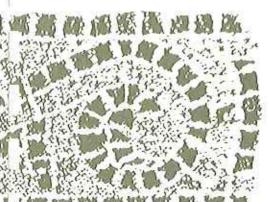
## THE PUFFINN



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A survey for The National Trust for Scotland

carried out by

Wk undertaken 1998

+ photos 1999

Glasgow University Archaeological Research Division

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#### Cover plate:

A night out in the Puffinn 1999,

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# THE PUFFINN

by

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1999

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### 1.0 Summary

In April 1998 the Army withdrew from St Kilda; however, the military infrastructure (the buildings, the road and so on) remains and is now maintained by a civilian work force. Perhaps the most infamous modern feature on St Kilda is the Puffinn, originally a military bar. It is now a 'private club' run by Serco Military personnel. This report describes some of the history and traditions of this establishment, and also seeks to assess the cultural significance of the Puffinn and address some of the differing attitudes toward it among those who use it.

#### 2.0 Introduction -

This work was commissioned by the National Trust for Scotland (hereafter NTS) in order that the Puffinn would be adequately recorded prior to any future refurbishment. The Puffinn was a military bar prior to the army withdrawal and contains almost 40 years' worth of associated memorabilia. The work for this report was undertaken in the summer months of 1998, following the withdrawal of the last Royal Engineer from the island. In the 1999 season further photographic recording completed this work. It should be noted here that traditions associated with the Puffinn and the KGB (see below) will have changed and developed over time. This report can only describe recent years with any certainty (from the late 1980s and early 1990s).

## 3.0 The Context of the Puffinn

St Kilda is a small archipelago 100 miles west of the Scottish mainland. The largest island within the group is Hirta. It is uncertain when the islands were first settled permanently, but in August 1930 the last of the native St Kildans, 36 people in total, were evacuated at their own request, as their way of life could no longer be sustained by an aging and dwindling population. The island remained uninhabited for 27 years until the arrival of the RAF in 1957.

Operation Hardrock began in 1957, the same year the NTS were bequeathed the islands of St Kilda from the 5th Marquis of Bute. However, this was not the first wave of military occupation on St Kilda. During the First World War a small naval detachment was stationed on Hirta with responsibility for manning a radio transmitter; after the war the military personnel were withdrawn and were not replaced.

In 1957 the RAF began constructing a road from the village area, where the main dwellings for the personnel were, to the top of Mullach Mor where a radar installation was to be positioned. The RAF were soon replaced by a detachment of Army personnel. In the mid 1980s Serco military were contracted to maintain and operate the radar stations and in 1998 the Royal Engineers were replaced by Serco Estate Management. Upon the withdrawal of the military presence, an island supervisor was appointed to oversee its smooth operation. Serco Estates Management are now responsible for running the power station and maintaining the MoD buildings, as well as associated duties. The two companies are independent of each other and it appears that the new arrangement works well.

The withdrawal of military personnel from Hirta marked yet another phase in St Kilda's history. One of the greatest concerns about its effects among regular visitors to and current employees on the island was the fate of the Puffinn. The military withdrawal sparked rumours that the Puffinn would be closed; however, this did not occur and today (1999) it remains open under the supervision of Screo Military personnel.

The Puffinn bar on Hirta was originally housed in an army Nissan hut; however, this structure was removed during the 1969 renovations of the military base and the bar is now in the main accommodation block facing Village Bay and Dun. The bar was constructed and run by military personnel, for military personnel, much like a squadron bar on any other army base in the UK. On St Kilda, however, the reality of the situation was always different from any other military establishment. Firstly, civilian visitors to the islands were not only allowed into the Puffinn but were positively encouraged to drink there. In the winter months visitors were very few and far between, but in the summer the number of people on the island and living on boats in the bay could swell into the hundreds, and this is still the case today. The Puffinn does not have a particularly long history, but it is certainly a colourful one.

## 4.0 Aims and Objectives

The primary aim of this project was to record some of the interior fixtures and fittings of the Puffinn and to attempt to portray the essence of the establishment. This report records the origins of some of the artefacts in the Puffinn before this information is lost. Not surprisingly, it has not been recorded elsewhere and as such almost all of the information within this report is from personal communications. In 1998 the Kilda Generating Board' (hereafter KGB) was disbanded just prior to the withdrawal of military personnel. As much of the memorabilia within the Puffinn is associated with this society, this report also attempts to set forth who and what the KGB was.

