

Nippon Club (1881–2014)

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ORIGINS

THE NIPPON CLUB is almost certainly the oldest Japanese institution in London other than the Japanese legation which was established in 1872 by Terashima Munenori.² The Nippon Club can trace its origins to 1881 when about twenty to thirty Japanese living in London gathered together monthly at a restaurant in the Strand. They discussed political and economic issues and helped each other to overcome the difficulties which they faced in a strange land. On some occasions they invited guests to speak. They called these meetings ‘London Nipponjinkai’ (London Japanese Club).

There were three major players involved in establishing the Nipponjinkai and looking after Japanese interests in London. These were Mitsui & Co.,³ the Yokohama Specie Bank⁴ and Nippon Yūsen Kaisha (NYK).⁵ These three trading, banking and shipping companies were Japan’s first major companies to establish roots in London. The three companies still chair the present Nippon Club in rotation.

In 1888 the Japanese Consul in London Sonoda Kokichi and his wife invited Nipponjinkai members to their house (46 Holland Road W14) to meet there rather than in a restaurant. From then on the Nipponjinkai regularly met there until Ozaki Saburo’s⁶ wife offered her place in Bayswater. In 1893 there were around forty members of Nipponjinkai while there were 116 Japanese living in London at that time.

Following the revision in 1894 of the Anglo-Japanese Treaty of Amity and Commerce 1858 (*Nichiei-Tsūshō Jōyaku 1858*) and the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895 Anglo-Japanese trade began to expand and following the conclusion of the first Anglo-Japanese Alliance (*Nichiei Dōmei*) in 1902 relations between the two countries became closer while increased numbers of Japanese businesses became established in London.

In 1904 the Nipponjinkai decided to establish a club house where members could meet fellow members at any time. With support from Japanese bankers, they leased a building in Covent Garden (39 King Street WC2) and opened their first club house with a lounge, meeting rooms, library and a restaurant. Genuine Japanese cuisine, such as special grilled eels, Dover sole *sashimi*, prawn *tempura*, pickled *daikon* were served in the restaurant. Although private, this must have been the first Japanese restaurant in London except one at the International Health Exhibition⁷ in 1884 where a temporary Japanese restaurant was staged during the exhibition. By now there were some seventy members of the club.

Following the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905) Japan became increasingly recognized as an important world power and trade with Britain expanded significantly. In 1906 total trade exceeded 123 million yen which was four times the volume recorded in 1893. More Japanese banks, trading companies and shipping companies set up offices in London and the number of Japanese living in London reached 276.

The Covent Garden club house soon became too small and in 1912 the club moved to new premises at 76–78 Mortimer Street W1. The premises were bigger and the rent was £500 a year for a seven year lease. By then, membership of Nipponjinkai had topped a hundred. On 21 July of that year the new club house was officially opened by Mr Katō Takaaki, the Japanese ambassador⁸ who was also the honorary Chairman of the Nipponjinkai. The tradition of the Japanese ambassador being the honorary chairman of Nipponjinkai still continues to the present day.

During the First World War between 1914 and 1918 there was a significant increase in Japanese exports to Europe. In 1919 trade between Japan and Britain had increased to 229 million yen.

A GENTLEMAN'S CLUB

The premises at Mortimer Street subsequently became too small to house all the members and various activities. The general committee decided to seek bigger premises in central London. In 1919 they bought a building at No. 3 Cavendish Square, W1, just behind Oxford Circus, for £15,000 with a 999 year lease. It was a four-storey building with a basement and attics. The club house consisted of a lounge, reading room, meeting room, games room, bar, dining room and billiards room. In addition there was guest and staff accommodation. On 20 October 1919 the club house was opened as the Nipponjinkai Club House but was usually called Nippon Club House. By then there were more than 1500 Japanese nationals living in London and membership of Nipponjinkai had risen to 400.

The club house was managed like an English gentleman's club. Membership was strictly limited to top Japanese figures such as diplomats, professionals and businessmen. In order to become a member a Japanese had to be recommended by other members to



Nippon Club, 3 Cavendish Square

join and although there were nearly 2,000 Japanese living in London in the 1920s membership was limited to 400. Non-members were only admitted when accompanied by a member. The club house was used for meetings, dining and pleasure. Many notable Japanese businessmen, diplomats, scholars, admirals, politicians and even a few prime ministers passed through the club when they were in London.

