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GENTLEMEN'S QUARTERLY

**HAVE YOU  
BEEN TO  
BRITAIN'S  
MOST  
EXCLUSIVE  
SEX CLUB?**

We have! Page 118

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Caribbean  
**CRUZ**

**Penélope: HOT  
HEAVENLY AND  
HANDY WITH A CUTLASS\***

(\*just ask Johnny Depp)

Story by JONATHAN HEAF Photographs by MARIO SORRENTI

JUNE 2011 £3.99  
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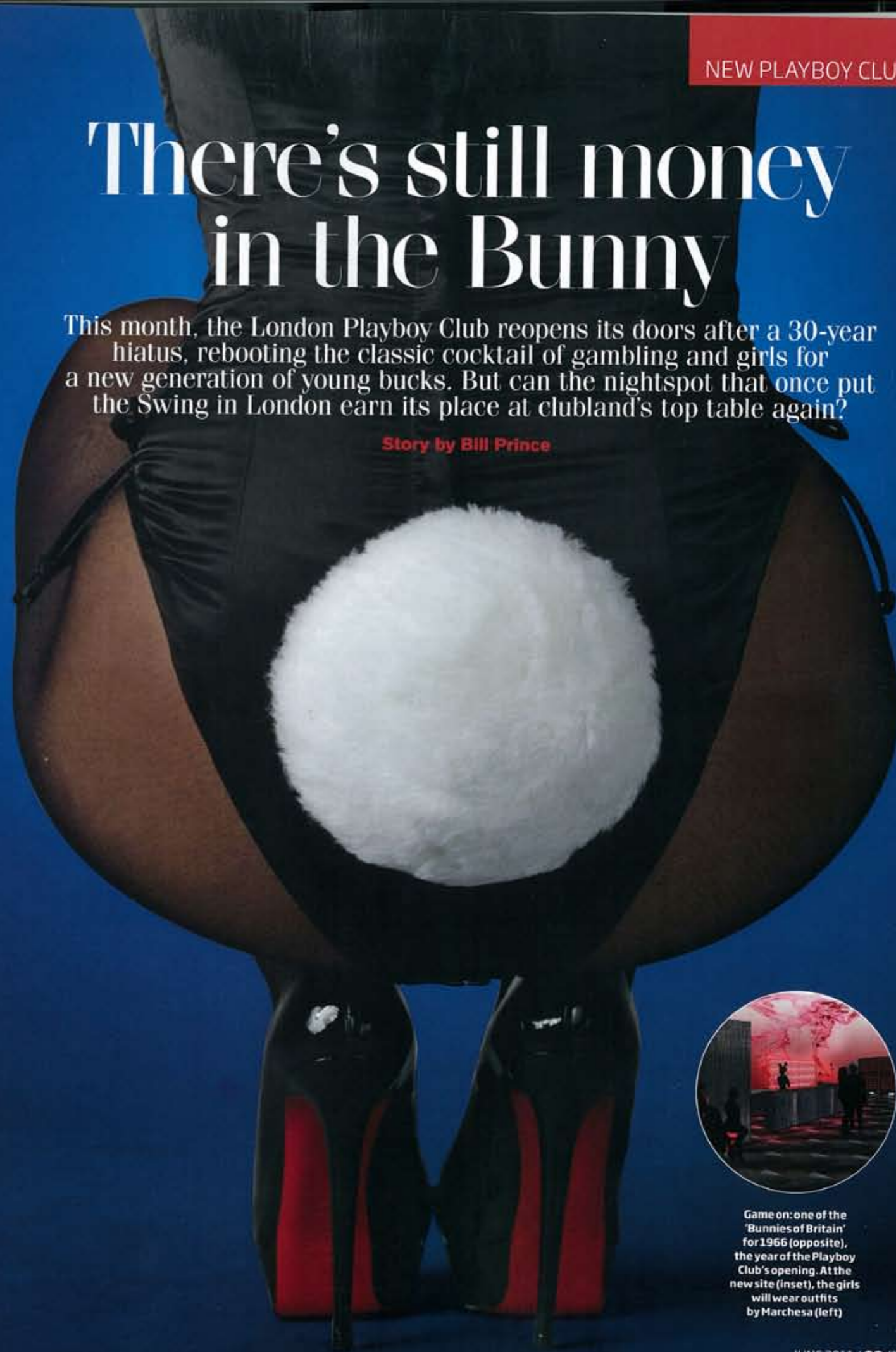
**Plus! The Hangover 2** BY BRADLEY COOPER & MIKE TYSON



# There's still money in the Bunny

This month, the London Playboy Club reopens its doors after a 30-year hiatus, rebooting the classic cocktail of gambling and girls for a new generation of young bucks. But can the nightspot that once put the Swing in London earn its place at clubland's top table again?

