

## THE KIT-CAT CLUB DECANTER

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When an engraved flask emerged from the dusty loft of a house in the South-west of England in 2003 (Sotheby's 2003, 76–7, lot 101) and was subsequently sold to a private collector at auction in London, it created more than a small amount of interest. How long it had been in that attic remains a mystery though the vendor had suggested that it had once belonged to an unnamed opera singer who had vacated the property some 20 years earlier. Its subsequent owners were oblivious of its true significance. However, as a piece of English social history this flask has an importance far beyond its intended use and decorative appeal and is central to our understanding of the *mores* of the period.

Dating from the first quarter of the 18th century, the flask is of soda metal, 280mm tall and in shape is of a flattened ovoid or tear-drop form possessing a string rim below the lip of the neck. An applied foot-ring completes the ensemble (FIG. 1).

Its dusty appearance owes nothing to the loft from whence it came but sadly the glass is affected by crizzling. This weathered look may appeal to the archaeological members of this Congress but, as we know, this condition was not achieved through burial in the ground but by the interaction of the atmosphere with the soda alkali (see for example Fearn *et al.* this volume).

On either side of the flask appear formal scenes of seated gentlemen wearing elaborate wigs, dining or toasting, their tables bedecked with wine glasses and decanters, the decanters of similar form to our flask itself but with what appear to be stoppers and with plates and cutlery. Whilst in the 18th century engraving was a popular form of decoration on glass and, of course, glass was commonly used at dining tables, engraved scenes of dining on glass vessels are relatively rare, especially on English manufactured examples. One famous later example is the English lead-glass punchbowl at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Sotheby's 1964, lot 154). Dating to *c.* 1760, one side of the bowl depicts a wheel-engraved view of men seated around a table holding drinking glasses, not unlike the scene on our flask. It also bears the coat-of-arms of the Wentworth family and a view of a large house on the reverse thought to be that of either Wentworth Woodhouse, Yorkshire, or Milton, Northamptonshire.

What makes our earlier continental soda-glass flask unique are the inscriptions. On the obverse appears 'The Kitcat' (FIG. 2) and on the reverse 'The Toasts' (FIG. 3). On the neck above the cartouche on the obverse side it is inscribed 'This Unites us' and within the scene of dining is inscribed the name *Jacob Tonson P.*

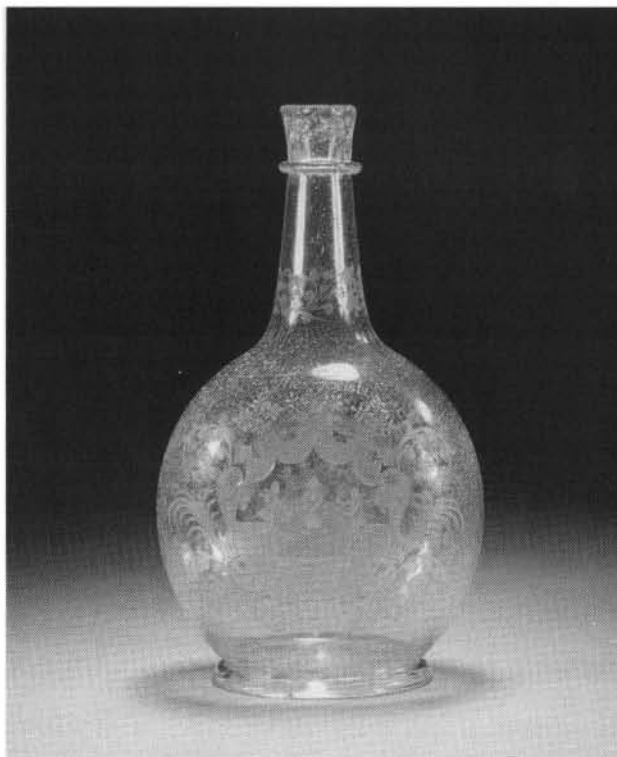


FIG. 1 The Kit-Cat Club decanter (courtesy of Sotheby's)

The iconography and inscriptions are a direct reference to the Kit-Cat club, founded in London towards the end of the 17th century largely by Lord Somers, the Lord Chancellor, and the publisher Jacob Tonson, its secretary. Various spelt Kitcat, Kit-Cat and Kit Cat, the club's members were influential Whig politicians, leading men of letters, architects, poets and the like. They began meeting in Christopher Catling's tavern near Temple Bar in the City of London. It is generally believed that the club took its name from his mutton pies which we are told were known as Kit-cats. These pies may be seen on the table on the front of the flask. Members included leading politicians and landowners, younger men like Sir Robert Walpole and William Pulteney, the writers Joseph Addison, Sir John Vanbrugh, William Congreve and Sir Richard Steele, as well as the Duke of Marlborough and the Earl of Burlington.