The club house was open daily from 11 o'clock in the morning till midnight except on Mondays when the club was closed. Members were entitled to bring up to six guests at a time. They enjoyed Japanese cuisine in the dining room, playing billiards, reading Japanese books and newspapers. British guests were often invited for drinks and meals. However, there were strict rules about use of the club house. For instance it was not permitted to bring alcohol into the club. There was a bar in the house which was opened between 12 noon and 3 pm and again between 5 pm and 11 pm on weekdays and between 1:30 pm and 2:30 pm, 6 pm and 9 pm on Sundays and Bank Holidays. Tips for staff were not permitted. These rules ensured that the Nippon club house had a good reputation among British people.

GOOD ANGLO-JAPANESE RELATIONS

After the First World War Anglo-Japanese relations were friendly and Japanese living and working in London had a good time. The Japanese community were proud of their Nippon club house. Bilateral trade flourished, the numbers of Japanese companies operating in Britain doubled and Japanese residents significantly increased in number. One resident at the time, Mr Taoka Yahei, commented 'Anglo-Japanese relations have never been as good as at present and the British people are so friendly toward Japan and the Japanese.'

In May 1920 the Japanese Crown Prince Hirohito, during his official visit to Britain, visited⁹ the Nippon club house and donated £700 to the club. The Nippon club house was well-maintained because of donations from visitors and from members leaving London.

THE SECOND WORLD WAR

The deterioration in Anglo-Japanese relation in the latter half of 1930s, the fears of Japanese competition in textiles and other manufactured goods and British concerns about Japanese advance into Manchuria and China complicated the lives of members of the Japanese community. When the Chinese Embassy in London began a campaign against Japan, Nipponjinkai members together with the Japanese Embassy set up a special committee to counter this campaign and explain Japan's situation and intentions.

Following the beginning of the Second World War in 1939 and Japan's support for Germany, the Japanese community in Britain had a difficult time. Many Japanese businesses were closed and businessmen were sent home. By 1940 membership of the Nipponjinkai had dropped to 187. Following German air raids on London some Japanese families were evacuated to High Wycombe. In November 1940, the majority of Japanese residents (mostly businessmen and their families) left Britain by the Japanese evacuation ship *Fushimi-Maru* from Galway, Ireland, and only a handful of Japanese men were left in London to look after Japanese interests.

In 1941 when Japan declared war against Britain the Nippon club house was seized by the British Government as enemy property. The club house was put under Swiss management. After the war, Japan was forced, in accordance with the terms of the San Francisco Peace Treaty of 1951, to give up all its properties outside Japan. The Nippon club house, although it was not owned by the Japanese Government and was registered as a British establishment, was not exempted.

There were two different Japanese societies in London before the War. One was the Nipponjinkai which was an elite Japanese society consisting of top businessmen, diplomats, scholars and professionals and the other was the Dōhōkai (residents club). Dohokai was for Japanese nationals who lived and worked in Britain as permanent residents. Members were *Ryokan* proprietors, shop-owners and shop-keepers, chefs, gardeners, actors, hairdressers, wives of British husbands and others who were not sent by companies. They regularly met and helped each other. They looked after the Japanese graveyard in Hendon Cemetery which still exists today.

Both groups ceased to exist and Japanese nationals living in Britain were interned on the Isle of Man.

NEW NIPPON CLUB

The Japanese economy gradually recovered. In 1951 a Japanese Government office was set up in London and the Anglo-Japanese Trade Repayment Agreement was signed. In 1952 the Peace Treaty with Japan came into force and the Japanese embassy was re-established in London. Japanese nationals were once more allowed to visit Britain. NYK re-opened a European shipping route and the Bank of Tokyo in place of the Yokohama Specie Bank established a London branch. Other Japanese banks, trading houses and insurance companies followed.

In 1955 there were 401 Japanese residents in London. They were mostly London representatives of Japanese companies. Because of Japan's role in the war many of them encountered hostility from British people and had difficulty finding accommodation.

Chinese restaurants sometimes refused to serve them when they found that their customers were Japanese. Mr Oba Sadao, businessman and historian, who came to London as a representative of a trading company in 1954 recalled that the atmosphere in London towards the Japanese was hostile and as a result Japanese living in London were keeping a low profile.

There were no Japanese restaurants or food shops at that time and there was an obvious lack of premises where Japanese could go and relax. Mr Satake Tamekichi, who used to run a small hotel near Marble Arch for Japanese nationals before the war, returned to London and invited Japanese businessmen to his home in Belsize Park where they could enjoy home cooking. They talked about reviving the pre-war Nippon club house.

