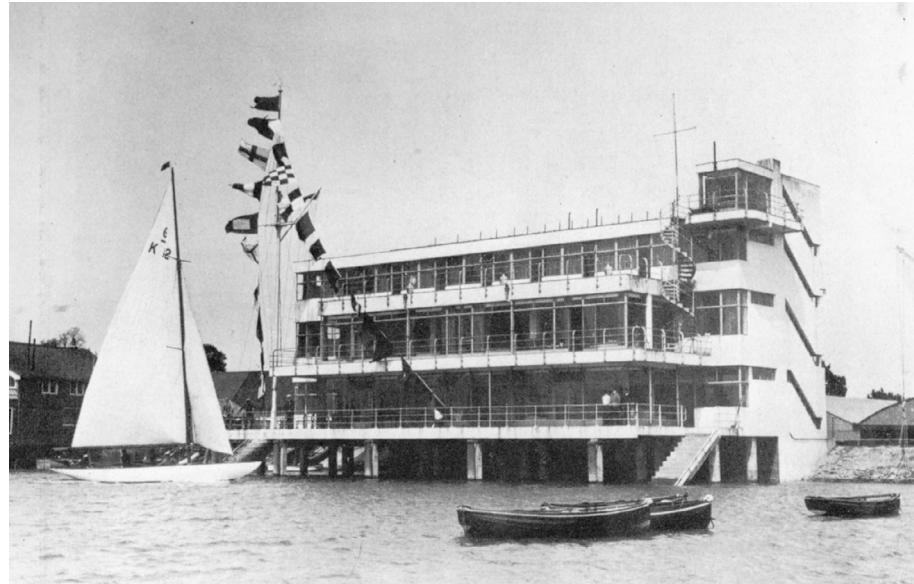


Emberton's Yacht Club: The architectural, social and cultural progression and limitations for gender and class within the Royal Corinthian Yacht Club



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## Contents

- 3. Introduction
- 4. The Royal Corinthian Yacht Club and its International Recognition
- 8. The Royal Corinthian Yacht Club and Modern Perceptions
- 11. Gender and Class in the RCYC and Wider World
- 17. The Corinthian; Building and Architectural Legacy
- 20. Conclusion



Figure 1

## Introduction

Joseph Emberton never considered himself a modernist architect. In fact, he despised all things associated with the ‘ultra-modern’, stating that it was “a horrid label and indicates eccentricity which is detrimental to anything.”<sup>1</sup> Despite this complete aversion to the contemporary, he managed to lead British modernism to a place of global recognition with his design for the Royal Corinthian Yacht Club. Documented in the MoMA International Exhibition of Modern Architecture and subsequently many various publications, the Royal Corinthian met the criteria for

<sup>1</sup> R. Ind, ‘Emberton’, Scolar Press, London, 1983, page 20



Figure 2

a modernist building established by Henry-Russel Hitchcock and Philip Johnson.<sup>2</sup> In terms of its theoretical being, the Royal Corinthian is a modernist triumph. Upon a closer inspection however, this idea of perfectionism through the built structure does not necessarily prove to be true. The built environment is not only a product of technological advancement and artistic design, but also a product of its contemporary social and cultural environment. The inter-war period of the 1920’s and 30’s brought about extensive social progress, however did still have its limitations. Emberton’s

<sup>2</sup> H.R. Hitchcock, P. Johnson, ‘The International Style’, Ontario, Penguin Books Canada Ltd, 1966, p. 136-7

design physically embodies this concept in the Royal Corinthian through spatial organisation, programming and ornamentation throughout the ground floor and first floor. This organisation is driven by two factors; gender and class, as well as the need to encase a two-tiered hierarchy, initiated by the yacht club itself. Whilst the exterior presents this perfection of modernism, the interior programme and functionality is dominated by social and cultural influences of its era. It is only once what these social and cultural influences have been investigated, can a complete picture of the club as an architectural, historical and social artefact be formed.



Figure 3

## The Royal Corinthian Yacht Club and Its International Recognition

The vision of a boat crashing through waves was very much encapsulated by Joseph Emberton’s design of the Royal Corinthian Yacht Club; a semi-aquatic, Grade II listed<sup>3</sup>, white clad rectangular form that teeters halfway on the edge of the shore, the other half supported on reinforced concrete foundations. Designed in 1929 and constructed in 1931 on the River Crouch, Burnham on Crouch, Essex<sup>4</sup>, the Royal Corinthian Yacht club building marked a new era

<sup>3</sup> Royal Corinthian Yacht Club, Historic England, ROYAL CORINTHIAN YACHT CLUB, Burnham-on-Crouch - 1123772 | Historic England, accessed 17/12/21

<sup>4</sup> R. Ind, ‘Emberton’, London, Scolar Press, 1983, p. 21

both physically and socially. The ultra-modern appearance of the expansive glass windows, white cladding and blue steel framing was no subtle piece of construction in this small riverside town with a population, at the time, of just under 3500 people.<sup>5</sup> The Royal Corinthian Yacht Club itself was and still remains today as a defining group of the Burnham community. Originally based on the bank of the Thames, the Royal Corinthian moved to the River Crouch in 1898,

<sup>5</sup> ‘1931 Census of England and Wales, County Report Part 1, Table 3, ‘Population, Acreage, Private Families and Dwellings,’ A Vision of Britain Through Time, Burnham on Crouch UD through time | Population Statistics | Total Population (visionofbritain.org.uk), accessed 6/01/2022

