



A Short History of Phyllis Court Club

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PHYLLIS COURT CLUB

The Club in its setting

Phyllis Court Club occupies a supreme position on the banks of the Thames overlooking the famous Henley Royal Regatta course.

No one who comes to the Club for the first time can fail to be charmed by its elegance, by the graceful trees set in the lawns reaching to the river's edge, and by the sheltering green hill on the opposite bank.

From the path by what is known as Cromwell's Wall there is an unrivalled and typically English view. A long curve in the river lets us see Henley bridge crossing from the Berkshire to the Oxfordshire bank where its former boatyards, now adapted to modern times but retaining Tudor style gables, fringe the waterside with Henley's church tower of St Mary's rising behind them.

Opposite can just be seen among the trees the Club house of the famous Leander Club, established in 1896, a substantial Edwardian building with a red tiled roof. On the same side of the river to the far side of the bridge is the Regatta headquarters' building opened a

century later in 1986 and appropriately designed like a large boathouse.

Adjoining Phyllis Court on the left is Fawley Meadow which was at one time under the same ownership as the Phyllis Court estate. Fawley Court, designed by Sir Christopher Wren, is now owned by the Marian Fathers, a Polish religious group.

The stretch of river leading down to Temple Island, the start of the Regatta course, is the most famous one-and-a-quarter miles of straight river in the world. Phyllis Court overlooks the winning post of Henley Royal Regatta.

The Name and the Old House

How did Phyllis Court get its name? Most people believe it's called after the old name for a red rose, 'fyllis' or 'fillets.'

A red rose was the nominal annual rent paid by the first owner of the land, John de Molyns, to King Edward III who had given him the Manor of Fillets in 1347. When Phyllis Court Club was founded on June 2nd 1906 a rose was incorporated in the Club's emblem.

From the very earliest times the site of Phyllis Court was a river crossing. Traversing the grounds of the Club is an ancient highway. Part of it runs from Dorchester-on-Thames through Benson and Nettlebed, down the Fairmile to the Club's landing stage and across the river. This was a route later used by the Romans and Saxons and traces of a Roman bridge have been found at the bottom of the river at this point. In the Middle Ages, and for many years afterwards, Phyllis Court and its surroundings became Crown property as part of Windsor Great Forest.

The old manor, which was at one time surrounded by a moat complete with drawbridge, was first fortified by the Parliamentary forces during the Civil War of 1643. Later, with Cromwell's men and under the instructions of the owner, Sir Bulstrode Whitelocke, the fortified manor was demolished. The bricks were used for the river wall.

Near the landing stage in the retaining wall

at the river's edge a plaque tells us: "This wall was built by Cromwell from the brick of the old Tudor House of Phyllis Court. AD 1643."

The house itself was rebuilt and from 1648 it became known as Phyllis Court. In 1688 William of Orange held his first court at Phyllis Court. Another house must have taken its place, and part of it was pulled down about 1785 and a new Phyllis Court built. The Club house as we know it now was built between 1837 and 1839, the date of the first Henley Regatta.

Eighty-Five Years as Phyllis Court Club 1906 to 1991

The owners of the large houses along the river are known to have entertained lavishly over several centuries. The frontage of Phyllis Court had always been sought after as a place to tether the elaborate houseboats of the last century, and as a place where people could view the river.



Looking towards Phyllis Court at 1888 Regatta

We are pleased to acknowledge information used from the longer history of the Club - "The Phyllis Court Story" by Angela Perkins. It is obtainable from the Club, price £3.50

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The first ever University Boat Race was rowed at Henley in 1829 and it was then that local people realised the straight stretch of water from Temple to Henley, with a few modifications, could be a valuable asset. On June 14th 1839 the first Henley Regatta was held. The Hon Thomas Stonor from Stonor Park nearby, was chairman of the meeting which decided on it.

In 1851 Prince Albert, Queen Victoria's Consort, became patron of the Regatta and from then on it became Henley Royal Regatta. A member of the Royal Family has been patron ever since.

For many years the Stewards of the Regatta secured the use of Phyllis Court grounds for visitors. Its popular situation made it an ideal place for a club, and in 1906 this came about. Phyllis Court became the social centre of the Royal Regatta and the site of one of the events of the London Season.

