

WG and the Savile Club

A Gentlemen's Club is a private (i.e. members-only) establishment typically containing a formal dining room, bar, library, billiards room and one or more rooms for reading, gaming (usually with cards) and socialising. Many clubs also offer guest rooms and fitness amenities. The first such clubs, such as White's (founded in 1693), Boodle's (1762) and Brooks's (1764), were set up and used exclusively by British upper-class men in the West End of London. Today, the area around St James's (a central district in the City of Westminster) is still sometimes called "clubland".

The nineteenth century brought an explosion in the popularity of clubs, particularly around the 1880s, when London was home to more than four hundred of them. This expansion can be explained in part by the large extensions of the franchise following the *Reform Acts* of 1832, 1867 and 1884. In each of those years, many thousands of men were granted voting rights for the first time and it was common for them to feel that, having been elevated to the status of a gentleman, they should belong to a club. The existing clubs, with strict limits on membership numbers and waiting lists of up to sixteen years, were generally wary of such newly enfranchised potential members, prompting some to form clubs of their own.

An increasing number of clubs were characterised by their members' shared interest in politics, literature, sport, art, automobiles, travel, geography or some other defining pursuit. In other cases, the connection was service in the same branch of the armed forces, or graduation from the same school or university. By the late nineteenth century, any man with a credible claim to the status of "gentleman" could find some club willing to admit him. This came to include professionals who had to earn their income, such as doctors and lawyers.

Most gentlemen joined only one club – usually the one whose professional, political or social ethos they identified most closely with – but some belonged to more than one. Members of the aristocracy and politicians were likely to

have several clubs. Earl Mountbatten in the 1960s is said to have had nineteen. (Winston Graham belonged to three: the Savile Club, the Beefsteak Club and Pratt's.)

Public entertainments, such as theatrical or musical performances, were not a feature of gentlemen's clubs. The clubs were, in effect, a home from home in the centre of London where men could relax, mix with their male friends, dine, sport, gamble and in some cases stay overnight. Expatriates, on arrival in England, could use clubs such as the East India Club or the Oriental Club as a base. Many men spent much of their lives in their club and it was common for young, new graduates who had moved to London for the first time to live at their club for two or three years before they could afford to take rented accommodation. Clubs had separate entrances for maids, waiters, cleaners etc, usually located at the side or back of the property away from public view. Certain features – exclusivity and a more or less rigid set of rules – were common to all gentlemen's clubs, although in other ways each differed slightly from the rest such that no standard definition would be likely to embrace them all.

In 1868, a gentlemen's club appropriately if unimaginatively named the New Club was launched at 9 Spring Gardens, overlooking Trafalgar Square in central London. Its establishment had nothing to do with voting reform, however – rather, a corps of one hundred members chose to leave the Eclectic Club following a difference of opinion concerning that club's expansion, in order to branch out on their own. The New Club prospered to the extent that, within three years, it had to relocate to bigger premises at 15 Savile Row, at which point it was renamed the Savile Club. A further move in 1882 took the club to 107 Piccadilly, where it remained until 1927, when a combination of factors – structural and budgetary problems, a nearly expired lease and insufficient floorspace – precipitated yet another relocation, this time to the Savile's present home at 69 Brook Street, part of the Grosvenor Estate in Mayfair.¹

[Photo \(next page\) courtesy of the Savile Club and Jacqueline Banerjee, Associate Editor of the *Victorian Web*. With thanks.](#)



The club (see image above) occupies an attractive, five-story, off-white, north-facing double town house (formerly numbers 69 and 71, now merged into one property) with a new mews wing behind and substantial undercroft. The building owes its extravagant *dix-huitième* interior to Walter Burns, brother-in-law of American financier J. P. Morgan, who adapted it for his wife Fanny to entertain in suitable style. Its elegant hall, grand staircase and lavish ballroom are supplemented by a dining room, bar, gaming room, snooker room, various meeting rooms, two libraries and twenty-five bedrooms. The merging of two houses into one and addition of a mews behind has resulted in corridors which are, some say, "confusing and feel a bit jumbled".²

The club's period interiors attract film and television producers alike. *Finding Neverland* (2004) starring Johnny Depp and Kate Winslet was filmed there, as was *Maybe Baby* (2000) starring Hugh Laurie and Joely Richardson. *Downton Abbey's* "the Embassy Club" was in fact the Savile, which has also featured in other popular period TV dramas including *The Inspector Lynley Mysteries*, *Poirot*, *Campion* and more.³

In contrast to the majority of London clubs, the Savile has no political, professional, occupational or other factional affiliation; rather, its membership can be described as a truly interdisciplinary republic in which the arts, humanities, sciences and professions mix without bias or inhibition, it being more a question of what kind of person the prospective member is than what he is or does. This was from the outset a fundamental founding principle, with the second stated aim of the New Club being:

The mixture of men of different professions and opinions; and a careful process of election.