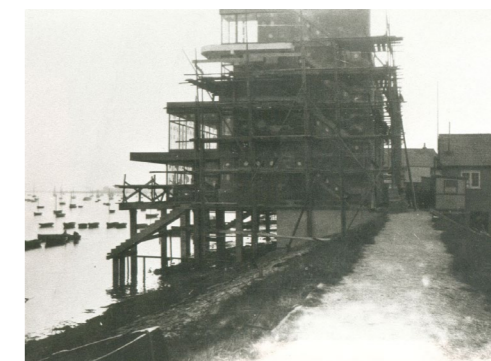


Figure 4

and purchased land for a new building in 1906.<sup>6</sup> The Commodore of the Royal Corinthian at the time, Philip Benson, who is considered as the primary client of the new club building, became acquainted with Emberton at the 1927 Advertising Exhibition<sup>7</sup>, and from this the Royal Corinthian was commissioned. Perhaps appropriately for the club, Burnham had built its industries on boatbuilding and boatyards that operated from the late 1890’s until their closures in the

<sup>6</sup> P. Pearson, ‘A Century of Yacht and Boat Builders in the Town of Burnham on Crouch,’ Burnham on Crouch, 2018, p.55

<sup>7</sup> R. Ind, ‘Emberton’, London, Scolar Press, 1983, p.22

Fig 3: RCYC Promotional Photo, RCYC Archives.

Fig 4: RCYC under construction, RCYC Archives

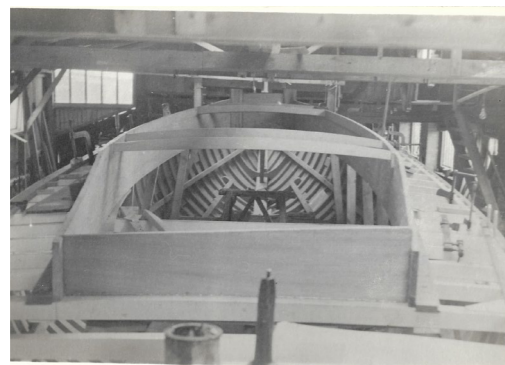


Figure 5

Fig 5: Boat building at one of the Burnham boat yards, provided by John Page

Fig 6: Catalogue for the MoMA 1932 Exhibition, <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/2044>

1970's and 80's.<sup>8</sup> Local sailing clubs and boatyards formed a symbiotic relationship; the boatyards providing yachts for the wealthy members of the club, and the club providing customers for the boatyards. It would only be appropriate then, that the architectural representation of such an important part of Burnham be designed in a style symbolising modernity in wealth and infrastructure.

Joseph Emberton, born in 1889 in Staffordshire,<sup>9</sup> is defined by his success

<sup>8</sup> P. Pearson, 'A Century of Yacht and Boat Builders in the Town of Burnham on Crouch,' Burnham on Crouch, 2018

<sup>9</sup> R. Ind, 'Emberton', London, Scolar Press, 1983, p.9

as a modernist architect during the inter-war period. His most defining work was his design for the Royal Corinthian Yacht Club, due to its appearance in the 1932 MoMA International Exhibition for Modern Architecture. He is also known for his designs of exhibition halls and department stores, along with the British Empire Hall at Olympia, the Simpsons Ltd department store and the Southsea branch of Timothy Whites. The latter two buildings were later featured in the MoMA Exhibition of Modern Architecture in the UK in 1958.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> S. Kutilainen, 'Joseph Emberton,' University of Brighton Design Archives, 1998, Joseph Emberton | University of Brighton Design Archives, accessed 17/12/2021

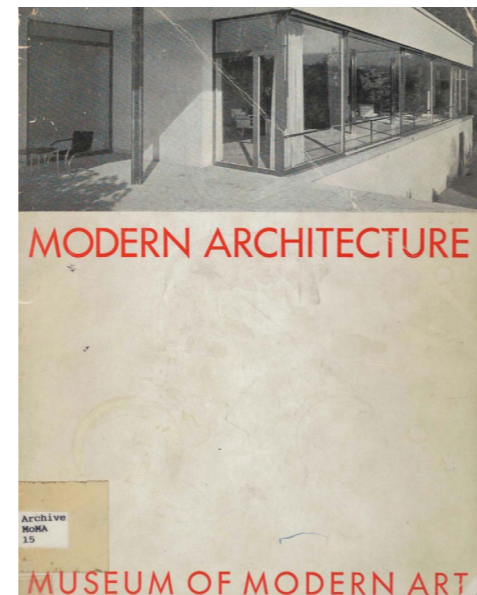


Figure 6

The Royal Corinthian's appearance in the MoMA 1932 International Exhibition became the symbol of Emberton's designs and the global view of the club as an artefact of modernist architecture. The exhibition was a collective of buildings that the curators of the exhibition, Henry-Russel Hitchcock and Philip Johnson, believed met their set of values of what it meant to be 'modern', or more accurately, 'internationally modern.' A photograph of the front of the yacht club was featured with a caption that read, "the large glass area is particularly suitable in a dull foggy climate."<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> H.R. Hitchcock, P. Johnson, 'The International Style', Ontario, Penguin Books Canada Ltd,



Figure 7

It can be inferred that Hitchcock and Johnson believed that Emberton's design met their criteria of what qualities a modernist building should hold. In the accompanying book that was published alongside the exhibition, 'The International Style', criteria on mass, volume, regularity of form and material elegance are presented.

