On 15th May 1776 an unlikely meeting took place between Samuel Johnson and John Wilkes at a dinner party held by Edward and Charles Dilly above their bookshop at 22 Poultry, London and instigated by James Boswell. Other guests included John Coakley Lettsom (a Quaker doctor) and Arthur Lee (a Patriot). The Dilly brothers were publishers for many authors including Boswell and Lettsom.

James Boswell

Johnson was a poet, essayist, moralist, literary critic, biographer, editor and lexicographer. He was a devoted Anglican and a committed Tory. In short he was regarded as one of the greatest figures of 18th century life and letters.

Samuel Johnson

Wilkes, on the other hand, was an English radical, journalist and politician who had been outlawed, imprisoned and made bankrupt. He was notoriously immoral and had been a member of the Hell Fire Club, at whose orgies it was whispered blasphemous writes were performed. Despite all this he had been Lord Mayor of London in 1775. Wilkes was an ugly man with a very bad squint. However, he had the tongue of an archangel, and in spite of his
looks, boasted that if left alone with a woman for half an hour he could make her believe anything he liked. This was the man that Boswell manoeuvred Johnson into meeting.

John Wilkes

Boswell knew that if he had immediately said that the Dilly brothers had asked Wilkes, Johnson and himself to dine with them the same day, Johnson would have certainly refused, for Wilkes had lampooned Johnson recently. He therefore influenced Johnson through his weakness for thinking that he was a man of the world, by telling him that Dilly had asked Johnson and himself to dine but that possibly Johnson might not wish to go unless he knew that the company he was to meet was agreeable to him. “What do you mean, sir?” said Johnson, huffily. “What do you take me for? Do you think I am so ignorant of the world as to imagine that I am to prescribe to a gentleman what company he is to have at his table?”

Boswell was most apologetic and explained that he only wished to protect him from meeting people he might not like. “Perhaps he may have what he calls his patriotic friends with him,” said Boswell. “Well, Sir, and what then?” snorted Johnson. “What care I for his patriotic friends? Poh.”

“I should not be surprised to find Jack Wilkes there,” said Boswell, springing his trap. Johnson fell into it at once. “And if Jack Wilkes should be there, what is that to me sir?” he said severely, after which he started to admonish the now delighted Boswell, saying:-

“My dear friend let us have no more of this. I am sorry to be angry with you; but really it is treating me strangely to talk to me as if I could not meet any company whatsoever, occasionally.” Boswell was repentant and said, “Pray forgive me, sir. I meant well. But you shall meet whoever, comes, for me.”

But it was not all plain sailing. On the appointed day Boswell found that Johnson had forgotten about the dinner party, and had ordered some dinner at home. It was only after Boswell mollified Mrs Williams, the house-keeper, that he eventually got the doctor dressed to go with him.
Boswell later recalled: “When I had him fairly seated in a Hackney coach with me, I exulted as much as a fortune hunter who has got an heiress into a post-chaise with him, to set out for Gretna Green.”

On their arrival at Dilly’s it was clear that Johnson knew very few of the guests. “Who is that gentleman?” he whispered to Mr Dilly in the drawing-room. When Dilly told him it was Arthur Lee, the American, he was distinctly upset, for Lee was the recognised representative left behind by Benjamin Franklin when he left London in 1775. Johnson had written a pamphlet entitled ‘Taxation no Tyranny’ in reply to the American cry of ‘No Taxation without Representation.’ The Colonies were in open revolt, and the ‘Declaration of Independence’ though not yet publicly known, was felt to be imminent. Little wonder that Johnson said “Too, too, too” under his breath when he found himself dining with Arthur Lee. But there was worse to follow: “And who,” said Johnson, “is that gentleman in lace?” “Mr Wilkes, sir.” This was too much for Johnson. He picked up a book and went and sulked in the corner of the drawing room, pretending to read.

