

**Marlborough House set (act. 1870s–1901)**, also known as the smart set, was a social clique of fashionable men and women that revolved around the court of Albert Edward, prince of Wales [see [Edward VII](#)], and was centred in London on Marlborough House, Pall Mall. The prince had moved into Marlborough House following his marriage to [Princess Alexandra of Denmark](#) in 1863. Initially 'Marlborough House' served as a shorthand for the prince's household, including [General Sir William Knollys](#), comptroller and treasurer (1863–78), his son [Francis Knollys](#), the prince's private secretary (1870–1910), and the equerries and courtiers who worked there. Marlborough House was also a court and served as the base from which the prince exercised 'social sovereignty'. Queen Victoria's extended mourning for Prince Albert, coupled with her distaste for 'society', meant that she had effectively abdicated the monarch's social role in favour of the prince of Wales. He presided at levees and drawing rooms held at Buckingham Palace, and—with the princess—held balls and garden parties at Marlborough House, where they also entertained visiting royalty.

Marlborough House also stood for a political position, especially on foreign policy and dynastic issues. In line with Alexandra's Danish family Marlborough House took a strongly anti-Prussian position during the Schleswig-Holstein crisis; in doing so it lined up against the queen who, sympathizing with her daughter, the crown princess of Prussia, took Prussia's side. Marlborough House was thus the 'reversionary interest', and tensions emerged between the queen and her son. The prince was personally sympathetic to William Gladstone, whom the queen detested, and wary of Benjamin Disraeli, the queen's favourite minister. Politically, however, the prince usually sympathized with Disraeli, for example supporting Turkey and opposing Russia in the eastern crisis of 1876–8.

#### Membership of Marlborough House

In 1869 the prince founded the Marlborough Club, initially as a protest when smoking was banned at White's Club. Meeting at 52 Pall Mall, just across the road from Marlborough House, the club was a *de facto* annexe to the Waleses' court. The prince visited almost daily and personally selected its first 400 members. He commissioned *Vanity Fair's* cartoonist, Carlo Pellegrini (Ape), to draw caricatures of the twenty-two founder members and in 1874 the publisher Samuel Beeton depicted the club and its members as:

A fragrant odour of the choicest weeds,  
A hum of voices, pitched in high-born tones;  
A score of fellows, some of our best breeds,  
The Heir-apparent to the British throne;  
Soft-footed flunkery tending to their needs—  
The vintage in request tonight is Beaune—  
Luxurious lounging chairs, well-stuffed settees,  
An air of lavishness, and taste and ease  
(‘The smoke room at the M— Club’, in S. O. Beeton and others, *Jon Duan*, 1874, 85)

The prince was actively engaged in the selection and approval of members who reflected his circles and interests, including the world of horse-racing (among them [George Payne](#) and [Henry Chaplin](#), first [Viscount Chaplin](#)) and Francis Knollys and [Sir Robert Kingscote](#) from the prince's household. The club's original trustees were [George Granville William Sutherland-Leveson-Gower](#), third duke of Sutherland [see *under* [Gower](#), [George Leveson-](#), first duke of Sutherland], [Thomas William Coke](#), second earl of Leicester, and Edward Granville, Lord Wharnclyffe (1827–1899).

The term Marlborough House set became current in the 1880s, its adoption reflecting a broadening and fracturing of London society into sets and cliques. In his diary for 10 August 1891 the civil servant and gossip Edward Hamilton provided a list of members of the 'smart set':