Their ostensible object would seem to have been the encouragement of literature and the fine arts, but the end they diligently sought to accomplish was the promotion of loyalty and allegiance to the Protestant succession in the House of Hanover. The club's political significance was



FIG. 2 The Kit-Cat Club decanter: detail of obverse 'The Kitcat'



FIG. 3 The Kit-Cat Club decanter: detail of reverse 'The toasts'

such that Robert Walpole records that though its members were generally mentioned as a 'set of wits', they were in reality the patriots who saved Britain. The club consisted of at least 39 members, all men of the first rank and quality of learning, most of whom were at times employed in the greatest offices of state, or in the army, and none were admitted but those of high distinction in one way or another.

To collectors of 18th-century English drinking glasses, the Kit-Cat club is best known by a type of glass. Varieties of the type are found in the collectors' literature (Bickerton, 1986, 81, fig. 117). Generally referred to as 'balustroid', such a glass is considered to have a tall trumpet-shaped bowl set on a short inverted baluster with a conical foot (Treglown and Mortimer 1981, 48). The club is better known to historians through the magnificent set of portraits of its members – which were indeed all gifts to Jacob Tonson – now hanging in the National Portrait Gallery, London, and at Beningbrough Hall, Yorkshire. They were painted over a space of more than 20 years by the well known portrait artist, Sir Godfrey Kneller, himself a member of the club. More than 40 of the original 48 portraits survive. Two balustroid wine glasses appear indistinctly in Kneller's club portrait of the Earl of Lincoln and the Duke of Newcastle, c. 1721. It is these images which have led historians to call what they believe to be similar glasses 'Kit-cats'. However, it has been suggested that the glasses in Kneller's portrait are unlikely to be precise copies of specific glasses used by the club (Treglown and Mortimer 1981, 46).

The portraits of the members were originally intended to be hung in the room which Tonson had added to his residence at Barn Elms, Surrey, for the meetings of the club. Due to the low height of the ceilings of this room the portraits had to be of a half size – 36 inches long by 28 inches wide. This merited 'Kit Cat' to become a technical term in painting.

It was the club's practice to toast famous and beautiful women. When a woman was toasted her name, and perhaps a verse, would be engraved on a glass. Tonson himself published *Verses Written for the Toasting-glasses of the Kit-Cat Club in the year 1703*. This year seems to be an important one in the life of the club about which I will say more shortly. The custom of toasting ladies after dinner was peculiar to the Kit-Cat club, and it emerged from a smaller club called 'The Knights of the Toast'. This is alluded to in no. 24 of the London society paper *The Tatler*.

Though this institution had so trivial a beginning it is now elevated into a formal order, and that happy virgin, who is received and drunk to at their meetings, has no more to do in this life but to judge and accept of the first good offer. The manner of her inauguration is much like that of a choice of a Doge at Venice; it is performed by balloting; and when she is so chosen, she reigns indisputably for that ensuing year; but must be elected anew to prolong her empire a moment beyond it. When she is regularly chosen, her name is written with a diamond on one of the drinking glasses. The hieroglyphic of the diamond is to show her that value is imaginary; and that of the glass, to acquaint her that her condition is frail, and depend on the hand which holds her.

The club had its toasting glasses inscribed in diamond point – an interesting contrast to the wheel engraving of

the flask – with a verse or toast to some reigning beauty, amongst whom were the four lovely daughters of the Duke of Marlborough – Lady Godolphin, Lady Sutherland, Lady Bridgewater and Lady Monthermer; Swift's friends, Mrs Long and Mrs Barton – the latter the beautiful and witty niece of Sir Isaac Newton; the Duchess of Bolton, Mrs Brudenell, and Lady Carlisle; Mrs D. Kirk and Lady Wharton.

One such toast is that to the Duchess of Richmond:

Of two fair Richmonds different ages boast,  
Theirs was the first, and ours the brightest toast.  
Th' adorer's offering proves who's most divine,  
They sacrificed in water, we in wine

Unlike on the European continent, glass engraving in England is quite rare. Wheel engraving was highly popular in Germany especially where the craft came under the patronage of the royal courts and local aristocracy. This was not the tradition in England. The use of a diamond point is thus more commonplace in England where the technique was largely undertaken by amateur engravers. The copper wheel was more likely to have been used by itinerant German artisans who had been trained in its use.

Returning to the flask, the club's secretary, Jacob Tonson, may have been the commissioner. However, since Kneller's portraits were gifts from the members of the club to Tonson, the flask may have been one further gift. Not only does his name appear within the design – with the addition of the curious 'P' suffix (possibly an allusion to his profession as a publisher) – but it might have been made for use at his home in Surrey where the club occasionally met. A London bookseller and publisher from 1676, he is best known for his close association with the poet John Dryden and published most of his works. He also bought the valuable rights to Milton's *Paradise Lost*. In 1712 he became joint publisher with Samuel Buckley of *The Spectator* which is still to be seen on our newsstands today. Tonson's portrait was painted by Kneller in 1717.

