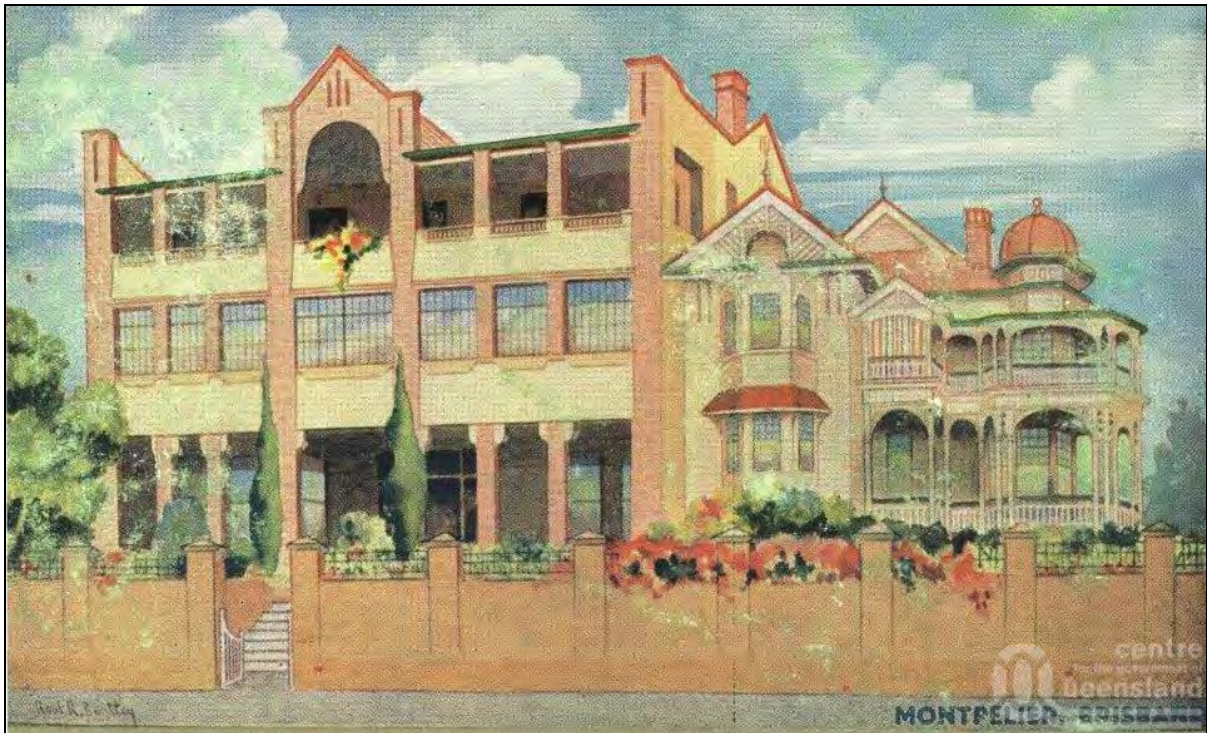




## CURRENT PREMISES

### SELECTION, ACQUISITION and DEVELOPMENT

Our thanks go to Captain Ron Purssey and to Colonel Dennis Scanlan for their assistance in preparing these notes.



*Montpelier Boarding House and the adjacent green house, 1930s.  
(Note that the buildings were not joined before USC purchased the premises.)*

These Background Notes have been prepared as 'bite-sized' light reading for our Members. The intention is to broaden understanding of selected aspects of the Club's rich history and heritage, and the remarkable people who have contributed to its development over the years. They are based primarily on a number of websites, with specific additional information in places. We acknowledge that there are probably errors and omissions. Please contact the Club if you have additional information or comments that will assist to improve these Notes.

We thank the History Interest Group and other volunteers who have researched and prepared these Notes. The series will be progressively expanded and developed over time. They are intended as casual reading, for private use by Members only, and as they lack the rigor, attributions, and acknowledgements required for academic or public use, Members are requested not to reproduce or distribute them outside of our membership.

## Introduction

The current Club premises are now synonymous with the United Service Club - we have been here since 1947 – so perhaps few of today's Members may realise that the Club had previously occupied five different premises since its foundation in 1892.<sup>1</sup>

This Note is intended to provide an overview of the acquisition, conversion and development of our current premises, and few snapshots of Club life since we moved here. It is based primarily on the Club's History book (*United Service Club Queensland: The First Century 1892-1992*, by Flight Lieutenant Murray Adams and Lieutenant Colonel Peter Charlton) and various websites.