Soon dinner was served, and Wilkes sat down next to Johnson and exerted himself to please. Johnson was a hearty eater, and Wilkes was very assiduous in helping him, for it must be remembered that even as late as 1776 the dishes at a dinner were put in front of the guests, and each one cut off what he required. It was therefore a great courtesy when a younger man, helping himself, also helped his elderly neighbour. “Mr Wilkes,” says Boswell, “was very assiduous in helping Johnson to some fine veal. “Pray give me leave, sir - it is better here – A little of the brown. – Some fat, sir a little of the stuffing. - Some gravy-” This completely won the doctor: “Sir, Sir, I am obliged to you, sir,” cried Johnson, bowing and turning his head to him. Fortunately the dinner was a great success and Wilkes and Johnson monopolised the conversation.

**John Coakley Lettsom (1744–1815)**
One of the guests at the dinner was John Coakley Lettsom, a physician and philanthropist and a friend of Boswell for 30 years.

Lettsom was born in 1744 at Little Vandyke, one of the Virgin Islands in the West Indies, the son of Edward Lettsom, plantation owner, and his wife, Mary née Coakley. Mary Coakley bore her husband seven sets of twins – all males. The seventh and last pair were John Coakley Lettsom and his brother Edward, who were the only twins to survive.
Early life and education
When he was six years old, Lettsom was sent to England for his education. Later he was apprenticed to Abraham Sutcliff, a surgeon and apothecary at Settle, Yorkshire. After five years' apprenticeship he served as a surgeon's dresser at St Thomas's Hospital, London.

Following his father's death, Lettsom returned to the West Indies to take possession of a plantation his father had bequeathed to him. He there performed a characteristically generous gesture: ‘The moment I came of age,’ he recalled ‘I found my chief property was in slaves, and without considering of future support, I gave them freedom, and began the world without fortune, without a friend, without person, and without address.’ Lettsom then went into practice in the Caribbean, and rapidly amassed some £2000, and with this he returned to London and embarked upon a medical career. In 1768 he entered the University of Edinburgh and later visited several universities on the continent. He graduated MD at Leiden in 1769, writing his dissertation on the pathological effects of tea drinking. In 1770 he became a licentiate of the Royal College of Physicians and a fellow of the Society of Antiquaries, and later, in 1773 he was elected a fellow of the Royal Society.

Medical practice and family life
Setting up in practice from Sambrook Court, Basinghall Street, London, Lettsom built up a successful practice through hard work. For example, in 1791 he observed that, ‘during the last nineteen years not one holiday have I taken.’ His busy practice made him wealthy and in 1800 his earnings were £12,000 (£756,000 today approx). His marriage to Anne Miers also gained him a considerable fortune and the couple had a large family.

Lettsom was a highly sociable man and he entertained extensively at his suburban house, Grove Hill, Camberwell. He also kept up an extensive correspondence with (among others) George Washington, Benjamin Rush, Benjamin Franklin, Erasmus Darwin, and Albrecht von Haller. Although a lifelong Quaker, he was not of the stern variety - indeed he was something of a ladies' man. He was widely regarded as a social climber, being caricatured in the Westminster Magazine in the guise of 'Dr. Wriggle' in 'Dr. Wriggle, or, the art of rising in physic'.

There are a number of limericks to Lettsom. For example:

I, John Lettsom,
Blisters, bleeds and sweats 'em.
If, after that, they please to die,
I, John Lettsom.

A prolific author
Lettsom was an ardent believer in the benefits of useful knowledge, medical advice, and moral exhortation. For example, he produced books and pamphlets against drunkenness. He also wrote about the evils of tea drinking and in his MD thesis on tea he argued that the habit made society enervated and effeminate. He championed a multitude of improving projects, among them soup kitchens. Passionate about education, he wrote a work on the management of boarding-schools, with advice on games, diet, attire, and cleanliness. Lettsom also found time to direct his attention to beehives, believing that they could become ‘appendages both of ornament and utility to the gardens about the metropolis’.
By 1802 Lettsom had collected his improving essays into *Hints Designed to Promote Beneficence, Temperance, and Medical Science*. These three volumes contained essays on such varied subjects as poverty, prostitution, infectious fevers and hydrophobia. Lettsom's literary activity was all the more remarkable because most of his works as well as his private letters were written in his carriage while driving about to see his patients.