In 1703 Tonson went to Holland for the purpose of procuring paper and getting engravings made for the edition of Caesar's *Commentaries* which he published in 1712. It is during this visit that I originally believed that Tonson acquired the flask. From a study of the style of the decoration used by itinerant Bohemian engravers – such as Georg Kreybich – the flask was thought at first to be Dutch or Bohemian. There are several aspects of this flask which now suggest a Saxon origin. Firstly, the flask is undoubtedly of continental manufacture and is similar to types made both in Germany and Holland at the turn of the 18th century. Figural scenes, mostly engraved in diamond point, are relatively commonplace in the Dutch glass engraver's repertoire, the tiled flooring reminiscent not only of contemporary oil paintings of Dutch interiors but also found later in the ever popular 'pregnancy' or 'Kraamvrouw' glasses produced by copper-wheel engraving in Holland in the middle of the 18th century. However, the early date of the engraving on this glass, the fact that it is done with a copper wheel, the strong similarity to glass produced in Dresden at this time and the style of Saxon engraving, would suggest otherwise.

The depiction of decanters in the table settings on the flask portray them with stoppers made as a wide band of glass below a ball finial with a hollow tapering peg below. Such stoppers are commonplace on Saxon flasks or

decanters and were used later in the century. Two ruby-tinted flasks are known, dated 1713–1719, of the same form as the Kit-Cat club decanter, each with a similar stopper, the sides bearing leaf and scroll cartouches, a flowing engraving style and applied foot rings (Haase 1988, 88–9, figs 101, 102). The Dresden glasshouse of Augustus the Strong, the Elector of Saxony, was known for its production of glass which were either royal gifts or commissions for people living far from the Saxon borders. As a centre of the arts it would not have been difficult for a member of the Kit-Cat club to have acquired such a commemorative piece from a glasshouse in Dresden, where engraving workshops were quite used to supplying foreign clients.

It is very likely that through his need for printing plates Tonson would be familiar with engravers in London. Therefore, it is interesting to see that a continental flask with English inscriptions was commissioned from Dresden rather than using a local engraver working in lead crystal. This might underline the lack of a glass-engraving tradition in London at this time, especially for wheel engraving. The Bohemian engraver Georg Kreybich is reported to have arrived in London from Hamburg in 1688 after travelling throughout Germany and Austria (Schmidt 1922, 391–2). He brought with him a shipment of glassware. He complained in his diary about the competition from six glassworks in the town which 'at that time made more beautiful glass than that which we had brought with us'. Kreybich was ultimately successful and attributed this success to the novelty of engraved and enamelled glass:

Our glass was engraved and painted and none like it had yet appeared there – we were the first. This again was an unexpected boon.

Kreybich returned to Bohemia via Harlem, Delft, Leyden, Amsterdam, Zwolle, Hannover, Wolfenbuttel, Leipzig and, interestingly, Dresden, engraving glass to order on his cart-mounted equipment.

In the summer the club met at the 'Upper Flask', Hampstead Heath, which was described as a gay resort with its races, ruffles and private marriages (Barrett 1889, 43). The allusion to Hampstead Heath as a gay resort is used in a very different manner from that of today where indeed in popular parlance it has become such!

Tonson appears to have been the key-stone of the Kit-Cat club, as may be collected from the following extracts from letters addressed to him from several members. The Duke of Somerset tells him in a letter dated 22 June 1703 'Our Club is dissolved till you revive it again, which we are impatient of.' In the same month and year, Vanbrugh, who was always exceedingly well disposed towards Tonson, and corresponded with him for over 20 years, writing to him in Amsterdam, says:

in short, the Kit Cat wants you much more than you ever can do them. Those who remain in town are in great desire of waiting on you at Barn Elms, not that they have finished their pictures, neither; though, to excuse them as well as myself, Sir Godfrey has been most in fault. The fool has got a country house near Hampton Court, and is so busy in fitting it up (to receive nobody), that there's no getting him to work.

Perhaps the inscription on the flask 'This Unites us' was an addition by Tonson to revive the flagging spirit of the club referred to by the Duke of Somerset.

From about the year 1720, the elder Tonson seems to have transferred his business to his nephew, and lived principally on his estate in Herefordshire, until 1736, when he died. From his will, made 2 December 1735 and proved 9 April 1736 it appears that he had property in Herefordshire and Gloucestershire. I have yet to find the will which one hopes might list this flask and other table vessels used in the service of the club. If this flask was a part of the larger gift of portraits to Tonson, it is tantalising to think that there may be other individual flasks extant which bear the names of the other members and that might have been used at Barn Elms.

The spirit engendered in this flask, its sentiments and its wide international appeal remind one of today's AIHV Congress where the appreciation of wine, women and glass Unites us all.

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