## 5.0 Methodology -

The methodology employed to record the fixtures and fittings in the Puffinn involved extensive photographic recording, supplemented by written descriptions. Much of the information given in this report on the history of various artefacts and traditions was gleaned from personal communication with personnel on the island.

#### 6.0 Results

The Puffinn is divided into two main areas by a retractable partition. The western end of the bar is largely a gaming area, with a pool table and darts board and a large chess board that actually forms part of the fabric of the floor. The eastern end of the room contains the bar itself and most of the chairs and tables. A stereo system provides music and there is also a television and karaoke machine. The partition which can divide the two areas is rarely used. Plates 1 and 2 show the interior of the Puffinn (see Appendix Λ).

#### 6.1 The Kilda Generating Board or 'KGB'

One of the most notable features of the Puffinn is the KGB memorabilia mounted on the eastern wall. The KGB was a society formed by the Royal Engineers to make life on St Kilda a little more interesting during their six month tour. It is unclear exactly when this 'society' came into being but it appears to have been in the early 1980s. It was intended to be a rank-free society within which grievances could be discussed, punishments could be given out by one's peers and social events could be organised. This section of the report outlines the traditions of the KGB, discussing some of the more prominent rules and attempting to explain other, more obscure ones. Plate 3 shows the KGB members of summer 1995. A complete list of KGB rules as at 16/02/96 appears in Appendix B of this report.

Although Royal Engineers were the only true members, it was usual practice in more recent years and possibly for some time to grant honorary membership to other military personnel on the island, such as the Officer Commanding (Royal Artillery) and the nurse (Queen Alexander Royal Army Nursing Core). Some Scroo Military civilian personnel and other regular visitors to the island were also invited to join as honorary members. In recent years the members of the KGB met in the Puffinn on Friday afternoons at 16.30 hours in order to nominate each other for a number of awards (see below) and have a sociable drink to mark the start of the weekend. The meeting was chaired by the KGB President, each member filling this post at some point during his tour. The role of President was only ever undertaken by one of the Royal Engineers, but never included the Resident Engineer or the Electrical Sergeant.

On joining the KGB one had to be initiated at this weekly meeting. This involved putting one's hand in a bucket full of the foulest ingredients imaginable in order to retrieve a disc, which was to be carried at all times for the duration of one's stay. Any member of the KGB could require what was known as a disc flash (or DF) at any time. If any member could not produce his disc in ten seconds, he had to buy a round of drinks for all the members of the KGB. If everyone present did produce his disc, then the drinks had to be bought by the individual who initiated the flash.

Each new member of the society was 'dined in' and, upon finishing a tour of duty, 'dined out'. These dinner nights generally took place on a Friday night and were largely an excuse to eat and drink in large quantities. They were regarded as the highlight of being a member of the KGB. The individual being honoured invited a guest to the meal and chose the menu for the event. All present were required to dress in an appropriate manner, men in dress trousers and a shirt and ladies in a dress or the smartest clothes they had available if they were not military personnel. Drinks prior to the meal were available from the Puffinn, and everyone would gather there for an aperitif and to purchase their contribution to the table.

On arriving at the table, nobody was to sit until all were gathered and permission was granted by the KGB President. The President dictated the rules of the table; for example, an individual might be fined for discussing work or for swearing. The fine for each misdemeanor was inevitably a round of drinks for the entire table. It was standard practice for everyone to have to purchase at least one round of drinks, and usually some members bought more rounds than others.

It was generally not considered desirable to be given an award at the Friday afternoon meetings, and the nominations were often keenly argued. The awards were as follows: 'Welly', 'Thor's', 'Cowboy', 'Jack', 'Limp' and 'Stitch'; they were largely related to one's actions in the work place.

#### Welly

This award was presented weekly to members (as opposed to honorary members). The Welly was awarded to the Royal Engineer guilty of the most misdemeanors in that week. These included sleeping in, ignoring health and safety regulations or leaving the base without 'booking out' or returning and forgetting to 'book back in'. (All people living on the base were required to sign a book on leaving the village area, so that in the event of fire or another disaster the whereabouts of all personnel would be known.) The brass badge to be worn was in the shape of a Wellington boot. Penalty for this award was a round of drinks for all members.

