



Factsheet G19 General Series

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House of Commons Information Office

The House of Commons Refreshment Department

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The Refreshment operation for the House of Commons is responsible for feeding the 650 Members, the 1,000 or so permanent staff of the House, and 8,000 other passholders to the Palace, plus members' guests and those attending functions arranged by them. This **Factsheet** gives the history of the refreshment services in the House and information about the current situation.

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Introduction

This Factsheet looks at the catering establishments of the House of Commons from 1773 to the present day. Now, the Commons Refreshment Department has outlets in the Palace of Westminster as well as the Portcullis House, 1 Parliament Street and 7 Millbank outbuildings. A recent addition has been the Jubilee Café in Westminster Hall which is open to both staff and visitors.

18th and 19th Century Facilities

No special arrangements were made by the House for feeding those attending it until 1773: before that, Members found sustenance in the many taverns and eating houses in old Westminster, which were especially numerous around New Palace Yard and the Bridgehead. As mentioned in **Factsheet P4**, the sitting times of the House over the years were in any case to some extent determined by contemporary meal times. In 1773, John Bellamy, the deputy housekeeper, was apparently requested by certain Members to set up a dining room in the precincts as a private venture. Two small rooms were provided and what we would now call a snack bar, or grill, established.

Bellamy's

Bellamy's, however, became a definite parliamentary institution in the sixty years of its existence. Dickens, a gallery reporter in his youth, described two of its staff in *Sketches by Boz*: Nicholas, the butler, and Jane, the flirtatious waitress; these humble members of staff thus attaining a literary immortality when many grave and reverend officers of the House of the same period remain merely as names. William Pitt's dying words are supposed to have been "Oh, for one of Bellamy's veal pies", but this is the only testimony we have for the quality of the cooking. A Select Committee reported in 1863 that only a dozen Members had actually used Bellamy's daily. Prices were high, at 5s 6d for a full dinner and 2s 6d for "cold meat, bread, beer and cheese" (the equivalents, possibly, of £12 and £6 at today's prices). Wine was especially expensive - claret was 10s 0d a bottle. (Bellamy, besides his catering activities, and being housekeeper of the Commons, was a wine merchant.) The establishment also had much competition from the taverns round about, especially, apparently, "Alice's" and "Jacob's". The old Bellamy's, as described by Dickens, was destroyed by the fire of 1834. (The name Bellamy's was later adopted by the New Zealand Parliament for its refreshment facility and the name is retained to the present day. It was adopted in 1991 for the new facility in No 1 Parliament St). Makeshift and temporary arrangements were in place until 1848, when a Select Committee recommended a new regime, under the eventual control of a Select Committee of Members. This was agreed and a contract let.

After the 1834 fire

In the post-fire rebuilt Palace, the main refreshment rooms for each House were on the west (non-river) side of the Library corridors. The Lords retain their dining room there, and the Commons now have their Tea Room so situated. There was a refreshment bar to the east of the Members Lobby. A smoking room, now the Members' Cafeteria, was added in 1848.

The contractor, a Mr Woodhouse, "late steward to the Duke of Beaufort", was awarded a sum from the House, and agreed to supply a certain level of service, during parliamentary session only, with meals at prices fixed by agreement with the Committee. The disadvantage of this system - and it is one which has beset all parliamentary caterers then and since - was the open nature of the parliamentary day. It is one thing to agree to provide a service at fixed hours, since the staff and running costs can be pretty well estimated. It is quite another to cater for an

institution which might have sat until 4 am when 10 pm was expected, or be "counted-out" for lack of a quorum at 7 pm when an all night sitting was in prospect; or which might suddenly be dissolved for a General Election when three more months' sitting was usual. In these circumstances, the costs of staff and food could not be estimated in advance, and a sensible contract price could not be established.

In 1853, the Committee called in the contract and awarded another (to Mr Steers, of the Junior United Services Club), because of "ineffective Attendance, and deficient and bad supply of Refreshment in the Dining and Tea Rooms". The same year, the Committee resolved that rooms on the principal floor should be reserved for the use of Members and Officers, and those on the ground floor available to Strangers.

