Recreational spending, taste, and milieu of the elite in London, c. 1700-1820

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While Thorsten Veblen is rarely explicitly evoked in discussions of Georgian leisure, he has shaped the ways historians think about leisure; particularly elite leisure. The rethinking of consumption and the elimination of “emulation” as an explanation for patterns of acquiring durable goods, has not been followed up with a systematic re-examination of leisure activities and time. Music and visual arts have seen some revision in the past decade, particularly with the emergence of an idea of a “merchant” taste in the arts, but studies of musical concert series, the opera, and fashionable masquerades such as those held at Carlisle House by Mme Cornelys evidence the continued explicit and implicit influence of the idea that the acquisition and demonstration of status were the primary goals of many prominent leisure activities.

The focus of this paper is London, c. 1750-1820. In particular I draw on a sample of seven account books and forty-five diaries kept by members of propertied society, i.e. the gentry, nobility, and the upper middle class—wealthy merchants and the like. The patterns of spending evident in account books provide a view of leisure spending from the patron’s perspective. The sample is relatively small, as few account books that survive from the period provide good evidence of leisure spending. Furthermore, identifying a transaction as specifically relevant to recreation is problematic because accountants rarely declare for what they intended to use the good or service acquired. The account offered here does enhance our understanding of where people’s recreational shillings went and how much money went to the newly commercialised spaces. They give us insight into variations in spending resulting from age, wealth, taste, and social position. Furthermore they reveal differences in the ways that money was spent on diversion between different sectors of propertied society.
An approach to spending that quantifies people’s engagement with commercial recreation and their patterns of spending allows us to re-assess the markets that attractions appealed to. The patterns of attendance revealed by an examination of accounts force us to re-examine motivations that have been imputed to customers, particularly desires for novelty and social status. Unpredictable personal events, social networks, and individual taste explain patterns of attendance better than do the price of admission or advertisements of new attractions. Finally, records of spending suggest that there were three sorts of market that were potentially in play for leisure entrepreneurs. Some venues appealed to regular attendance from polite society and infrequent visits from a broader public, others attracted a wide variety of middling and labouring Londoners, and a third group of attractions depended on a loyal niche audience to survive. This provides a basis for reconsidering factors shaping the provision of leisure facilities.

Throughout this paper I use ‘leisure’, ‘amusement’, and ‘recreation’ interchangeably in a stylistic choice that diverges from eighteenth-century practice. In the eighteenth century, ‘amusement’ and ‘recreation’ had very similar meanings. ‘Leisure’ denoted an opportunity to do something, but not necessarily a pleasurable activity. In Georgian England, ‘leisure’ was a category of time that included amusement or recreation, but it also covered unpaid duties and obligations. ‘Recreation’ or ‘amusement’ referred to activities freely undertaken for enjoyment and which form the focus of this study. Enjoyment and pleasure are subjective feelings, so there can be no conclusive list of activities that count as ‘recreations’. Nonetheless, people generally expressed pleasure when they were involved in domestic sociability, card games, listening to music, attending parties or the theatre and some types of reading, writing and needlework.

The remainder of this paper focuses first, on how people spent their leisure money; second, on what this means for our understanding of consumer motivation; and
finally, argues that an individual’s social networks rather than the cost or novelty of
an entertainment provides the best tool for understanding consumer behavior.

Our understanding of Georgian recreational activities suffers from inadequate
attention to leisure seekers. The overwhelming bulk of work in this area has focused
on provision rather than use and newspaper advertising still too often stands in for
research into users’ actions. Our understanding of consumer motivation needs
revision. Historians have suggested audience members pursued three broad goals at
commercial venues: amusement/relief from boredom/novelty, social status bought
by cultural patronage, and personal development. While those goals played a part in
motivating spending, none is sufficient to explain the patterns of consumer
behaviour.

Spending on commercial leisure spaces varied considerably per unit of time
depending on the season of the year and the socioeconomic status and life-stage of
the accountant. People of elite social status tended to spend (or at least pay) in large
lumps, something suggested by subscriptions to concerts and the opera and
investments in domestic space, furnishings, food, and drink to allow for substantial
and fashionable entertaining.

Though the sample of account books is small, the patterns of behaviour exhibited by
the accountants reflect those that can be documented for larger social groups. Time-
use and spending data reveals that diarists fit broadly into two groups. One group,
primarily gentry and nobility, had plenty of money and time and therefore were able
to visit attractions frequently. Members of polite society engaged in a well-defined
recreational routine built around a weekly schedule of levees, assemblies, routs,
plays, operas, and concerts. These activities needed to incorporate some variations to
avoid being dull, but theatres, opera, and certain concert series counted on consistent
support from polite society. At the same time there were variations within the
groups. Attendance at concerts was not assumed.
None of the accountants examined here mention going to concerts, though clearly some specialised interest groups within this society did provide loyal support for such niche activities. Activities in commercial spaces such as theatres, the Opera, or the Pantheon crowded people’s schedules, but they did not replace socializing in private houses. Though trips to public spaces clearly took time away from gatherings in the domestic sphere, socializing in public remained subordinate to domestic gatherings. For instance the impact of famous spaces such as Madame Cornelys, Almack’s, or the Pantheon on patterns of visiting and domestic recreation appears limited to a small group of people during a short period of time.