#### Thor's

This award was presented to honorary members, such as Scroo personnel or the nurse, for misdemeanors similar to those outlined above for the award of Welly. The brass badge was in the shape of a hammer. Penalty for this award was a round of drinks for all members.

#### Cowboy

This award could be presented to any member of the KGB and was given to the biggest 'cowboy tradesman' of the week. Examples of this would include using a brick as a hammer, a screw driver as a chisel or a pile of chairs as a ladder. The brass badge was in the shape of a sheriff's star. Penalty for this award was a £0.50 donation to the lifeboat fund.

#### Jack

This award was presented to any member who had been the most 'jack' during the week. The expression 'jack' is widely used among military personnel to indicate when someone has been less than charitable to his or her fellow members. An example of 'jack' behaviour would be to drive past someone who one knew was waiting for a lift up the hill, leaving him or her to walk. The brass badge was a lifting jack medallion. The penalty for this award was a £0.50 donation to the lifeboat fund.

#### Limp

This was presented to any member of the KGB who had shown 'limp' or weak tendencies or judgments in the previous week. An example of such behaviour might be that one was waiting for a lift up the hill and had the Land Rover drive straight past. The brass badge was in the shape of the male member. The penalty for this award was a £0.50 donation to the lifeboat fund.

#### Stitch

This was presented to any member of the KGB who 'stitched up' another member for an award. This award was keenly fought over, as it was the only one worth winning. The brass badge for this award was in the shape of a sewing needle. This was the only award which brought a reward for winning as opposed to a penalty; whoever won this award received a drink from KGB funds.

Once the awards were decided, the names of the recipients were written on chalk boards in the bar and each one was required to wear his or her 'brass', a metal badge which had to be clipped onto clothing, for the duration of the weekend.

#### 6.2 The Ceiling

It is unknown exactly when the tradition of writing on the ceiling of the western half of the bar began; however, some of the current graffiti dates back to at least 1986. It is likely that carlier scribblings have been destroyed by later additions or have simply faded over time. In the past, this practice was generally restricted to members of the military detachment and the occasional visitor to the island. Today it is common for every visitor who wishes to do so to write their name on the ceiling.

In general the graffiti left by military personnel marks the completion of their tour of duty, indicating the dates they were stationed on the island, their names and usually their thoughts about St Kilda as a place. Visitors' comments generally mark the completion of their visits, their names and a comment about their experience of the island. A photographic record of the ceiling was undertaken in the summer months of 1998 but further recording was required in 1999.

#### 6.3 Puffinn Artefacts

This section of the report identifies and discusses a number of features in the bar. As it would be impossible to relate the history of each artefact, some of the more prominent ones have been selected for discussion here.

As noted above, the Puffinn was the focus of KGB activity on the island for years, and many of the artefacts are associated with the society. Some of these appear in Plate 3 (see Appendix A), which shows the members sitting around the KGB table with their mascot, Nellie the Soay sheep, with the chalk boards for the awards on the wall in the background.

A number of decorated slates adorn the walls of the bar. Most are military in nature; however, a number were gifts to the island from visitors expressing thanks for the hospitality extended to them during their stay, such as the slate gifted to the KGB by an NTS work party in 1985. Unfortunately, a number of slates have been destroyed through carelessness in the past, but 10 currently (1999) remain intact.

Hanging above the bar is a small bell (see Plate 4, Appendix A). To the uninitiated this bell is extremely dangerous, as it is customary for the individual who rings it, deliberately or accidentally, to buy everyone in the bar at the time a drink. In the summer months this can prove a very expensive mistake. It is unknown when this tradition began, but it has been established for many years and remains an unwavering rule to this day.

At the other end of the bar is yet another trap for those new to the establishment, called 'The Bhroige Stone' (see Plate 5, Appendix A). This stone tells the (fictional) tale of its origin. The story spirals down the stone, requiring the reader to turn it and finally lift the stone from the bar to read the conclusion. On doing so the reader will be informed that he or she must buy the bar a round of drinks. If ever the stone is raised off the bar for any reason, the culprit will be punished in this manner.

Other features of interest include a model of puffins undertaking various human tasks, a theme also visible in a small painting which hangs on the east wall of the bar. Almost certainly each of these puffin portraits was designed to portray the character of a person on the island at the time.