Representatives from NYK, the Bank of Tokyo and Mitsui & Co. who had been the leading members of the pre-war Nipponjinkai, searched for a suitable building. In 1960 they found appropriate premises in Chelsea (13 Chelsea Embankment, SW3), a Victorian era building beside the Thames costing £50,000. The lounge, library, bar and office were on the ground floor. On the first floor there was a big dining room and on the third floor there were meeting rooms and private dining rooms. Mr Satake Tamekichi became the manager of the club house.

Named the Nippon Club, the first chairman was Mr Matsudaira Ichirō from the Bank of Tokyo and Ambassador Ohno Katsumi¹⁰ was the honorary chairman. The membership consisted of fifty corporate members and 250 individual members.

There were hardly any Japanese restaurants in London at that time and the Nippon Club dining room was the place to enjoy Japanese cuisine. Mr Kondo Shigeru, who ran Momo restaurant in Ealing in 2014, was a manager of the Nippon club restaurant. He recalls:

Nippon Club was a prestigious club and the atmosphere was elegant and dignified but at the same time relaxed and comfortable. There were three very good chefs, Mr Shibuya, Mr Watanabe and Mr Iwasa in the restaurant, which was always busy with members. Food was very good and very reasonable because the Nippon Club was not a profit-making organization. Many members entertained their business clients here and families dined at weekends.

MEDICAL CLINIC

In 1961 the Nippon club set up a welfare committee with the aim of establishing various welfare services for members, including the provision of medical advice from Japanese doctors, children's education in Japanese and some leisure activities. Four Japanese medical doctors who were researching at British universities at that time were asked

to give medical consultations to members. Those doctors were not allowed to practise in Britain, but they understood the differences in treatment between the two countries and gave valuable advice.

The Japanese really wanted to have Japanese doctors in London not only because of the language problem, but because of the differences in treatment and medical practice. There had been a medical clinic with a Japanese doctor and even a Japanese dentist in London before the war. By now there were over 1,000 Japanese living in Britain compared with only a few hundred before the war.

The problem of recognition of medical qualifications was not unique to Britain. There was a mirror problem affecting the British community in Japan. The basic issue was one of recognition of medical qualifications by the British Medical Association (BMA) in Britain and by the Japan Medical Association (JMA) in Japan. Both were essentially conservative organizations and in effect closed shops. They were determined to insist that only those who qualified under their rules and regulations should be regarded as qualified.

The British and Japanese governments were eventually forced to confront this problem. Eventually after tortuous negotiations between the British Embassy in Tokyo and the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Tokyo a compromise was reached in 1964,¹¹ which set a precedent for the future. The JMA was induced to grant a licence to practice for foreign patients in the Kansai to a Dr Barraclough. In return a Japanese doctor was allowed by the BMA to treat Japanese patients in London.

In 1965 the Nippon Club Clinic opened in Golders Green, North London, where a big Japanese community existed. Dr Asai Eiichirō from the Japanese Red Cross Hospital was appointed as the first doctor. In the first year the clinic treated some 1,100 patients and did general medical check-ups on over 1,000 members and their families.

In 1974 the number of Japanese residents in Britain exceeded 5,000 and the Nippon Club opened a second clinic in Sutton with another Japanese doctor. The Japanese clinics in London looked after Japanese patients living in Britain as well as Japanese living in the Middle East and Africa where the medical system was less advanced and there were no Japanese medical doctors.

Dr Asai served for five years and Dr Ishii took over and worked till 1975. Both doctors were from the Japanese Red Cross Hospital, but in 1975 the Red Cross Hospital decided to expand its facilities in Tokyo and needed more doctors. As a result the Nippon Club had to look elsewhere for doctors. In 2014 the Nippon Club maintained two clinics, one in North London (St Johns Wood) and the other in South London (Wimbledon) staffed by three Japanese doctors from Jikeikai University. They were treating a total of over 10,000 patients every year.

JAPANESE SCHOOL

The welfare committee of the Nippon Club was asked to investigate the feasibility of establishing a Japanese school in London. Some members were concerned that their children attending local schools would forget the Japanese language and also fall behind Japanese educational standards. In 1964 the Nippon Club conducted a survey of their members on whether a Japanese school was necessary. About half of those who replied seriously wanted to have Japanese education facilities in London.

In 1965 the Nippon Club set up 'Nihongokai' (Japanese language club) with seventy-five members and started teaching Japanese language. Classes were held every Saturday morning for two hours in the Convent of Our Lady of Sion (Chepstow Villas, W11). The classes were divided into three groups, the first elementary school, the second elementary school and middle school. The classes were taught by Mr Nomoto Kikuo and others.

