

THE CITY OF LONDON CLUB RESTORED

by

Clive Aslet

COLLECTIVE PRINCIPALS

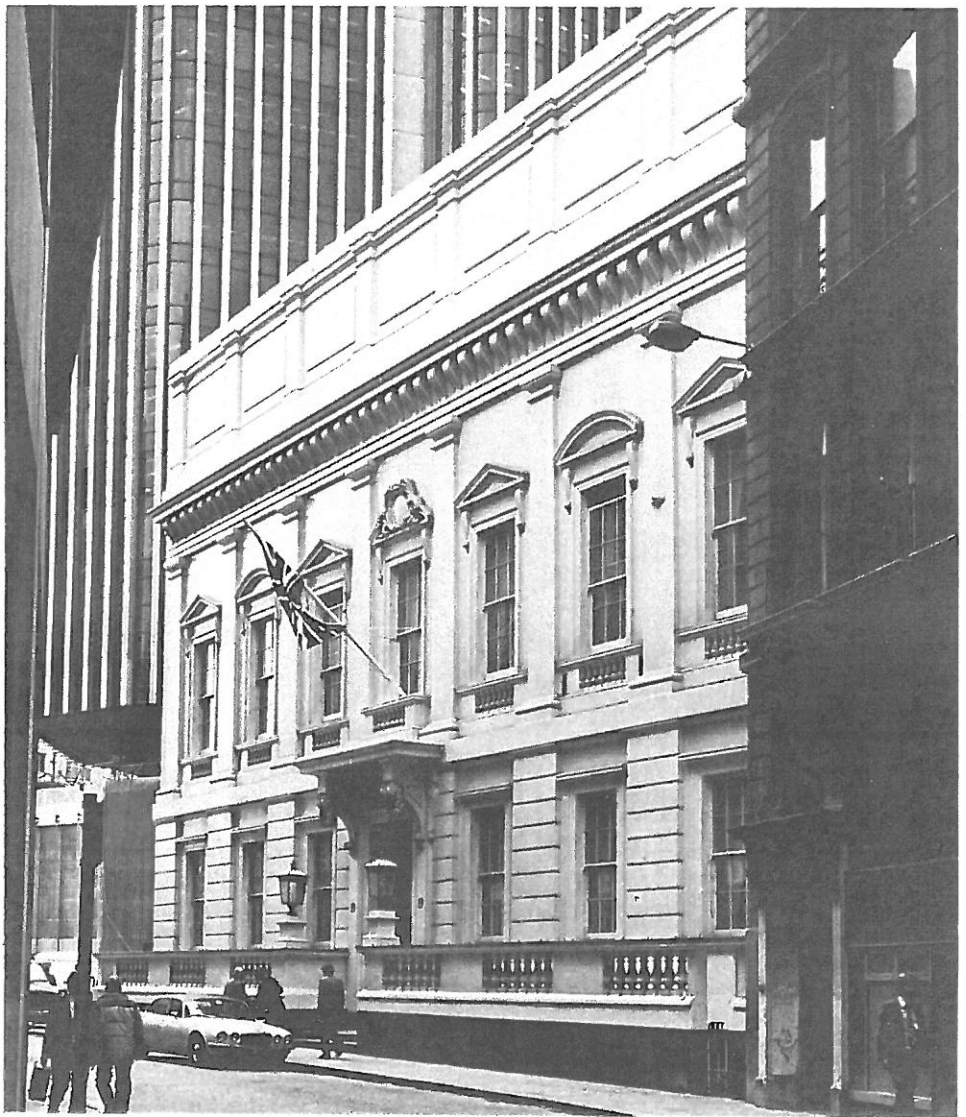
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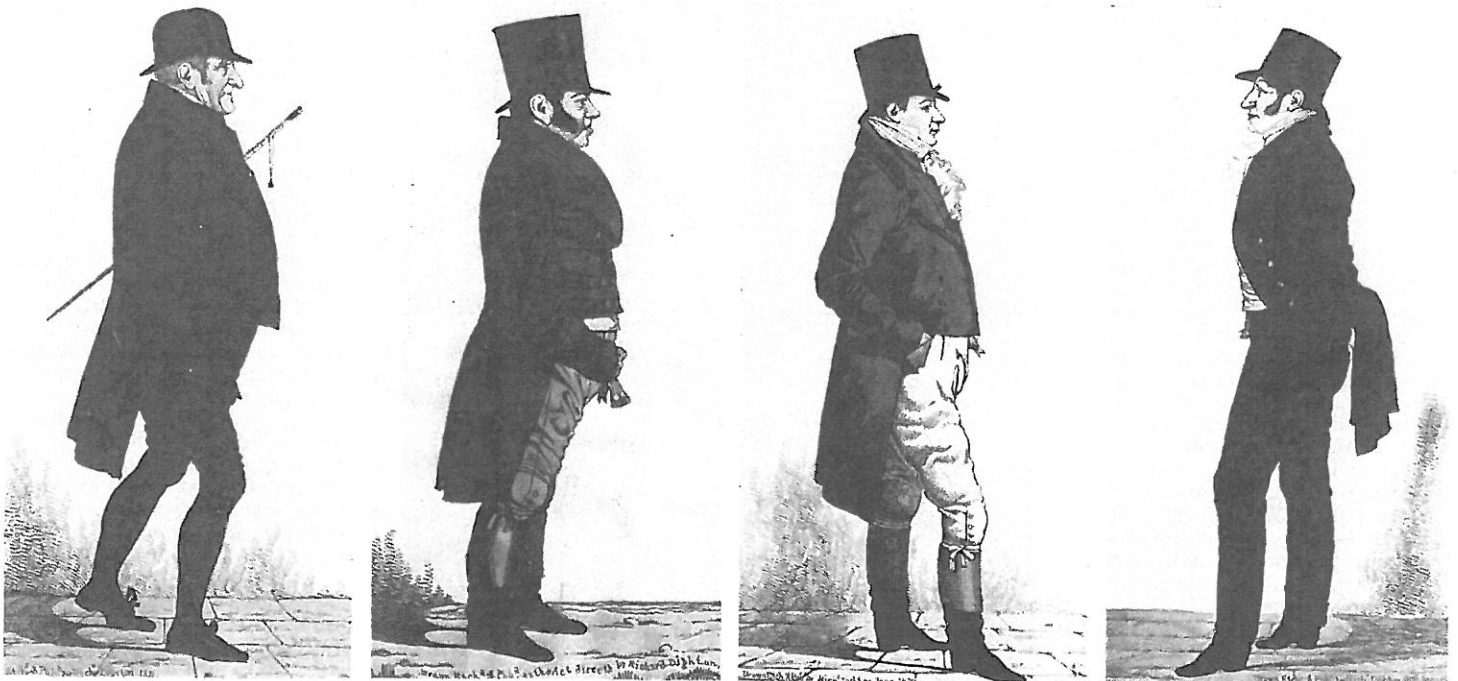
THE City of London is a place of architectural contrasts. Edwardian Portland stone, Victorian terracotta and even Wren steeples jostle uncomfortably up against steel and glass. So the picture presented by Old Broad Street should not occasion the surprise that it would in any other part of the metropolis. At the foot of the 600ft NatWest tower, its ribs of steel and fillets of tinted glass glittering in the sun, is a sedate, stucco-fronted building, the City Club, whose imperturbable dignity is unruffled by being dwarfed by its sleek neighbour. The result is a kind of Dickensian anomaly that Max Gordon of the Louis de Soissons partnership, architect of the recent restoration of the club, diagnoses as "architectural schizophrenia". Not, he continues, that this was the fault of the original scheme for the tower, which would have done away with the club house completely.