One of the features about which visitors most commonly ask is a small coffin sitting against the southern wall. The coffin's plaque reads 'WO2 E. Bear, died 15.5.73, RIP'. The coffin contains the remains of a stuffed teddy bear which was once used to gauge the wind direction for air drops of supplies. On one occasion the bear was blown right over the cliff face, but it was retrieved and given a funeral service.

Almost every artefact in the Puffinn has a story behind it; most are military in origin and were made on the island, although some were gifts to the Puffinn from grateful patrons. One example is the puffin fresco on the upper reaches of the bar which was painted in the 1980s by a visitor to the island. Members of the Large Animal Research Group (or LARG) have presented the bar with mounted sheep skulls, and other patrons have gifted various artefacts, including flags and banners (such as the Stornoway Round Table flag presented in 1996).

#### 6.4 Events

The chimney challenge is an event that has occurred on St Kilda for a number of years. The challenger must run from the Flagpole (which stood above the jetty until it was removed in 1998), along the military road and up the very steep slopes of Mullach Sgar (through a natural fissure), to a small cleit which is now bare of turf. The names of those who have undertaken this challenge are on a board in the Puffinn.

The carliest recorded challenge was undertaken in December 1984 by A.W. Woodhouse, and completed in 10 minutes and 26 seconds. A number of people have undertaken variants on the challenge, attempting it blindfold, backwards and even in a helicopter! The last challenge recorded on the board was in 1991; however, each year a number of enthusiasts continue to engage in this pursuit for their own satisfaction. In 1998 the first NTS work party to visit the island undertook the challenge in relay form. In earlier years, those that completed the course were also presented with a certificate in the Puffinn to mark their achievement.

The western wall of the bar is adorned with pictures of guide dogs which were bought with the proceeds from various events held in the Puffinn in past years. One of the charity events most commonly held in the bar is Puffin racing. This involves six carved, colour-coded wooden Puffins being raced around a large board, their movements determined by the throw of two dice. The patrons in the bar divide into groups and bid for the honour of owning a Puffin, and the money raised goes to a charity.

When the game begins, one of the dice determines the colour of the Puffin which is to move and the other the number of spaces. The board is made more complicated by the insertion of hurdles which can send the player back a number of spaces or even to the start of the board again. The night is generally enjoyed by everyone and a large amount of money is often raised for charity. In recent years the proceeds from such events have been donated to the Royal National Lifeboat Institution.

Other events include fancy dress nights, theme nights, games nights and video nights. Games played include twister, musical chairs and blind man's bluff, as well as the use of the so-called coffin which sits in the south-west corner of the Puffinn (Plate 6). The coffin is actually a contraption that tests the balance of the player. It is raised from the ground by a foot or so, a pole is inserted through it and the coffin is balanced on two axles. The object of the game is to remain balanced in the coffin while attempting to knock beer mats from the tops of beer cans, generally with little success.

Various theme nights in recent years have included hat nights, when everyone in the bar must wear a hat, toga parties, and medieval nights. A number of these theme and games nights have occurred since the military withdrawal, indicating a continuation of the traditions that were initiated by the military in years past.

## 7.0 Discussion and Conclusions

The Puffinn continues to be a focus for socialising for employees and visitors on St Kilda. On the whole people enjoy the relaxed atmosphere of the bar, but for some it is exactly the kind of place they expected to have escaped by visiting St Kilda. The Puffinn can become quite rowdy at times, particularly at weekends, and as this report demonstrates it is very much steeped in the culture of alcohol and the traditions of the military. This military influence will undoubtedly fade in time, and indeed the KGB disbanded just before the withdrawal of the Royal Engineers in the spring of 1998. It is inevitable that the various artefacts in the Puffinn will be added to, replaced and indeed broken over time and for this very reason this report was commissioned by the NTS. Modern St Kilda is very different to the island evacuated in 1930; however, the story

of the island continues and the Puffinn acts as a place where people meet, socialise and ceilidh after they have concluded their business for the day. There can be no definite conclusions to this piece of work, as this report only seeks to record some of the more notable fixtures and fittings of the establishment and to describe the atmosphere of the place, and both of these change according to the various patrons of the bar.

The Puffinn is a place where individuals often feel they can let go of their inhibitions and the worries of normal life on the mainland. This is particularly noticeable among people visiting the island for the first time, who are cut off from the pressures of work, family and home life and news of the wider world in general.