The Japanese population in Britain and the number of children were growing. The Nihongokai had started with fifty-seven pupils in 1965 but increased to ninety-five in 1967 and 120 in 1968. Three classes became seven classes and the higher age classes moved to the annex of the Japanese embassy. Pupils numbers further increased from 125 in 1970 to 350 in 1973 and to 470 in 1974. Classes had to be held in many different schools and other premises.

In 1975 the Nippon Club had applied to the Japanese Education Ministry and the British Ministry of Education for permission to open a Japanese day school in London. In 1976 Japanese School Ltd. was established and a school building (Gloucester Avenue, Camden NW1) was purchased. In October 1976 the Japanese day school and the Japanese Saturday school were officially launched. The headmaster and teachers came from Japan.

In the 1980s the number of Japanese pupils increased still further and the Camden School became too small. In 1987 the Japanese School moved from Camden Town to Acton (Creffield Road, Acton W3). In 2014 the Japanese School had around 430 pupils in the day school and 1,200 in the Saturday schools. The Saturday schools were divided into three schools in Acton, Finchley and Croydon. The Nippon Club remains the key organization behind the Japanese School in London. Its management committee meets every month to discuss the arrangements for the school.

NEWSLETTER *BIG BEN*

It is not clear whether the Nipponjinkai had any kind of bulletins or newsletters. When the Nippon Club started after the war, it published a small hand-written mimeograph newsletter edited by Jiji

Press London. It reported the various activities of the club and had special feature stories, such as about the Hendon Japanese graveyard, the internment camp on the Isle of Man during the war and the opening of the Nippon Club clinic in Golders Green. In the 1970s Nippon Club Newsletters were published as a page in *Living in Europe*, the Japanese community newspaper published by OCS (Overseas Courier Services Ltd.). Unfortunately both the mimeograph bulletins and the *Living in Europe* have totally disappeared.

However, in 1980 the Nippon Club started publishing an official newsletter called *Big Ben*. *Big Ben* covers not only the club's activities, but various features and topics useful for Japanese residents in Britain, plus news of the Japanese society in Britain and various Japan-related events. Unlike its predecessors, the entire volumes of *Big Ben* were kept in the Nippon Club and in the Japanese Embassy Library. *Big Ben* is published every other month and celebrated its 200th issue in July 2012. *Big Ben* is in the Japanese language and originally was typeset by photo typesetter. As digital technology has advanced, many organizations including *Big Ben* have moved to online publishing. As a freelance journalist I have been involved in contributing articles to *Big Ben* since 1983 and have been the editor since 2003. *Big Ben* represents the Nippon Club and the Nippon Club reflects the Japanese community in Britain.

NIPPON CLUB'S DIFFERENT PREMISES

When the post-war Nippon Club started in 1960, the only Japanese restaurant was that in the Nippon Club. However, as the number of Japanese in London grew in the 1970s, more Japanese restaurants opened and the Nippon Club restaurant began to face financial difficulties. New Japanese restaurants were concentrated in the City and West End near Japanese businesses. Chelsea was rather out of the way for the Japanese community and the restaurant gradually lost its customers.

In 1977 the Nippon Club decided to close down the restaurant and in 1978, the club house in Chelsea was sold. The responsibilities of the Nippon Club for running the medical clinics, managing the Japanese school and for other activities, however, remained and office space was still needed. Mitsubishi Corporation accordingly gave the Nippon Club temporary office space in their building in the City. Later the Nippon Club had a small office in Royal London House (16 Finsbury Circus EC2), then in Hambro House (Vintners Place EC4) in 1981 and then in Prince Rupert House (64 Queen St EC4) in 1988. The monthly general committee meetings were held in the chairman's company office while other committee meetings were held in the offices of member companies. In the 1990s the



Lounge in Samuel House at 6 St Albans Street SW1 (1995–2014)

Japanese bubble economy had burst and Japanese companies were reluctant to spend money on non-profit making activities.

Some members, however, wanted a club house with meeting rooms and a lounge where members could meet or learn languages and enjoy cultural events. They declared that without a club house it could not be called a club. In 1995 the Nippon Club moved to Samuel House (6 St Albans Street, Piccadilly SW1). Although it was not very large, Samuel House had three meeting rooms, a lounge and a library. Members could hire a meeting room, enjoy coffee and tea with friends, watch Japanese TV or read Japanese newspapers in their club.

