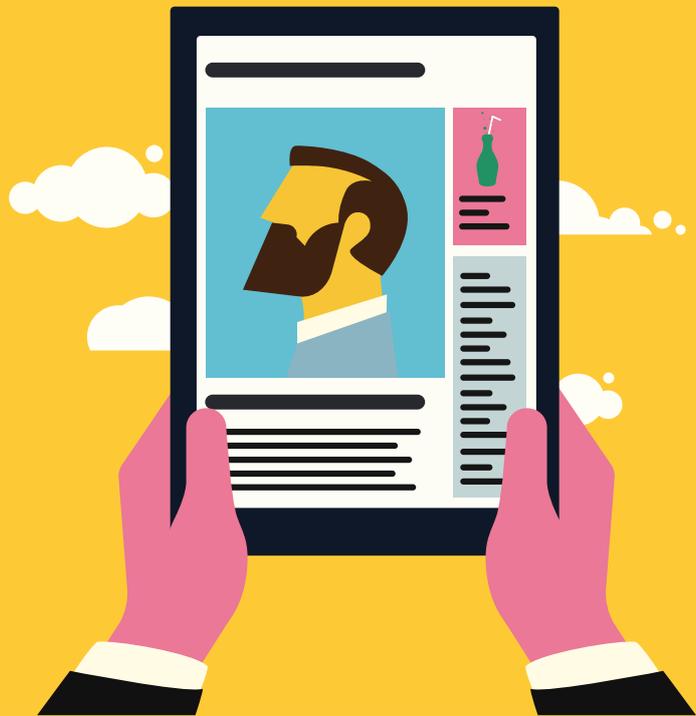


THE COMMUTER CLUB



America and the Northbank: a special relationship that has helped to create London icons

Earlier this month the world-renowned American Bar at The Savoy Hotel reopened its doors, after temporarily closing last year due to the COVID 19 pandemic. It welcomes a new Head Bartender, Shannon Tebay; the hotel's first female head bartender since Ada Coleman was at the helm over a hundred years ago, and, perhaps ironically, the first American.

Shannon should feel at home at The Savoy. As American as apple pie, albeit a very sophisticated slice, the American Bar first opened in 1893 and is the oldest surviving cocktail bar in Britain, and one of the earliest establishments to introduce American-style cocktails to Europe.

Of course, the bar sits within one of London's most quintessentially British establishments, in the heart of London's Northbank, right in the centre of the capital. Its impact on the British hospitality scene when it first opened in 1889 was significant. A pioneer of Great British style, The Savoy is a hotel of firsts. It was the first

luxury hotel in Britain, the first to have electricity, electric lifts (known as "ascending rooms"), air-conditioning, 24-hour room service, private bathrooms, and constant hot and cold running water. This must have been a marvel to anyone accustomed to the two inches of lukewarm brown water de rigueur in the grand English country house.

In 1937, King George VI became the first reigning monarch to dine in a hotel when he attended a private dinner at The Savoy; his daughter, Princess Elizabeth, was first seen in public with Prince Philip at a wedding reception in the hotel in 1946. Vivien Leigh met her future husband, Laurence Olivier, in The Savoy's lobby.

The Savoy has also been home to Paddington Bear on a number of occasions. There is an old superstition at The Savoy about having 13 people at a table for dinner, which dates from 1898, when a diamond magnate scoffed at the idea that it would be bad luck to dine with 12 other guests – he was shot dead soon after. Ever since then, if someone is needed to fill a fourteenth chair the hotel cat, or a sculpture of it, is drafted in. Former PM David Cameron opts for a different seat-filler all together, noting "If I have 13 to dinner, I place Paddington Bear in the spare seat."

The Savoy's place in British history is ensured – what's interesting is that it's also the epicentre

of the burgeoning Anglo-American 'special relationship' at the end of the 19th century. Between the wars the hotel became a magnet for American tycoons and was nicknamed "the 49th state". A rudimentary tickertape was even installed to keep the Vanderbilts, Astors, Carnegies and Guggenheims in touch with stock prices on Wall Street.



Shannon Tebay, Head Bartender, The Savoy

It also often hosted meetings of The Pilgrims Society, founded on 16 July 1902 by Sir Harry Brittain, the British journalist and Conservative politician who tried to foster closer Anglo-American relations. Still going strong today, over the years the Society took on diplomatic significance, attracting heads of state and diplomats, with lavish banquets held at iconic New York and London hotels like the Waldorf-Astoria and of course, The Savoy.