The club has undoubtedly been lucky. It was saved by a planning decision that Col. R. Seifert, whose partnership is architect of the National Westminster development, regards as "unique". Planning permission for a scheme for the tower that would involve redevelopment of the City Club site was obtained in 1970. Only after a campaign of protest led by Mr Simon Jenkins did the then Secretary of State, the late Mr Anthony Crosland, list the building in 1974. Even though work on the development had already started, the bank accepted the decision with grace. The City Club had already made plans to move out of its premises in accordance with an agreement reached with National Westminster in 1970. This was to the effect that the bank would move the club to new premises in return for the old club house. Now it was decided that the club should stay in its old home. The bank undertook to restore the club building in return for the site to which the club was due to have moved.

Restoration was undertaken on a scale beyond the wildest dreams of most West End clubs, with their much publicised financial troubles. The final cost was £2 million. Indeed, hardened clubmen, used to the Victorian dowdiness that is the image of the traditional club room, may find so much fresh paint and new upholstery dazzling to their unaccustomed eyes. A modern colour scheme of very milky café-au-lait walls with blue



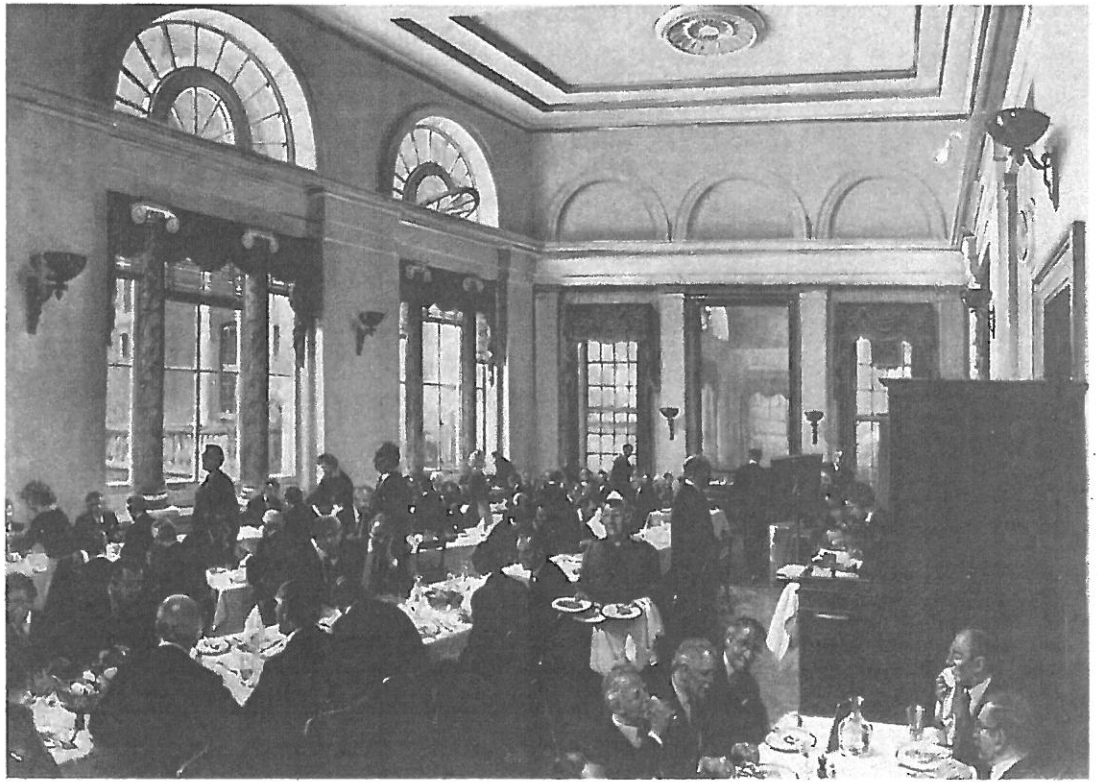
1—THE CITY OF LONDON CLUB, OLD BROAD STREET, EC2. Saved by spotlisting in 1974, it has been restored at a cost of £2 million