Samuel House was just three minute's walk from Piccadilly Circus. All the committee meetings were held there. The Nippon Club organized its own English and French language courses and held seminars for members. The Nippon Club again functioned properly as a club from 1995 to 2014. But London property prices were rising and Samuel House cost £185,000 a year.¹² Apart from paying for Samuel House the Nippon Club had to pay other big rents for the North Clinic (St. John and St. Elizabeth Hospital) and the South Clinic (Parkside Hospital). The club accordingly decided in 2014 to move out of central London. New much smaller premises were found in Southwark (5–11 Lavington St SE1) but the club could at least provide a lounge and meeting rooms.

The Nippon Club's income is dependent on the membership fee. The club cannot expect in the future any significant increase in membership. The number of Nippon Club members has in fact hardly increased over the last decade. The membership mostly consists of Japanese corporations and Japanese businessmen. Although the number of Japanese living in Britain has been slightly increasing, the Japanese corporate sector may be decreasing. This is partly due to the Japanese economic recession and partly due to the shift of Japanese economic strategy toward Asia.

The Nippon Club in 2014 maintains its traditional roles of promoting the welfare of its members, their health and the education of their children. It remains at the centre of the Japanese community in Britain.

REFERENCE:

London Nipponjinkai Album 1921

Mr. Sadao Oba 'The 100th Anniversary of Nippon Club' (*Big Ben* 1985–1987)

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Setsuo Kato, journalist, member of general committee and editor of *Big Ben*, Nippon Club.
- ² See *Japanese Envoys in Britain 1862–1964* ed. Ian Nish, Global Oriental, 2007.
- ³ See Mitsui in London by Sadao Oba in *Britain and Japan: Biographical Portraits*, ed. Hugh Cortazzi, volume V, Global Oriental, 2004.
- ⁴ See Yokohama Specie Bank in London by Keiko Itoh, in *Britain and Japan: Biographical Portraits*, ed. Hugh Cortazzi, volume V, Global Oriental, 2004.
- ⁵ See Nippon Yūsen Kaisha (NYK) by Hiroyuki Takeno, in *Britain and Japan: Biographical Portraits*, ed. Hugh Cortazzi, volume V, Global Oriental, 2004.
- ⁶ See Ozaki Saburō (in Three Meiji Marriages) by Noboru Koyama in *Britain and Japan: Biographical Portraits*, ed. Hugh Cortazzi, volume IV, Japan Library, 2002.
- ⁷ See pages 7 and 8 of *Japan in Late Victorian London: The Japanese Village in Knightsbridge and the Mikado, 1885*, by Sir Hugh Cortazzi, Sainsbury Institute, Norwich, 2009.
- ⁸ See biographical portrait by Ian Nish in *Britain and Japan: Biographical Portraits*, volume IV, ed. Hugh Cortazzi, Japan Library, 2002 and *Japanese Envoys*, ed. Ian Nish, Global Oriental, 2007.
- ⁹ Nipponjinkai made an official album to commemorate the Royal visit to the Club House. As there are hardly any documents or reference left about Nipponjinkai before the Second World War, this album is a rare and precious document.
- ¹⁰ A portrait of Ohno Katsumi by Eiji Seki is contained in *Japanese Envoys in Britain 1862–1964*, ed. Ian Nish, Global Oriental, 2007

¹¹ The account given here is based on the memory of Sir Hugh Cortazzi, the editor of this volume. He recalls meetings in Tokyo when he was first secretary in the British embassy in Tokyo with Yamazaki Toshio, later ambassador in London, but then head of the British Commonwealth Section (Eirempoka) in the Gaimusho. Yamazaki had to deal through the Ministry of Health and Welfare with the JMA. Hugh Cortazzi had to deal through the Foreign Office and the Ministry of Health with the BMA.

He recalls that In Japan during the allied occupation between 1945 and 1952 a number of foreign doctors had been registered in Japan without having to pass Japanese medical examinations in Japanese. After the occupation ended these licences were not revoked, The Tokyo Medical Clinic in the Masonic Building at Shiba, which included a small number of foreign qualified doctors including a New Zealand doctor Dr Derek Fair and the American Dr Milton Morton and the dental surgeon Dr Besford, were allowed to continue to provide medical services to foreigners in Tokyo. There were also a few other qualified foreign doctors such as the German doctor Eitel who were also allowed to practise. But the JMA decided that in future only doctors, who had passed their qualifications in examinations written in the Japanese language would in future be allowed to practise in Japan. The American Seventh Day Adventists had their own hospital and as they trained staff in Japanese (including the Japanese scholar Dr Nelson) were willing to take examinations in Japanese. But, as foreign qualified doctors in Japan aged, the British communities in Japan were likely to face a situation in which they would not have adequate access to foreign qualified doctors.

¹² Comprising £93,000 Rent, £47,000 Service Charge and £45,000 Council Tax.