Louise Duchess of Manchester [[Louise Frederica Augusta Cavendish](#), duchess of Devonshire], Gosfords [[Archibald Brabazon Sparrow](#), fourth earl of Gosford (1841–1922), and Louisa, countess of Gosford (*d.* 1944)], Eddie Stanleys [[Edward Stanley](#), Lord Stanley], the reigning Duchess of Manchester [[Consuelo](#), née Yznaga (*d.* 1909)], Lady Dudley [*d.* 1929], all the Rothschilds [see *below*], Arthur Sassoons [1840–1912], Lister-Kayes [Sir John Lister-Kaye, third baronet (1853–1924)], Miss Emily Yznaga, Hindlips [Samuel Allsopp, second Baron Hindlip (1842–1897)], Lady [Margaret Williams-]Bulkeley [1839–1909] and her daughter [later Mrs Benjamin Guinness], Lord Arlington [[Henry Gerard Sturt](#), first Baron Alington] and his daughters, Owen [1836–1904] and Hwfa [1849–1926], Williamses, Falkiners [Sir Leslie Falkiner, seventh baronet (1866–1917)], Leinsters [Gerald Fitzgerald, sixth duke of Leinster (1851–1893), and Hermione, duchess of Leinster (1894–1895)], Muriettas [Don Jose de Murietta], Gerards [William Gerard, second Baron Gerard (1851–1902), and Mary, née Milner (1854–1918)], Oppenheims [Henry Oppenheim (1835–1912)], Francis Knollys's, Randolph Churchills [[Lord Randolph Churchill](#) and [Jeanette Churchill](#)], Horners [John (1835–1906) and Frances], Wellingtons [Henry Wellesley, third duke of Wellington (1846–1900)], Londonderrys [[Charles Vane-Tempest-Stewart](#), sixth marquess of Londonderry, and [Theresa Vane-Tempest-Stewart](#), marchioness of Londonderry], de Greys [Frederick Robinson, fourth earl of Grey (1852–1923), and Constance, countess de Grey (*d.* 1917)], Brooks [Francis Greville, Lord Brooke and later fifth earl of Warwick (1853–1924), and [Frances \(Daisy\) Greville](#), Lady Brooke], Carringtons [[Charles Wynn-Carrington](#), Earl Carrington], Suffields [Charles Suffield, fifth Baron Suffield (1830–1924), and Cecilia, née Baring (1831–1911)], W. Carringtons [Sir William Carrington (1845–1914)], Algy Lennoxes [Lord Algernon Gordon-Lennox (1847–1921)], and a certain number of single men such as Lord Hartington [[Spencer Compton Cavendish](#), marquess of Hartington, from 1891 eighth duke of Devonshire], Oliver Montagu [1844–1893], J. C. Sykes, [Horace Farquhar](#), Henry Chaplin, Bully [Sir Lawrence] Oliphant, Soveral [Luiz de Soveral, marqués de Soveral (1855–1922)], J. Baring [[John Baring](#), later second Baron Revelstoke], Fr Mildmay [Francis Mildmay, first Baron Mildmay (1861–1947)], M. [Montagu] Guest [1839–1939] ... A man like Rosebery [[Archibald Primrose](#), fifth earl of Rosebery] is of course of the set, but as a matter of fact is not much in it. (Crook, 241)

In reality the smart set's composition was continuously shifting and Hamilton's list, though offering a useful snapshot, includes several individuals—for example Lister-Kaye, Hindlip, and Mildmay—who rarely featured in proceedings, while omitting others who were more prominent.

A more authoritative guide to the set's membership is provided by the names regularly cited in the prince of Wales's unpublished diaries, along with his guest lists for house parties and dinners. These sources identify the set's recognized members as Arthur Edward Augustus Ellis (1837–1907), [Lord Charles Beresford](#), the duke of Sutherland, Heneage Finch, seventh earl of Aylesford (1849–1885), and Edith, countess of Aylesford (*d.* 1897), [Louis Mountbatten](#), [Prince Louis of Battenberg](#), Maria, Lady Ailesbury (*d.* 1902), [Charles Yorke](#), fifth earl of Hardwicke, [Maurice de Hirsch](#), [Baron de Hirsch](#), [Charles Hardinge](#), [Thomas Johnstone Lipton](#), [Sir Ernest Cassel](#), and [Reginald Brett](#), [Lord Esher](#). In 1898 [Alice Keppel](#) became *maitresse en titre* to the prince. Other female members of the smart set included Mrs Willie James, née Evelyn Forbes (*d.* 1928), and Lady Naylor-Leyland, née Jeanie Chamberlain (*d.* 1932). The Marlborough House set also included a French annexe, comprising a Mr and Mrs Standish, the princesse de Sagan, the marquise de Gallifet, and the duc and duchesse de Mouchy.

The nucleus of the set consisted of the prince and princess, the prince's private secretary Knollys, and Louise, duchess of Manchester. The duchess had previously served as the queen's mistress of the robes (1858–9) but Victoria had disapproved of 'her *tone*, her love of admiration and "fast style"' (Magnus, 110). Having been snubbed by Victoria—who refused to invite her to the wedding of the prince of Wales—the duchess quickly switched her loyalty to Marlborough House. Here she exploited the opportunity that closeness to the prince offered for leadership of the metropolitan elite and—together with Lord Hartington, whose mistress she had become about 1866—she and the prince formed the 'innermost trinity' of London society for the next forty years (Vane, 75).