It is evident that the yacht club complies with the modernist rules of form and mass. A steel frame, reinforced concrete piles, walls of 4.5-inch bricks and plaster rendering<sup>12</sup> create a delicate, draping effect, despite the

<sup>12</sup> R. Ind, 'Emberton', London, Scolar Press, 1983, p. 24

"grille of verticals and horizontals"<sup>13</sup> and somewhat robust exterior appearance. This represents the idea of volume as a dominantly functional concept, "composed almost entirely in terms of the needs it must provide for, with only minimal concessions to the inescapable needs of sound construction."<sup>14</sup> With the development of reinforced concrete in Britain and off-site pre-fabrication,<sup>15</sup> such visions

<sup>13</sup> H.R. Hitchcock, P. Johnson, 'The International Style', Ontario, Penguin Books Canada Ltd, 1966, p. 40

<sup>14</sup> H.R. Hitchcock, P. Johnson, 'The International Style', Ontario, Penguin Books Canada Ltd, 1966, p. 41

<sup>15</sup> A. Powers, 'Britain,' Reaktion Books, 2007, p. 17



Figure 8

could be made into reality.

Secondly, regularity, "as opposed to symmetry or other kinds of obvious balance,"<sup>16</sup> also holds functional qualities within the international style according to Hitchcock and Johnson. In Hitchcock and Johnson's accompanying book, this aversion to the symmetrical is due to the functions of modern living and their incapability of fitting into "an eighteenth century shell."<sup>17</sup> From the original plans, it is clear that

<sup>16</sup> H.R. Hitchcock, P. Johnson, 'The International Style', Ontario, Penguin Books Canada Ltd, 1966,

<sup>17</sup> H.R. Hitchcock, P. Johnson, 'The International Style', Ontario, Penguin Books Canada Ltd, 1966, p. 61

Fig 7: Side view of the RCYC after construction, RCYC Archives

Fig 8: Side view of the RCYC today



Figure 9

Fig 9: Light detail on the rear of RCYC

the main functions of each floor, the dining rooms and lounges, are all positioned slightly off to the left, hence regularity within asymmetry.

Finally, through this international analysis of the yacht club, Emberton's attitude towards ornamentation and décor comply with the Hitchcock and Johnson attitude of material elegance over furnishing and décor. The only detail needed to explain further Emberton's attitudes towards such extravagances lies within letters between himself and Johnson concerning the club building. Johnson stated his distaste for the choice of circular staircase, to which Emberton replied

that the decision was not his to make; "none of the standardised articles which you see in builders' merchants' catalogues have yet shed their Victorian details."<sup>18</sup> Despite the fact that he despised the 'modernist' label, Emberton did hold values and opinions reflecting that of a true modernist.

<sup>18</sup> R. Ind, p.24

### The Royal Corinthian Yacht Club and Modern Perceptions

The view of the yacht club established by the MoMA exhibition is only representative of a small proportion of what drove and influenced Emberton's design. Analysing the representation of the yacht club through this exhibition and its documentation is not extensive enough. It is missing crucial social and cultural factors developed through the changing nature of the club in the late 1920's and early 30's. Emberton's design established a class and gender hierarchy, and therefore produced varying levels of success of his design. This can only be recognised by analysing the design of the club from a modern architectural, social and cultural perspective in

order to discover why such decisions were made. Consequentially, analysing the yacht club's attitudes towards Emberton's design, paired with the social and cultural factors from today's perspective, will reveal a more complete representation than solely that of any architectural exhibition. Initially, by analysing the core client and the social conditions that lay within this group, can an understanding of how the social conditions of the new club building be formed. The institutional conditions of a sailing club in the 1930's would have been an environment in which social limitations for any group that was neither male nor of upper-middle class would



Figure 10

Fig 10: Royal Yacht Squadron, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-hampshire-23599270>

have thrived. Many sailing clubs would uphold the idea of 'exclusivity' and 'elitism,' maintained by the prohibition of female members and their banishment to the role of wives and mothers. Wealthy, male members, could continue to uphold their pride in the form of a sailing club membership. Evidence of this can still be seen today. In 2013, the Royal Yacht Squadron in the Isle of Wight, which branded itself as one of the most 'elite' sailing clubs globally, finally permitted women, 199 years after it was founded.<sup>19</sup> Clearly, elitism overruled

<sup>19</sup> 'Isle of Wight's Royal Yacht Squadron to allow women members', BBC News, 8th August 2013, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-eng>

