

# History of the Celtic Club

Founded on 26 September 1887, the Club was originally a semi-political association, supportive of Irish [Home Rule](#) amongst Melbourne's sizeable Irish population; and championing the rights of [Irish Australians](#) in an establishment otherwise dominated by the [Anglo-Saxon](#), (largely [Protestant](#)) traditions of [Great Britain](#) and its colonies. Reflecting this political background, the original name of the club was the 'Celtic Home Rule Club. Though politicised, the club nevertheless sought to avoid domination by the [clergy](#), both to avoid offending Protestant Irish members, as well as to preserve the institution as a celebrator of the secular life and culture of Melbourne.

Formally opened in the new year of [1888](#), meetings of the club were originally held at the Imperial Hotel, before the first club rooms were opened at 82 [Collins Street](#). This makes the club the second-oldest Irish organisation in Australia, after the Sydney-based Hibernian Society (founded 1880); and the popularity of such an association is evident from the membership increasing from only 70 to 400 within its first year. The dominant figure of the club from its foundation to the early twentieth century, was Morgan Jaguers, who also headed Melbourne's Irish Land League, Irish National League, United Irish League and Melbourne Irish Pipers' Club.

Disagreements within the club over political crises back in [Ireland](#) almost destroyed it as a viable entity. The [Parnell](#) divorce scandal (1890-1891) caused a split in the club between continued supporters of Parnell and his detractors. Such was the turmoil wrought by the Parnell case, the club was refounded at the corner of Collins Street and [Swanston Street](#), in 1891.<sup>1</sup>

Enduring such divisions (and threatened bankruptcy in 1900), the club remained the Australian centre for fundraising aimed at establishing a free Ireland, and a peak was reached in 1912 with the profitable departure dinner of Irish envoys W. A. Redmond and J. T. Donovan. The pair, feted by notaries from all over the country, left Australia after eighteen months with £30,000 to devote to the cause.

Despite being a focal point for often overt sectarianism, the "Triumphant Years" of the club (and its associated St. Patrick's Day events) were between 1908-1913, during which attendances at marches rose to 100,000, and successive [Governors-General](#) also put in appearances at the club and festivities, before the [First World War](#) brought renewed tensions.

With civil war threatening in Ireland in 1914, Club president Major T. M. McInerney took the remarkable step of cabling [British Prime Minister Herbert Henry Asquith](#) with an offer of assistance from the club. The actual outbreak of war led to the club slowly losing touch with mainstream events, its chief members clinging to outmoded ideas about an autonomous Ireland within the [United Kingdom](#), long after the rank and file had turned to republicanism.<sup>[12]</sup> The [Easter Rising](#) (1916) and [Anglo-Irish War](#) (1919-1921) reignited the divide between British loyalism and Irish nationalist feeling in [Melbourne](#), resulting in the increased politicisation of [St. Patrick's Day](#) marches and events with which the club was associated. Archbishop [Daniel Mannix](#)'s championing of the 'No [Conscription](#)' case caused tension within the Celtic Club; but the [Irish Civil War](#) (1922-1923) was most divisive, as politicised Irish Melburnians were forced to choose between the government of the new [Irish Free State](#) and the [Irish Republican Army](#)

(headed by [Eamon de Valera](#)). The club practically split again in 1920 as a result of this, as well as the [city council's](#) attempts to ban the St. Patrick's Day celebrations.<sup>1</sup>

Thankfully, the politics of the old world soon receded from importance, particularly as the effects of bitter division and infighting on Melbourne's Irish community became apparent.<sup>1</sup> The Celtic Club was one of the few survivors from the plethora of Irish-Australian political and social organisations which existed before the turmoil of the First World War.<sup>1</sup> As the twentieth century progressed, the club began to assume its current form, as a purely social gathering place for "respectable gentlemen". Irish politicians visiting the club (de Valera on 12 May 1948; [Gerry Adams](#) in the 1980s) have been treated more as celebrities than the leaders of a particular cause (though some club members are reputedly still ardent supporters of the [Irish nationalist](#) cause).

## Headquarters of the Celtic Club



 Former Monahan's New Union Club Hotel. 316 Queen Street, Melbourne

Since 21 December 1959, the club's headquarters have been at 316-320 [Queen Street](#), near the corner of [La Trobe Street](#) in Melbourne's [Central Business District](#). This purchase - of Monahan's New Union Club Hotel - thus provided the club with a stable headquarters, ending the uncertainty which had plagued it since foundation. The club is open to both members and non-members for meals and beverages, provided visitors reside outside a 5 kilometre radius of the HQ. Visitors residing within 5 km must apply for membership before enjoying the facilities.

Live sports events (including [Gaelic football](#) and [Hurling](#)) are broadcast in the bar area of the club, and live music is also performed, in keeping with the club's heritage as a champion of Irish culture.

Histories of the club include: Hugh Buggy, *The Celtic Club – A Brief History*, 1947 & D. J. O'Hearn, *Erin go bragh - advance Australia fair: a hundred years of growing*, Melbourne: Celtic Club, 1990. Both record the key events in the club's history, and the role it played in helping Irish Melburnians to become accepted into mainstream Australian culture. Various histories of the Irish element in Victoria (and Australia more generally) make frequent reference to the importance of the club for maintaining a sense of 'Irishness' in Melbourne, as well as helping to foster a new identity. The club was also of sufficient cultural and historical significance for the city of Melbourne to be included in Andrew Brown-May and Shurlee Swain's groundbreaking *Encyclopedia of Melbourne* in 2005.