Story by Bill Prince



Game on: one of the 'Bunnies of Britain' for 1966 (opposite), the year of the Playboy Club's opening. At the new site (inset), the girls will wear outfits by Marchesa (left)



The new Playboy Club will be true to the original ethos: it will be upscale, adult and sophisticated. With cool new Bunny outfits



# THIRTY YEARS after dipping out of view, the Playboy Bunny is back in London.

Early next month, after a £15m refurbishment by London Casino International in partnership with Playboy Enterprises, the Playboy Club London reopens on the site of the former Rendezvous casino on Old Park Lane. It is, appropriately enough, a gamble: the last London Playboy Club went down in flames, a victim of changing times and a titanic power struggle between the high-flying boss of its clubs and casinos operation, Victor Lownes, and the powerful forces marshalled around the empire's increasingly remote and reclusive founder, Hugh Hefner.

But the new operators have their best game faces on. They've invested heavily in the environment (the first-floor gaming room and downstairs restaurant and bar areas have all been designed by Jestico and Whiles - responsible for the *bunga-bunga* feel of the new W London hotel) and recruited a bary of new Bunnies to serve a new generation of patrons in search of a bit of *Mad Men* in the middle of London. They're confident the revival of London's legendary Playboy Club, a mere 100 yards from its original site at 45 Park Lane, will be a success.

One man, at least, is banking on it...

Chicago, 1959, and 33-year-old Hugh Hefner is sitting on the windfall from the kind of open-to-all-comers bonanza America hasn't seen since the gold rushes of the 19th century. Five years before, he'd launched a magazine aimed un-squarely at men, with a front cover featuring a picture of a naked Marilyn Monroe he'd found in an unpublished calendar shoot. Hefner had originally wanted to call the magazine *Stag Party*, until a passing friend, who'd spotted an advertisement for a new automobile, suggested *Playboy*.

The emblem for the magazine, however, was Hefner's own. A gifted illustrator, he would continue to flatplan or "storyboard" his beloved publication long after his early cohorts had got rich, gone abroad or simply disappeared along the way. Hefner's "boy bunny" - a young buck, in other words - became the nudge-nudge, wink-wink talisman for a generation of war-weary, increasingly restless young men eager to share in the "Playboy philosophy". Put in Hef'speak: "The freedom to enjoy pleasures earned through work and success."

That these freedoms were best expressed by the chance to ogle pneumatic "Playmates" cosseted between serious articles, searching celebrity interviews and the proprietor's own long, chin-stroking pieces on the dangers posed by a society resistant to his magazine's call

for an open and inclusive approach to sexual relations, proved a circulation winner. But as the decade closed, one story had proved especially popular with the million "young bucks" who constituted *Playboy's* circulation. It was about a Chicago club called the Gaslight, which, as well as giving its patrons a key to the joint, offered temporary respite from the here-and-now nerviness of the Cold War-era American heartland. "We'd work in the afternoon and evening [on the magazine] and then, around midnight, we'd go out to the clubs," recalls Hefner. "And what prompted that piece was that the Gaslight was a very popular club with white-collar ad people."

The chance to indulge in a little after-hours commercial networking aside, hanging out at the Gaslight persuaded *Playboy's* founders to dare to imagine a club of their own, wherein the lofty ideals of Hefner's philosophy could be married to the rude enjoyment of many of those same manly delights, including, as it would later turn out, table service provided by waitresses representing the kind of kinky bonhomie many of its patrons would have last spotted on the nose cone of a B-52 bomber.

Thus began the second, even larger bonanza to hit Hefner's nascent empire: the Playboy Clubs.