At the conclusion of hostilities in 1945 the Club was in a strong financial position having a large numbers of new members, honorary members and visitors: *During the war, with the help of the Americans, we drank the Club into a sound financial position.* The existing club building at 70 George Street was now too small to cater for the expanding membership following demobilisation, and new premises were required. It was said at the time that we needed: *A well situated building providing ample space, comfort, overnight accommodation and having a dignity befitting the status of the Club.*

There was an extensive process to identify potential new premises. 183-187 Wickham Terrace, comprising 'Montpelier' and the Green House was almost ideal, with on-site tennis courts, a near-city location, sweeping views of the city and river, a tram stop close-by, and provision for ample parking,.

In 1946, under the Presidency of Lieutenant Colonel Leonard Little MBE, and with a membership grown to 1,200, the Club purchased our current Club buildings at 173-183 Wickham Terrace.



*Lieutenant Colonel Leonard Alfred Little MBE (1903-74)  
President 1945-46. Life Member 1947*

Ownership of the site was transferred to the United Service Club in November 1946 and the Club relocated to Wickham Terrace on 26 May 1947. We are still here almost 70 years later. The committee's decision to purchase these premises, perhaps somewhat courageous at the time, has proven to be far-sighted and wise.

The buildings were built as a private boarding house ('Montpelier') and as a doctor's surgery/residence (the Green House), within a few years of each other and designed by the same architect. 'Montpelier' was still in use as a quality guest house when the Club purchased it.<sup>2</sup> Some work was required to convert the buildings to the specific needs of the Club, and other works have been undertaken throughout the years.

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<sup>1</sup> For more details of our previous premises see the separate Note in this series: '*Buildings. History. Early Premises*'

<sup>2</sup> For additional information about our current premises (incl their earlier history and their heritage qualities) see the separate Note in this series: '*Buildings. History. Current Premises; Early History and Heritage*'.

Both our buildings have since been heritage listed. The Club has recently established a fund to receive tax-deductible contributions to help meet the increasing maintenance and repair costs to maintain their gracious ambience for the comfort of Members, but its balance remains modest.

## Selection and Acquisition

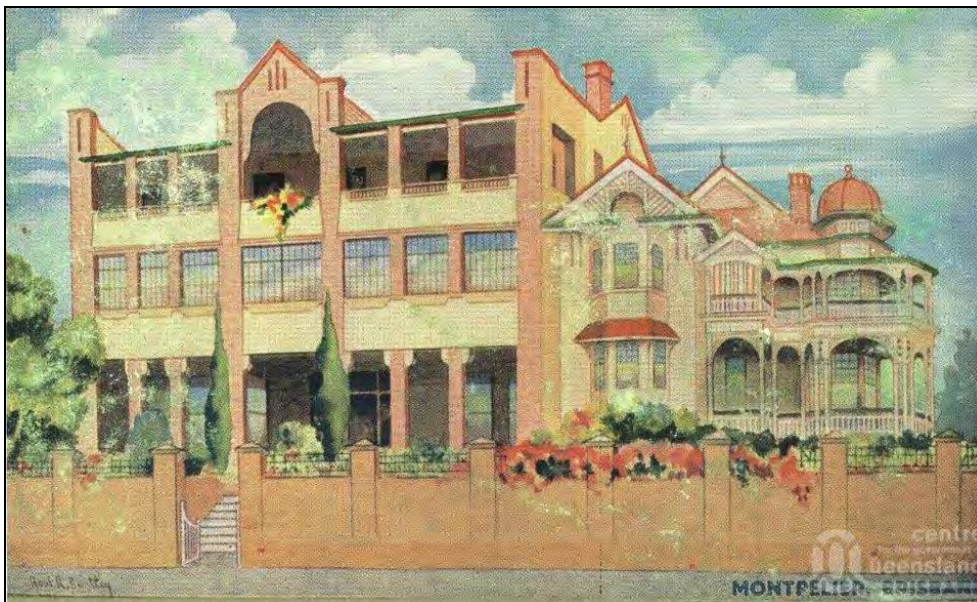
During July 1946, a well-disguised advertisement was placed in *The Courier-Mail*: *CONFIDENTIAL, inquiries for a city building to buy or lease, not less than 10,000 sq. ft. floor space bounded by North Quay, Botanic Gardens, Wickham Tce & Petrie Bight. Full details covering price, rentals, annual charges in strictest confidence to CT 82, C Mail.*

The advertisement produced a few responses and Club President, Lieutenant Colonel Leonard Little MBE, investigated the suggested properties but none of the buildings inspected met the Club's requirements.

