



The Cavendish

London

# THE CAVENDISH HOTEL

*Historical Notes  
by  
Nicholas Redman*







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## *Introduction*

Jermyn Street in which the Cavendish Hotel stands runs east-west across the northern part of the district of St. James's, an area which is known for its aristocratic connections, and in particular for its clubhouses. It also includes St. James's Palace built for King Henry VIII. It takes its name from Henry Jermyn, Earl of St. Albans, to whose trustees the whole of Pall Mall Field was leased in 1661 by the trustees of Henrietta Maria for thirty years, with subsequent grants extending the leasehold to 1740.

Lord St Albans planned and then developed a court suburb centred on St. James's Square, an orderly and innovative piece of town planning. Jermyn Street, first mentioned by name in the rate books for 1667, was completed by 1681-82, though it was not extended west to St. James's Street until 1746, and east into Haymarket only in c.1819. The church of St. James, by Sir Christopher Wren, on the north side of the street, which acted as a focal point, was consecrated in 1684.

From an early date there seems to have been a marked difference in the social status of the inhabitants of the western and eastern halves of Jermyn Street. Most of the more highly rated houses stood to the west of the church, and a number of them were occupied by persons of note. A blue plaque on a building near the Cavendish, for example, records that Sir Isaac Newton lived in a house on that site. East of the church the rateable value of the houses declined progressively.

### *Cavendish Hotel – early days*

In 1815 Jermyn Street was described as containing “a whole range of hotels... All the articles of consumption are of the best; and the accommodations, much to the injury of taverns and lodging-houses, combine all the retirement and comforts of home with the freedom of access, egress, and ingress, which one normally expects when abroad”.

No. 81 Jermyn Street became a hotel towards the end of the eighteenth century. A petition by Robert Miller, hotel keeper

and wine merchant, in 1811 for a new lease of the house, described it as having been “for many years known as Miller's Hotel”. For a short period in the 1830s the hotel was called the Orléans Hotel, but in 1836 its name was changed to the Cavendish.

By the mid-nineteenth century the street was home to generals, princes, bankers and viscounts, and had become a very fashionable place. A statue to Beau Brummell (1778-1846) by sculptor Irena Sedlecka was unveiled by HRH Princess Michael of Kent near the hotel at the entrance to the Piccadilly Arcade in 2002. It bears the quotation: “To be truly elegant one should not be noticed”.



The Cavendish seems to have been particularly favoured by members of the Irish aristocracy. Lord Talbot de Malahide, Fellow of the Royal Society and a lord-in-waiting to Queen Victoria stayed at the hotel from 1859 until his death in 1883. At various times he was joined by other Irish gentlemen including Major-General the Rt. Hon Francis Plunkett Dunne and Lord Edward Kennedy. Later on, Lord Ribblesdale took a permanent suite of rooms at the Cavendish making it his London home until his death in 1925. The Cavendish's reputation was well established by the end of the century. And that was before Rosa Lewis decided to move there.

### ***Rosa Lewis***

Rosa Ovenden, the fifth of nine children, was born in Leyton in East London on 27 September 1867. She left school when she was 12 years old to go into domestic service. At the age of 16 she joined the household of Philippe, the exiled Comte de Paris at Sheen House in Mortlake. After valuable apprenticeships and several

promotions she was lent to the Duc d'Aumale at Chantilly, before coming back to take charge of the kitchens of the Duc d'Orleans at Sandhurst. Lady Randolph Churchill started the trend of employing her, followed by the Saviles, the Asquiths and many other aristocratic and well to do families.

Her style was influenced by French cooking, and was much simpler and lighter than the English food of the time. It was at Sheen House that she first met Edward, Prince of Wales, who complimented her on the excellence of her cooking, and publicly admitted to liking her food the best. For the next 20 years hostesses wishing to impress Edward always employed Rosa.

In about 1899 or 1900 she moved the headquarters of her catering service to the Cavendish. In 1902 the lease of 81 Jermyn Street and 21 Duke Street was re-assigned by the landlords from Felipe Santiago Franco to Rosa's husband Excelsior Tyrel Chiney Lewis, a butler, who she had married in 1893. The remaining years of the lease cost her £5,000. Yearly rates were

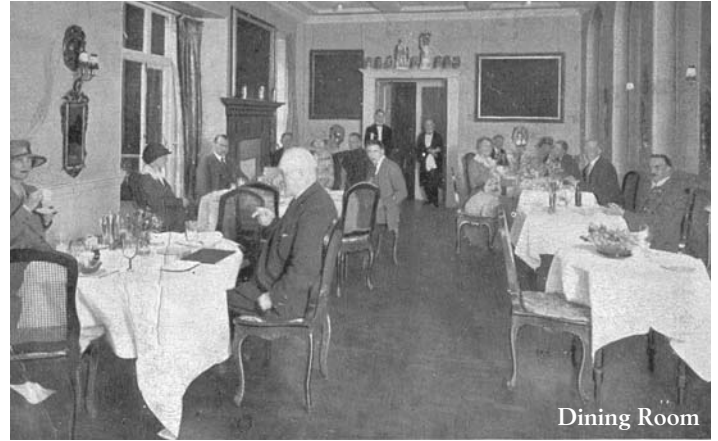
£54 13s 9d. Total rent and rates amounted to some £600. It was suspected by some that the King had helped her to purchase it. After buying the lease she put her husband and his sister Laura in charge. But within nine months debts were mounting out of control, fraud was suspected, guests were leaving and bills were unpaid. Lewis had a drink problem. Rosa threw them both out, divorced her husband, and in 1904 took over the running of the hotel herself.