The club motto, *Sodalitas Convivium*, expresses admirably the pleasure of members as they eat, drink and enjoy one another's company regardless of background, attainment or standing. The main thing expected of them is good fellowship and a willingness to contribute, each according to his means, to the communal *esprit de corps*. Sir John Cockcroft understood. "I take my acquaintances to the Athenaeum," he said, "but my friends to the Savile."^{4,5}

It is of course impossible to list all the distinguished members of the Savile, but among the literary figures Robert Louis Stevenson, Rudyard Kipling, Max Beerbohm, Sir Henry Rider Haggard, Thomas Hardy, A. P. Herbert, Compton Mackenzie, Henry James, H. G. Wells, Evelyn Waugh, J. B. Priestley, William Golding and W. B. Yeats will always be remembered. (When Golding was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1983, he became, according to club historian Garrett Anderson, the seventeenth Savilian Nobel laureate.)⁶

Equally distinguished were musicians Frederick Delius, Sir William Walton, Sir Adrian Boult, Sir Edward Elgar and Sir Arthur Bliss. Between 1868 and 1993, more than three hundred Fellows of the Royal Society were elected members, among them eight Presidents. Sculptor Sir Henry Moore, film directors Michael Powell and Ronald Neame, actors Sir Charles Chaplin and Sir Ralph Richardson, caricaturist Sir David Low, Stephen Potter (author of *Gamesmanship, Lifemanship, One-Upmanship et al.*) and Arthur Balfour, Prime Minister, all added "sovereignty" to the interdisciplinary republic of the Club. Other notable former Savilians include Charles Darwin, Ernest Rutherford, Lord Kelvin, A. A. Milne, Gilbert Harding, C. P. Snow, J. M. Barrie, Richard Adams, Robert Donat, Roy Plomley, Val Gielgud, Clement Freud, C. B. Fry, Leo Abse and Winston Graham, to name but a few.^{7,8}

Over and above members' individual interests or proclivities, geographical location within London alone is influential upon the membership of a club. In the Savile there were and are comparatively few lawyers from the Inns of Court or merchants from the City but, conversely, quite a number of medical men from nearby Harley Street.⁹

The traditional mainstays of the Club are food and drink, good conversation, bridge, poker and Savile snooker, a nineteenth century variant of the standard game in which the yellow and green balls are not used, the brown counts eight and so on (although it should be added that regulation snooker and billiards are played too). In contrast to the contemporary practice at other clubs of requiring members to eat *à la carte* at small separate tables, as in a restaurant, the Savile's dining room includes two long club tables, derived from the Club's original *table d'hôte*, to encourage conversation.

The Savile has always had a policy of keeping fees and subscriptions as low as possible so as not to exclude potential members of more modest means who might find the high cost of the grander London clubs too daunting. Unlike most other clubs, the Savile has no black ball system: candidates proposed for membership simply require the unanimous support of the Election Committee. Though other Club members may not vote, they may petition in writing, either for or against the candidate. If his proposal fails at the Committee's first meeting it is deferred until the next; if it suffers three successive deferrals the application is dropped with re-submission prohibited for three years. After being launched in 1868 by one hundred members whose aim was to attract two hundred more, The Savile presently has about one thousand members, of whom perhaps half are "active".

Though the Club has rules, these are not inflexible: for example, regular cigar club dinners went with the UK smoking ban (implemented in 2007) but have since been revived (weather permitting) on the terrace; "the penny game" (a form of bowls, using coins rolled down grooves in the banisters of the grand curving staircase) disappeared with decimalisation (introduced in the UK in 1971); Friday night candlelit dinners in the ballroom for wives and girlfriends disappeared with changes in fashions and attitudes and so on. Others traditions have evolved: for example, whilst the preferred dress is still jacket and tie, the code has been relaxed slightly to allow for the less formal attire worn in offices today, but only if it does "not offend other members"; mobile phones are generally banned but may be used in the Club's old telephone area.¹⁰