**Philanthropic and professional activities**

Lettsom took part in the foundation of several valuable institutions. In 1770 he united with others in founding the General Dispensary in Aldersgate Street, the first of its kind in London. The dispensary gave free out-patient treatment to the poor through its resident apothecary, and inaugurated a tradition of domiciliary visiting by the medical staff. In 1774 he assisted William Hawes and others in founding the Royal Humane Society, to resuscitate the drowned, and in 1791 he was the driving force behind the establishment of the Royal Seabathing Infirmary at Margate, designed mainly to permit tuberculous patients to convalesce.

Lettsom's name is, however, chiefly connected with the Medical Society of London - became one of the society's founders in 1773. He supported it by the gift of a freehold house in Bolt Court, Fleet Street, and of a considerable library, and also by the foundation of the Fothergillian gold medal named after his patron. His own name was commemorated in the Lettsomian lectures given in the society. The aim of the society was to promote research as well as conviviality and papers were regularly delivered. The society proved especially popular with those excluded for religious reasons from the inner circles of the Royal College of Physicians.

Though piqued at his exclusion, as a Quaker, from the fellowship of the Royal College of Physicians, Lettsom was a zealous upholder of the dignity of his own profession. He later waged newspaper wars against quacks such as Theodor Myersbach, a German uroscopist and William Brodum, proprietor of a dangerous ‘nervous cordial’.

Lettsom was a supporter of smallpox inoculation and helped with the foundation of the Society for General Inoculation. When vaccination was introduced he warmly supported Edward Jenner.

**Grove Hill, Camberwell**

It was in 1779 that Lettsom purchased two and a half acres of land to build his villa at Grove Hill, Camberwell and by 1795 his estate had expanded to include over 10 acres of gardens. It was here that Boswell, Charles Dilly and John Nichols, Editor of the *Gentleman's Magazine*, and others enjoyed Lettsom’s hospitality.

![Grove Hill, Camberwell](image)
Camberwell was a very rural village in Lettsom’s day. In 1782 there was a plague of caterpillars in the neighbourhood, and the Vestry paid sixpence a bushel for their destruction. They also offered four pence for every hedgehog, dead or alive, one shilling for every polecat, and three pence a dozen for sparrow heads. In 1797 they were much troubled by ‘hogs being suffered to range at large in the roads’.

Lettsom built his villa and gardens so he could have a convenient place where he could retire at intervals from the heat and the smoke of the City and indulge in his botanical and horticultural hobbies, and also entertain his guests. On occasions he would prefer to walk back to the City rather than travel back in his coach.

Lettsom, in his description of his villa, says nothing about his accommodation, although he gives minute details of his museum and library. It is worth remembering that the eighteenth century was the era of the private collector, as public museums and libraries were still in their infancy at this time.

The library contained about 6000 volumes of books. There were also cabinets of shells, insects, various objects of natural history, specimens of woods and ambers, a collection of engravings and a 60-volume collection of dried plants. The museum had a collection of ores and minerals, and catalogues were kept for inspection. Members of the medical profession were encouraged to visit the library and museum which were open to them on Saturdays. The gardens were also open to the public on certain dates.