In 1911 the Governors of Bethlem Hospital, owners of the freehold since 1830, granted Mrs. Lewis a reversionary lease of the Cavendish together with the Hotel André (which had been known as the British Hotel until 1908) at 82 and 83 Jermyn Street. The deal also included a private hotel at 84 Jermyn Street and Nos. 18, 19 and 20 Duke Street. As part of the agreement she undertook to spend £5,000 on improvements.

She now set about combining and modernising these properties to form the one Cavendish Hotel. In the beginning



Courtyard



Dining Room

*The Cavendish Hotel Circa 1920's*



Bedroom



Entrance Hall

there were only 3 bathrooms. By 1923 there were 46. She showed a remarkably sure and very personal flair for furnishing and decoration, and a delightful, if somewhat austere, taste in dress. Guests of the hotel were not welcomed unless they were personally known to her, or came with an introduction from one of her constantly increasing circle of friends on both sides of the Atlantic. She frequently held parties in her sitting room at which the champagne flowed freely. The slight air of raffishness was heightened by the enormous number of portraits and photographs of the famous, and not so famous, or the merely notorious, which lined the walls. Her famous rebuke to those who behaved badly was 'You treat my house like an hotel!'

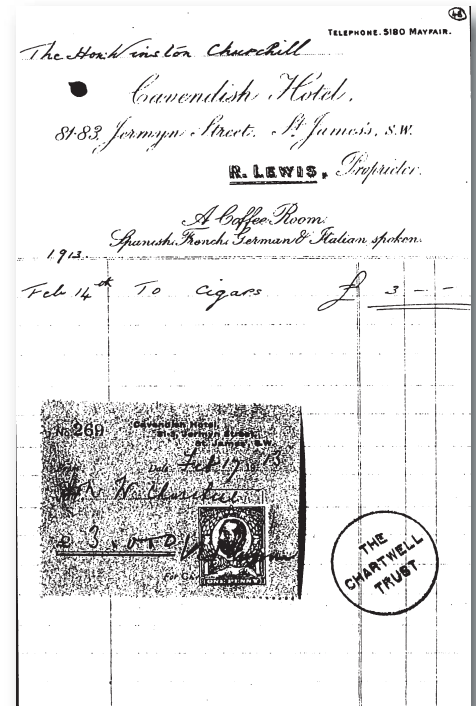
In November 1907 she cooked for the German Kaiser Wilhelm II while he was staying at Highcliffe Castle, Christchurch. He was so impressed that she was later invited on board the Imperial Yacht, the Hohenzollern, to eat luncheon at his table as his personal guest. Her friendship with the Kaiser, close friendship with Lord Ribblesdale, and her alleged affair with the

Prince of Wales ensured that her name was always in the news. She was now doing official dinners for the Government as well as private events, supported by her team of helpers. Her recipes were published in the newspapers. The celebrated chef Auguste Escoffier described her as the "Queen of Cooks".

Meanwhile business at the Cavendish was doing well. Lord and Lady Randolph Churchill often stayed there with young Winston, who continued to visit in adult life. Among the papers held in his Archive Trust is a bill and receipt dated February 1913 from the hotel's Coffee Room for £3 for cigars. According to the printed heading on the bill Spanish, French, German and Italian was spoken in the Coffee Room. Other visitors included Lord Northcliffe, General Kitchener and the Duke of Windsor. Other regulars included Ellen Terry, George Bernard Shaw, Tallulah Bankhead, Isadora Duncan, John Singer Sargent and Augustus John. Both the latter painted Rosa.

The First World War brought the Edwardian period to an end, and the

beginning of many changes, both at the hotel, and in society. The portrait presented to her by the Kaiser, which had had pride of place in the hotel was relegated to the men's room. Although Lloyd George and many other well known figures frequently came to the hotel, she decided, as the war



went on, to turn it into a 'social first aid centre' for servicemen. But times were not easy and by the end of the war the hotel had become tired and shabby.

In the 1920s Mrs. Lewis briefly encouraged a new crowd of bright young things. And it was at this time that she recruited a seamstress, Edith Jeffrey, to help renovate the fabrics at the hotel. Edith became a lifelong friend staying with Rosa to the very end. But more and more Rosa began to retreat into the old world of Edwardian comfort to hide from the rapid social changes of the period, creating an atmosphere that was appreciated by many. Evelyn Waugh, in his 1930 novel, *Vile*

Bodies, which features the Cavendish with Rosa thinly disguised as Lotte Crump of Shephard's Hotel, wrote, "one can still draw up, cool and uncontaminated, great, healing draughts of Edwardian certainty".

