

OUR HISTORY

Founding of the Canadian Club of London

The Canadian Club of London has a long and distinguished history of uninterrupted service in the community since its founding July 31, 1906. During the past 100 years, the Club has been host to more than 1,000 Canadian and international leaders who have shared their views with enthusiastic London audiences, making the Canadian Club one of the oldest continuing organizations in the city.

The Canadian Club movement traces its origins to 1892 in Hamilton ON where its founders set out the Club's purposes as the study of history, literature, art, music and national resources of Canada, the recognition of native worth and talent and the fostering of a patriotic Canadian sentiment.

The Men's Canadian Club of London was organized in 1906 at a meeting of the Irish Benevolent Society held July 6 at the then city hall. It was suggested that London should have a Canadian Club similar to those opened over the previous 14 years in other parts of Canada. It was also suggested that while there were clubs for the Irish, the English and the Scots in London, there wasn't one for "Canadians" and thus the attraction of the Canadian Club.

A committee was appointed and discussions were held with members of the Irish Benevolent Society, the St. Andrew's Society, the St. George's Society and the other membership services in the city.

The London Free Press of the day ran the headline: Tangible Idea Now – Canadian Club Goes – Irishmen Pass Resolution and Call Meeting of Citizens for July 20.

The history of the Club notes: "Invitations were sent to 500 representative citizens and with the hearty cooperation of the Press of the City, prominent clergymen and various societies, the auditorium of the City hall was filled on the evening of Friday, July 20. By a standing vote of that meeting it was decided to organize the Canadian Club of London.

A committee appointed by the meeting met on July 24 and prepared a Constitution and By-Laws, which were duly adopted at a general organizational meeting held at City hall on July 31, 1906."

The Club over the years, according to one of its early volunteer presidents, is credited with bringing together in one organization citizens representing all phases of the city's religious, professional, military and business affairs to "unite in this non- political, non-sectarian body imbued with the highest ideals of Canadian sentiment."

It was noted at the time that London was a hotbed of political dissent where "there was deep-seated political rancour, and prejudices difficult to gain cooperation." In subsequent years it was concluded that the Canadian Club of London had been instrumental in calming disputes by "bringing together in one organization representing all phases of the city's religious, professional, military and business life."

The first slate of officers was drawn up by the committee. It needs to be made clear that all the organizers and members of the original Canadian Club of London were men, as was the nature of the society of the day. In fact, women did not become members of the Club until 1973. The Women's Canadian Club of London, meanwhile, was established in 1910 and continues today.

Early reports tell of Canadian Club banquets and luncheons attended almost exclusively by men who enjoyed cigars and the odd sip of brandy at meetings. Speech topics tended to focus on Canada and the British Empire. It was also common for the men's and women's Canadian clubs to hold joint meetings and share speakers.

The fourth annual meeting of the Canadian Club of London, held in 1911 at the historic Tecumseh house (then situated at the southwest corner of Richmond and York streets), featured speeches by the Hon. Clifford Sifton, Chair of the Conservation Commission of Canada, the Hon. W.L. Mackenzie King, then Minister of Labour for Canada and later Prime Minister, and His Lordship Bishop Michael Francis Fallon, then taking up his duties as the Catholic Bishop of London. The minutes included the following reference – quaint and out of date today – "A number of ladies were present. Of course, they took no part in the banquet proper, but arrangements were made ... for their accommodation, and many availed themselves of the opportunity to hear the distinguished guests." A special guest was Sir George Gibbons, the first president of the London club, who was newly back in London after being knighted in England by King George V.

Founding of the Canadian Club of London

The first board of directors of the men's Canadian Club of London in 1906 included the "who's who" of the city.

Honorary President: Sir John Carling, KCMG, one of London's best-known business and political leaders. Born in London Township, he moved with his family to London in 1839 where his father established a brewery. John became a partner in the brewery with his brother William and entered politics first as a school trustee, then a member of city council, before being elected a member of provincial legislature. At the time of Confederation, he held seats in both the federal and provincial governments. He resigned the provincial seat in 1872 and served several terms in federal cabinet positions before being knighted in 1893. He was named to the Senate in 1896 and died in 1911.

First Honorary Vice President: Hon. Charles S. Hyman was born in London in 1854 and succeeded his father as owner of the Hyman Tannery and Leather Merchant company. He served a term as Mayor of London in 1884 and was elected at various times as a member of parliament, becoming minister of public works in the Laurier government in 1905, a position he held until he retired from politics in 1907. His home was Idlewyld on Grand Avenue.

Second Honorary Vice President: Hon. Thomas Coffey, founder of the Catholic Record magazine and, in 1906, a newly appointed Senator.

President: George C. Gibbons who was knighted in 1911 for his services as chairman of the Canadian section of the International Waterways Commission. He was a prominent London lawyer, a founder of the London Club and served on many local boards. His wife Lady Elizabeth Gibbons was the first president of the Women's Canadian Club of London. Their children donated Gibbons Park in their memory and heirs of their daughter Helen subsequently arranged for the University of Western Ontario to purchase Gibbons Lodge as residence for its President.

