

American Connections

From the very beginning, Grosvenor House had strong links with the United States, as the following three observers noted:

“Edwards designed Grosvenor House specifically for the American market. He paid a short visit to the United States and made a study of hotel buildings and facilities. As a result of his vision his new hotel was the first in London to have a bathroom to every bedroom and the first hotel in Europe to have running iced water in every bathroom.”¹

“In the layout good note was taken of American models and the complex was broken up into several separate blocks with deep set backs from the street between them, instead of the light-wells traditional to Britain.”²

“No recent building in London has been put up with such speed and efficiency. Messrs. Edcaster employed many American methods in the construction to eliminate delay and inconvenience. For example, during building operations all refuse, instead of being disposed of in the oldfashioned way, was shot into great metal tubes which conveyed it below without dust or trouble. Throughout the building a similar ingenuity is traceable. When Londoners have grown accustomed to this great addition to a familiar landscape, there is little doubt that it will be acknowledged a bold and, on the whole, exceedingly successful adaptation of old ideas to the demands of modern civilisation.”³

This fascination with things American extended to Grosvenor House Restaurant, as the (Daily Mail) noted in July 1938: “It had always seemed curious to me that in London you can find every style of foreign cooking, with one exception. There are restaurants which specialise in Austrian, Hungarian, Russian, Turkish, Swiss, German, and even Yugoslavian cooking; not to mention innumerable French, Italian, Indian and Chinese restaurants. But so far there doesn’t seem to be one which specialises in American cooking. And American cooking has a cuisine all on its own. Grosvenor House, however, is now trying to rectify things with a Tudor Grill where they specialise in all kinds of American dishes”.

As a further stimulus to American trade Edwards opened a New York office on Fifth Avenue. Prices ranged from a guinea to ten guineas a night. Servants were accommodated at an inclusive daily rate of eighteen shillings. To facilitate telegraphic bookings there was a code based on the names of classical figures. ‘Caesar’ meant reserve a sitting room, two double bedrooms and a bath.

Edwards’ efforts to appeal to the American traveller certainly seem to have worked. Grosvenor House has been host to many famous Americans over the years, as both visitors and guests. They include: Douglas Fairbanks Jr, Orson Welles, Jacqueline Onassis, Henry Kissinger, Mrs Eleanor Roosevelt, General Eisenhower, General Patton, Sammy Davis Jr, Muhammed Ali, Madeleine Albright, Ella Fitzgerald and Kirk Douglas.

¹ Kathleen Jones and Trevor Hewitt, A.H. Jones of Grosvenor House, 1971.

² F.H.W. Sheppard, General Editor, Survey of London, Vol. 39, The Grosvenor Estate in Mayfair, Part I, General History, 1977.

³ Christopher Hussey, ‘The Great Estates of London and Their Development’, Country Life, April 21, 1928.

Grosvenor House at War

The outbreak of World War II in September 1939 brought dramatic changes to the hotel. Ten thousand sandbags were positioned to protect the building against bomb blasts and more than five miles of blackout material covered the hotel's thousands of windows.

A large landmark such as the Grosvenor House was an obvious target for the German bombers, as were the flashes from the gun batteries stationed opposite the hotel in Hyde Park.

The thunder of the guns shook all the windows, and set furniture and crockery trembling. Fortunately, while many incendiary bombs fell on Grosvenor House, all were extinguished by the hotel's fire-fighting squads.

There were many near misses. A bomb in April 1941 blasted 1,000 panes of glass, another in May broke 2,000 panes of glass and many window-frames. A delayed action bomb necessitated the evacuation of part of the building for several days until a bomb disposal team had made it safe.

As the air raids grew heavier an extra 20,000 sandbags, 850 tons of sand, 8,000 feet of timber and large quantities of steel girders were added for greater security. As soon as an alert sounded, at whatever hour of the day or night, roof spotters, fire fighters and demolition squads were at their posts, while special telephone lines and messengers connected the various observation points with the central control office.

In 1941 Grosvenor House staff provided a 38 strong platoon to the 1st County of London (Westminster) Battalion, Home Guard. Commanded by a resident, Mr G.H. Whigham, the platoon often drilled on the hotel roof.

During the war the Great Room took on many new roles. It became home to the Officers' Sunday Club, which was to entertain over 300,000 officers and guests of the Allied Forces during the next six years. It was also used briefly as an annexe to the Immigration Section of the US Embassy, issuing visas to British mothers and their children wishing to go to America.