The other group was hampered by a lack of money, time, or both. They might visit a play, pleasure garden, or Astley’s once or twice a year, but few would have made frequent visits to any of these spaces. People in this group (and tourists) would have gone to the famous attractions once and perhaps repeated their visits with (other) tourists or children, but establishments could not have counted on their repeated patronage. Within this group there would have been special interest groups as well who would have attended lecture series as underwriter John Eliot or upholsterer Job Knight did, or the debating clubs as merchant Samuel Curwen did. Middling Londoners visited commercial recreational venues as special events that occasionally replaced domestic socializing or with special visitors. The middling sort used public spaces specifically designed for pleasure as breaks from routine forms of sociability. Because of the seasonal availability of recreational ventures, the winter and spring were the most expensive period of the year for the gentry and nobility, but country house gambling in other seasons meant that the summer and fall could be costly too. On the whole, all levels of propertied society spent most heavily during the winter and spring, though the increase was much smaller among merchants and members of the professions who did not enjoy cheaper living in the countryside during the summer and autumn. Participating in the full complement of activities in the gentry calendar during the season meant spending more on recreational ventures and
forking out money for the theatre, concerts, and other performances between one and four times a week.

We also find variations within the two broad lifestyle groups. Lifestyle was shaped but not determined by wealth. People might pursue lifestyles that seem to have been out of line with their economic status. Whether this resulted from attempting to keep up with friends, was necessary for keeping up appearances associated with a profession, or came out of some other choice or preference remains unclear. It was possible to adapt the lifestyle of the west end gentry and nobility to limited budgets. Though he was not part of the gentry, Charles de Coetlogon emulated many of the gentry practices by living off annuities, visiting theatres regularly, riding around town in hackney coaches, frequently hosting dinners, and possibly keeping a mistress. But he had to cut corners by abstaining from some activities that were de rigueur among the people at the top of the social ladder. The example of actress Elizabeth Inchbald also shows that maintaining aspects of a fashionable lifestyle on an extremely limited budget was possible with good connections and the right sorts of friends. The way people spent their money and the amount of money people had were related, but not inextricably bound.

Life-stage was another important variable that played a part in differentiating people within broad groups. Middling people with businesses to run or children to support engaged in little spending at spaces set up as recreational ventures. The adult Quaker merchant Jacob Hagen had the most austere lifestyle of the bunch, spending very little of a relatively large income on recreation of any sort. While the evidence of other merchants’ behaviour suggests that Hagen’s abstemiousness was extreme, it also shows that Hagen was different in degree rather than kind. Most merchants and professionals who were family men spent money on recreational ventures infrequently, though unmarried middling people, like the gentry and nobility, spent a high proportion of their money on concerts, the opera or the theatre.
Childless men and women had fewer financial responsibilities than parents did and so were able to spend more freely.

When we approach leisure choices for all social groups we find that cost is a limiting factor, but not an efficient explanatory factor for individuals’ decisions to pursue one activity over another. Exclusivity controlled by cost is an over-rated motivation. Cases from the Old Bailey suggest that an individual’s social rank (below the level of people who sat in the boxes, the most expensive and exclusive area of the theatre) or the money in their pocket was a poor predictor of where they sat. The music enthusiast John Marsh described at great length how he tried different areas of the opera-house to determine the best sound for his ticket price.

The rarity of visits to theatres, the opera, and other spaces associated with the elite routine in the diaries of merchants and other members of the middle classes suggests that visiting those spaces is unlikely to have reflected attempts to move up the social ladder. Rather social power among the middling was demonstrated in different ways.

Low rates of attendance among the middling population show that prices need to be complicated as indicators of motivation and guides to clientele. The price of admission did have some effect on who could attend or how often they could attend, but price was not the only factor shaping people’s decisions. The elite did not automatically prefer expensive activities. The Royal Academy art exhibition and the pleasure gardens at Vauxhall drew elite attendance despite being cheap, though by contrast inexpensive attractions such as Astley’s circus and Sadler’s Wells enjoyed limited patronage from the gentry and nobility. Despite high prices, Gallini’s Rooms and other exclusive concert venues did not attract everyone who valued exclusive socializing, as Simon McVeigh suggests they did.¹ Some people who were interested in concerts attended, but not a broad spectrum of wealthy people. Diary evidence

¹ McVeigh, *Concert Life*, xiii, 6-7, 11-2.
shows that concerts attracted a small but loyal clientele, suggesting that exclusivity may have been attractive, but concerts primarily drew people with an interest in hearing music. It remains unclear why an expensive activity like opera-going became *de rigueur* for the elite, when others, such as concert going, did not. In the cases of both concerts and the opera, high prices are best understood simply as having been necessary to support the costs of staging the performances.