The situation was becoming desperate when, in the street one day, Colonel Little met Major Maldwyn Davies, a Club member. Davies mentioned that his family owned a property in Wickham Terrace which might be suitable and added that he and his sister (a Mrs Dempster in Western Australia) were trustees of their father's estate. Davies told Little that he would accept a reasonable offer and would try to persuade his sister to sell if the Club was interested. Mrs Dempster eventually agreed to sell. Little, however, also needed to present the committee with an alternative choice.

On 3 July, 1946, after some solid work by the special sub-committee and as a result, too, of his own driving leadership, Little was able to report to the committee meeting that 'Beerwah' and 'Montpelier' were available as club premises.

The president was empowered to make all necessary enquiries regarding 'Montpelier'.<sup>3</sup> It was valued at £30,000. (As a building, 'Montpelier' had been purpose-built built as a high-quality gentleman's boarding house and the premises have an interesting background)<sup>4</sup>. Moreover, the only alterations necessary were the installation of a bar and a billiard room; apparently there were only minor structural changes required.



*Montpelier Boarding House and the adjacent green house, 1930s.  
(Note that the buildings were not joined before USC purchased the premises.)*

The committee decided to proceed with negotiations to buy "Montpelier" for £30,000, subject to confirmation by a general meeting. Authorisation was also given for the expenditure of another £20,000 on conversions and furnishings. The crucial committee meeting had lasted one hour and 15 minutes.

<sup>3</sup> A US officer who had stayed in Montpelier during the war, recalled on a post-war visit to Brisbane that it was a well-made building with a long verandah on the second floor which gave, in those days, a view of the river. The features which he remembered were all qualities which attracted Little to the building.

<sup>4</sup> See separate Note on the early history and heritage of the Club's current premises.

(Little was a no-nonsense man of action and put himself somewhat ahead of both the committee and the membership and anticipated the decision of the special general meeting. He had earlier accepted the offer by Major Davies to sell the premises at 173-183 Wickham Terrace, to the club for £30,750. Little gave his personal guarantee to the Bank of New South Wales pending approval by the special general meeting.)

In the previous 12 months, the committee had investigated a number of possible alternative premises few of which still exist. These premises investigated included:

- Glenrowan Hospital, Wickham Terrace;
- Coronation House, Creek Street;
- Commonwealth Bank Building, King George Square;
- St Luke's Hall, Charlotte Street;
- YWCA Building, Adelaide Street;
- Webster's Building, Mary Street;
- a property in Wharf Street, between Ann and Adelaide Street;
- ACB Building, Fortitude Valley;
- a property adjoining the Hotel Cecil, in George Street;
- McMur House, Edward Street;
- Desmond Chambers, Adelaide Street;
- 'Beerwah', opposite the Museum;
- Bayard's in South Brisbane;
- Naval House, Edward Street and
- 'Montpelier' in Wickham Terrace.

Naval House in Edward Street would have been a splendid site, near the Gardens and at the other end of Alice Street from the Queensland Club. But that building was too small and lacked that essential accommodation which was a primary reason for the committee's choice.

Similar problems existed with the other buildings, although 'Beerwah', opposite the old Museum, is still in use as a private hotel. However, it was then, and remains today, too far away from the business district to be suitable as a club.

The Members were given the committee's recommendation: *Of these, the only property recommended by the committee is 'Montpelier'. It was on a prime location, for the site could not be built out<sup>5</sup>, it was within easy tramming<sup>6</sup> distance of the city and, most importantly, it provided ample parking space for cars<sup>7</sup>.*

Members were assured that the area of the proposed premises was large but, if it is was found to be too large, the surplus could be disposed of. The two buildings - one of brick, one of timber - were in good condition and were suitable for conversion to Club uses within reasonable cost. If necessary, the timber building could be sold or leased without difficulty; already the committee had had an expression of interest from the Moreton Club.

As attractions, the committee planned to use the tennis courts at the rear of the building, while noting there was ample room for squash courts. Apart from these facilities, the building could provide a large lounge, a dining room, a beer garden on the third floor and a residential section. *In fact, it can be made into what the United Service Club should be.*

As for the all-important question of finance, the purchase and conversion of 'Montpelier' at a total outlay of £40,000, was a price which could be met without increasing membership charges. Assets stood at £11,000

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<sup>5</sup> An optimistic assessment as the splendid river views over the city have long been built out.