The first Playboy Club opened in Chicago, in February 1960, after another bit of groovy happenstance: the previous summer, Hefner had planned to use the city's Soldiers Field football stadium to hold a jazz festival celebrating his magazine's fifth anniversary until city officials withdrew permission. At the eleventh hour, a big-time real-estate operator named Arthur Wirtz stepped in with the offer of his Chicago Stadium. The event was a sellout (as well it might, given it featured Count Basie, Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald, Miles Davis and Dizzy Gillespie) and a grateful Wirtz offered Hefner another of his Chicago assets, the rundown Colony Club. In charge of opening the first full brand extension of the Playboy ideal would be the magazine's young promotions director, 31-year-old Victor Lownes.

Two years younger than Hefner and, like his boss, recently divorced, Lownes was another player-manager of the Playboy lifestyle and quickly spotted the club's broad potential. He drafted in as a partner local restaurateur Arnie Morton (of Morton's steakhouses), who set about creating the sense of abundance and opulence both Hefner and Lownes saw as being an important element of their just-so approach to the "good life".

"As unreal as it sounds," says Hefner, "when we opened the club in Chicago, apart from Arnie, we were guys with no experience in

clubs. And overnight it became the most successful club in Chicago."

However, by 1963, while Hefner shuttered himself away in Playboy's Chicago "mansion", popping Dexedrine and working on his philosophy, his promotions director was getting itchy feet. So Lownes flew to London to open the company's first overseas club, armed only with what many at the time considered an all-too-blue-chip business reputation - and, as it turned out, an unblinking sexual rapacity seemingly matched only by his boss back home in the States.

Landing in the UK in December 1963, the young tycoon received a shock when he started going out in London. Having discovered a loophole in the so-called "vicars' charter" that had passed into law in 1960 to allow for whist drives and the like, the capital was in thrall to gambling.

"I had no idea," says Lownes. "In America, gaming was limited to Las Vegas. And Vegas in 1960 was a very different place from what it is today. So I phoned home and said, 'Guess what? They're gambling in London. The Playboy Club should be a casino.'" It was also to be the making, and very nearly the breaking, of the entire Playboy empire.

After considering and discarding the idea of buying an existing casino (later, the British firm Lownes formed Victoria Sporting clubs), Lownes signed a lease on 45 Park Lane, an apartment block that had run into trouble. After buying back leases to those flats that had already been sold (realising a further asset in 19 luxuriously appointed apartments he could rent out to high rollers and celebrity pals), Lownes then set about acquiring the new London Playboy Club and Casino's most visible asset: the Playboy Bunnies.

Well-upholstered, homely girls with no sharp edges, either conversational or physical, the Bunnies were meant to embody the fulsome-yet-wholesome aesthetic of Hefner's Playboy philosophy.

"The 'Bunny Image' was handed down through the generations," remembers Serena Williams, a Bunny Girl who later went on to run the Playboy Club press office. "And it wasn't the size of a girl's breasts or the shape of her body, it was very much about her face and personality, her countenance overall." Auditioned in day-long recruitment drives, successful applicants were given three weeks of intensive training before taking to the floor to practise their demure yet delectable "Bunny dips".

"Bunny Mothers" gave advice and maintained discipline, issuing "demerits" (ie, fines) for



## King of clubs

1. Playboy founder Hugh Hefner with his promotions director, Victor Lownes, the prime mover behind the company's club and casino operations.
2. A 'Bunny Pictorial' outside the club's Park Lane premises in London, 1969.
3. Hefner and his then girlfriend, Barbi Benton, welcomed on their arrival at Heathrow (flown in via his private DC-9 Bunny Jet) by girls from the London club, 1970.
4. Legendary theatre critic Kenneth Tynan reviews the service, December 1966.
5. George Best was a regular patron, along with much of Swinging London.
6. Frank Sinatra has his ol' blue eyes on a Bunny Girl, December 1966.
7. Bunny Girl turned centrefold Marilyn Cole shows off her January 1972 shoot for the magazine - she later went on to marry Victor Lownes and says of the club 'it was a sophisticated, glamorous place'.
8. Sammy Davis Jr displays some rat-pack charm, October 1969.
9. Hefner takes to the dance floor, 1966.
10. Woody Allen brings Manhattan smarts to Mayfair on centre stage for a set at the club, December 1966.
11. Jean-Paul Belmondo (with moustache), Ursula Andress and James Garner make up a power table, December 1966.



