one's ability to pay.



Photo 1.1: Manchester Country Club, by Gil Talbot Photography, courtesy of Manchester Country Club, (Manchester, New Hampshire, USA).

At this point, it is worth reiterating that clubs are different from other types of hospitality organizations, or public accommodations. They are governed by different rules, different laws and they exist to serve a different clientele. It also means that they have a different set of objectives as well as challenges. But first, more about what clubs are.

The most common type of club with which most students will be familiar is the country club, which focuses on golf as its primary activity but also offers a myriad of other activities. Perhaps students are familiar with this type of club already having worked at one, grown up as a member, or visited one with a friend or relative. Country clubs are the most popular, most common and most visible type of club in much of the world. One of the purposes of this book though is to explore some of the other types of clubs, which often receive less attention.

The history of the Old Colony Club (Exhibit 1.1) provides several lessons for students of the club industry. It is representative of all clubs, in that it started as a gathering of like-minded individuals with mutual interests; it went through some tough times which resulted in its dissolution; politics played a key role in its early days; and it highlights the important role that tradition plays in all clubs.

Exhibit I.1: Profile of Old Colony Club

One of the more interesting clubs that we have encountered, and one with direct ties to early American roots, is the Old Colony Club in Plymouth, Massachusetts. It was founded in 1769 by a small group of individuals, many of whom were direct descendants of Mayflower passengers. It was originally established to (among other reasons) “... avoid the many disadvantages and inconveniences that arise from intermixing with the company at the taverns in this town.” The club allowed its members to socialize amongst themselves, and to enhance their general happiness. Membership also allowed them to debate the attributes of the Tories and the Whigs (early American political parties). Much of their purpose was also established on observing and celebrating Forefathers’ Day (an observance that continues to today). Unfortunately, the political debates proved to be too much, resulting in the departure of the Loyalist members. This resulted in the closing of the club in 1773. However, it was reformed in 1875 wherein discussions of politics were forbidden:

“Gambling, intoxicating liquor, public demonstrations for political parties, partisan political discussion, and loud and boisterous talk were forbidden.”

Over the years, the club was organized, reorganized (1883) and moved several times. It moved in 1893 into its current location, where members continue to get together for social occasions and to celebrate the founding of the country. An excellent account of their history can be found at [http:// www.oldcolonyclub.org](http://www.oldcolonyclub.org).

We will profile many different clubs throughout this book. Students should attempt to identify commonalities and differences amongst and between the different clubs.

We have begun to describe what clubs are but it should be made clear that clubs differ from every other segment of the hospitality industry in many ways: perhaps the most significant factor that sets them apart, from a management perspective, is the privacy element which limits the enjoyment of its products and services to members only.

Other factors which set them apart also include the:

- Product and service mix that they offer
- Quality of services offered
- Facilities
- Ownership