Founding the Club, 1906

R.E. Finlay of Shiplake had taken a lease of the property in 1905 from the owner W.D. Mackenzie of the adjoining Fawley Court. Even

before the documents were signed he died and the lease was transferred to his eldest son, Roy. He soon found it difficult to keep it going as a private house, so in view of its unique position and the popularity of the river at that time, he decided to open Phyllis Court officially as a proprietary club on June 2nd 1906.



Captain Roy Finlay, Founder of the Club

For the next 27 years the names Finlay and Phyllis Court were knotted together. He never married. The Club, he said, was the woman in his life and its object was "to provide its members with a country Club on the River Thames and to promote such sports and recreation for which the grounds and premises of the Club might be suitable."

Visitors to the Club, and particularly to the Regatta at this time, reflected the aristocratic status of the Members and their guests. Improvements were made to the house and grounds to make them suitable to receive and entertain them.

In 1906 the part of the moat that remained was cleared to make a waterway to the river and in 1907 a boathouse was built at the carpark end. A luncheon room and kitchen, and a bachelors' wing were added to the house.

At their opening 800 Members and friends were present. In 1908 the Olympic Regatta was held in Henley. Over 100 members of foreign crews were entertained at Phyllis Court.

In those days military bands were engaged to play in the Club gardens on Sunday afternoons. Then, as now, parties would come on to dinner from Ascot and the Club could be filled with an Ascot house party staying for the whole of Ascot week. To take the overflow of residents, the next door house, Manor Garden, was bought from W.D. Mackenzie of Fawley, (but sold back to him in 1934).

In 1911 Roy Finlay made reciprocal arrangements with several overseas clubs, many of which still continue. In 1912 the Grandstand was constructed for the visit of King George V and Queen Mary to the Royal Regatta. Four grass tennis courts were laid.

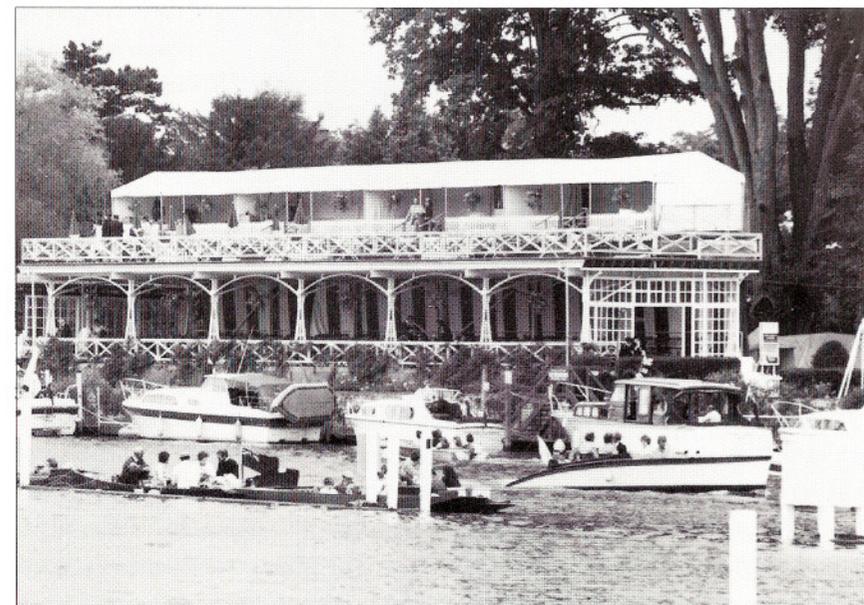
Then came World War I. The Club was kept open. History relates that the old garage

was requisitioned by the Royal Flying Corps (later the RAF), and that Admiral of the Fleet Earl Jellicoe and Lady Jellicoe spent a month's leave at Phyllis Court after the controversial Battle of Jutland.

After serving with the army Roy Finlay returned to work for his beloved Club in 1917. The following two seasons went well and Phyllis Court quickly regained its popularity.

Phyllis Court in the Twenties

Boating, tennis, dancing and cocktails was the mixture enjoyed in the days after the war for those who could afford it. Between the wars Phyllis Court was known to all the bright young things. If they did not live locally, they motored down from London. To make it easier, the Great Western Railway laid on trains for the Club's entertainments just as they had taken people to the Regatta since 1857.



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Instructions for dress were first established in the Twenties. After the First World War the social scene was changing fast and newcomers wanted to do the right thing. The Club secretary of the day suggested: "Men, a smart lounge suit, possibly with white flannel trousers. Ladies, as for Ascot if in the Club Enclosure, or usual summer clothing."