Edward Hamilton's list also included several former mistresses of the prince of Wales: Madame Murietta, Lady Randolph Churchill, and Consuelo, duchess of Manchester, were all women whose names had been linked with his. Georgina, countess of Dudley—daughter of Sir Thomas Moncreiffe, seventh baronet—was another whom the prince had admired in the 1860s. She was a sister of the unfortunate Harriett Mordaunt, whose life was ruined in the scandal of the Mordaunt divorce case. By the early 1890s the prince's reigning mistress was Lady Brooke. The Marlborough House set also included several members of the Waleses' household: Lord Suffield was a lord of the bedchamber to the prince (1872–1901), Oliver Montagu an equerry, and the countess of Gosford a lady of the bedchamber to the queen. Many members of the set were related or connected by marriage. Lady Williams-Bulkeley, wife of the eleventh baronet, was the sister of General Owen Williams, an equerry, as was the countess of Aylesford. In 1878 Lord Carrington married Cecilia, daughter of Lord Suffield. Lady Dudley was the aunt of Evelyn Forbes, the wife of Willie James.

Bachelors such as [Christopher Sykes](#) [see *under* [Sykes](#), [Sir Tatton](#)] played a key part in the Marlborough House set. Sykes was the butt of frequent practical jokes; on one occasion, when the prince tipped a glass of brandy over his head at dinner, Sykes merely bowed and responded 'As your Royal Highness pleases' (C. Sykes,

'Behind the tablet', *Four Studies in Loyalty*, 1946, 28). This was a joke which the prince never tired, and Sykes regularly entertained the prince at Brantingham Thorpe for the St Leger at Doncaster races. Another bachelor was the Portuguese ambassador, the marqués de Soveral (nicknamed the Blue Monkey by the kaiser), whose 'universal utility at the palace have so firmly established him in the place once occupied by Mr Christopher Sykes as to obscure ... his professional strength and skill' as a diplomat (Escott, 70).

### Social origins and opinions

The smart set was not especially political, though the prince's friends included politicians from both parties: Rosebery, Hartington, and Carrington from the Liberals; Lord Randolph Churchill and Henry Chaplin from the Tories. The smart set was often compared with a contemporary circle, the **Souls**, who gathered around the Conservative politician Arthur Balfour, though important differences existed between the two networks. More political, intellectual, and cultured, the Souls—who actively defined themselves against Marlborough House—were largely from 'old money' backgrounds. The smart set was rather more plutocratic and parvenu: **Henry Allsopp, first Baron Hindlip**, was a self-made brewer from Burton upon Trent, and the Lister-Kayes were cotton spinners, while Hamilton's list also included four American heiresses: Lady Randolph Churchill, Emily Yznaga, and her sisters Consuelo and Natica, Lady Lister-Kaye. At the same time instances of land and inherited wealth could also be found within Marlborough House. The Churchills, Stanleys, Montagus, and Fitzgeralds, for example, were established members of the aristocracy, while the Londonderrys, Dudleys, and Williamses were old families with fortunes built on coal. Such figures as Lady Randolph Churchill and Lady Brooke were also at ease in the company of both the smart set and the Souls.

When he was a young man the prince's friends had been raffish aristocrats like as Lord Randolph Churchill, the duke of Sutherland, and Lord Charles Beresford. Many bankrupted themselves in an effort to entertain the prince and to match his standards of extravagance and gambling. The fifth earl of Hardwicke, dubbed Champagne Charlie, and Christopher Sykes were two who squandered their fortunes and family estates in competitive entertainment by royal command. Partly for this reason, the prince became increasingly captivated by 'plutocracy, Semitic or American' and with 'the modish smartness that is its product' (Cannadine, 346). The merchant banker **Nathaniel Mayer de Rothschild**, along with his brothers Alfred and Leopold, had been friends of the prince at Cambridge, as had their cousin **Ferdinand de Rothschild, Baron de Rothschild**, who built Waddesdon Manor, near Aylesbury, where the prince was a frequent visitor. **Sir Albert Sassoon** [see under **Sassoon family**], the 'Rothschild of the east', entertained the prince on his visit to Bombay in 1875, and thereafter his half-brothers Arthur and Reuben Sassoon became members of the smart set. Baron de Hirsch joined the set when he settled the prince's debts in 1890 and Hirsch's protégé, Ernest Cassel, another German-Jewish financier, became a member from 1896 when he similarly came to the rescue. Established members of the Marlborough House set had mixed feelings about this shift. 'We resented the introduction of Jews into the social set of the Prince of Wales', wrote Lady Brooke, 'not because we disliked them ... but because they had brains and understood finance. As a class we did not like brains. As for money, our only understanding of it lay in the spending, not the making of it' (Allfrey, 10–13, 23). Critics attacked the Marlborough House set for diluting traditional standards, eroding social exclusiveness, and making the monarchy no longer 'the champion or guarantee of exclusive society' (Cannadine, 346). No doubt this was how it appeared to many at the time. But equally, by changing the rules of admission to society, the monarchy was adapting to a rising tide of plutocracy that it could not afford to ignore. As the court of the widowed Victoria became increasingly isolated and out of touch, the prince's court cheerfully embraced new money and cosmopolitanism.