<sup>6</sup> The 'tramming distance' was a reference to the tram which ran up Upper Edward Street and terminated outside the Brisbane Grammar School. The turning circle is still visible.

<sup>7</sup> In relation to car parking, the committee's foresight is remarkable. No doubt many of the members owned motor cars in those early post-war years, but this decision was made even before the Australian manufacture of the Holden, and thus well before the motor car assumed its primacy of importance as a means of transport. 'Ample parking space' suggests that the committee understood, perhaps even instinctively, the potential of the motor car to change working, living and recreational patterns after the war.

in cash and securities, and another £9,000 in land and buildings, which left £20,000 to be raised either by loan or by debentures.

The committee's recommendation was that the £20,000 be raised by £10 debentures at four percent, issued to members. *The virtue of this method is that, in the event of a depression, the Club will owe money to its members, not to an outsider.*

Of the 166 members present, 165 voted in favour of the proposal to buy 'Montpelier', for the sum of £30,000. The next motion was for the purchase of its furniture and fittings; that, too, passed without any real dissension and the members also agreed to the very sensible suggestion of raising the money through debentures. The meeting took little over an hour and then, no doubt, the Members adjourned to the bar rather pleased with their night's work.

Now the committee had to translate that decision into action and wasted no time in carrying through the general meeting's decision. On Friday, 4 October, 1946, it met and considered the need to finance the purchase of 'Montpelier'. A subcommittee of three was formed to raise the necessary money including applying to Sub-Treasury to float the debenture issue.

There remained, among the other problems to be solved, the question of what do with the few permanent boarders who remained in 'Montpelier'. The lease to Mrs Sheahan still had almost two years to run.

During wartime, Brisbane had expanded beyond almost all recognition. At this time war-time rationing of building materials still applied; housing was in short supply and good quality lodgings, close to the city, were difficult to obtain.

Negotiations continued with Mrs Sheahan seeking £8,500 (comprising £7,500 for the furniture and £1,000 for 'disturbance'). The Committee wished to avoid a delay in moving into the new premises and a final figure of £8,250 was agreed. Although there was no great pressure to leave George Street, prestige and the operations would suffer if it delayed moving into 'Montpelier', particularly as membership would grow after the move.

The committee met again on 21 October, 1946 with the purchase still influencing its thinking. Proposals to begin the painting and to purchase and refrigerators were considered and passed. Other matters were catering, and the use of a temporary lounge until a bar was established.

In the months before Christmas 1946 planning for the move to Wickham Terrace gathered momentum. On 2 December, a further special committee meeting was held to settle more of the detail of the purchase and eventual move. Much attention of this period was directed towards getting the Wickham Street premises ready for opening. Conversion teams of carpenters, bricklayers, electricians, refrigeration experts, terrazzo masons, and others began work on refurbishment of the two buildings.

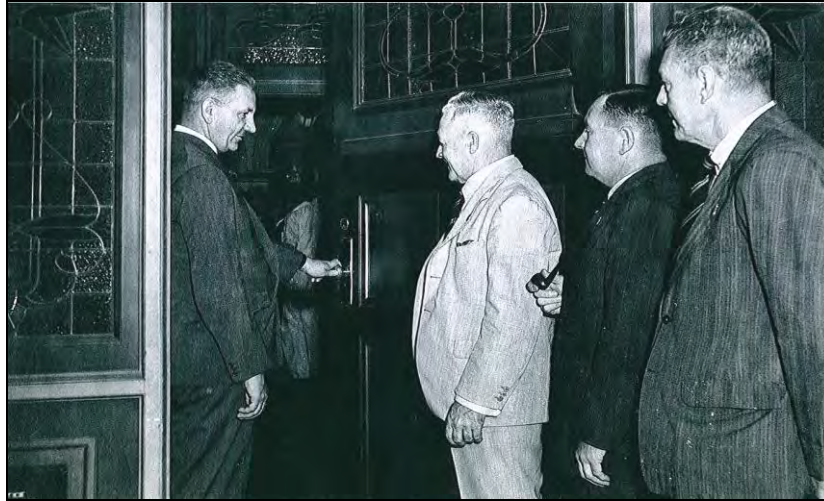
Although post-war shortages might have existed in some areas, there was certainly no shortage of patronage. Part of the reason for the growth in sales was the number of new members continuing to join. Despite the growth of membership, gratifying to a committee anxious to see the expansion, there remained the vexed question of what to do with the Green House<sup>8</sup>. Its use was concerning the committee, which was aiming to maximise return on this particular investment. The Green House was valued at about £5,000, but with the wartime price control regulations still in force, a return of only 10 per cent was the maximum allowed. The sale of this property was not thought to be prudent; the sub-committee members were told that the value of the property must appreciate.