An advertisement for the hotel in 1927 under the heading 'Country Solitude in Town', declared: 'All bedrooms overlook courtyard, face south, and enjoy maximum sunshine and daylight. Steam heating and baths to every room. Old established and luxuriously appointed'.

When old Dorchester House in Park Lane was demolished in 1929, Rosa, always a keen collector, bought pictures, mirrors,



**The Cavendish Hotel**  
81-83, JERMYN STREET, ST. JAMES', S.W. 1

**COUNTRY SOLITUDE IN TOWN**

All bedrooms overlook courtyard, face south, and enjoy maximum sunshine and daylight.

**STEAM HEATING AND BATHS TO EVERY ROOM**

Old established and luxuriously appointed.

Telephone: REGENT 1203.  
Telegrams: "EXCELLENT, PICCY, LONDON."  
ROSA LEWIS.



railings, mantelpieces and cast-iron balustrades. Some of the decorative items finished up in the garden.

During the Second World War Rosa again played host to servicemen. In May 1941 the Cavendish was badly damaged by



bombs in an air raid, and she was lucky to escape without serious injury. Despite the bombing the hotel carried on. In 1944 she became ill and had to go to a nursing home. In 1945 her little dog Kippy died, the third with that name. There used to be a plaque to the original Kippy just inside the front door. It read: 'Kippy 1912-1929. In loving memory'.

She eventually returned to the hotel where Edith took care of her, until she finally died on 28 November 1952 at the age of 85. Many local streets were closed for her funeral service which was held in James's church. It took place in the south aisle, the only part of the building in use after the main church had been heavily damaged in air raids in 1940-41. She was buried in Putney Vale Cemetery.

For another ten years Edith Jeffrey continued to run the hotel, now in a state of decline, until her own death. In June 1962 the old Cavendish Hotel finally closed its doors, and work began to clear out all the furniture and other items that Rosa Lewis had amassed over the years.

## *The new Cavendish Hotel*

In November 1964 the site was occupied by the developers Queen Anne's Hotels & Properties Group, which soon after became a subsidiary of Trust Houses Ltd., chaired by Lord Crowther. Within six weeks the old hotel had been demolished and re-building commenced. The new hotel was very different to the old Cavendish, but it did not neglect its heritage. Photographs of Rosa Lewis, of the old Cavendish Hotel, as

well as old bills and letters, displayed in the hotel reception area ensure that the memory of this remarkable woman, described in her obituary in The Times as 'a welcoming, gracious survivor from another age', is not forgotten.

The new Cavendish Hotel was built by main contractors Sir Robert McAlpine & Sons to the design of architect Maurice Hanna. It cost nearly £2 million, and had 252 bedrooms. It is stone-faced, of



Entrance, late 1970's

reinforced concrete frame construction with a three-storey podium surmounted by a 130 ft. high twelve-storey tower. There are entrances in Jermyn Street and Duke Street, the latter also giving access to an underground car park. An interesting feature at this entrance is a large semi-abstract relief by William Mitchell. The seven fibre glass panels, cast from polyurethane moulds and each measuring about 16ft by 3ft, were originally bronzed but have since been painted white.

The new Cavendish formally opened on Saturday 2 July 1966. It is interesting now



to note that the tariff for a double bedroom then was from £9 a day, while a Penthouse bedroom with balcony was from £12. This rate included continental breakfast when served in the bedroom. In 1970 Crowther's Trust Houses Ltd merged with Charles Forte's Forte Holdings Ltd to form Trust Houses Forte Ltd. In 1979 the company changed its name to Trusthouse Forte Ltd, eventually becoming Forte PLC in 1991.

The Cavendish was also in the news at this time with the screening by BBC Television of the drama series 'The Duchess of Duke Street'. The story, loosely based on Rosa Lewis's life and career, ran for 31 episodes broadcast between September 1976 and December 1977. On 16 November 2006 a circular green City of Westminster plaque on the wall by the Jermyn Street entrance was unveiled by Gemma Jones, the actress who had played the part of Louisa Trotter, the 'Duchess' in the series.

Forte's ownership of the Cavendish came to an abrupt end in January 1996 following the company's falling to a hostile £3.9 billion acquisition bid by TV and

leisure group Granada. In May 2000 control of Granada's hotels, including the Cavendish, was transferred to a holding company Granada Compass, and it was from Granada Compass that the De Vere Group bought the Cavendish in December 2000 for £60 million. In 2006 Richard Balfour-Lynn's Alternative Hotel Group (AHG) completed a £1 billion acquisition of De Vere. Shortly afterwards AHG sold the Cavendish to the owners of the Telegraph Group, and the nearby Ritz Hotel in Piccadilly, and a new chapter in the more than 200-year-long history of the hotel began.