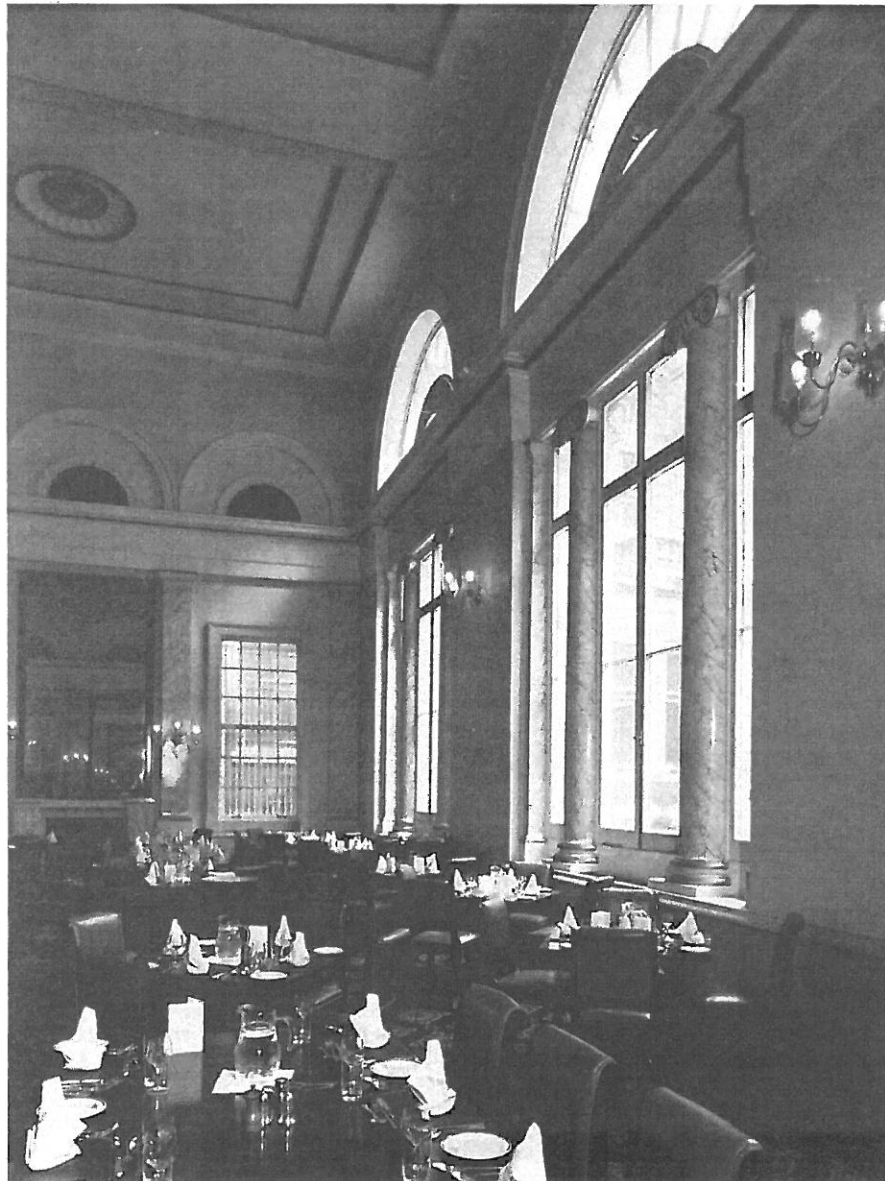
2—ORIGINAL MEMBERS OF THE CITY CLUB. These etchings by Richard Dighton show (left to right) Mr Sims, Richard Thornton, Sir John Hall and Jacob Montefiore

carpets has been chosen: a pity, since some of Hardwick's sketches indicating the much richer original colours, dominated by terracotta red, were unearthed in the course of restoration. But even traditionalists will admit that, in other aspects of the restoration, the application of modern ideas to the late-Georgian structure has had entirely beneficial results. The basement kitchen has been completely redesigned and the members' rooms and services clustered around the central core of the building have been virtually rebuilt.

The purpose of the City Club, according to the early minutes, has always been to offer the attractions of a West End club to hard-working bankers, merchants, shipowners and "others of known Respectability" in the City. Members can enjoy "a Place of Useful Resort, and the Convenience of procuring Refreshments with Comfort at a moderate Charge". It was founded during the club boom of the late 1820s and 1830s, the committee first meeting on February 29, 1832. Decisive action—as one might expect of City men—was taken immediately: a lease with H.M. Commissioners of Excise was signed in September 1832, and the



3—TERENCE CUNEO'S PAINTING OF THE MAIN DINING ROOM. Painted 10 years ago when it was thought that the club house would be destroyed



4—THE MAIN DINING ROOM TODAY

building of the present club house was begun in January the next year. Architecturally it is therefore slightly later than the Athenaeum (1828-30) and the Travellers' (1829-32), and a few years earlier than the Reform (1836).