In 1920 seven En-Tout-Cast tennis courts were constructed. The first-ever tournament under Lawn Tennis Association rules was played at Phyllis Court. By now, Roy Finlay had negotiated reciprocal Membership with 31 London clubs, and overseas Membership with 148 service clubs in India, Egypt and other parts of the Empire.

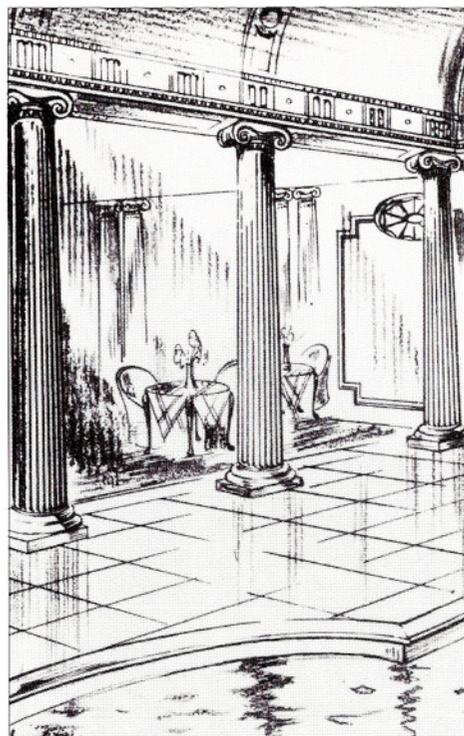
Indeed he received so many overseas guests that he was allowed to entertain them "on the house". The clubs founded by the British in India and the Far East were furnished similarly to Phyllis Court. But while the decor and facilities at Phyllis Court have been constantly updated to move with the times, many of these

overseas clubs still reflect what Phyllis Court was like in the Twenties and Thirties.

In 1924 HRH The Prince of Wales (briefly King Edward VIII and then the Duke of Windsor) became Patron. In 1925 the first cocktail bar was constructed. That was the year Roy Finlay suggested impressive schemes for extensions and improvements to make Phyllis Court into a country club of the type which had become popular in the United States. Here he was ahead of his time.

A Grecian style swimming-pool, grand extensions to the public rooms including a small conservatory-like theatre with domed roof and glass sides were planned. A 1925 edition of *The*

Illustrated London News reproduced drawings of the proposed improvements. Had they been carried out, Phyllis Court would indeed have been "the most luxurious country club in the world," in the words of that magazine. As it was, Roy Finlay did not have financial backers and the whole scheme was dropped.



Proposed Grecian pool, 1925

In 1927, on June 2nd, a 21st Birthday Party of the Club was attended by over 600 people including the Spanish and Italian Ambassadors. The same year the Club scored a first by having Suzanne Lenglen, the world's most accomplished lady tennis player, make her first appearance in this country as a professional and play an exhibition match. C.B. Cochran, the impresario, arranged it at a fee of £1,000. Her emancipated tennis wear and the famous bandeau she wore around her head created a fashion which many Members adopted.

In 1928 and 1929 the present lounge was created by knocking down the walls which had divided it into rooms. The staircase, which was a copy of one in Arlington House, Pimlico, was installed.

By 1929 the Club had 2,500 members - a record up to that date. A large number of foreign crews took part in the Regatta and, as ever, they were entertained at Phyllis Court. Catering then was by the famous Gunter's of Berkeley Square.

In that year, 1929, Roy Finlay bought the freehold of the property.

Before the Second World War

And so with its record number of Members, Phyllis Court Club embarked on the Thirties. Around this time Prince and Princess Arthur of Connaught became quite frequent visitors. From time to time they brought King George of Greece.

In 1932 Prince Arthur presented a flag to the Club which was kept in a glass case immediately inside the entrance for 20 years. That year Count Grandi, Mussolini's right-

hand man and Italian Ambassador to this country at that time, paid several visits. It is recorded that on August 9th 1935 he entertained to lunch HRH Princess Maria, youngest daughter of the King of Italy.

In 1933 Roy Finlay retired, but continued to help the Club until he died.