The Savoy's early embracing of all things American seems to have spread beyond the hotel's walls, and in fact, the Northbank is peppered with American connections and fascinating stories which have helped to shape the landscape, the architecture and the culture of the area.

Some are surprising. Let's start down in Trafalgar Square and the statue of George Washington. Unveiled on 30 June 1921, the statue was a gift from the United States and is in fact a replica, based upon Frenchman, Jean Antoine Houdon's marble version (commissioned in the 1790s by Thomas Jefferson) which can be seen in Richmond, Virginia.

The statue shows Washington resting upon a 'fasces'; a collection of wooden rods which the

Romans employed as a symbol of authority. There are thirteen sticks in Washington's bundle, representative of America's original thirteen states.

As the Commander in Chief during the War of Independence and of course, the first ever President of the United States, George Washington is once rumoured to have said, "I will never set foot in London again!" It is said that those responsible for installing Washington's statue in London bore the legendary President's sentiment in mind - and so arranged for a quantity of Virginian soil to be placed beneath the plinth, thus ensuring that the statue is technically on American turf...

At the other end of Strand stands Bush House, which for many is known as the one-time home to that very British institution, the BBC. The BBC European Service moved into Bush House in 1940 and was joined, in 1958, by the other departments of the Overseas Service. For the next half century, the building was home to the BBC's shortwave news services, which broadcast around the world in as many as forty-five languages.

However, its origins lie thousands of miles across the Atlantic in New York City.

Bush House was the brainchild of the American businessman Irving T Bush and designed by US architect Harvey W Corbett in 1919. Its original function was to be an international trade centre with exhibition galleries, shops, conference rooms, reference libraries, a small theatre, badminton court, cinema, swimming-pool, club and restaurant.

These grand designs are reflected in the size, scale and opulent architectural detailing of the complex, particularly in its central block, opened in 1925. The official opening of Bush House was a major event and took place on 4 July 1925 - American Independence Day.

Irving T Bush had previously built Bush Tower in New York, which was the city's first skyscraper to be constructed following the passage of the 1916 Zoning Resolution. Because the zoning ordinance greatly restricted the massing of buildings, it was characterized by contemporary

writers as possibly the last skyscraper to ever be built in New York City. Bush's vision was to export his New York template to London.

Bush hoped the two buildings would become twin pillars of international trade, permanently joining the old world to the new. You can still see the inscription above the main entrance to Bush House in London today, which reads "To the Friendship of English Speaking Peoples". A marketing brochure from the 20s made the connection between the two Bush developments:

"If you put your finger on the centre of the map of London, you strike the site of the Bush Building. It is not only the geographic centre, but the commercial and business centre, and the heart of the newest and most modern part of the city.

It is located at the intersection of the Strand, Aldwych and Kingsway. The Strand is the Broadway of London: Kingsway is its 42nd Street".

Ultimately, Bush failed to turn his buildings in New York and London into twin centres of international commerce. Instead, Bush House became a centre of international communication with the arrival of the BBC in 1940. Today, Bush House is part of the Strand Campus of King's College London.

"The Strand is the Broadway of London."

Where Bush might have failed at delivering his vision, others were more successful. Many of you will have heard of the Astor family – they are arguably the living embodiment of the American Dream – but perhaps more surprising is the family link to the Northbank area.

William Waldorf Astor was born in New York City in 1848 as the only child of John Jacob Astor III. Only two generations earlier, his great grandfather, John Jacob Astor I, had left the village of Walldorf, near Heidelberg in Southwest Germany, to find a future for himself across the Atlantic. And what a future he found: after amassing massive profits through



Bush House, 30 Aldwych

fur trading and a vast shipping empire, he ploughed his money into property on Manhattan Island, earning the title the 'Landlord of New York'.

Only three generations of property development later, William Waldorf Astor was part of one of the richest ever dynasties in US history, inheriting a vast fortune in 1890. Interviewing Astor for his 1906 book, *The Future in America*, H.G. Wells wrote:

"...[William Waldorf Astor] draws gold from New York as effectually as a ferret draws blood from a rabbit."