One interesting account of the first Dining Room, in 'contracted' days, is that of Nathaniel Hawthorne, the American novelist. He wrote, of his visit in 1856:

"It was very much like the coffee-room of a club. The strict rule forbids the entrance of any but members of parliament; but it seems to be winked at, although there is another room, opening beyond this, where the law of exclusion is strictly enforced. The dinner was good - not remarkably so, but good enough - a soup, some turbot or salmon, some cutlets, and I know not what else; and a bottle of claret, a bottle of sherry, and a bottle of port."

Eventually, in 1863, the Kitchen Committee cancelled the contract altogether and themselves assumed, through an employed Manager, direct control of the catering function. The Committee reserved to themselves certain of the functions of a Steward's Committee of a London club - for instance, the selection of wines (there was, apparently, a weekly wine-tasting of anonymous samples submitted by various wine merchants). The House was justly famed at this time for the excellence of its cellar. It was also renowned for the Valentia Vats - a vat of Scotch whisky, of a capacity of 1,000 gallons, and of Irish whiskey, of 300 gallons.

In 1869, the idea of a joint Lords/Commons dining room, which would have resulted in a large room 125ft x 27ft in the centre of the building (one of the last designs of E M Barry before his dismissal), was considered. At the same time, the Manager, Mr Nicholes, described the conditions in the kitchens as "worse than being on board any Indian steamship". The Committee rejected on cost grounds the large dining room but adopted measures to relieve the problems of the kitchens. (The House of Lords still maintain their own refreshment facilities, which are unconnected with those of the Commons. However, many House of Lords staff use Commons catering facilities and vice-versa.)

Also in 1869, the Committee resolved "that a tank be provided for the preservation of turtle" in the dining room, and by 1885 the Tea Room had been established in a former Committee Room, on the principal floor river front adjacent to the Library (this is now the Members' Smoking Room).

Sir John Sinclair, writing in 1872, said of the catering facilities:

"The dinner rooms are comfortable and spacious, . . .but it is somewhat more expensive, and very inferior to the Clubs; and very often, just as you are raising the first morsel to your lips, jingle, jingle, jingle goes the bell, and you have to rush off to vote, finding your hot joint tepid and your gravy congealed on your return. Close to the library is the newspaper-room, inside it the tea-room, and down below is the smoking-room, from which in the summer evenings you can walk out on the broad terrace which overhangs the Thames, and which is a cool,

cheerful, and animated spot - enlivened by the steamers, boats, and barges, which are continually passing."

By the end of the nineteenth century, just over 100,000 meals a session were being served: in 1904, it was recorded, £7,637 was received from sale of food, £4,097 from wines. Among miscellaneous receipts were £21 7s 2d from the sale of kitchen refuse for pig swill and £5 10s 3d from empty bottles.

The catering operation became quickly an accepted and indispensable part of parliamentary life. There were still many alternative places for Members to dine (in addition to the clubs of St James', for instance, there were the Whitehall and St. Stephen's clubhouses adjacent to the Houses of Parliament, and the National Liberal Club on the Embankment) but the refreshment rooms at the House became the usual place to eat. Equally, taking tea on the terrace, for instance, became a recognised social institution and entertaining ladies to "tea, cake and strawberries", an established pursuit on Edwardian summer afternoons. Perhaps the biggest ever operation of the Department was to feed 1,500 persons in Westminster Hall in August 1905.

20th Century Facilities

In 1894 the kitchen had been remodelled and resited, and in 1901 very considerable relocations, alterations and enlargements of the premises effected, though these were not as thoroughgoing as a Committee had recommended. (They had suggested extending the lower smoking room as far north as the Speaker's House.) The Harcourt Room, at the Lords end of the building on the ground floor, opened in March 1907. An interesting account of the department in 1912 tells us that the staff then numbered 90 plus up to 50 casuals a day; and that waiters' wages were from £1 to 30s 0d a week for a 66-hour week "with intervals for rest". Casual waiters were paid 3s 6d for serving dinner and the terrace tea waitresses 2s 0d for three hours' work. The Head Chef ("a naturalised Frenchman") earned £7 a week and had 19 assistants. In 1910, a three-course Member's dinner cost 1s 0d, a glass of whisky 6½d, and a bottle of claret, 10d.