It was not until 1936 that a group of Members met to consider the feasibility of turning Phyllis Court from a proprietary club into a Members' Club. To finance this, Founder Debentures and a mortgage were taken up and on January 1st 1937 the Club became the Phyllis Court Members' Club Ltd. with a Council of five debenture holders' nominees and five Members elected to manage its affairs. The second World War was soon to follow in September 1939 and the Club's activities were suspended for its duration. A wooden plaque at the entrance to the Club describes how the house was used:

"This plaque records the fact that Phyllis Court Club was requisitioned by H.M. Government for the duration of the 1939 - 1945 war. It was first used as a WAAF Officers' Mess for the Central Photographic Unit at Medmenham, which played such a vital role in the war.

Later it became a top secret unit making important photographic mosaics and models for the future Allied Landing Beaches in France, and planning many raids including the "Dambusters." The Clubhouse ended the war on a more peaceful note, being used by the American Red Cross as a rest centre for war-weary airmen. Thus this lovely building served with honour during the greatest crisis in our nation's history."

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The use of the Club as a rest centre had the advantage of preserving its fabric and at the end of the war the premises and furniture were handed back in good repair. Staff such as gardeners and handymen had been kept on by the Air Ministry so the grounds had been well maintained. The premises were de-requisitioned in October 1945 and work on checking inventories of furniture and assessing dilapidations to the buildings went on through the spring of 1946.

Post-war financial worries

On May 29th 1945 Special General Meetings of Members and debenture holders were held at Aldwych House. They were asked to consider whether the property and other assets should be sold in view of the difficulties likely to be experienced in finding sufficient new Members (a problem in 1939) to run the Club successfully. Roy Finlay had given notice for the repayment of his mortgage in July 1945.

The Stewards of the Regatta were known to have wanted to buy Phyllis Court, and at one of their meetings a resolution to purchase the Club assets was formally moved. But a counter move resolving to continue the Club was carried at Aldwych House and Sir William Alexander, a leading Member, took over Roy Finlay's mortgage.

An appeal was made to debenture holders to donate their debentures to the Club or sell them at a nominal amount of four shillings in the pound.

Members donated debentures to a par value of £6,160 and owners of a further £2,105 sold at the nominal figure. These debentures were registered in the names of Trustees for the benefit of the Club.

So the Club was saved.

Now it was time to try to restore the Club to its old vigour, and Dickie Dunn was engaged as Secretary by Sir William Alexander with this in mind. Part of his brief was to increase the Membership.

The Second World War, more than the First, had altered the social scene. Owners of requisitioned country houses and London town houses, were finding them difficult to restore and keep up. Increased taxation, lack of servants and shortages of various kinds meant that for many families life was never the same again. Dickie Dunn and his wife Lorna's brief was to broaden the basis for Club Membership, and with their experience in running clubs in London, they were a good choice.

Upholstery and curtains had to be renewed and Lorna Dunn had to invite gifts of coupons for material which was still rationed. There were Nissen huts on either side of the gates and pigs were kept in part of the kitchen garden where the vegetables were still grown.

A house on as old a site as Phyllis Court might well be expected to have ghosts, and the Dunns were the first to confirm this. More than once footsteps were heard approaching a bedroom followed by the door opening and no one visible coming in, although a presence was sensed.

On 17th April 1946 the Club was ready for its opening party in the Thames Room. Members old and new met the Council, and guests from Henley and the surrounding area were invited. In 1948 the Olympic Regatta was again held at Henley as it had been 40 years before. Dickie Dunn gave all the crews a free badge to come to the Club in Regatta week, including Anthony Armstrong-Jones (later Lord Snowdon) who was cox of the Jesus boat that year.

He also arranged an affiliation with Temple Golf Club and continued to foster the connection with Hurlingham and the overseas members of affiliated clubs. He introduced reduced fees for junior Members and put an effort into reviving Saturday dinner dances. There were also Sunday tea dances in these days. A memento of his time as Secretary are the daffodils which he planted on the bank along the moat.

He brought bands whom he knew down from London - one especially well remembered was led by a certain Reg with his saxophone - and for special evenings he arranged a cabaret. He knew an agent who had young hopefuls on their books and in this way Bob Monkhouse

and Jimmy Edwards entertained the diners at Phyllis Court long before they became household names.

During Regatta a dance was held every night. On Saturday was the Finals Night Ball. On warm evenings guests would punt across the river to the fair in their evening dress. The boathouse had skiffs and punts for the use of Members.

Could it continue?

