



## Local History Collection

### 30 - The Kit Kat Club

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The Kit Kat club was formed in around 1690 and was one of the first and most influential London Dining Clubs and was the pre-cursor to the English trend for 18th Century clubbing. Their objectives were a strong Parliament, a limited monarchy, strong resistance to France and the protestant succession to the British throne.

Their members were drawn from the Whig politicians and literary writers and became a hub of patronage of intellectual friendship and a club where politics was discussed and then written about in 'The Spectator' which shaped the English way of life and national identity.

It is suggested that the club first met at the Cat and Fiddle Inn on Gray's Inn Lane in London. The Cat and Fiddle was owned by pastry maker, Christopher (Kit) Cat (or Catling) and those who attended meetings ate mutton pies called Kit Kat ('A Kit Kat is a supper for a Lord').



**Gray's Inn Lane, 1880**

The first Chairman (and Founder) was the publisher and bookseller Jacob Tonson who gathered 39 male literary figures and wealthy noblemen into the club membership, possibly increasing to 55.

It was Tonson who made Milton's Paradise Lost popular and the first bookseller who threw Shakespeare open to the general public.

The club met on Thursday afternoons, in several locations, to dine, talk, read aloud and toast absent Ladies. Meetings could continue until the early hours of the morning!



**Portrait of Jacob Tonson by Godfrey Kneller**

Members of the club saw themselves as promoting the English cultural reputation on the international stage along with being educators. It was unlike any other previous London club and by the 1700's it had an emphasis on journalism and opera and membership subscriptions were 400 guineas.

During the Summer months the Kit Kat club met at Down Place, Water Oakley, the home of Jacob Tonson and then his descendant Richard Tonson, MP for Windsor.



**Down Place, Water Oakley**

Members included the Dukes of Somerset, Richmond, Grafton, Devonshire and Marlborough. After King George 1 came to the throne the membership list also included the Duke of Newcastle, Earls of Dorset, Sunderland, Manchester, Wharton and Kingston, Lords Halifax and Somers, Sir Robert Walpole, Vanbrugh, Congreve, Granville, Addison, Garth, Maynwaring, Stepney and Wallis.

The artist Sir Godfrey Kneller was also a member, his 48 portraits (36" x 28") painted over 20 years form the most complete list of members. Richard Tonson had a room built at Down Place to house all the portraits some of which hang in the National Portrait Gallery today.

Sir Robert Walpole records that "though the Kit Kat club was generally mentioned as a set of wits, they were in reality the patriots that saved Britain". It was possibly as a member of this club that Walpole learned to wield power through patronage, the press, and partying.

The Kit Kat club founded in around 1720 and most of their venues no longer remain. However, Down Place is now part of Bray Studios, Water Oakley.



**Down Place, Bray Studios**