One of the members proposed by WG was *Poldark* actor Christopher Biggins (another was the Geordie musician Alan Price). Here's what Biggins wrote about what he called the "fabulously old-fashioned" Club:

... Every time I went ... it was always full of classic old colonels. It wasn't really my scene and I loved it and laughed at it in equal measure. The club has a rigid set of rules. If you are on your own you are seated at a long table next to other members and left to sink or swim in conversation. Fortunately small talk

is something I'm good at. I swam away happily. Ordering meals took some getting used to as well. The waitresses aren't allowed to interrupt the members to ask them for their orders – instead you have to write down what you want on a bit of paper and they have to peer across at it. How quintessentially English, and bonkers, is that?¹¹

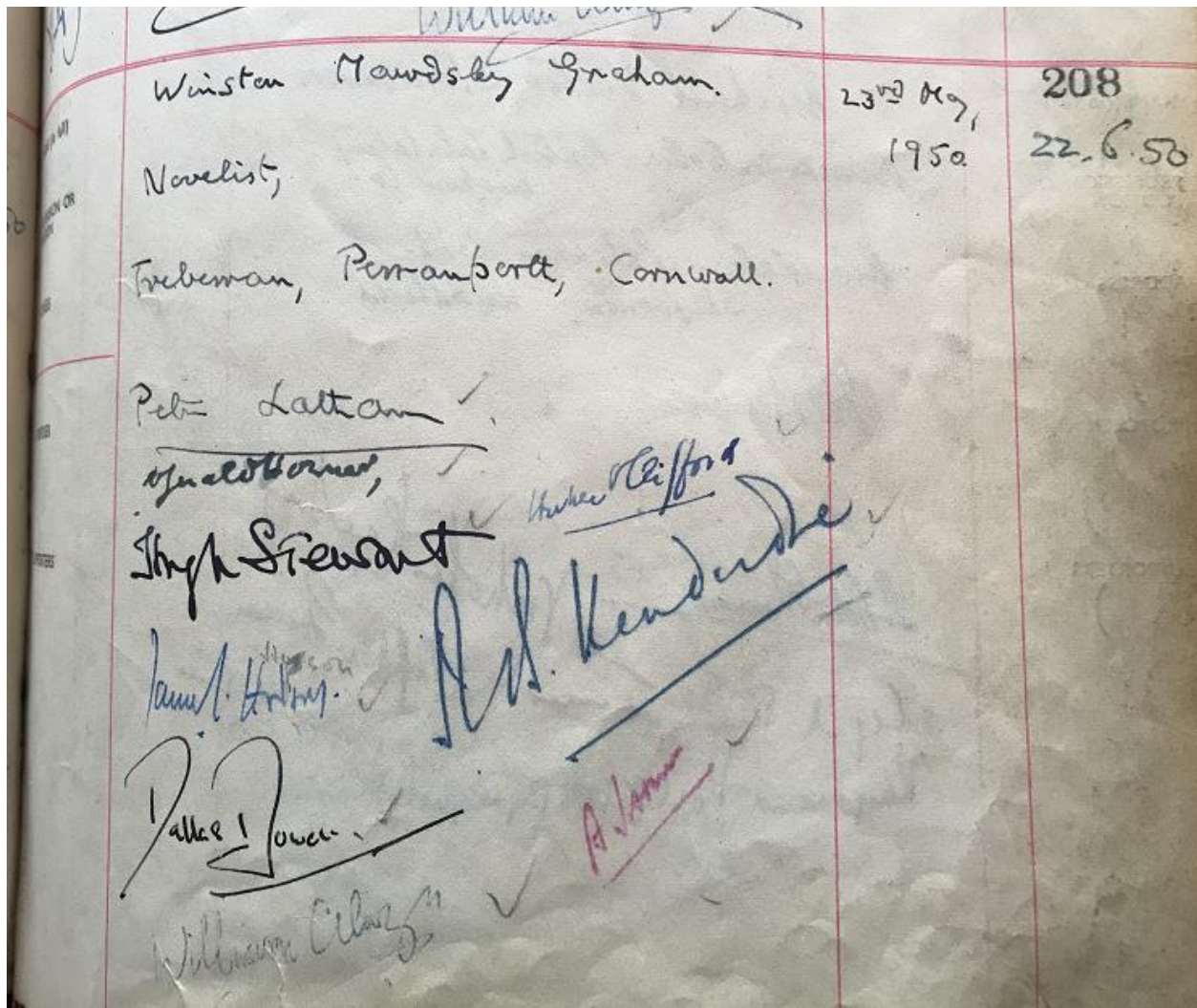
Aside from a traditional book collection housed in the Undercroft, the club maintains an invaluable treasury called the Savile Monument (see image below) comprising books, tapes, records and other media written, directed, illustrated, edited or translated by members in a collection that dates back to the club's foundation in 1868. It is a long-standing club tradition that any member who writes, edits or translates a book should present a copy to the Monument with a short dedication. The collection is held mainly in alphabetical order of members' names and includes works by Thomas Hardy, Robert Louis Stevenson, Compton Mackenzie, Winston Graham,¹² H. G. Wells, W. B. Yeats and many more.¹³