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As this account of patterns of leisure spending suggests, the studies of commercial leisure and entrepreneurs only tell part of the story about the relationship between the market and recreation. Historians have tended to assume that a combination of exclusivity and novelty secured the patronage of the wealthy and snobbish. At the same time novelty and inexpensive access to activities that allowed the labouring sorts to emulate the rich offered venues with humbler clienteles the opportunity to flourish.

Patterns of attendance evident in diaries suggest that we can divide recreational enterprises into three categories. Firstly, theatres, Ranelagh and Vauxhall pleasure gardens, and certain other mainstream entertainments were sustained by a combination of polite routines that led the gentry and nobility to attend regularly and the occasional visits of lots of less wealthy people. The gentry and nobility in the west end were the big spenders and the most regular guests at the theatres, but they
were not numerous enough to consistently fill a theatre and spent much of the year (even during the theatre season) away from the metropolis. The middling and labouring sorts supplemented the limited crowds of gentry during the periods around Christmas and Easter and on a daily basis the audience at the theatres contained a large proportion of people who came to the theatre from the City.

Secondly, places that could not count on patronage as part of the fashionable routine, for instance Astley’s, had to have a metropolis-wide appeal in order to remain solvent. Few members of the gentry recorded visiting Astley’s in their diaries, yet this venue was able to survive by dint of attracting many different types of people. At the same time, however, all such needed to change their offerings regularly to sustain interest even among the crowds who visited infrequently. Repeat visits from humbler audience members were necessary to sustain the business for more than a couple of years.

For the third group, specialist entertainments, solvency was less predictable. Even venues catering to a wealthy audience might not secure sufficient patronage. The persistent financial difficulties of the opera throughout the first half of the eighteenth century or the repeated failures of concert series appealing to select clienteles are good examples of this. Once the opera was able to establish itself in the polite routine it was able to depend on consistent financial support, but other ventures such as concert series, Mrs. Cornelys’ establishment at Carlisle House, and the Pantheon, collapsed or chased less wealthy clienteles after the novelty wore off.

The need for novelty has been tied to middle and upper class lifestyles that supposedly involved little business. Novelty could influence a consumer to attend a particular event, but it does not seem to have been important enough by itself to win much patronage. Some diarists appear to have attended performances because of the newness of the offering. City merchant George Macaulay attended some performances on their opening night, perhaps his reason for going. In October 1796
he went to Drury Lane to see part of “Bold Stroke for a Wife” and “for the first Time received Richard Cour de Lion … got up with splendid decorations and well supported truly by Mr Crouder and Shelly.” Two months later he saw the premier of “The Shipwreck”, also at Drury Lane. Macaulay never explicitly says he attended because it was the premier, but the holding of a premier may have encouraged him to attend on a particular night. Dozens of plays and afterpieces premiered each year, so clearly a new show was not by itself enough of a reason for Macaulay to go. For people who attended the theatre as part of a routine, new elements might have livened up an otherwise familiar attraction.

Individual behaviours reflect small group preferences more clearly than they reflect attempts at social mobility or preferences typical of classes or sorts. Qualitative work on diaries demonstrates the value of understanding social connections for explain specific choices in preference to wealth or social status. This interpretation is supported by scholarship on modern networks shows that personal networks and cultural tastes influence each other. An individual’s tastes work to build a network at the same time as that network influences taste. This is borne out by evidence that a “few years [could cause] great changes” in a network if someone decided to change their lifestyle. In the midst of her letter journal Lady Mary Coke decided to “le[ave the world” and abandon fashionable society. As a result, a comparison of Lady Mary Coke’s companions across a seven-year gap reveals more substantial shifts than those in other diaries. Many women disappeared from the diary once Lady Mary no longer operated in society. In particular the fashionable hostesses

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2 BL, Add MS 25038, f. 4.
3 Ibid., f. 24.
4 Lizardo, ‘How Cultural Tastes Shape Personal Networks’.
5 Coke, Letters and Journals, IV:163.
6 Ibid., IV:162.
who Mary had regularly interacted with at card parties were no longer mentioned once Lady Mary ceased to attend their functions.  

Account books suggest that consumer spending determined the ways that leisure entrepreneurs set themselves up in terms of price and season. Patterns of attendance differed between the money and time-rich residents of the west end and the rest of the population who lacked some combination of time and money. Carving out a space within polite routines or a niche market among the nobility could be lucrative, but long-term success was not guaranteed. At the same time appealing to a broad section of Londoners might provide some financial stability, but keeping middling and labouring patrons coming back year after year required careful attention to the product being marketed. The innovations in leisure venues involved creative work by entrepreneurs who were limited in their ability to get customers to change their habits.

Variations within groups defined by leisure spending reveal differences caused by life-stage, gender, and personal preferences. Attendance patterns reveal that the motivations typically imputed to audiences only partly explain behaviour. Neither an interest in novelty, social status, nor personal improvement are evident in the majority of spending choices. Audiences were largely self-selecting; prices were less about excluding the wrong people and more about squeezing as much as possible out of the audience that came. In the context of recreation, status was primarily assessed through sociability rather than through consumption.

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Ibid., IV:154.