Over Christmas 1946, the president received approaches to use the Green House from the Master Mariners Association and the Moreton Club. As well, the real estate company, Ray White, offered to lease the premises. The committee resolved that the Green House be let to the Moreton Club for a rental of £1,050 a year, and thus began the Moreton Club's association with the Club.

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<sup>8</sup> The wooden building on the eastern side of the Club has always been known colloquially as the 'Green House' because of its colour when it was purchased. Ever since, whenever repainted the Club has been considered, this made decisions about colour choice extremely easy.

The Club moved into Montpellier officially on 26 May 1947.



Entering 183 Wickham Terrace 26 May 1947

Once in the new premises, the committee moved quickly to improve the range of social activities offered to members and their ladies. However, these were still austere years after World War II. Friday was a 'meatless and butterless' day, because of the difficulty in obtaining these goods; bottled beer was still in such short supply that it could not be sold to members for consumption away from the premises.

Post-war rationing and the general austerity of those years still provided problems. For example, planning for the 1947 Ball, a gala social occasion, was hampered by the inability of the breweries to supply additional quantities of beer (the final position was for guests to make their own arrangements for liquor). Nevertheless the evening was a huge success; Cloudland was packed, all 2,100 tickets were sold, and alcoves were set up on the balcony to accommodate the overflow of guests inside the hall itself.

On 15 July 1947 Field Marshal Lord Montgomery (*Monty*) visited the new Club on Wickham Terrace and was greeted by many hundreds of members. The week before his visit, the committee resolved to make both the Field Marshal and Lord Louis Mountbatten life members<sup>9</sup>.



<sup>9</sup> Australians had served under General Montgomery in the north African theatre of World War II (most notably at El Alamein). Admiral Mountbatten was appointed Supreme Allied Commander South East Asia Command later in the war.

Clearly the growing membership was finding the Club attractive, not just as a place to meet for a quiet drink after work and to renew old friendships, but also as a place of entertainment. The membership grew strongly during this period.

### Development of our New Home

At the 1947 annual meeting, President Little was able to report that the Club now had a total of 2,168 members. More than 1,200 new members had joined since the move to its premises on Wickham Terrace.

The President noted: *It is appreciated that difficulties would have been experienced if the Club had not received the professional services rendered by a number of members, and thanks are expressed to all those associated with the alterations and additions to the new premises, which have resulted in our new home becoming one of the finest clubs in Queensland and, when all our ambitions are realised, will be one of the finest clubs in Australia.*

The Club received a face lift and was decorated to celebrate the Royal Tour in 1954<sup>10</sup>. HRH Prince Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh, was offered and accepted life membership of the Club however neither he nor Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II were able to attend the Club during that visit.



*The Club decorated and illuminated for the visit of HM the Queen, 1954 (John Oxley Library)*

In 1955 the committee again considered a proposal to dispose of the Green House as they believed that the wooden building *to have a life expectancy of approximately 20 years*. After further discussion by the committee the idea was never put to the members.

The Green House was refurbished in about 1966, and in about 1990 both buildings were again refurbished. (The paint must have been of excellent quality as the next re-paint of the Green House did not occur until 2015.)

However, the first major alterations to the Club since officially moving into Montpelier on 26 May 1947 were carried out in the 1970s.

The Club's history book (*The First Century 1892—1992*), states on page 182: *The bars, the accommodation and dining room were barely of a standard sufficient to entice members to return often.*

<sup>10</sup> The central theme of the decoration was a huge Crown standing over the Royal Cypher with a stand of flags surrounding the Crown. The flags consisted of those of Australia and the three services, the Union Jack and the Club Flag. At night, the façade had a most pleasing effect, restrained but colourful.

