



Napoleon room, Halifax Club

Join the club

A couple of Atlantic Canada's private business clubs are shaking off the stuffy image and opening their doors

In 1862, word came from Queen Victoria herself: there was no Gentleman's Club in Halifax, and it was high time one was put in place.

When the queen speaks, people listen. A dozen high-profile Halifax businessmen promptly got together and purchased land on Hollis Street, in the heart of the city. In less than two years the Halifax Club opened.

"It was a refuge from all that was going on in a man's business and in the business world," says Jodi Bartlett, general manager of the club today. "It was very exclusive, very prestigious, and very limited."

The club prospered. Over the decades, it remained a place where men met for billiards, cigars, business meetings and high-powered lunches. Connections were made, plans laid and deals brokered.

It didn't change in a major way until 1985, when the first woman was allowed to join. (It was a 10-year lobbying effort by a female lawyer, Noella Fisher, that resulted in this "momentous" change.) Today's Halifax Club, like private business clubs across the country, is nothing like the 12 old boys from 1862 had in mind.

THE CLUB SCENE

It's not just that women now make up about 40 per cent of the Halifax Club's 1,000-plus membership. Daily business tasks can't stop at the door; cell phones and laptops are allowed everywhere in the building except the dining room.

"The club has to change," says Bartlett. "(Today's members) want to build business relationships, they want to learn... they also want to have fun." And they want to do it efficiently. The Halifax Club hosts more than a dozen events a month, including lunch speakers, happy hours and dances. The dining is modern and high-end.

While members are still greeted by name, the doors have opened a little wider and the services have gotten a little more extensive. Because of it, the Halifax Club is thriving in a way many of its brethren are not.

FINDING ITS FOOTING

Douglas Reevey, president of the Union Club in Saint John, has been leading a major effort to rejuvenate his club. For decades, the business model was little more than "we are the Union Club." The right people just joined — no recruiting necessary. That doesn't happen any more.

The Union Club has been open since 1884, and in its current location for over 120 years.

"Back in the day, this was a place men could go for some privacy; men who had

some wealth and were in business in the area," Reevey says. He imagines the heyday of the 1930s and 1940s, when Saint John was bustling as the main port in Atlantic Canada. The Union Club was the place to be.

(Aside: women were allowed to join the Union Club as of 1936. They even had their own room, the Ladies Lounge, and linen towels and Pears soap in the powder room.)

"The private business club industry has been in a downturn," he admits. "People don't drink at lunch time anymore. Society doesn't approve of three-hour lunches."

To locals, though, the club is still perceived as a closed, elite group. "I invite friends here for lunch and they say things like 'we can really go there?'" The Union Club still has some prestige — but that doesn't pay the bills.

Reevey reports the Union Club is evolving with the times, a move which put it on stable financial footing for the first time in years. They've started a regular lunchtime series with high-profile guests. There's a new "younger, hipper lounge" upstairs that's fully wired, and where cell-phone use is welcomed — unlike in the rest of the club.

CLUB MIX

Should the old Gentleman's Club be let go the way of smoking rooms and martini lunches?

"I value it. I'm drawn to the history and tradition of the Union Club," Reevey says. "It's beautiful inside; a warm feeling at the end of the day, where friends and business associates are."

Bartlett echoes his words. "You get to know each other within the club, and business is about building those relationships."

Would she describe it as a stage for power networking?

"Yes. A lot of our members are mid to high-level management. That high-level connection is very present here."

BIRTHDAY CLUB

This year, 2012, marks the Halifax Club's 150th anniversary.

There's just been another surge in Halifax Club membership, thanks to the \$25 billion shipbuilding contract for Halifax announced in October. But just as Bartlett talks about the young members who join, determined to stay in the loop, she pays tribute to the elder statesmen.

The Bachelor's Club, a sub-group within the Halifax Club, still meets regularly, as they have since 1920. Bartlett says they're about to have their 600th dinner.

The old boys, it would appear, are still kicking in the club scene. | ABM

Speaking of memberships, I'm wondering which offer the most networking value. Email thoughts on this or any other executive leisure topic to: stephanieporter@gmail.com