By 1930, the Members' Dining Room was in its present place on the river front - in rooms originally designed as Committee and Conference rooms, and the Strangers' Dining Room was established on the court side of the Private Corridor, where are now the kitchens for the two main dining rooms. There was a separate Ministers' Dining Room to the north of the Members' Dining Room, which later became the Smoking Room when that was converted to the Strangers' Dining Room.

In 1950, the Committee reported "the Cafeteria is unsatisfactory ... the Strangers' bar uninviting ... the Tea Room badly designed". They resolved, in anticipation of later events, that "the Committee consider the catering ... a service of the House, and not a business concern". On 27 July 1967, the Services Committee resolved that a service charge not exceeding 10% be charged, and that all tipping be abolished. In January 1968, representative meal prices were 7s 6d for a 3-course dinner in the Members' Dining Room, £2 10s 0d for a 5-course banqueting meal, and 6½d for a cup of tea.

Mikardo Committee

In 1975, a Government Committee of Inquiry was set up under the chairmanship of Mr Ian Mikardo MP to examine the financial and operational controls of the Refreshment facilities of the

House and to make recommendations for their future financial viability. In June 1976, the Mikardo Report noted that the diversity of the catering facilities, the level of service expected by Members throughout sitting and during recesses, the lack of budgetary control and interest charges on the bank overdraft had combined to produce what the Committee called "a mournful catalogue of ills".

The Refreshment Department

The Committee made a number of recommendations, the most important of which was that the Refreshment Department should become "a fully fledged Department of the House with its own administrative head". Accordingly, Mr John Smillie, General Manager of the Refreshment Department, was appointed as the first head of this new Department of the House with effect from 1 April 1980. Under the new administrative arrangements, the costs of all permanent staff were borne on the House of Commons Administration Vote and the debt accruing from past years was written off. Major equipment costs continued to be paid for out of the allied services Votes, as were ancillary costs such as heating, lighting and printing. The remainder of the Department's income and expenditure was henceforth borne on a separate trading account, which was "expected to make an overall profit". At the end of its first year of operation, the Refreshment Department Trading Account showed a net profit of £265,843 on a turnover of £1,356,906.

Other recommendations of the Mikardo Committee failed to gain the support of the House. These included a reduction in the segregation of facilities for Members and staff by the creation of a large self-service restaurant located in the area of the present Members' Dining Room, Strangers' Dining Room and Pugin Room. Constraints of space prevented the implementation of other recommendations to expand services.

Souvenirs

The 1980s did, however, see two significant new developments. The first of these was the opening in 1981 of a kiosk, latterly sited opposite the Strangers' Bar, to sell to Members, staff and guests various souvenirs of the House. The souvenirs range from keyrings and china, to whisky and humbugs! By 1991, the annual turnover of the Souvenir Kiosk was more than £660,000. The second development of that decade was the increase of banqueting facilities for Members, who may book rooms for functions, either on their own behalf or for organisations with which they are associated. In 1982/83, the first year for which published figures are available, the income from banqueting services was £596,377; by 1993/94, this figure had risen to over £1.5 million. Over this same period, the gross profit derived from banqueting services has risen from some £315,000 to £995,000; this profit from banqueting services is now vital to the financial viability of the Refreshment Department and allows prices in the cafeterias and dining rooms to be kept at modest levels.

From 1965 until 1991, the Department remained under the ultimate control of the Catering Sub-Committee of the Services Committee, successor to the Kitchen Committee. These Committees have always been chaired by a senior backbencher. Sir Alfred Jacoby (MP for Mid-Derbyshire and Chairman of the Committee in the 1890s) was jocularly known as "Minister for the Interior" during his incumbency of the post. (By coincidence, two Cheltenham Members, Sir James Agg-Gardner and Sir Charles Irving, were long serving Chairmen). In May 1991, Mr (later Sir) Colin Shepherd MP (Hereford) was appointed to the post of Chairman of the new free-standing Catering Committee established in the wake of the Ibbs Report.