### Honour and immorality

Leadership within the Marlborough House set was exercised by the prince. There was a strict code of honour (not the same thing as morality) that members violated at their peril, as was clearly shown by the Aylesford scandal. In 1876 Edith, countess of Aylesford, wrote to her husband, who was then in India with the prince, to announce that she proposed to leave him for Lord Blandford. Adultery was one of the set's favourite pastimes, but it was a sport that had to be played according to strict rules. Divorce was utterly unacceptable, as a likely route to social disgrace and damaging public exposure, as the prince had found to his cost when he was subpoenaed as a witness in the Mordaunt case of 1870. By asking her husband for a divorce, the countess of Aylesford broke this golden rule, and her punishment was ostracism from smart society. Lord Randolph Churchill, Blandford's brother, accused the prince of engineering the affair between Blandford and the countess. Churchill's refusal to apologize or withdraw led to the prince banning him from all social gatherings, and his ostracism lasted until 1886. To members of the set the prince's word was law. But to outsiders those who obeyed the royal code were equally disreputable. The earl of Aylesford loyally did as the prince told him and went into voluntary exile after the scandal. However to Lord Derby, writing in the year of Aylesbury's death (1885), the earl 'had got through his whole fortune by gaming, racing, and extravagance generally: and was one of the very worst examples of the English peerage. Naturally, he belonged to the Marlborough House set' (*Later Derby Diaries*, 103). The prince's word was complemented by more formal legal advice provided by the set's indispensable solicitor, **George Henry Lewis, later first baronet**. Said to know all members' secrets, Lewis had been introduced to the prince in 1868 by Lord Marcus Beresford, and subsequently advised him during the Mordaunt case and the quarrel in 1889 between Lady Brooke, her former lover Lord Charles Beresford, and the prince. To the journalist T. H. S. Escott, Lewis was akin to a theatrical financier who occupied the best stage box: 'Whatever is going on, not merely before but behind the footlights, is an open scroll to this astute, terrible, and within certain limits, very nearly omnipotent gentleman' (Escott, 109). It is a great regret to historians that Lewis destroyed his firm's papers.

Marlborough House thus became a byword for louche morals. Through the efforts of the prince's father the Victorian court had been distanced from the aristocracy and identified with moral virtue and domesticity. In May 1868 the queen had warned her son of 'the luxuriousness, extravagance and frivolity of Society', and had implored him to use his influence to counter these vices (Magnus, 102–3). The prince did precisely the opposite but—far from endangering the monarchy—his raffishness increased his popularity, except on those occasions when it threatened Princess Alexandra, who enjoyed even more support than her husband. Taking their cue from the prince, the Marlborough House set was identified with horse-racing (Ascot, Epsom, and the St Leger were fixed points in their calendar), shooting, bridge-playing, extravagant dining, and keeping late hours. Corridor creeping was a stock feature of smart set house parties, a characteristic lampooned by Hilaire Belloc:

There will be bridge and booze 'till after three  
And, after that, a lot of them will grope  
Along the corridors in robes de nuit  
Pyjamas, or some other kind of dope ...  
And Mrs James will entertain the King.  
(Leslie, 153)

On the next day the party would line up to be photographed, with the prince seated in the centre, his hostess on his right-hand side, his current mistress on his left. If morals were lax, sartorial standards were strict and members of his circle were expected to conform to correct modes of dress. Culinary standards were likewise high. Nicknamed Tum Tum, the prince was notoriously greedy and enjoyed dining with the Rothschilds on account of the truffles and Strasbourg pies created by their French chefs. After its transformation by George Escoffier, the Savoy Hotel became a favourite dining place for members of the smart circle.

With the prince's accession as Edward VII in 1901, the Marlborough House set became the nucleus of the new court and many members were rewarded with office. Horace Farquhar became master of the king's household, Arthur Ellis was appointed comptroller in the lord chamberlain's department, Lord Suffield became a lord-in-waiting, and Francis Knollys the king's private secretary. The Marlborough House set, of which Queen Victoria had so deeply disapproved, had become the Edwardian establishment.

Jane Ridley

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OXFORD  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Jane Ridley, 'Marlborough House set (act. 1870s–1901)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, May 2012  
[<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/theme/53154>, accessed ]

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