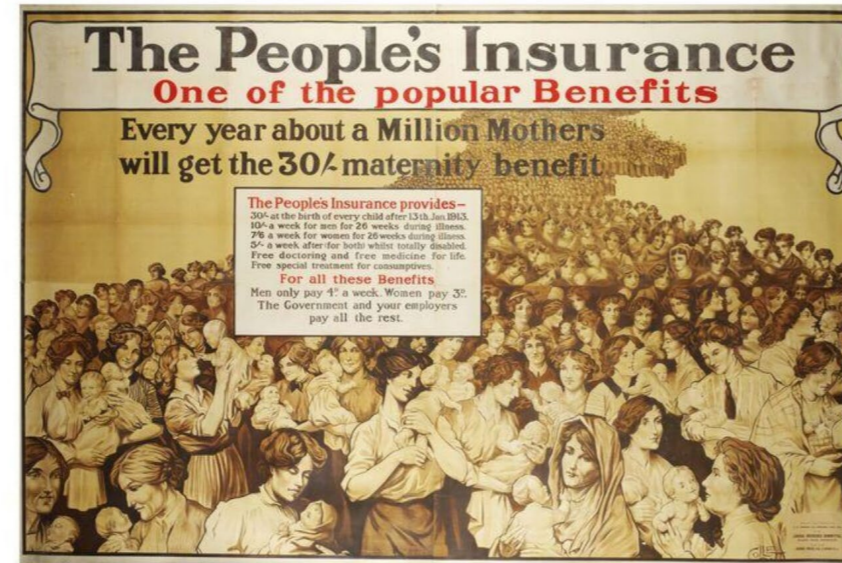


Figure 11

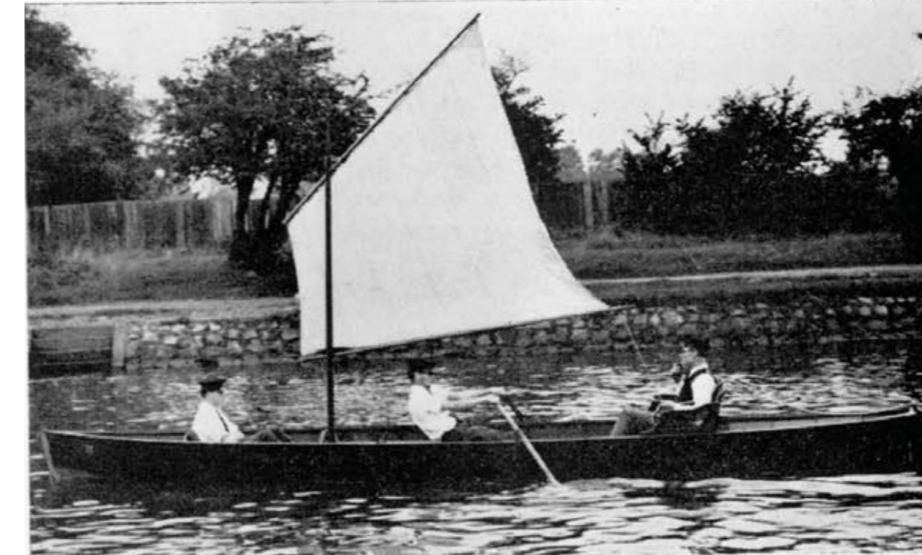


Figure 12

Fig 11: 'The People's Insurance: One of the Popular Benefits' <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O560034/the-peoples-insurance-one-of-poster-collett/>

inclusivity. A large proportion of the Royal Corinthian members during the 1930's were upper-middle class Londoners. The members and their families would travel down for the weekend to sail, made possible by the establishment of a railway line. These members would own large yachts kept at the club and would hire professional crews, or 'hands', to sail the yachts for them.<sup>20</sup> The Commodore of the club at the time, Philip Benson, is a perfect example of the systematic attitude of female domesticity in the 1930's. Benson, who had taken over his father's advertising company S.H. Benson, produced advertisement

20 Archive, R. C. (2021, October 8). Essex

campaigns for a variety of companies such as Bovril, Guinness and Coleman's.<sup>21</sup> Notably, no female depictions are featured in the majority of his advertisement designs. One of the few adverts that does feature the depiction of women is 'The People's Insurance: One of the Popular Benefits', published in 1911.<sup>22</sup> The poster promotes the benefits of maternity leave, depicting a large group of women wearing shawls and holding babies and/or toddlers. This further enforces

21 S. H. Benson, V&A Collections, <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O561972/poster-benson-s-h/>

22 'The People's Insurance. One of the popular Benefits,' V&A Online Collections, <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O560034/the-peoples-insurance-one-of-poster-collett/>

the idea that the main client, making decisions both for the physical design for the club, and on whether female members were to be allowed to join the club, only viewed women within a domestic role. Whilst this isn't considered an unusual male attitude in the 1930's, it does begin to reveal systematic attitudes within. Would Benson have been a modernist? By 1930's standards, the simple answer is yes, however there wouldn't have been much to justify his stance as a modernist by today's standards. Purely by the choices he made; of choosing Emberton, of finally allowing female membership, would have been adequate in securing the outward ap-

pearance of modernism. Clearly, the bar was low.

Despite there being very little requirements for one to brand themselves a modernist or in any way progressive, the Royal Corinthian's acceptance of female members in the 1930's would have created one of very few entryways into the sport. Whilst the superstitions surrounding the bad luck that women were supposedly bringing on board were considered outdated, the shackles of motherly and domestic roles had extinguished any possibility of partaking. Ingrid Holford's 'A Century of Sailing on the Thames' documents an 1897 race for

the Thames Sailing Club, "the distinguishing feature to be the compulsory presence of a lady in each boat."<sup>23</sup> The assumption was that, "ladies have theories of their own as to the stability of ships/ and generally believe an inclination of 5° produces all the effects of an inclination 180°."<sup>24</sup> Women could only be involved in the sport if it was at their own comedic expense. Men had created a narrative to why women weren't involved in sailing. The fear of falling in, of danger, of getting wet? Those were apparently the reasons why they would not partake, and

23 I. Holford, 'A Century of Sailing on the Thames', Surbiton, Anchor Press, 1968, p. 6

24 I. Holford, 'A Century of Sailing on the Thames', Surbiton, Anchor Press, 1968, p. 6

even if they did, their fears would only hinder the handywork of their male counterparts. It is even documented in the race that, "it was Miss Price's hand on the tiller, not her father's!"<sup>25</sup> Women were keen, competitive and adventurous. Unfortunately, for both the Thames Sailing Club and the Royal Corinthian, founded on the Thames only a year after said race occurred in 1872,<sup>26</sup> it would be decades before serious female membership would be considered.