According to his own testimony,¹⁴ WG first visited the Savile Club in 1945 (presumably some time after VE Day) as a guest of his friend Peter Latham. The two men first met during the war when Lieutenant Latham, a gunnery instructor, was stationed at Penhale Camp, just along the coast from Perranporth, where WG and his wife ran a B&B. Latham's wife Angela and their daughter came to stay for a few weeks to see more of Peter, and he them. Thereafter WG remained in touch with both Peter (a musician and musicologist whom he described as "the jolliest and most lovable of men") and Angela (a fresco artist) until death took first him and then her.

When Latham suggested that WG should consider Club membership, the author wasn't keen. Because he'd always been "so much a loner, club life did not appeal at all" and his first taste of it tended to confirm that view. After dining next to eminent zoologist Sir Peter Chalmers Mitchell and opposite H. G. Wells, neither of whom "were exactly apostles of lightness and joy", WG "pleaded the excuse that (he) lived in Cornwall and wasn't really the clubbable type" and so the matter languished.

But 1945 was a pivotal year for WG. He started it with twelve published novels and three published short stories to his name but still, by his own estimation, after ten years of hard graft, no nearer success than ever. His novels had earned "up to £100 each"¹⁵ but he regarded them as not up to snuff (he would later actively suppress them all) and himself as a struggling, provincial, little-known and little-read author. But all that was at last about to change. Within five tumultuous years, his books began to sell both at home and, crucially, abroad (1949's *Cordelia* shifted more than half a million copies in the US alone); he also carved a niche for himself in the British film industry, after his first (co-written) screenplay was successfully produced by Rank and the screen rights to two of his novels were sold to Gainsborough Pictures. Perhaps not surprisingly, this precipitous change in his fortunes, and with it his way of life and outlook, led to a revision of his attitude towards clubs and club membership. When in 1950 another friend, Hugh Stewart, suggested he should join the Savile, WG, "having seen so much more of London in the interim," agreed to give the matter more serious consideration. A lunch at the Savile with Stewart and Latham led to his "name (going) down in the book"



Above is the page of the Savile Candidate's book on which, on 23 May 1950, **Peter Latham** put forward WG as a prospective member. The eight supporting signatories are:

[possibly] The Revd Jerald Howard

Hugh Stewart (1910-2011), a film editor and producer

Hubert Clifford (1904-1959), an Australian-born British composer and conductor and latterly the BBC's Head of Light Music

James L. Hodson (1891-1956), novelist, playwright, diarist, journalist

Captain Richard (Dick) Kenderdine R. N. (1893-1960)

Dallas Bower (1907-1999), a film and television director and producer

[possibly] A James

William Alwyn (1905-1985), a composer, conductor and music teacher¹⁶

and on 22 June his membership was confirmed. "Within a year," he wrote, "I began to feel that, in addition to Cornwall, I had another home."¹⁷

*The club coruscated with great names ... it was a place where the great went to relax; it could be as unceremonious as a public school, as intellectual as the best university, as Bohemian as a Soho restaurant.*¹⁸

*The Savile Club ... is, in my view, the most interesting club in London. When I was elected ... it seemed to me to be full of wits, wags, sages, drunks and holy eminences in every profession ... Above all – and here it is perhaps unique – it was totally classless [and without] prejudice ... Moiseiwitsch, the pianist, with whom I was ... very friendly at this time, wanted to put me up for the Savage. When I told him I might try for the Savile, he said: "Oh, that's a snob's club". He could hardly have been more wrong (unless one includes intellectual snobbery, of which there was a reasonable but not unreasonable amount).*¹⁹