The information gathered to produce this report has been obtained from a number of sources, most of all from personal communications with various people and through my own experience of the Puffinn.

## 8.0 Acknowledgments -

I would like to thank everyone who has given me information about the Puffinn for this report. Some of the information was obtained from Serco Military personnel and some from Royal Engineers that have served on St Kilda in years past. Thanks also go to Jen Cochrane, Laura Hayes and Mel Richmond for administrative work.

## 9.0 Appendices -

Appendix A

See following pages.



Plate 1: The west end of the Puffinn.



Plate 2: The east end of the Puffinn.



Plate 3:

The KGB members, Summer 1995.

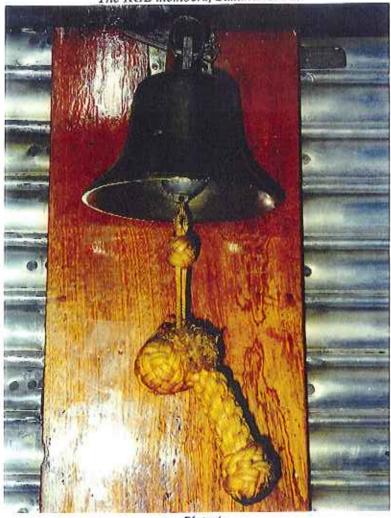


Plate 4:

The bell above the bar.

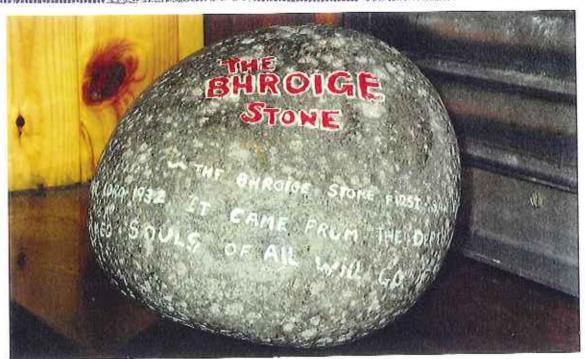


Plate 5: The Bhroige Stone.



Plate 6; The coffin game.

#### Kilda Generating Board Rules

#### The Disc

- 1 The disc is presented to a member at his first meeting by the President.
- 2 The disc is to be carried loosely on the member at all times, ie not worn around the neck, in a wallet or in a wash bag.
- 3 You are not allowed to say the words 'disc flash' (you can say 'DF' though).
- If a member calls a 'DF' (ie reveals his disc and/or shouts the words Disc Flash), all the members present have 10 seconds to reveal their discs. If all the members present reveal their discs in time, the person who called the 'DF' has to buy a round for them. If, however, any member does not reveal his disc within the 10 seconds then that member will have to buy the round.
- 5 If a non-member calls a 'DF' then the call is void.
- 6 The words on the back of the disc are to identify each individual's disc and are not for discussion. If this occurs then a beer has to be bought for those present at the discussion by that member.
- If a disc is lost then the President must be notified immediately, and by the next meeting the member will receive a replacement; however, he has to buy a round at the meeting. As soon as the President is informed, that member is exempt from 'DFs' until he receives his new disc.
- 8 Discs are not to be removed from a member's room by another member.
- 9 A 'DF' cannot be called by a member in his own room.
- 10 If a 'DF' is called in a member's room he is exempt from the 'DF' but still receives a beer from the caller or non-producer in the normal way.
- 11 No member is allowed more than one disc

### Members' Responsibilities

- All Engineer members returning from leave who wish to eat biscuits during tea breaks are to bring back with them biscuits to the value of £5 for the tea room. Anyone failing to do so who is found eating biscuits will receive a Welly.
- 2 Engineer members are also to send back a postcard to the KGB. He has two mail drops to produce them, counting the mail drop he returns on. Failure to do so will result in his buying a round.
- 3 Members leaving the island are still subject to KGB rules; ie they can be 'DF'd' whilst on leave or at their new unit by a fellow member.
- 4 Any member wishing to leave the KGB must do so at a meeting.
- 5 Any member with a complaint or suggestion for the KGB is to submit it at the end of the meeting.
- 6 Any member wishing to nominate a fellow islander as an honorary member is to put it to the vote at a meeting. If the honorary member is elected he/she will be invited to attend the next meeting of the KGB.
- 7 All new Engineer members will be given a 'dining in' function to welcome them into the KGB. This may double up as a 'dining out' do for members leaving the island.