25 I. Holford, 'A Century of Sailing on the Thames', Surbiton, Anchor Press, 1968, p. 6

26 'The History of Royal Corinthian Yacht Club,' Royal Corinthian Yacht Club, RCYC History - Royal Corinthian Yacht Club, accessed 27/12/2021

Fig 12: Thames Sailing Club, I. Holford, 'A Century of Sailing on the Thames', Surbiton, Anchor Press, 1968, p. 4

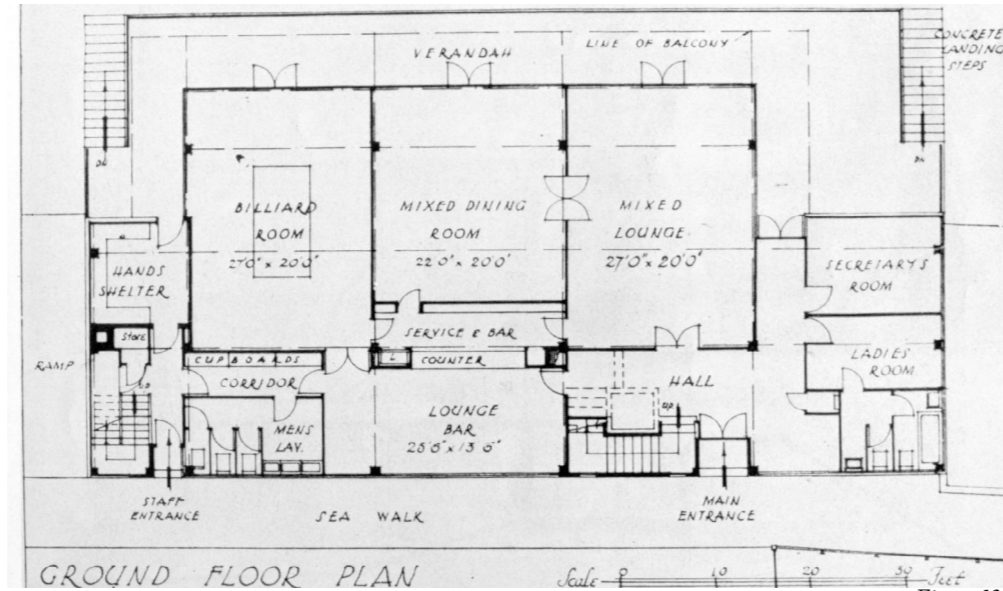


Figure 13

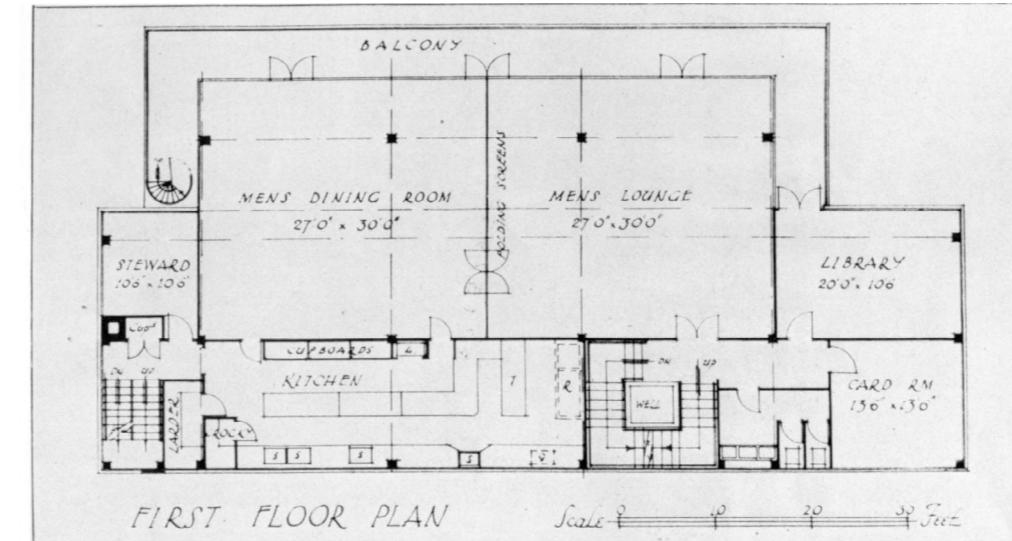


Figure 14

### Gender and Class in the RCYC and Wider World

One of the responsible factors for why female membership was even considered in the first place was due to a general social progression for women, however still possessed some limitations. It can be believed that this social climate was a by-product of the First World War. At the beginning of the war, women were prohibited from voting or working in any service, military or combat roles. The drafting of men then pressured the military and businesses to employ women in their place. By July 1917, 4.7 million women had paid employment in Britain.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>27</sup> 'Women in World War I', The National World War I Museum and Memorial, Women in WWI | National WWI Museum and Memorial (theworldwar.org), accessed 30/12/2021

World War One was very much present in Burnham on Crouch, after an airfield was established in 1915 for use by the Home Defence, and was later taken over by the RFC.<sup>28</sup> It can be speculated that women did gain employment during World War One in Burnham, but there are few records to show this. However, one irrefutable fact is the inequality of pay between men and the women that replaced them; "war bonuses were always higher for men; and trade boards/ staunchly upheld the idea that no matter how low wages were, women should have

<sup>28</sup> 'Burnham on Crouch', Wikipedia, Burnham-on-Crouch - Wikipedia

less than men."<sup>29</sup> Campaigns of equal pay had different motives; feminists drove home progression for women, anti-feminists saw it as a way of preserving men's employment and wages.<sup>30</sup> This slow progression for women's rights in the 20th century, or more accurately, the changing perception of women's roles in society, would only be allowed to occur at a certain pace. This, of course, is not unusual. The phrase 'Rome wasn't built in a day' is fairly fitting. During this inter-war period, men had returned to their previous employment and women were

<sup>29</sup> G. Braybon, 'Women Workers in the First World War,' Oxon, Routledge, 2013, p.98

<sup>30</sup> G. Braybon, 'Women Workers in the First World War,' p. 98

dismissed. In 1919, 600,000 women were registered as unemployed,<sup>31</sup> despite proving their capabilities as skilled workers. Women lost their sources of income and were yet again reliant on men to provide an income.