*I came to look forward to my visits: they were a tremendous mental stimulus.*²⁰

WG recognised, like others before and since, that the success of such an enterprise depends critically on the willingness of its members to give freely of their best, which, after that initial reluctance to join, he did:

*... the men I met and came to know by staying in the club, not just using it for occasional meals, were the nucleus, the hard core of regular attenders who got the most out of the club by putting the most in, and it was these men whose ranks I intermittently joined and by whom I was accepted.*²¹

In 1993, Savilian Garrett Anderson published an entertaining and informative history of the Club called "*Hang your Halo in the Hall!*" WG not only wrote clearly detailed and extensive reminiscences to assist his fellow author, but

also read most of the book in typescript, made "many valuable suggestions" and penned the book's foreword. Anderson comments:

It was fortunate for the Club that Hugh Stewart and Peter Latham persuaded Winston Graham to overcome his diffidence and throw in his lot with the Sodality at Brook Street in 1950, for this "unclubbable man" has been a pillar of the Savile ever since. Apart from his ability to dispel any longueurs in the Sandpit [a Club meeting room] or at the long table he has served for some years on the committee, is an ex-trustee²² and, perhaps above all, was one of the triumvirate who transformed the fortunes of the Club in 1976 by "auditioning" Peter Aldersley for the part of secretary,²³ one of the few of his creative inspirations he is prepared to boast about.²⁴

To give just a couple more examples of WG's active involvement: when ("a few years" before 1993) the Club gave a celebratory party in Thomas Hardy's memory, WG was asked to be the event's chairman;²⁵ similarly, when an eightieth birthday luncheon for Eric Partridge was mooted, it was WG who stepped up ("with Maurice Goldman's willing help") to organise it – which proved, incidentally, a ticklish job because only twenty could attend and many more wished to.²⁶

Time passes so quickly – it's easy to forget that WG was a Savilian for more than half a century (for fifty-three years to be precise). In a review of the author's *Memoirs*, published posthumously in September 2003, J. Osman Streater (1942-2013), Club Chairman from 1990 to 1996, hinted at the longevity of a presence stretching back to the reign of King George VI:

*When people live as long as Winston Graham did, names become a problem for many readers. He writes of evenings with the likes of Gilbert Harding and Sir Ralph Richardson, and of working with the likes of Gregory Peck, Jack Hawkins and Dennis Price, not to mention Valerie Hobson [who lost out to Greta Gynt for the part of Philippa in *Take My Life*], Arlene Dahl*

and Samantha Eggar. Perhaps you have to be of a certain age to recognise most of these names.²⁷

In an obituary published in the *Daily Express* on 15 July 2003, Maggie Pringle wrote:

When Graham came up to London, he used to stop off at Claridges and have his hair done by Ken in Gentleman's Hair-dressing there. Recently Ken travelled down to Sussex to do his hair and have lunch. "I started doing Mr Graham's hair in 1975. When he'd been staying at the Savile, I took an hour off in the morning to go and play snooker with him," he recalled.

Though he received little formal education, Winston Graham was keenly intelligent, widely read and always up for new experiences via intellectual and social intercourse, which served not only to keep his mind sharp but also to fuel and replenish the bubbling cauldron inside his brain where his wonderful books were cooked up, one after another. But writing is an essentially lonely business, and all the more so when you live in remote Cornwall, which from 1925 to 1960 he did. Fortunately, although he considered himself not "really ... clubbable", all his adult life he had the happy knack of making and maintaining seminal friendships – with Tom Attlee, Fred Harris, Frank Swinnerton, Valerie Taylor, Max Reinhardt, Richard Church, Ian and Marjory Chapman and Ann Hoffmann to cite a few who spring to mind²⁸ – and becoming a Savilian can only have aided that felicitous propensity. Take, for example, these lines he penned about the aforementioned lexicographer Eric Partridge:

*Eric Partridge and I were elected to the Savile Club in the same year, 1950. There we met casually, and exchanged names and views once or twice. I knew him of course as a distinguished etymologist, but I didn't then know that he had included a passage from one of my novels in his book, *British and American Usage*, which was to be published the following year. Then one day he invited me to his birthday party, which he was giving for a few friends at the Club, and our acquaintance*

*ripened into the warm friendship that persisted until the day [in 1979] he died.*²⁹