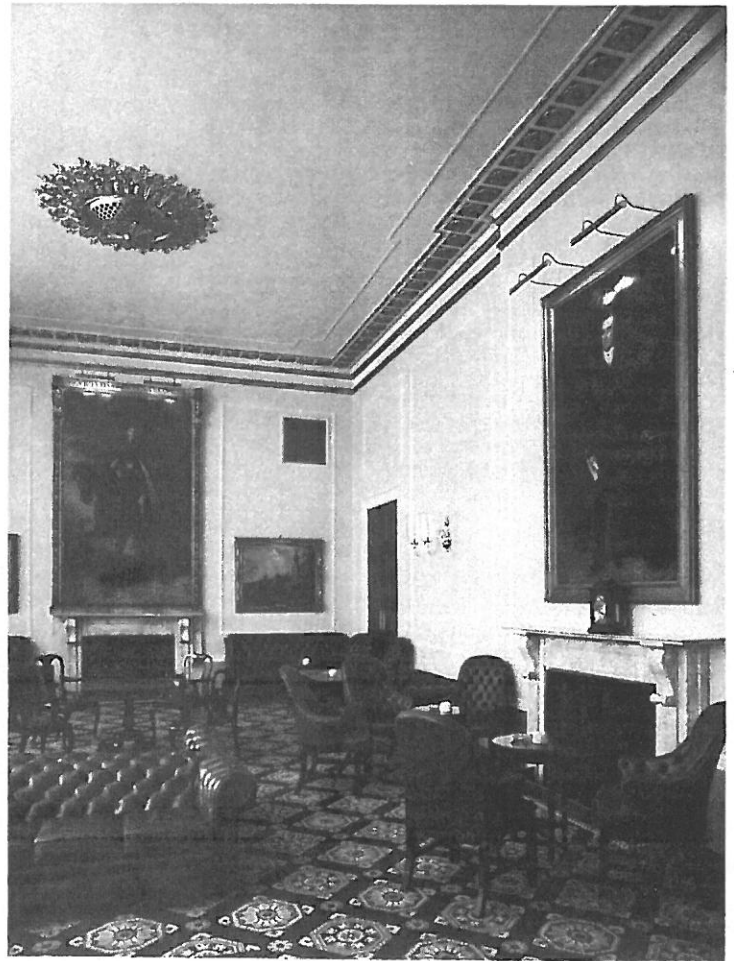
The committee invited a number of "eminent Architects" to submit designs for a building that would cost under £10,000. Unfortunately the minutes do not say who they were. But it is characteristic that Philip Hardwick, "a Gentleman of distinguished eminence in his Profession" with a City-based practice, should have been chosen, rather than a more fashionable architect like Decimus Burton or Barry.

An impression of the original 250 members chosen by the committee (all subsequent members being elected by a ballot of the whole membership) is given by cartoons hanging in the members' bar (Fig 2). Of those illustrated here, the etching of Richard Thornton is subtitled "A View on the Baltic Walk", so presumably the gruff-looking subject was a merchant, while Sir John Hall was secretary to the St Katharine's Dock company. These characters were obviously more representative of the club's early days than the two most famous original members, the Duke of Wellington and Sir Robert Peel. Nevertheless, it says something that both remained members until their deaths in 1852 and 1850, and it cost them an annual subscription of six guineas. Today it is a requirement that every member must be a "principal in business".

The City Club's Old Broad Street façade is a sound piece of Classicism, with Doric pilasters articulating the first floor. It would, like other clubs, be a correctly reticent building if the recessed tower-block next door did not throw it into relief. A corbelled cornice, a swaggered hood over the entrance door and a tall blind attic are the only details that are out of the ordinary.

True to the form of most 19th-century club buildings, the City Club is planned around a central stair hall. There is a touch of drama about the entrance, the vestibule being divided from the stair hall by three arches. Originally, since the stair hall is in the centre of the building, a lantern window gave light from above; now, however, only its form has been retained, not its function, because a roof garden (Fig 7) has been built above it. The stair itself has a central flight that divides at a half landing: here there is a clock incorporating a thermometer and barometer made for the club by L. Casella of London. Sadly, the magnificent tiled staircase built in 1903 to give access to the basement lavatories has been removed, although some of the glories of tilework survive in the renovated rooms below ground.

Behind the staircase on the ground floor is the most impressive room of the club, the main dining room. It