PHOTOGRAPHY: RON GALELLA; GETTY IMAGES; RON GALELLA/WIREIMAGE; IAN TYAS/GETTY IMAGES



misdeemeanours ranging from sloppy service to bad posture. There were also strict rules about dating "key holders" (at least during working hours), and God help any Bunny found in the lift that serviced the club's apartments.

"In America, we said the girls couldn't date the customers, no matter what," remembers Lownes. "Here, I said, 'To hell with that arrangement, they're going to date whoever they want to.' And I didn't make any rules about that except they couldn't go up to the apartments and croupiers couldn't go out with punters, or else they were fired."

According to Marilyn Cole, a Bunny who would later marry Lownes (she also dated Hefner and was the magazine's January 1972 centrefold): "You never felt you were in this predatory meat market. In fact, it was the opposite: you looked a bit of a wally if you were caught chatting up a Bunny. But that was because it was a sophisticated, glamorous place."

Not that Lownes was concerning himself too much with wallies. "Listen, it was a respectable and luxurious venue. The Bunnies weren't nude, they were girls in costumes. And [the punters] weren't just people handing over money. It wasn't a trust-fund Johnnies, inherited thing. For instance, the Arabs loved us. And we had lots of connections from the magazine. John Paul Getty wrote a finance page for us. Everyone wanted to be part of us."

Including, as it turned out, an above-average number of Hollywood's high-living elite. "When we opened the [London] club in 1966," recalls Hefner, "there were three or four major Hollywood films being made in London. So James Garner was there. Ursula Andress was there with Jean-Paul Belmondo; Peter Sellers came; Woody Allen got up and performed. And I came back from that opening convinced I was looking at the future. The miniskirt had just arrived, gambling was prevalent, sexual attitudes had changed dramatically. I'd been making this case for the sexual revolution and it was there [in London]."

"We used to go to the Playboy a lot," says Tina Moore, who, with her husband, West Ham United and England captain Bobby, were the Posh and Becks of the time. "It was the place to go to." Not surprisingly, Tina especially remembers decamping to the Playboy after England won the World Cup at Wembley in July 1966. "Normally the Playboy Club was quite 'cool', because they were used to having huge stars going there, but that was an amazing night. Burt Bacharach was playing the piano - I think he asked Bobby up to sing. Of course, Bobby had Bunnies sitting on either leg, but it was the one night you wouldn't have minded, because the players belonged to everyone."



Close to home: Playboy's new London venue (above right) is just 100 yards from its original Mayfair plot (right)



The casino would remain the main driver of the London club - even after the introduction of the 1968 Gaming Act, which forbade the active encouragement of gambling with "enticements", be they celebrity singsongs or a well-executed Bunny dip. It also forbade directors of a casino from playing at their own tables. No matter. Although Lownes was no gambler (in his autobiography *Playboy Extraordinary*, published in 1982, Lownes goes as far as saying gambling is, "The tangible expression of a very volatile aspect of human nature"), he was happy to spend his evenings at home playing backgammon - albeit rarely *à deux*...

Following his move to London, Lownes had rung the changes by "living a different kind of existence" from that of his bachelor days in the States. "Victor really flung himself into life," remembers Marilyn. "It was open house, almost 24 hours a day. He had girls living in his house [in Connaught Square] and they would be expected to appear dressed for dinner."

Afterwards, the house would fill up with actors, screenwriters, directors and movie moguls until, at some unspecified yet preordained moment, Lownes would utter what became a well-known phrase among his

friends: "I have what I consider to be a very good idea..." This was his way of saying the evening had moved on from board games to bedroom.

Press shots from the time confirm Lownes' pad lacked for few diversions: beside his bed, a burr walnut-covered console controlled the integrated music system. By pressing a button, a Paul Delvaux painting of two nudes descended to reveal a hidden TV. In his wardrobe hung suits from Brioni and Douglas Hayward, monogrammed dressing gowns from Turnbull & Asser and shoes from John Lobb and Salvatore Ferragamo. With a chauffeur-driven Rolls-Royce at his disposal, as well as an Aston Martin and use of the club's two silver Cadillacs, it's no wonder Lownes says, "It was very easy being me!"

