

Social Clubs

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From the eighteenth century, pubs had been the natural home of all types of clubs and special-interest groups, and as gin palaces became more elaborate, these were increasingly encouraged. Mr Pickwick's journeys start at, and the novel is predicated on, the Pickwick Club, which holds its meetings in a pub. Its club room was the epitome of many an upstairs club room, containing little more than a long wooden table and Windsor chairs, with prints on the walls. Pubs found numerous ways of attracting regulars: in the

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1860s, several along Fleet Street were known as sporting taverns, stocking sporting newspapers, posting up telegrams announcing race results and otherwise ensuring they were the meeting places for like-minded people. The actor Charles Macready and John Forster were members of a Shakespeare club in the 1830s that met at the Piazza Coffee House in Covent Garden to read and discuss literature; Dickens soon enrolled.

Pubs and clubs were also venues for people at times of distress, as well as at times of jollity. In Shoreditch in the 1860s, a pub sold black-bordered 'tickets' for 3d, to help the family of the recently deceased 'Jemmy Baldwin [who] had died sudden, leaving nothing to bury him ... a few friends would meet that night at the Tinkers' Arms, Spicer Street, for the benefit of the widow and orphans'. On happier occasions, many of these pubs also held 'twopenny hops', or costermongers' dances, where anything up to a hundred men and women congregated to drink and dance to the music of a fiddle, 'sometimes with the addition of a harp and cornopean' (a cornet: a brass instrument that sounded like a trumpet). By the 1850s, many pubs had widened the scope of their club meetings, holding weekly discussion groups that were open to casual visitors, with a variety of subjects and different customer profiles being known and understood. The Cogers, in Bride Lane, Fleet Street, was a political forum; the Green Dragon, also in Fleet Street, held discussions on Tuesdays for 'Literary Loungers'; on Mondays and Thursdays for other 'popular subjects'. At the Blue Posts, in Shoe Lane, the Ruminators met on Wednesdays, with more miscellaneous discussions on Tuesdays and Fridays, while Mondays and Saturdays were given over to Harmonics.

Harmonic meetings, also known as free-and-easies, covered the social spectrum: men meeting for the purpose of drinking and singing, sometimes as a club or a group of friends, sometimes a group of strangers. When a free-and-easy was held in a pub, there were usually some professional performers, but all present were expected to contribute. In *Sketches by Boz*, Dickens described a late-night harmonic meeting, where as many as a hundred men sit at tables, listening to three 'professional gentlemen' sing a glee (a part-song for three or more voices), after which they drink and smoke, and listen once more to 'our friend, Mr Smuggins', who 'after

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a considerable quantity of coughing' sings a comic song, 'received with unbounded applause', followed by a recitation, before the group joins in another glee.

If the harmonic meeting was open to the public, the landlord of a pub frequently acted as the chairman, as is the case in *Oliver Twist* at the Three Cripples, the rogues' pub in Saffron Hill, where the landlord seemed 'to give himself up to joviality', but 'had an eye for everything that was done, and an ear for everything that was said'. *Bleak House*, too, includes a harmonic meeting at the Sol's Arms, with the professional Little Swills, the comic vocalist. But it was group singing that was the *raison*

d'être of these evenings: 'it is only when one of the amateurs presently consents to oblige amidst a great rattling of glasses and thumping of pint pots, that the chorus develops its full perfections ... with the united strength of some forty pairs of lungs.' So ubiquitous was the free-and-easy that in *Little Dorrit* even in the Marshalsea the prisoners hold a regular club night in their 'Snuggery', complete with 'presidential tribute ... beery atmosphere, sawdust, pipelights, [and] spittoons'.

Sometimes the meetings were more select, involving a group of friends or colleagues, as in *The Pickwick Papers*, when the legal clerks gather at the Magpie and Stump pub in Clare market: 'There's Samkin and Green's managing-clerk, and Smithers and Price's chancery, and Pimkin and Thomas's out o' doors-- sings a capital song, he does.' Sometimes harmonic meetings were held to celebrate specific events. In *Nicholas Nickleby*, when the strolling players, the Crummies family, plan to go abroad, a supper is given in their honour at a local pub, 'at which Mr Snittle Timberry would preside, while the honours of the vice chair would be sustained by the African Swallower'. A shoemaker attended a similar dinner that his employer held for his workers: the master 'occupied the chair himself, and requested that I would act as vice', as after the meal, 'we indulged in

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mirth and song'. In the early 1830s, John Barrow, the editor of the *Mirror of Parliament*, was trying to find work for his nephew, a young man named Charles Dickens, and asked the journalist John Payne Collier whether he might recommend him to the owners of the *Morning Chronicle*. Barrow 'also informing me that [Dickens] was cheerful company and a good singer of a comic song', Collier 'agreed to meet Dickens at dinner'; Dickens was so young 'that he had no vestige of beard or whiskers' and had needed a 'good deal of pressing' before he sang 'The Dandy's Dog's-meat Man', as well as a song he had written himself, 'Sweet Betsy Ogle'.

More common were regular club nights, whose exclusivity was an indicator of their desirability. In *The Old Curiosity Shop*, Dick Swiveller belongs to 'a select convivial circle called the Glorious Apollers' [sic], of which he had 'the honour to be Perpetual Grand'. This was a lower-middle class version of Pip's club in *Great Expectations*, the Finches of the Grove: 'the object of which institution I have never divined, if it were not that the members should dine expensively once a fortnight, to quarrel among themselves as much as possible after dinner, and to cause six waiters to get drunk on the stairs'.

These young men met regularly in Covent Garden, in the heart of the song-and-supper-club neighbourhood. From the earliest part of the century, 'Supper Rooms' were places men went to in the evening after dinner, and among the most famous were Evans's, Offley's, the Garrick, the Coal Hole and the Cider (sometimes Cyder) Cellars, all in Covent Garden or near the Strand. Singing was automatically part of the evening.

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An 1839 guidebook, in its listing of supper clubs, observes, in its entirety: 'At most of these houses some good singing is to be heard, they being attended by professional men': the quality of the song was more important than the food or the ambience, neither of which was mentioned. These clubs served breakfast fare, alcohol and cigars. In the intervals between the songs, the waiters rushed round, crying, 'Gentlemen, give your orders; give your orders, gentlemen; whiskey, brandy, gin, and rum-- rum, gin, brandy, whiskey,' and taking orders for food: 'Fried-'am-an'-eggs for you, sir? Sausages, did that gentleman say? Sausages is all gone, sir ... Tripe, sir? Yessir.' Then, when they heard 'Order, order! Silence, waiters. Gentlemen, if you please, I'll sing a song,' they vanished until it was finished, when it would be, 'Now, then, Waiter, bring that gentleman's kidneys. Chop and shallots for the man oppo-*site*. Look alive there-- be brisk! Kidneys for you, sir? Copy of the song just sung,

gentlemen-- copy of the song; celebrated song, sir-- thanky, sir. Song, gentlemen, song; orders,
gentlemen, orders-- gentlemen, give your orders!