The importance to WG, and his art, of the "tremendous ... stimulus" provided by his fifty-three-year-long membership of the Savile Club should not be underestimated. His change of heart about joining proved of immense benefit to him personally, of course – but surely to all of us, his readers, too.³⁰

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NOTES AND SOURCES

¹ Wikipedia

² *Convivial Companionship – The Savile Club, London* by Lew Toulmin (online resource)

³ The Savile Club's web pages

⁴ *The Scientific Temper : An Anthology of Stories on Matters of Science* by Anthony R. Michaelis (online resource)

⁵ Harvard Club of the United Kingdom (online resource)

⁶ Golding was the third Savilian Literature laureate (after Kipling in 1907 and Yeats in 1923); the other fourteen were scientists, from Strutt (Physics, 1904), Thomson (Physics, 1906) and Rutherford (Chemistry, 1908) on. Excluding Chaplin (who was an honorary member for just one month), only one Savilian – Emeric Pressburger – has won an Oscar to date, for screenwriting in 1943.

⁷ As 4

⁸ As 1

⁹ As 4

¹⁰ As 1

¹¹ From *Just Biggins : My Story* by Christopher Biggins (John Blake Publishing Ltd, 2008). After he was cast as Revd. Osborne Whitworth in the second (1977) *Poldark* series, Biggins and the Grahams became firm friends. In the book here cited, he also recounts this amusing tale about his fellow Lancastrian:

Once I joined [the Grahams] on holiday in Menorca ... We were all laughing because a lady sunbathing near us was reading one of Winston's ... novels. So when she went into the sea for a swim he dashed over and signed it. Did she see him? Did she ever notice the signature? Did she dismiss it as a joke? Who knows, but it was lovely to conjure up a mystery for her. Maybe she can solve it by reading this.

¹² The Monument's holding of just seventeen WG titles (two in both UK and US editions) is sadly incomplete.

¹³ As 3

¹⁴ *Memoirs of a Private Man*, Macmillan, 2003, chapter 1.6

¹⁵ *Argosy*, December 1967

¹⁶ WG and Alwyn first met in 1946 during the production of *Take My Life*, for which Alwyn composed the music.

¹⁷ As 14

¹⁸ *Memoirs*, 1.7

¹⁹ "Hang Your Halo In The Hall!" *A History of the Savile Club* by Garret Anderson (The Savile Club, 1993). Re the book's title, Anthony R. Michaelis (see note 4 above) writes:

Hang your Halo in the Hall! [is] good advice to any new member, or visitor, moved to hold forth at length on his hobby, only to be contradicted by his neighbour, who may happen to be the country's, or possibly the world's leading expert on the subject. It is a golden rule, even for an old member, to inquire carefully into the expertise of an unknown member before engaging him in discussion.

²⁰ As 18

²¹ As 18

²² A Trustee is "an elder statesman of the Club who is in effect a Guardian. They usually serve for five years. They are respon-

sible for finding a new Chairman when the time comes and keeping an eye on the Committee." (Thanks JML)

²³ The Club did not employ a full-time, salaried secretary until 1910. He (W. A. Evans) was "the first of a long line, some ... good, some bad, some brilliant and some disastrous ..." Peter Aldersley was clearly a success.

²⁴ As 19. Although the Club commemorated its first 125 years with a substantial book, its centenary did not pass wholly unmarked either. Sixteen members contributed writing or illustrations to the thirty-two pages of *The Savile Club 1868-1968* (ed. Monja Danischewsky and Stephen Watts, The Savile Club, 1968), among them WG, whose *Brief Encounter* sympathetically recalled fellow Savilian Gilbert Harding (1907-1960), an idiosyncratic radio and television personality now largely forgotten.

²⁵ As 19

²⁶ ERIC PARTRIDGE in his own words, edited by David Crystal, Andre Deutsch, 1980

²⁷ Osman Streater, *Camden New Journal*, 2003 (precise date unknown)

²⁸ Swinnerton, Church and Reinhardt were all fellow Savilians. Though WG's first contact with Swinnerton was in 1943, it is likely that he first met both Church and Reinhardt at the Savile Club.

²⁹ As 26

³⁰ The Savile Club sits on Brook Street, which links Grosvenor and Hanover Squares, and WG's fictional Hanover Club, which features in *The Tumbled House* (1959), *Angell, Pearl & Little God* (1970) and *Stephanie* (1992) is clearly an affectionate portrait of it.

The kind assistance of Club secretary Julian Malone-Lee in the preparation of this article is much appreciated.

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