On a microscopic level, this same logic applies to the Royal Corinthian. The inter-war period raised questions about women's place in society, and the same questions were being asked about women's position in the club; as solely voyeurs or also as

<sup>31</sup> 'The Post-war Legacy of Female Factory Workers in WWI', My Learning, The Post-war Legacy of Female Factory Workers in WWI • Female Munitions Workers in WWI • My Learning, accessed 30/12/2021

participants? The decision to allow women was of course progressive, however Emberton's arrangement for them within the club highlights its limitations. The only areas accessible to women were three rooms situated on the ground floor; the ladies' room, mixed lounge and mixed dining room. The ground floor was also occupied by a billiard room, lounge bar, secretary's room and hands shelter. The three rooms are significantly smaller than those of their male counterparts on the first floor, which included the men's lounge, men's dining room, library and card room. All rooms on the ground floor could also be accessed by men. The only

room that could be used exclusively by women was the ladies' room; a small room on the right-hand side of the building, and was smaller than the secretary's room. Emberton's arrangement of the spaces used by female members clearly establishes the idea of an inter-club hierarchy.

The tell-tale sign of this is not in fact confirmed by any written statement or anything in relation to the women of the club, but is in fact signified by the areas associated with the professional sailing staff of the club. Many of the large yachts owned by members of the Royal Corinthian required a large crew in order for it

Fig 14: Original first floor plans, RCYC Archives



Figure 15

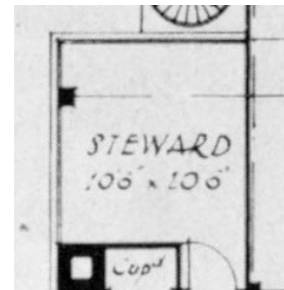


Figure 16

Fig 15: Hands shelter, Ground floor plan, RCYC Archives

Fig 16: Steward's office, First floor plan, RCYC Archives

Fig 17: Zimmer Der Dame, B. Colomina, 'The Split Wall; Domestic Voyeurism', 'Sexuality and Space' (1992), 'Gender, Space, Architecture: An Interdisciplinary Introduction', London, Routledge, 2000

to be sailed. A solution to this was to hire professional crews, consisting mainly of local boat builders looking for work during the quieter months. Two rooms were allocated in Emberton's design for use of these professional crews. The hands shelter, situated on the ground floor and is now used as a changing room, provided basic shelter from the elements. Crew members were not permitted to access other areas of the building. If a crew member wished to get a refreshment from the bar, drinks would be passed through via a small hatch in the wall. This concept of hiding the undesirable when they are no longer desired is rife within

Emberton's design. The steward's office, positioned directly above on the first floor, would have been occupied by the crew's steward, the head of the crew. Following this pattern, it is evident that Emberton had established a hierarchy from the lowest on the ground floor, to the highest on the first floor. Allocating the female members a space within the club that is not only smaller than the male equivalents, but is also located in an area of lower 'rank', is undoubtedly Emberton's method of discarding those less important to the Royal Corinthian as a social group.



Figure 17

The arrangement of these rooms can also be classed as an example of domestic voyeurism. Coined by architectural historian Beatriz Colomina, domestic voyeurism is a term describing the visual connection but physical separation that has been used by modernist architects to arrange bodies based on gender. One such adopter was the architect Adolf Loos and can be seen in his design for Müller House in 1930. Domestic voyeurism paired with Loos's concept of a theatre box created small, private spaces, with expansive views of other occupied areas of the building; "the smallness of a theatre box would be unbearable if one could not look out



Figure 18

into the large space beyond."<sup>32</sup> The lady's room (Zimmer Der Dame) is positioned as such; a small room occupying the centre of the house, its window overlooking the living room. Emberton's arrangement for the women within the club follows this same ideology; three small rooms, the two largest with access to a view of the River Crouch thanks to the large floor to ceiling windows. Without the expansive windows and appealing view, the occupiers of the mixed lounges and living rooms would have indeed found the space unbearable to use.

<sup>31</sup> B. Colomina, 'The Split Wall; Domestic Voyeurism', 'Sexuality and Space' (1992), 'Gender, Space, Architecture: An Interdisciplinary Introduction', London, Routledge, 2000, p. 315

The photograph of the mixed lounge also proves that the design fitted the idea of the domestic living. The choice of décor and furnishings, when laid side by side to the men's lounge, reveals that a concept of domesticity and feminine 'homely comforts' was applied. The photograph shows the view of the room, looking away from the window and into the space. There are no occupants in the room, only the arrangement of chairs, tables and dressers, as well as a series of flower vases. Without the knowledge that this is in fact a room within a sailing club, it would be otherwise assumed that this space could be a living room, or at best, some sort of waiting room.



Figure 19

The flower vases and landscape paintings signal to replicate 'the feminine touch', whilst the furnishings remain basic and dull. Advancing technology throughout the 1920's had brought about mass produced furniture for more affordable prices, and the Great Depression triggered a demand for modern industrial production methods and materials in the 1930's.<sup>33</sup> It is evident from the photograph that these new industrially-produced furniture pieces had not yet reached this part of the club, as the furniture depicted represents the more handcrafted method and materials.