First Vice President: Adam Beck, best known for his initiation in 1906 of the Hydro-Electric Power Commission of Ontario of which he was named its first chairman. He served a three-year term as mayor of London beginning in 1902 and except for 1919-1923 was London's MLA until his death in 1925. He was knighted in 1914. Secretary: S. Frank Glass whose family owned the Glass Bros. Pottery and glassware company in London. Many of the Glass family were active in local politics with David Glass being elected mayor in 1858, 1865-1866.

Literary Correspondent: John M. Gunn, an executive of McClary manufacturing, at the time the largest stove works in the British Empire (eventually it became General Steel Wares). He was the longest living member of the original board of directors.

Treasurer: Jared Vining, a lawyer who was a subsequent President of the Club and was knighted in 1933.

The executive committee was composed of:

- J.W. Little, after whom UWO's first stadium was named
- Dr. J.A. Wilson, who is credited with initiating discussions to found the Canadian Club. He served as Mayor of London in 1898 and 1899
- John Power
- John McLean
- Col. W.M. Gartshore, born in London in 1853, he became president of McClary Manufacturing and had a long military career with the 7th Fusiliers of London and the First Hussars (Calvary). He served in the Riel Rebellion and retired as Lieutenant Colonel of the Hussars 1st Brigade. His home on Ridout Street is the site of the Gartshore condominium.

The Canadian Club of London's Early History Intertwined with Historic Downtown Buildings

The London city hall mentioned in the Club's founding was then situated on the west side of Richmond Street midway between King and Dundas streets. It was a fine white brick building that had been opened in 1855 marking the incorporation of London as a city. City hall had entrances both from Richmond Street and Covent Market Square where the original market building had also opened in 1855.

The auditorium on the second floor, where the Canadian Club was founded in 1906, was a favourite meeting place for London organizations and also had a tragic history. On January 3, 1898, a huge crowd gathered to celebrate the election of Mayor Dr. John Wilson. The floor gave way plunging 250 people to the floor below. Twenty-three people died and 150 suffered injuries, many caused when a 500-pound city safe tumbled on the struggling crowd on the first floor. The building was repaired.

One of London's most historic buildings, the Masonic Temple with accommodated the Grand Opera House seating 1,128 people, had occupied the site just to the south of city hall at the northwest corner of King and Richmond streets. It was destroyed by fire in 1900 and replaced by what became known as the Richmond Building.

In 1911, shortly after the formation of the Canadian Club, the aging city hall was sold to the Royal Bank and became the bank's main branch until replaced by the Royal Bank Tower in 1967. The municipal officers occupied temporary quarters until 1928 when a new city hall was built on Dundas Street just east of Wellington Street. It in turn was replaced by the present city hall in 1971.

Initially, meetings of the Canadian Club were held in the Tecumseh house which had opened in 1856 at the southwest corner of York and Richmond streets. The four-storey building, named after the famous Shawnee first nations chief, was one of Southwestern Ontario's great railway hotels. When it opened, it was the largest Canadian hotel west of Toronto.

One of its most famous guests was the Prince of Wales Albert Edward and extensive renovations were made at the Tecumseh House to accommodate his visit in 1860. The hotel was also the site of one of the more colourful exploits of Mayor Frank Cornish. On March 10, 1863 at a ball sponsored by the British garrison officers to celebrate the marriage of the Prince of Wales to Princess Alexandra, the mayor got into a dust up with a British Major Bowles who was second in command of the garrison.

Rumours had been circulating linking Bowles' name to Mrs. Cornish, and the mayor, known to take the odd drink of intoxicating liquor, confronted the major. Blows were exchanged, and the mayor ripped off the major's military decorations and gave him a sharp boot in the posterior.

The next morning Mayor Cornish was found guilty of assault and fined \$6. The British army demanded a civic apology. City council refused and the British withdrew a number of troops which was an economic blow to the city.

The Tecumseh was demolished in 1929 to make way for the Richmond Street underpass. As the old hotel deteriorated, the Canadian Club moved its meetings to the new Hotel London, which opened in 1927, and met there until the building closed and was demolished in 1972. The club's meeting site moved to the downtown Holiday Inn and subsequently to what is now London Hilton.

Speakers from Around the World Attracted to The Canadian Club of London over the past 100 years

The Canadian Club of London (for men only) was founded at a point in Canadian history when a new spirit of nationalism was becoming more evident. In 1906, Sir Wilfred Laurier's government was at the height of its power, Saskatchewan and Alberta had been newly admitted as provinces, a second transcontinental railway was under construction and in London a number of distinguished community leaders were attracted to the concept of Canadian Clubs first established in Hamilton in 1892.

London had a population of 41,000 and a reputation for somewhat vicious partisan politics, but probably not much different than other Ontario cities of the era. There were well-established clubs representing the views of the Irish, English and Scots, and a long list of political party groups. Dr. John Wilson, a former mayor of London, joined with others including members of the Irish Benevolent Society who felt there was a pressing need for an undenominational, non-partisan and non-political organization where members could work together for the common good of the community and the country. As he put it, "we need a body in which men of all nationalities might meet on common basis as Canadianism."