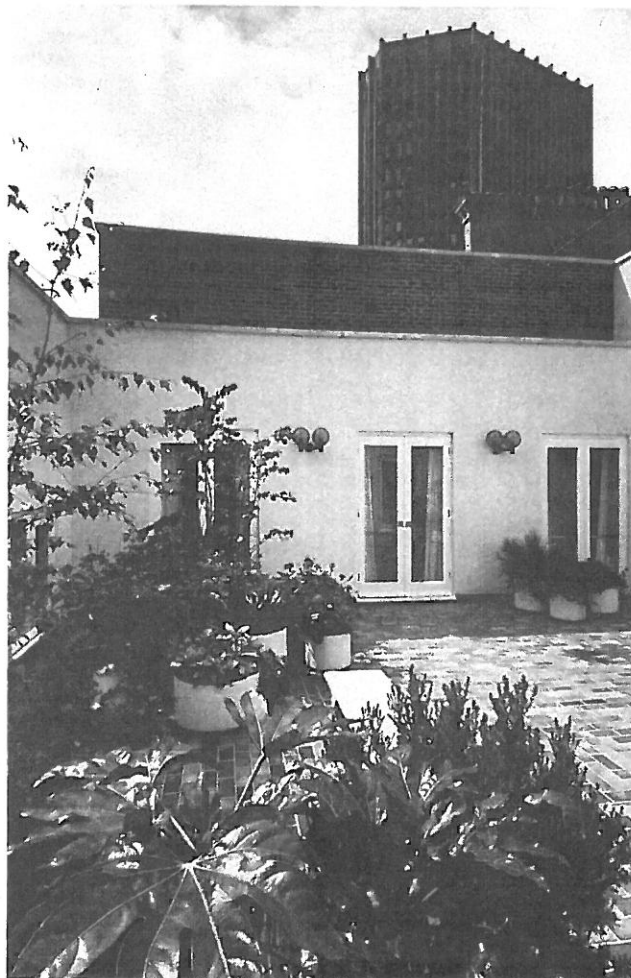


5—THE STAIR HALL. (Right) 6—ONE OF THE TWO COFFEE ROOMS ON THE FIRST FLOOR. The portrait on the right shows John Masterman, MP for the City and the first chairman of the club

has the proportions of a double cube (30ft by 60ft by 30ft), and the room is given a strongly architectural character by the very tall windows—variants of the Palladian motif. Arches rising almost from the floor to the ceiling are cut across by an entablature; this is supported by pairs of Ionic columns that unequally divide the rectangular openings below it. Wisely, the committee has not impaired the massive architectural effect by hanging curtains. Some people will regret the substitution of the present brass light fittings for the more architectural brackets of the 1930s shown in the painting by Terence Cuneo (Fig 3), commissioned to record the room before the demolition which did not come. But the restoration has emphasised the majestic proportions of the room by clearing away an ugly serving area. This is not, however, the only benefit members will enjoy from the redesign of the club's kitchens.

The visitors' dining room lies behind the entrance façade, to the right of the vestibule. Appropriate to the room to which ladies may be admitted, the decorations are in a pretty Adam style, supplied early this century by Waring and Gillow.

Above this on the first floor are the coffee rooms, which occupy the whole length of the Old Broad Street elevation. Most of the old furniture has been replaced by new, and it is still in need of a few years' use by cigar-smokers and newspaper-readers to tone down the leather. All the steel casements in these rooms and the others on the façade that were put in after the original windows were blown out during the Second World War have been replaced by wooden sashes. The larger of the two coffee rooms is



7—THE ROOF GARDEN AROUND WHICH ARE GROUPED THE ROOMS ON THE REBUILT SECOND FLOOR

dominated by the portraits of the Iron Duke, and John Masterman, MP, the first chairman: they looked down from above simple marble fireplaces, ornamented only by scrolled brackets supporting the shelf. They will soon be joined by a recently completed portrait of Mr Desmond Reid, the present chairman, by John Ward.

The main dining room, the visitors' dining room, the stair hall, the (present) members bar (on the other side of the vestibule from the visitors' dining room) and the coffee rooms comprise the principal rooms of Hardwick's club house. They represent the basic structure that was kept and restored. Additional services were, as Mr Gordon describes it, "clamped" on to either side, providing a new service staircase, service hoists and serveries, lavatories, a new passenger lift, members' staircase, television room and secretary's office. The second floor was entirely rebuilt behind the façade, doing away with the warren of redundant servants rooms in the attic. Here the rooms are grouped around the central roof garden to maintain the symmetry of the building and give natural light. A members' self-service restaurant has been provided on the Old Broad Street side, while at the rear of the building is a suite of four private dining rooms.

Thus the City Club has emerged from its harrowing decade of uncertainty with an enviable range of modern services as well as a sound structure. To commemorate the restoration, the club has commissioned a set of club silver from Christopher Lawrence. This is an appropriate act of thanksgiving for a lucky escape.

Illustrations: 1, Mobile Press Photos; 2-7, Jonathan M. Gibson.