*What was good enough in the 1950s and even into the 1960s was not good enough in the 1970s. Brisbane had changed, become rather more sophisticated, lost much of its 'big country town' feel. Restaurants and modern hotels were competing with the Club and were, in many cases, winning. It is fair to say that the United Service Club in the early 1970s was somewhat fusty and old-fashioned.*

A second quote from page 114 (devoted mainly to the four members of the Purssey family having been members of the United Service Club) states: *Ron Purssey served for six years on the Club's committee in the 1970s and, during his time as the Club's honorary architect, was responsible for the major transformation of the top bar, and the downstairs lounge, bar and dining room.*

What the history does not show was that Ron Purssey was part of a team, albeit a very small team. He had returned from the UK in 1959 a totally modernist architect. The Club had a quite dynamic secretary in Lieutenant Colonel Dean Swift and a matching president Colonel Colin Wilson who had taken over from Group Captain Ray Smith who also favoured change.

As a team of three they enthusiastically set to, and ripped out every unnecessary and superfluous item, wire, cable, conduit and old fashioned fitting from the entire entry area level. New windows and lighting were designed for the main staircase. Several large openings were cut through massive thick walls creating a totally new circulation for members and their guests as it remains to this day. A large crystal chandelier was purchased, assembled piece by piece on the floor and raised in the centre of our beautiful dining room with a great sense of achievement. A completely new reception area with office space behind was designed and built. Air conditioning was installed, and finally new furnishing and carpet with the Club badge was laid throughout the dining room, vestibule and entry.

The old tired and inefficient rectangular top bar with its dull steel and laminate top was demolished completely, much to the abject horror of one well known member who had occupied his corner spot forever.



*The old Top Bar (before demolition for rebuild) circa early 1975. (Major Brian Purssey at centre of right photo.)  
(Photo courtesy Ron Purssey)*

An ingenious circular bar was designed which could be split in two if required<sup>11</sup>. It worked. The architect organised the positioning of and assisted with the erection of the multitude of colourful service plaques which today are to be seen in the Military Bar downstairs.

<sup>11</sup> These were controversial times regarding the question of civilian membership, and controversy also raged as to which area of the Club should be available to the ladies (shock horror, but that is the way it was in those days).





*"New" Top Bar, July 1975. The circular bar could be split in two if required, eg one half for the ladies.  
(Photo courtesy Ron Purssey.)*



*USC Honorary Architect Capt Ron Purssey (as a lieutenant)  
sketched at a RAE camp in 1964 by John J Delahunty.*

Towards the end of the working week the bar was filled to capacity with conviviality, but, with the inevitable passage of time, new and stringent liquor and driving laws meant even more major changes to our Club. But that was for others in another era.

Further work in 1996 included converting 'Montpelier's' 22 bedrooms to 16 units and enlarging the dining room. Refurbishment works were also completed on the Green House, lounges, meeting rooms and 'Montpelier's' Top Bar.

In the period 2007-2010 further refurbishment of 'Montpelier' was undertaken, including the installation of a disabled toilet, renovation of the accommodation units to make three suites and 14 en-suite rooms, an upgrade of the kitchen, upgrade of the Gents toilet, replacement of the much-loved but increasingly unreliable (c1930) elevator, resurfacing the rear top car park and conversion of the (now-disused) Top Bar to a large office for commercial lease.

Special mention must be made of the treasured Top Bar in 'Montpelier'. While many a happy time was had here, prior to 2009 the old bar had not been used for 10 years probably due reduced demand because of aging membership, and changes in members; driving attitudes and habits. It was turned into a commercial tenancy in 2009 much to the disappointment of some of the older members.

The installation of a new elevator that would meet the requirements of disabled-access legislation, service all floors, and be located close to the rear entrance was one of the major capital works undertaken in 2009/10. The new lift was a welcome addition, particularly for the Club's less-mobile members.

At the same time the rear entrance of 'Montpelier' was refurbished.



*New rear entrance and elevator 2010.*

The United Service Club is comfortable in its surroundings, with members across the decades placing high value on the Club's rich heritage, something we have committed to preserve.

Montpelier and the Green House have provided, and continue to provide a very special place to its members. The current premises have, over almost 70 years, become synonymous with the Club. It is interesting that the potential future development options canvassed by the committee during the years 2013 to 2015 are not dissimilar to those considered by previous committees over the years.

The 2014 Member Survey confirmed the view that we prefer to stay here; the membership places high value on our heritage-listed buildings, car parking facilities, our Club's heritage, and the *Club experience*.

The committee continues to be committed to preserving these aspects and to achieve this into the future, as it continues to consider the options for the better use of our 'back yard'.



*HRH The Duchess of Kent visit on 25 February 1992, hosted by Club President MAJGEN 'Digger' James*