It didn't take long – in fact from the first proposal to form a Canadian Club it took only three weeks to have a public discussion, draft a constitution and name a first board of directors.

From the beginning, outstanding business leaders served the Canadian Club of London as directors and presidents. Volunteers over the first 30 years, among others, included Dr. C.C. Waller, principal of Huron College; Dr. Wilson; Hum Cronyn; Col. Ibbotson Leonard; Professor Fred Landon, a former London Free Press editor and head of Western's library; Arthur R. Ford, long-time Free Press columnist and editor; Richard Crouch; Lt. Col. J. Innes Carling and many other well-known Londoners.

The committee planning the first annual meeting of the Club in 1907 were pleased to have a quote of \$1.25 a plate for the meal at the Tecumseh House but voted not to serve intoxicating beverages. The dinner had a deficit of \$8.46 and the Free Press described it as "a brilliant epicurean event."

Over the early years, the Club attracted many speakers from the military, particularly during the two World Wars, as well as a sprinkling of British nobility, Canadian business leaders and members of the international diplomatic corps. An honoured guest on several occasions was Col. Charles R. McCulloch of Hamilton, the acknowledged founder of the Canadian Club movement. A 1913 joint meeting of the Women's Canadian Club had McCulloch as its speaker. In May 1919 the speaker was Dr. William Roche, one of Western's first two graduates and the newly appointed Chancellor for the university. Canadian Clubs were founded in all Canadian cities as well as in several U.S. locations and in England. Canada House on Trafalgar Square was the headquarters for a Canadian Club in London.

The club's, including London's, regularly drafted resolutions in the early part of the century, calling for such things as revisions to the federal civil service, support for the military and reform to taxation and social legislation.

An interesting speaker in November 1930 was a Major George Washington Stephens who had made a long study of the possibilities of a St. Lawrence Seaway project. He spoke to the Canadian Club at noon and the Women's Canadian Club in mid-afternoon at Central Collegiate.

For the 30th anniversary of the founding of the Canadian Club of London, held at Hotel London in 1936, a special printed program paid tribute to the founders. Music was provided by the regimental band of the Royal Canadian Regiment.

Leading up to the Second World War, the club hosted, among other speakers, Count Nicholas Ignatieff, a former Russian nobleman, then a teacher at Upper Canada College; the Hon. Howard Ferguson, then the High Commissioner to Great Britain (and later premier of Ontario); and Fuad K. Mufarriji, secretary of the Arab Defence Council, who cautioned that the Jewish people had no real historic claim to a homeland in Palestine.

During the Second World War, there were regular speakers from the military as well as representatives of Poland and other countries overrun by Germany and Russia expressing hope their countries would be re-established after the war. A speaker from China in 1942 said his country could win over the Japanese as long as the allies didn't introduce some kind of "Munich" agreement that would create a withdrawal of support.

The Canadian Club regularly held joint meetings with the Women's Canadian Club and other service clubs. One such meeting was in October 1941 with the Kiwanis Club and the League of Nations' Society to hear British MP Beverly Baxter suggest Canada's role and destiny after the war was won. The membership of the Canadian Club increased dramatically during the Second World War and exceeded 700 by 1954.

One of the more unusual speakers in 1944 was a Lord De La Warr, a British peer who traced the connection of his ancestors to the region, declaring Delaware Township, Delaware village and the Delaware first nations tribe had all been named by his forebears.

A London Free Press editorial at the time of the 1946 anniversary of the club's founding agreed with Fred Landon that much of the partisan bitterness which used to mark the elections in London had been eliminated through the efforts of the Canadian Club in sponsoring non-partisan discussions on public issues. "The Canadian Club can take credit with contributing to public discussion on great issues and the breaking down of prejudice and antagonisms likely to cripple the life of the community," said Landon.

On March 9, 1949, External Affairs Minister Mike Pearson spoke about international tension in recent weeks because of the Cold War and hinted at a new Atlantic pact which in a few weeks became the beginnings of NATO.

Women Admitted as Members in 1973

In September 1973 the Canadian Club of London admitted Mayor Jane Bigelow as its first female member. The speaker on the occasion was Toronto Mayor David Crombie. London lawyer David Peterson, club president, presented Mayor Bigelow with the first official women's membership and quipped: "Maybe the London Club can take a cue from us." Mayor Bigelow earlier had shook up the staid London Club suggesting it was time they allowed women to join – and they did shortly thereafter.

Mr. Peterson said the decision to admit women to the Canadian Club of London "was not condescending and not mere tokenism." He added: "Probably we should have done it 15 years ago, perhaps 25 years ago." Several other women also joined the club at that meeting including London teacher Jean McKenzie who four years later became the first female president of the Canadian Club of London.

Mayor Bigelow, in accepting the membership, thanked the club "first as a person" because it is now "a club of contemporary persons", second as a woman, and third, "as a politician."