But Astor's relationship with America was unhappy. In 1892, perhaps to disappear from public view, he sent a report of his own death to the US papers and was rewarded by unkind obituaries; his time in the States was well and truly over.

"America is not a fit place for a gentleman to live. America is good enough for any man who has to make a livelihood, though why traveled people of independent means should remain there more than a week is not readily to be comprehended." William Waldorf Astor, 1890

Emigrating to England, he had soon bought Cliveden, the remarkable 17th century country house in Buckinghamshire, as well as Anne Boleyn's family home Hever Castle in Kent, a home in Brighton (where the locals referred

to him as “Waldorf by name and walled-off by nature”), and an astonishing seafront villa in Sorrento. But it is in his commission for the construction of this lavish office at Two Temple Place in the Northbank footprint that we get an insight into Astor’s own interests and aspirations. He handed his architect, the acclaimed John Loughborough Pearson, an unlimited budget for Two Temple Place and the result reads like a short biography of Astor, created for him by some of the greatest craftsmen of the time.



Two Temple Place

By all accounts Astor cut an uncongenial figure. History attests to a shy and austere man with a secretive nature and prickly personality, and this is reflected in the building’s imposing façade, formidable gargoyles and strongroom – a state-of-the-art secure vault with a granite floor and custom-made Chubb steel door which has since been removed. Meanwhile, an opulent interior with wood panelling and intricate carving is a vivid reflection of his deeper passions and interests, featuring a fantasia of romantic and historic figures from classical literature, mythology, and the past.

For Astor, Two Temple Place would be his office and home, supporting his desire to create a home away from the United States where he felt his children would be safer from the threat of kidnapping. The Astor family eventually sold the property following William’s death in 1919. The

building changed hands many times before it was bought by banker Richard Q Hoare OBE in 199 for his charitable organisation, The Bulldog Trust. Today it serves as a public gallery, as well as function and events space.

William Astor saw England as a haven from an America he had come to dislike, and other American industrialists and impresarios were also attracted by the British way of life in the early 20th century.

One such man was Charles Frohman, who was an American theatre manager credited for creating the Broadway star system. Among the most notable plays that he produced was James Barrie’s Peter Pan.

From his earliest visits to England, Charles became an Anglophile. He loved the slower pace of life and said that there was no sneer of commercialism in the British Theatre, unlike in America. He stayed at the Savoy Hotel each year he came to London and always used the same seat in the Grill Room in the Savoy. A plaque was placed on his seat after his death. Frohman funded the construction of the Aldwych Theatre which opened on 23 December 1905. It was designed by W.G.R. Sprague and built as a pair with the Waldorf Theatre (now called the Novello Theatre). Both the Waldorf Theatre and Frohman’s Aldwych Theatre were commissioned for the newly built Aldwych, which replaced the notorious slums of Holborn.

In 1915, playwright J.M. Barrie, creator of Peter Pan, asked for his friend Frohman’s help on a production in London. While Frohman was enroute, his ship, the Lusitania, was torpedoed by a submarine. According to the survivors of the disaster, Frohman eschewed one of the prime places of the lifeboats, famously offering as an explanation one of the lines from Peter Pan: “Why fear death, it’s the greatest adventure of all”.

Talking of great adventures, London is today one of the world’s great global cities, and the Northbank sits at the heart of it. We can see, from just these few stories, the international influence that has forged the identity and character of the place.

Today, the Northbank is one of London's most vibrant and diverse districts, attracting multinational companies, award-winning theatre, globally renowned academic institutions, and of course before COVID pressed the pause button, international tourists. Before the pandemic, London was the leading destination for a trip to the UK for American tourists, with 49% of visitor nights spent here. With internationally famous landmarks and destinations, including Somerset House and Trafalgar Square, the Northbank undoubtedly sits on the holiday itinerary for many tourists visiting the capital.

With the recovery now underway, tourism is starting to return to the capital, and international visitors will once again be following in the footsteps of Bush, Astor, Frohman and many other American friends of the UK. Of course, America is just one influence, and London is a melting pot of many nations, cultures and creeds. It is this diversity that gives London its unique appeal, not only for visitors but also for those who live and work in this great global city.

In the words of that very London invention, Paddington Bear, "In London everyone is different, and that means anyone can fit in."

