



THE CALEDONIAN SOCIETY OF LONDON

Honorary President: HRH The Prince Charles, Duke of Rothesay KG KT GCB OM

A VERY SHORT HISTORY OF THE CALEDONIAN SOCIETY OF LONDON

The Caledonian Society of London was instituted in 1839 and had its first formal session in 1839-1840. Preliminary action, leading to this, may have started as early as 1837, the year in which Queen Victoria ascended the throne. The impetus seems to have been a desire by professional Scots, particularly those from the Lowlands, to create an alternative gathering to the earlier Highland Society, in which they might feel more comfortable and maintain the twin aims of, as we now say, fellowship and charity. Notwithstanding this apparent divide, many members of the Caledonian Society have been of Highland stock and, over the years, some have belonged to both societies. More tangibly, the two societies came together, in 1859, to take a leading part in the raising of the London Scottish Regiment, an occasion that is still celebrated every November.

The early history of the Society is not well documented, not least because most of the records were lost in the 1870s. The earliest account was not published until 1890 and relied heavily on personal papers and memories. Later records are more complete.

It is clear that the early years were not without difficulty. We are told that in 1843, a membership of 47 included eight Englishmen and one Irishman, and a policeman had to be hired to keep order at a dinner that year! Nevertheless, the Society claims to have been the first body of its kind, in 1845, to invite lady guests to dine, an occasion attended by 140 gentlemen and 72 ladies. A few years later, the Society was £300 in debt, a substantial amount for the time, and had only 20 members. Thereafter, the strength of the Society, and its purely Scottish character, seems to have strengthened steadily. For very many years, only 100 ordinary members have been permitted, additional to office bearers and those presented with the Society's Gold Badge.

The number of gatherings each year has remained fairly constant but their nature has changed over time. The pattern of 'suppers', later known as 'little dinners', and an annual festival, to which ladies were invited, seems to have been established quickly. However, with reports of ten or a dozen dishes and fifteen toasts, most of these early occasions must have offered little opportunity for serious speaking. The inclusion of a key note speech or 'sentiment' seems to have been first introduced in 1897 although it did not become fully established until the early 1900s, and at first were frequently given by a Brother Caledonian and not, as more recently, by invited guests. For many years, entertainment by singers and other musicians have complemented piping during dinner programmes. Member's silver badges were introduced in 1888, 'Caledonian Honours' were in use, in conjunction with toasts, by 1894 and the President's badge was presented to the Society in 1910. Nowadays six dinners are held each year, and are characterised by singing, piping and sentiments given by guest speakers.

For more than 150 years after its formation, Society gatherings were held in the function rooms of various hotels and restaurants, latterly the Hotel Russell in Russell Square. Since the late 1990s, most meetings have been held in The Caledonian Club.

The charitable aim has been maintained by support for the two main Scottish Charities in London, the Royal Scottish Corporation, now known as ScotsCare, and the Royal Caledonian Education Trust, previously known as the Royal Caledonian Asylum or the Royal Caledonian Schools. This support is given by donations from Society funds, and by encouraging the individual members to make their own contributions, the latter tradition being expressed in the welcome to new members by the President. Evidence of the extent of members' participation is provided by the number of members who feature in the management of the two charities.

After more than 175 years The Caledonian Society of London continues to offer Scots in London the opportunity to enjoy each other's fellowship in a traditional environment, while being encouraged and enabled to assist their less fortunate countrymen and women.