Following the publication of the Ibbs Report, particular attention was paid to the largely advisory role envisaged for the new Catering Committee and the role of the Head of the Refreshment Department was redefined, in order to take into account the greater decision making responsibility which would result from the implementation of the Report. In November 1991, the Speaker appointed Mrs Sue Harrison to the new post of Director of Catering Services, to replace the former post of General Manager of the Refreshment Department.

Throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s, catering services operated by the Refreshment Department continued to expand. The summer marquees erected on the Terrace were retained for longer each year and a new Summer Terrace Pavilion was erected in 1989 to operate between Easter and December each year: the most ample description of an English summer season this writer has ever encountered. In October 1991, a catering complex was opened in the new parliamentary buildings at No 1 Parliament Street; named "Bellamy's" after the founder of the Refreshment Department. The facilities include a large self-service cafeteria, lounge, bar and private dining room. Another new cafeteria was opened in the parliamentary offices at 7 Millbank in October 1992, swiftly followed by a "brasserie" style restaurant in April 1994.

Modernisation

In December 1993, the Catering Committee published their Report on Refreshment Services for the House of Commons, which, unlike earlier reports, attempted to examine the entire operation of the Refreshment Department and the services it provides. The report concluded that, largely as a result of piecemeal and ad-hoc improvements in the past, the Refreshment Department premises were "dilapidated, do not reach the standards required by current legislation, and, generally, are inadequate for the number of customers the Department now seeks to serve". On 12 July 1994 the House approved the Catering Committee's Report and work commenced to implement a strategic modernisation programme, systematically planned and executed over the next five to six years. The first fruits of this were the opening of the new Terrace Cafeteria in 1997, together with its associated kitchens. During 1999 some dining rooms and many banqueting services were closed owing to these works (re-opening in March 2000), causing a decrease in income but allowing the Refreshment Department to enter the 21st century with modern facilities.

Further outlets have become available since the new parliamentary building, Portcullis House, opened in the autumn of 2000. These include a cafeteria, a restaurant and a coffee bar.

During the year 1998-99, the Refreshment Department served almost 1 million meals: an average of 4,500 each day during parliamentary session. With a total of 21 trading outlets, the Refreshment Department Trading Account now has an annual trading income of more than £3.7 million.

Vending Services

Tea, coffee and snack machines are located at various sites throughout the parliamentary estate.

Bars and the Licensing Laws

Bars in the House of Commons operate without a licence, and do not keep to the permitted hours laid down by the Licensing Acts. Wright and Smith, in their book on the Palace of Westminster of 1902, describe the bars as "illegal". There had been some doubt on the issue back to 1897, when an unsuccessful Bill was introduced. A case was brought in 1898 by a Mr Williamson against one Norris, an employee of the Refreshment Department, for supplying him (a stranger) with alcohol (brandy and soda) for payment (1s 0d) at the then bar in the Lower

Waiting Hall. Chief Justice Lord Russell of Killowen threw out the action on the grounds that the servant, Norris, committed no offence of selling alcohol without a licence because of his status as a servant of the Kitchen Committee. He and Mr Justice Wills, however, expressed doubts as to the supposed exemption of the House from the Licensing Act 1872, but made no definite ruling on the issue.

This point was resolved when A P Herbert, the author and semi-professional litigant, in May 1934 laid an information against the Kitchen Committee and Manager of the Refreshment Department for selling alcohol without a licence: the King's Bench decided it had no jurisdiction in an internal matter of the House. This case (*R v Graham-Campbell, ex parte Herbert*) has entered the canon of parliamentary law. In fact, because Members and staff of the House require refreshment of all kinds whenever the House or its committees are sitting, a major problem of the Department is the length of time its outlets must remain open. This applies to bars and cafeterias alike, and in both cases too, there is the concomitant problem of assessing likely demand. This may depend on such things as the incidence and length of divisions, whether the Whips are on, whether many Committees are sitting, and who is speaking in the Chamber.