- 8 The member nominated to look after the tearoom is to carry out the following tasks: keep the tea-room stocked up with tea bags, sugar, milk and coffee at all times; clean the tearoom after Tuesday afternoon break and before the meeting.
- The member nominated for centre of the dinner table must clean and stocks up with the normal condiments; remove any empty containers; clean the centre of table and any spare place settings after Tucsday evening meal and Friday lunch time. If the member who is on centre of table is not at any of the meals, then it is the responsibility of the person who wants the item to get it. [Centre of table member does not get a Welly].
- Members carrying out bar duties receive an automatic late start, but must ensure the bar is cleaned and restocked before starting work at 10.30 am.
- 11 Any honorary members handing in his/her disc must be re-elected before attending any further KGB functions, except in extreme circumstances.
- 12 No dangerous 'DFs', ie, while driving, weight-lifting or climbing.
- 13 'DFs' to be announced in a clear voice.
- 14 'DF' drinks to be consumed in the bar only.
- 15 A 'DF' may be called with false objects, eg 2 pence pieces; when a member starts the count he becomes responsible for the 'DF'.
- Members must phone back at least once during their leave, which must be a minimum of 2 days before they are due to return.

#### Responsibilities of the President

- 1 He must ensure that all members of the KGB know the time and place of the weekly meeting.
- 2 He supplies and presents discs to new members.
- 3 He amends all relevant KGB boards.
- 4 He is to collect £1 from each member weekly for KGB funds.
- 5 He is to ensure all awards are returned cleaned prior to the meeting.
- 6 He is to record and issue all awards.
- 7 He is to open the meeting with a 'DF' from Nellie.
- 8 He is to administer the KGB funds and stock up the soft drinks in the tearoom.
- 9 If a member receives an award in his absence the President is to inform him and write his name on the relevant board. He is then to inform that member of the reason for his nomination at the earliest opportunity.
- 10 He is to check that the tearoom and centre of table have been cleaned prior to the meeting.
- 11 He is the only one allowed to touch the Welly Board. This involves adjusting the discs and clearing it before the meeting.
- 12 He is to collect 50p per award at the end of the KGB meeting and deposit it into the Lifeboat/MS box.

#### Responsibilities of the Vice-President

- 1 He organises the dinner nights, including scating plans, menu, waiter, chef, pan bash, drinks, barman etc.
- 2 He assumes the role of President in his absence.
- 3 He amends the place setting name-plates for dining in/out functions.

#### Examples of Offenses

- 1 Farting in the tearoom or at the dinner table.
- Being late for parade in the tearoom, 0830 and 1330; (Res. Eng. and Sgt. Elec. inclusive). One Welly is awarded for being late with another Welly for each 5 minutes thereafter. If for some reason you cannot attend you must inform the President either directly or indirectly. If the President is not told you will be considered late. (The President must inform the Vice President.)
- 3 Leaving an empty/dirty cup in the tearoom after tea-break has finished (0900 & 1400).
- 4 Leaving a dirty place setting at the dinner table.
- 5 Breach of safe working practices.
- 6 If the President does not clear the Welly Board before the start of the meeting he receives as many Wellies as there are people on the board.
- 7 Any member that receives 10 Wellies buys a round and returns to zero.

#### Rules for Dinner Nights

- First parade for dinner nights is 1830 to set the table up (less those being dined out).
- 2 All members are to parade in the bar at 1930 for pre-dinner drinks.
- 3 Grace is to be said by the member being dined in.
- 4 No farting, burping or swearing at the table.
- 5 No smoking at the table until ashtrays are given out.
- 6 Permission to leave the table must be sought from the President.
- 7 KGB jumpers, trousers and a collar and tie are to be worn by all members (ladies may wear a dress or skirt and blouse).
- 8 Each course will be served at the President's convenience.
- 9 Each member is given three lives; a life will be lost each time a member talks shop/crap.

NOTE: CONTRAVENTION OF THE ABOVE RULES WILL RESULT IN THE MEMBER BEING REQUIRED TO BUY A DRINK FOR ALL MEMBERS PRESENT.



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