The grounds of his estate had various areas of interest. For example, the bowling-green was where the Athletae Club of twelve distinguished physicians and surgeons used to meet when it was Lettsom’s turn to host the meeting. The Temple of the Sybils was a sort of amateur observatory erected by Lettsom on the edge of the hill overlooking Peckham, which contained models illustrating popular lectures of astronomy. It also housed a number of South Sea weapons and curios as well as a set of models in cork of various classical tombs. This place was also a favourite rendezvous for Boswell, John Nichols, Charles Dilly and others and was where Boswell repeated his Horation Ode to Charles Dilly, plus other songs, when animated by Tortola punch or delicious syllabub. One verse from this Ode is as follows:

Methinks you laugh to hear but half
The name of Dr Lettsom
From him of good-talk, liquors food,-
His guests will always get some.
Boswell and Alcohol

Lettsom, although a very abstemious man himself, did not believe in forcing his views too much upon his guests, and appears to have kept a very good cellar at Grove Hill, as witnessed by the Rev Thomas Maurice:-

“Cellars with wine of choicest vintage stored;
A kind good mistress and a bounteous lord.”

When Dilly was away on business the pleasure of entertaining guests was assigned to Boswell, who sometimes in that capacity had tried the strength of the oldest bin. Boswell, as every reader of the *Life of Johnson* knows, was inclined to get very drunk at times, a common failing of his age, but in those days not at all derogatory to the dignity of a gentleman. Johnson himself, especially after the death of his wife, was most abstemious, and it was a constant grief to him when Boswell exceeded the limits of sobriety. Not only the Doctor, then, but Boswell’s father and his friend Temple all tried to cure Boswell of this weakness. Yet though he promised again and again, he failed. In a letter to Temple, describing one of those lapses, he says, “I did not get drunk; I was however intoxicated and very ill next day. I ask your forgiveness and I shall be more strictly cautious for the future. The drunken habits of this country (Scotland) are very bad.” This was 1775. But that he had not greatly improved may be surmised from a letter written to him by Lettsom in 1791: -

“Dear Boswell

“When I acknowledge that ever since I had the pleasure of thy acquaintance I have felt a singular esteem for thee, I only express a sentiment which every other person must feel, if placed in the same situation. The generosity, the candour, the openness of thy heart, combine to acquire and to secure the attachment of every liberal mind. This attachment I presume to claim; it is this that compels me to risk thy future friendship, by embracing the freedom which it inspires.

“I have, my friend, had some occasions of viewing thee in the most interesting situations, when thy whole soul has been poured out in social enjoyment, I might have said
ecstasy, and in no point of view canst thou appear more endearing; for those will love thee most who see most of thy heart. But in these scenes of pleasure, which I have cordially enjoyed, sometimes a sigh of solicitude has burst upon me, lest by any unguarded excitement of such conviviality a bodily constitution may be undermined, and that life thereby shortened, which every man of refinement and virtuous sociality must wish long, very long preserved.

“I have observed, not merely a too frequent use of the glass, but that mixture of liquors which, as a professional man, I can add tends to injure the best human fabric. I will add further, what ample experience authorises, that by whatever means the spirits are exhilarated beyond that chaste medium of nature, the alternation of mental languor will result; so that the depression is great in proportion to the degree of foreign excitement.

“Two motives embolden me thus to recall sober reflection, to chasten and moderate the fascinating influences of social pleasures, either too frequently repeated or too far extended. I feel in the first place the emotions of friendship, which I cannot repress; and in the next intrinsic solid sense of one I am proud to call my friend: these equally impel me to risk his censure, whilst the latter encourages me to subscribe myself, his sincerity,

J.C. Lettsom”

It is worth remembering that Lettsom had known Boswell for over 20 years when he wrote this letter which, allowing for the ore rotundo manner of the eighteenth century, is a very beautiful one. We can see in its carefully balanced phrases a sincere desire to help without offending; and that Boswell took it in the spirit with which it was written is proved from one of his subsequent replies:

“I regret that I see you so seldom. I am not cheerful at present; the visible wearing away of Sir Joshua Reynolds depresses me so much; and besides, I have not been so attentive as I should be to your most friendly recommendation as to regimen Spero meliora [I hope for better things].

“I ever am Yours very sincerely.

James Boswell

It was probably in the Temple of the Sybils, judging from Nichols’ recollections, that Lettsom noted these too convivial tendencies of his friend; and this building on the grounds of Grove Hill gains therefore an added interest from the association with James Boswell.