Like so many businesses and organisations in the 1950's, the watchword was to consolidate and keep going. Rationing, both of food and petrol, rising costs, severe credit squeezes, new staff regulations and so on made life difficult. However, the Club's social events continued. There were Scandinavian and Italian Balls, a concours d'Elegance and a Golden Jubilee Ball. Even so, Members were not using the Club sufficiently to prevent regular losses being incurred, so little change was possible other than routine maintenance and redecoration.

By 1957 affairs were reaching a crisis and



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so a meeting of the Board of Directors was held in London. The new accountants stated that in their view the Club could not continue to trade without a possible action for fraud for incurring debts without foreseeable means of paying them.

Council Members agreed to subscribe between them 25 per cent of the amount donated by Members up to a total of £200 each. Members and the Council produced about £5,000 and closure was averted. By 1960 there were 1,000 members.

But more capital was needed. It was decided to seek planning permission for flats on part of the old kitchen garden, which was by now unused, on the right of the drive. In this way sufficient funds were brought in and improvements carried out to the Club house helping to make it what it is today.

In fact the profit from the sale of this land, and land on the other side of the drive, meant that for the first time in its history the Club was free of debt. The Club's 70th anniversary in 1976 was marked with a highly successful Birthday Ball.

Sadly, a few months later, smoke rising from the Club house on Christmas morning signalled that the Club was on fire.

The River Bar was destroyed, the lounge and ballroom badly damaged and the Thames Room and the bedrooms above it were blackened by the fire which had been started by one of the porters.

So more work had to be carried out, but by Easter 1979 the exterior was ready with a new

honey-coloured wash on the walls and brilliant white paintwork.

The Eighties

These were prosperous years and Phyllis Court was able to take advantage of the upward swing when earning and spending reached a new high level.

Membership increased and the Club's facilities, which since 1978 had been also available for social and business events, began to be more regularly booked. The reception rooms were increasingly hired out for business lunches, conferences and private dances. This of course boosted Club funds.

The unique location continued to make it a particularly attractive place for wedding receptions, it being almost as beautiful in winter as it is in summer.

The Regatta had been steadily growing in popularity since 1980 and more and more crews were entering from overseas. From 1986 it was extended to five days rather than four.

More and more schools and colleges entered the event over the years, and more people come to watch them.

Corporate entertaining on the Stewards Enclosure side of the river grew during the seventies and eighties. From 1980 Phyllis Court itself regularly set aside part of the croquet lawn bordering the moat for business pavilions, and the Grandstand was regularly hired out for private and business parties.

The Royal Regatta is of course an added attraction to life at Phyllis Court and as it approaches there is an obvious sense of anticipation. This, and the annual round of life on the river brings into clearer focus the seasons of the year, and makes Phyllis Court unique.

The transformation at Regatta is almost unbelievable. The whole aspect of the lawn changes with large marquees housing champagne and Pimms bars, delicious food, coffee and a souvenir shop. The river frontage is thronged with people, while a band plays on the lawn as it did many years ago, and the terrace is extended by tables and chairs filling out a little apron enclosure.

Happily, rowing is not a popular event for television coverage and during Henley Royal Regatta, Phyllis Court retains the traditional English garden party atmosphere it has always enjoyed, and which Ascot, Wimbledon and many other traditional events no longer have.

Today, Phyllis Court looks confidently to the future while retaining the best standards and traditions of its illustrious history.

Members and their guests continue to enjoy

its gracious grounds, comfortable bar and high standard of cuisine, while those Members who so wish, can extend their enjoyment by choosing to join one or more of the 'Sections' – clubs within the Club – which offer art, billiards, boating, Bridge, chess, croquet, golf (nearby), dancing, and tennis – and various luncheon and dining clubs. Special outings and Club functions are regularly arranged.

Reduced overnight rates in the attractive bedrooms, all with bath ensuite, are offered to Members attending Club events. Details of the facilities open to non-residents for business functions, charity occasions, private parties, weddings and receptions, are readily available.

The Club has reciprocal arrangements with Hurlingham Club, Putney; The East India and Sports Club in St James's Square, London; and the Caledonian Club, Halkin Street, near Hyde Park Corner, and a long list of overseas clubs.

Phyllis Court is unusual in being owned by its Members and successive Councils have endeavoured to manage the finances so as to allow for the proper upkeep of the house and grounds in which every Member takes pride.



Phyllis Court en fête