The Great Room was then converted into a vast ARP (Air Raid Patrol) dormitory. Hotel staff were provided with sleeping accommodation on the ground floor, and hotel visitors had beds on the balcony. Because the beds were rather closer together than was desirable, a woman attendant was specially employed to waken snorers who might disturb their neighbours.

In 1943 the Great Room became one of the largest US Officers messes. It was known as 'Willow Run' after the Ford Motor Company factory near Detroit which was famous for producing B24 Liberator bombers. At its peak, the mess served 14,000 meals per day, and between 1943 and the end of 1945, had served five and a half million meals.

The war saw Grosvenor House hosting many Allied war leaders. General Sikorski, Polish Premier, General de Gaulle, and King Haakon of Norway spoke to gatherings of their countrymen there, and US Generals Patton, Marshall and Eisenhower all visited the hotel during this time. "Grosvenor House in Battledress, sandbagged and walled about in concrete, with shuttered windows and austerity menus, never closed its doors for one hour, day or night, during the 2,074 days of World War II. The four great towers still stand and gaze across the deserted gun sites in the Park, the doors swing open to friends from the four corners of the world, the flags still fly".¹

¹ 'An Hotel Goes To War' published by Grosvenor House.

The Great Room

When the hotel first opened, what is now the Great Room was an ice rink. Initially, The Park Lane Ice Club proved to be a great success, and was the venue for hockey matches, recreational skating and fantastical ice galas. The floor could also be converted at short notice into an exhibition hall and in 1933 it became a circus ring for the Circus Ball held in aid of the London Homeopathic Hospital.

It was perhaps the success of events such as the Circus Ball that gave A.O. Edwards his vision for the future of the room. By 1935, anticipating competition from new ice rinks around London, including the Queens Ice Club in Bayswater which he had built, Edwards decided to close the skating rink and use the space for banqueting. The Great Room, as it became known, was and still is the largest hotel banqueting space in Europe – measuring 1,902 square metres (20,454 square feet).

In 1933 Sydney Lipton became leader of the dance band at Grosvenor House, and from then until the war he conducted there every night. Lipton broadcast regularly on BBC radio from 1933.

The Great Room is synonymous with the Grosvenor House Art & Antiques Fair and, the inaugural event was held there 1934, under the original name of the Antique Dealers' Fair. Queen Mary, who had a wide knowledge of antiques, visited the inaugural fair, and accorded it her patronage in 1937. She maintained her interest until her death in 1953.

The next Patron was Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth, The Queen Mother. In 2003 Her Royal Highness Princess Alexandra who had been Guest of Honour at the Opening Preview of the 1999 Grosvenor House Art & Antiques Fair, consented to become Patron of the Fair.

Approachable Luxury

The opening of the new Grosvenor House in May 1929 was described in (The Graphic) as “an outstanding event”, and an important addition to the London social scene.

Since then the Grosvenor House has been host to thousands of social occasions including annual company dinner dances and Christmas parties, and events both public and private.

The hotel has always been a public space – somewhere to meet, celebrate and enjoy. Staff have welcomed not only Royalty, heads of state and celebrities, but also the ordinary visitor whether for a week stay or just for tea.

In September 2008 after a four-year, multi-million pound restoration programme, Grosvenor House rebranded as a JW Marriott Hotel.

The new design of the hotel created an environment of simple elegance ensuring many original features of the period had been retained. Details within the hotel including service, space and culinary experiences were crafted to make guests feel welcome and free to be themselves.

Speaking about the re-brand at the 80th anniversary celebration in 2009, Chairman and CEO of Marriott International, J.W. Marriott Jr said, “Grosvenor House, A JW Marriott Hotel has always been a star on London’s hotel scene and now, thanks to this outstanding restoration, that star is shining brighter than ever. The hotel is now ready to serve a new generation of discerning international guests and I am very proud to have the Grosvenor House bear the JW Marriott name.”

At JW Marriott we believe that the ultimate luxury is the time to think and the freedom to focus and our associates intuitive service will orchestrate a personalised experience with attention to the smallest details and look for opportunities to share the uniqueness of Grosvenor House.



The entrance to Grosvenor House from Park Street today



Lobby



JW Steakhouse



Park view suite



The Great Room