<sup>33</sup> 'Art Deco in the Home', V&A Museum Articles, V&A · Art Deco In The Home (vam.ac.uk), accessed 4/01/2022

Fig 18: Mixed lounge, RCYC Archives

Fig 19: Mixed lounge, RCYC Archives





Figure 20

Fig 20: Kaufmann Office, <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O69452/kaufmann-office-panelled-room-wright-frank-lloyd/>

Fig 21: Men's lounge, RCYC Archives

A comparison between this space and that of its male counterparts further cements this logic that social rank was translated through décor and furnishings. Even at first glance, it is obvious that the architectural superiority and complexity of the men's lounge surpasses that of the mixed lounge for a variety of reasons. Firstly, not only is the men's lounge located in an area identified as higher ranking, but the physical structure of the room hints at a more carefully considered design. The timber wall cladding and doors on the right side of the photograph is typical of 1930's luxury; the rectangular and square forms strategically mimic the exterior form. Similar



Figure 21

cladding techniques were used by the architect Frank Lloyd Wright. Wright was commissioned by Edgar J Kaufmann, department store owner and the owner of one of Wright's most well-known designs, Fallingwater.<sup>34</sup> The offices designed by Wright for Kaufmann's offices in Pittsburgh were clad in cypress plywood and blockboard. Floors, walls, and ceiling, as well as a three-dimensional mural above the desk, were constructed and put together by cabinet maker Manuel Sandoval.<sup>35</sup> Even though the Roy-

<sup>34</sup> 'Kaufmann Office', V7A Museum Collections, <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O69452/kaufmann-office-panelled-room-wright-frank-lloyd/>, accessed 5/01/2022

<sup>35</sup> C. Benton, 'Frank Lloyd Wright: The Kau-

al Corinthian Yacht Club predates the Kaufmann office by four years,<sup>36</sup> the same technique can be traced between the two of using economical materials, but sophisticated application, to create an immoderate appearance. This subtle feature creates an air of higher architectural awareness; an awareness for what is considered modern and a wealth status symbol.

Further cementing the immoderate appearance of the space is the high-

mann Office by Christopher Wilk', *Journal of Design History*, Vol. 9, No.3, 1996, p. 225

<sup>36</sup> 'Kaufmann Office', V7A Museum Collections, <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O69452/kaufmann-office-panelled-room-wright-frank-lloyd/>, accessed 5/01/2022

er quality of the furniture. Plush leather-clad wooden armchairs and hardwood tables can be found in the photograph. The photograph of the mixed lounge brings a sense of forced domesticity and discomfort due to the rigid arrangement of the furniture. On the contrary, the photograph of the men's lounge creates a sense of ease and relaxation, not too dissimilar to that of a smoking lounge. The significantly more luxurious chairs signify that this was a place of calm, of after dinner conversations and spectacular views of the Crouch. The comparison of these two photographs reveals Emberton's desires for the type of environment within each space. The

mixed lounge was a formal space, regimented by the social expectations and environment implemented by those that could enjoy the luxury and ease of the men's lounge.

### The Corinthian; Building and Architectural Legacy

Bernard Tschumi's differentiation between building and architecture in 'The Pleasure of Architecture' categorises the built form as one of function and utility and architecture as one of pleasure; "as opposed to building, making architecture is not unlike burning matches without a purpose."<sup>37</sup> The act of creating architecture is not a necessity, but it is an act performed out of pleasure by creatives to enhance the occupants' experience. When this concept is applied to the Royal Corinthian, it can be considered both a success and a **failure. As a piece of modernist archi-**

37 B. Tschumi, 'The Pleasure of Architecture', p. 52, J. Hill, 'Actions of Architecture', London, Routledge, 2003, p.76

ecture, the club has been considered a success since it's construction, and the evidence is clear in the form of its appearance in the International Exhibition. It was also given a Grade II listing in 1971 for its architectural and historical interest.<sup>38</sup> As a functional modernist building however, this is where the flaws lay. Its utility is met with the constraints of the client to enforce their own values to ensure a hierarchical organisation. This does not provide any benefits to the members' experience of the building, but fixates the strong social and cultur-

38 'Royal Corinthian Yacht Club', Historic England, <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1123772?section=official-listing>, accessed 5/01/2022

al conditions of the 1930's. Importantly, it must be noted that this is a conclusion that can only be made by viewing this building from a modern perspective. At the time of the yacht club's design and construction, the building would have been viewed as a perfectly functional building. Allowing female members to join was a new and important decision and their role within the club may not have been considered too greatly. It would have just been assumed that the social roles that they maintained outside of the club as second-class citizens would continue within. It is only when the club is analysed as a modernist building from a modern perspective, can it



Figure 22

be concluded that it was not successful. Architect, programme and client all posed their own opinions and requirements for the design of the Corinthian, however it can be said that the Royal Corinthian Yacht Club held the strongest position. The idea of sole authorship for the design by Emberton is indeed false; whilst this is attributed to him, there is evidence to suggest that the client held a stronger social power over the design. In no other designs by Emberton has he used this same spatial organisation based on gender. Therefore, it must be a requirement of the client, rather than a concept towards achieving a modernist design. It is also the re-

sponsibility of the club as the overruling client, that the club is unsuccessful as a functional modernist building, as maintaining the social hierarchy was prioritised over the architectural qualities of the building.