Archive Copy

Appendix A

Staff in charge of catering services from 1869

Known Managers before 1914

fl 1869	A Nicholes
fl 1897	D Moss
fl 1901-11	C F King

General Managers of the Refreshment Department from 1914:

1914	G Willsher
1923	R J Bradley
1945	Major S E Sidwell
1953	C Mclver
1960	E G Roberts
1967	A M Mitchell
1972	W J J Smillie

Directors of Catering Services

1992	Mrs S Harrison
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Archive Copy

Appendix B

Principal outlets of the Refreshment Department

Palace of Westminster

Dining Rooms

Members' Dining Room	daily "Bill of Fare" offering traditional lunches and dinners for Members and Officers only.
Strangers' Dining Room	as for the Members' Dining Room, but where guests may be entertained.
Churchill Room and Bar	à la carte lunch and dinner menu for Members, Officers and their guests.
Terrace Pavilion	from Easter to July only, open to Members, Officers and their guests for a self-help hot and cold buffet.
Press Dining Room	daily "Bill of Fare" as in the Members' Dining Room but used by members of the Press Gallery, some Officers, and their guests.

Cafeterias

Terrace Cafeteria	self service restaurant, offering all day meals and light refreshments for Members, their guests and staff and their guests.
Members' Tea Room	offering light snacks and refreshments for Members and Officers only.
Press Cafeteria	as for the Members' and Strangers' Cafeterias, but open to members of the Press Gallery, staff of the Official Report and their guests.
The Staff Hall	Refreshment Department staff meals only.
Jubilee Cafe	open to both staff and visitors to the House of Commons. Opened in May 2002

Bars

The Pugin Room	bar lounge, also serving morning coffees and afternoon teas to Members, Officers and their guests.
Members' Smoking Room	for Members only.
Strangers' Bar	for Members, Officers, senior staff, and their guests.
Terrace Bar	as for Strangers' Bar (Easter to July only).
Annie's Bar	for Members, Officers and Lobby journalists. Opened in 1968; relocated 1995.
Press Bar	for Lobby journalists, Official report staff and Doorkeepers

Souvenirs

The Main Kiosk	opposite Strangers' Bar.
Terrace Kiosk	mobile souvenir kiosk for functions only.
Westminster Hall Kiosk	for sale of souvenirs to line of route visitors.

Banqueting

Terrace Dining Rooms	four rooms on Centre Curtain Corridor, available to Members, Officers and all-Party Parliamentary groups for private functions.
The State Apartments	the State Dining Room and the State Bedroom, used for the Speakers' functions.
Members' Dining Room	
Strangers' Dining Room	available for private functions at weekends,
Churchill Room	during recesses and on certain other occasions.
Terrace Pavilion	

1 Parliament Street

Bellamy's

Bellamy's Cafeteria	opened October 1991. Single status self service restaurant open to Members, Officers, staff and their guests.
Bellamy's Clubroom	light snacks and refreshments.
The Astor Suite	available for private functions through the banqueting service.
Bellamy's Souvenir Kiosk	for sale of House of Commons souvenirs.

7 Millbank

The Millbank Room	Opened April 1994. Modern "brasserie" style restaurant and bar terrace, open to Members, Officers and their guests (plus staff and their guests on Monday and Friday).
Portcullis Cafeteria	Opened October 1992. Single status self service restaurant open to Members, Officers, staff and their guests.
Souvenir Service	souvenirs available to order.

Portcullis House

The Debate	Opened October 2000. Food court style restaurant offering meals and light refreshments. Open to Members, Officers, staff and their guests.
The Adjournment	Opened October 2000. Brasserie style restaurant serving light meals & bar service for Members and Officers and their guests (plus staff and their guests on Thursday evenings and Fridays).
Despatch Box	Opened 2001. Speciality coffee bar with light snacks and refreshments open to Members, Officers and staff.

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The House of Commons Refreshment Department

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