Despite Emberton's strong attempts to implement the social rigidity that the Royal Corinthian so desperately wanted for its members, there is evidence to suggest that it wasn't sufficient enough for the club's standards. The impact of the social manipulation methods dwindled after its construction, and new segregation methods were initiated. A photograph from the 1930's of the ground floor balco-



Figure 23

ny is clearly a staged one. The sitters, both men and women in sophisticated attire, are arranged in a curve formation so that no one is obscured in the shot. Its only when one looks beyond the formation of the sitters that it is revealed that the balcony is segregated. A misted glass panel divides the space with the words inscribed upon it; "MEN ONLY." Beyond this divide can we see a small group of men gathered outside what must be assumed to be the billiard room. A study of the original plans reveals no divider in Emberton's design, nor in the promotional photos used for the 1932 MoMA Exhibition. The only responsible group for this decision, there-

Fig 22: Ground floor balcony, 1930's, RCYC Archives

Fig 23: Ground floor balcony, Men Only sign, 1930's, RCYC Archives



Figure 24

Fig 24: Dining room showing demolition of interior walls, 1950's, RCYC Archives

Fig 25: RCYC as HMS St Matthew during WW2, RCYC Archives

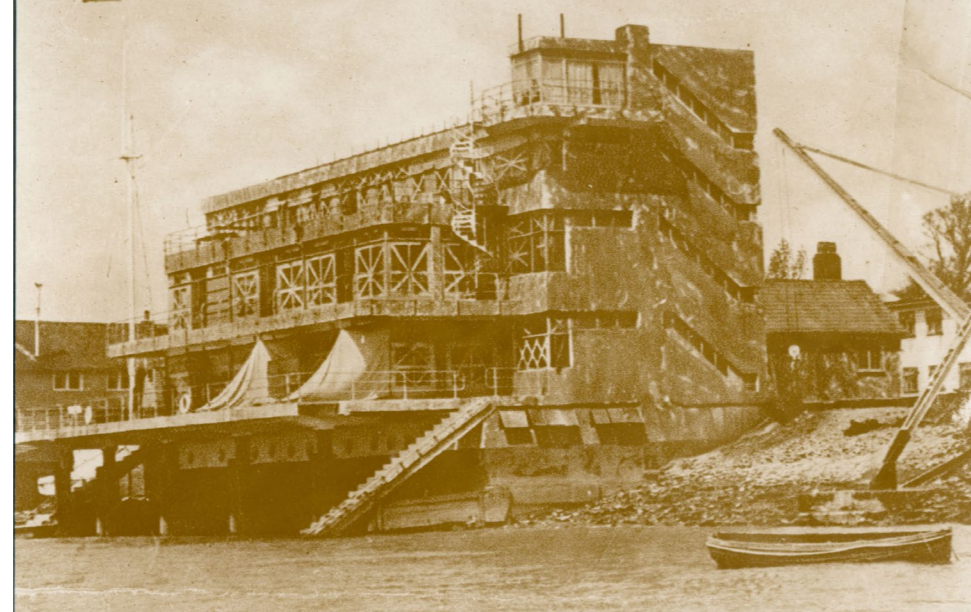


Figure 25

fore, must have been implemented by the club after Emberton's design was complete and after it's recognition as an example of international modernism. It must also be noted that the demolishing of the partition walls on the ground floor were not done in some attempt of social progress, but rather by accident. During the Second World War, the Corinthian was taken over by the Navy for their own use.<sup>39</sup> The partitions were demolished and windows bricked up to make the space for the Navy, and from then on, the impact of physical separation had disappeared. Emberton's attempts at creating a two-tiered social environ-

<sup>39</sup>Archives of the Royal Corinthian Yacht Club

ment through spatial organisation, programming and ornamentation did not meet the club's social and cultural ideologies concerning the status of their female members, and therefore took matters into their own hands by implementing their own physical barriers between these two groups. Even the yacht club's strict hierarchy was not strong enough to survive post war, and today the club remains in its open-plan format.

## Conclusion

The perception of this architecturally notable building has shifted and moulded as social and cultural conditions have progressed in Britain. Whilst it always has been and always will be a true example of British modernism from the 1930's, there is more to be revealed about the occupants and the environment within than solely the architectural representation. The perception of perfected modernism displayed in the MoMA International Exhibition of Modern Architecture is not a complete analysis of Emberton's building. The clients and social restraints put pressure on Emberton and his aim of modernist simplicity to segregate the newly established fe-

male members. This building is a perfect example of how client beliefs and attitudes overrule the vision of the architect, therefore creating a space that is not functional for all, but visually is very successful. This was achieved through a spatial organisation that placed higher-class on the first floor of the building and lower classes on the ground floor, where women could access only three rooms. The organisation of the spaces for the staff, the hands shelter and steward's office, further solidifies the structure of the class hierarchy through the positioning of the hands shelter directly below the steward's office. The ornamentation and furnishing of these rooms,

when compared to the others on the first floor, attempts a forced replication of the domestic house and the idea of 'feminine touches', as a result creating a rigid and uncomfortable space. This exemplar piece of modernist architecture was formed from systematic limitations for those that were neither wealthy nor male, and therefore could only have ever been considered exemplar in both functional structure and architectural design when it was initially built.

Today, the yacht club still remains as the open-plan format that the Royal Navy had left it in. Only a few small fractions of the wall remain, mainly as

part of folding doors to create partitions for events. Despite the complete refurbishment during the Second World War, the prediction is that these internal walls would have been demolished regardless. The nature of the club would continue to change and adapt throughout the 20th Century as social and cultural advancements progressed. It may not have occurred so early on in the 20th Century, but growing pressure both internal and external would have led to this more inclusive organisation. This does not make this building any less original or modernist. Instead, this adaptation purely ensures the continuity of the appropriate use and functionalism of

the Royal Corinthian for many years to come. It will achieve the modernist goal of longevity within the yacht club and as a landmark within the community.

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