And surveying the horizon from Lownes' particular vantage point in early 1975, it's hard to disagree. Besides the elegant London residence and use of the club's Park Lane apartment, in 1972 he'd bought a country estate, Stocks, which he cannily turned into a staff training college (billable to Playboy) cum weekend retreat, where he entertained lavishly and indulged his passion for horse riding. UK outposts of the London club had opened in Manchester and Portsmouth, and having added the Clermont Club to the company's portfolio in 1970, a chain of Playboy-branded betting shops were opened, followed in 1979 by the acquisition of another London casino, the Victoria Sporting Club. But while the UK business thrived, the Playboy empire had begun to slide.

In 1971, Playboy had gone public, but sentiment among larger investors had

always conspired to keep share prices low. In 1975, saddled with enormous overheads at a time when the magazine's sales had started to falter, the company asked Lownes to tackle the group's cost base back home. Unpopular measures included grounding the Bunny Jet and reducing the 50-strong "skeleton" staff at the mothballed Chicago mansion to a more manageable 12. Still, by 1979, while its London clubs posted profits of \$26m, Playboy's losses worldwide were \$5m.

And there were other changes afoot. Middle Eastern key holders, long the backbone of the UK casino business, were backing off - in particular the Iranians, who, as Lownes puts it, had been steady customers and "very good losers" before the revolution in 1979 ended their run. And then, in 1980, competition to the Bunnies themselves appeared when Peter Stringfellow dressed waitresses at his eponymous St Martin's Lane club in lingerie.

"Stringfellows was probably the first on the block with that image," says Stringfellow. "When I arrived in London, it had moved from the pretend glamour of the Bunny Girls to real 'people in the street' glamour. The London Playboy Club was spot-on for its era, but the real glamour was people being glamorous themselves. And my waitresses were a little more risqué than the Bunny Girls."

If the writing was on the wall for the "Bunny dip", Victor Lownes could be forgiven for barely noticing. At the same time as Playboy was applying for a gaming licence for a new, \$150m casino resort in Atlantic City, Lownes had entered into a dispute with another UK casino operator, Ladbrokes, over allegations that its employees had been caught taking down Playboy Club key-holders' car registrations in order to poach their business. Ladbrokes rebutted the claims, and shortly afterwards licensing authorities were notified of two alleged infringements of the Gaming Act by the Playboy Club. Lownes denied both allegations (concerning the accepting of uncleared cheques and directors of the company gambling at their own tables), but while he was hospitalised after a fall from his horse, both the Playboy and Clermont clubs were raided. In April 1981, following advice from his own counsel, Lownes was fired by Playboy, as was his colleague William Gerhauser. Five months later, both clubs had their licence renewals refused and within the year, the UK Playboy Clubs had been sold to Trident Television. The era of the Playboy Bunny in London was over.

"We had the only winning game in town, so the attention turned to us," is how Lownes remembers it today. "The Playboy Clubs were making money, Playboy wasn't making money.

So the guys back in Chicago thought, 'We have to take that over so we have a basis for staying with the company.'

"And then some disgruntled ex-employee brought up some allegations, and the first thing Playboy's solicitor said was, '[If you want to keep your licences] fire Lownes and Gerhauser.' But he was working on the principle that something was being done wrong. But there was nothing. And the very reason they lost the licence was because we'd promised that the control of the company would remain in London, no matter what. The charges were crap, and later dismissed, but by firing us they passed the company into foreign control and that's the only reason they lost those licences."

Not surprisingly, Hugh Hefner sees it rather differently. "The whole climate changed. The powers that be couldn't hurt us with the magazine because of the First Amendment in America, but they could hurt us with the casino licences. You have to remember that we were the only non-English club in the country and that was a problem, too. To Victor's credit, we were the club that had the best reputation in London. But he got in a p\*\*\*ing contest with another club operator and made some enemies. So, my feeling is that he could have saved us if he'd been willing to, but his ego wouldn't let him."



Gambling on nostalgia: the gaming area of the original London club (right) and its 2011 equivalent (below right)

With the casino operations gone, Playboy, by then mired in debt, had to look at other revenue streams, altering Hefner's highly sexualised yet squeaky clean Playboy philosophy for good.

"It changed the whole direction for us," says Hefner. "By the early Eighties the part that was profitable was the casino part - after that we went through a period when we were struggling. That's what drove us really into adult TV." His days as a Playboy over, and literally battered and bruised following his unceremonious unseating(s), Lownes retreated to his country estate, Stocks, later buying Wedgies on London's Kings Road to realise a "town and country club". Neither venture worked, and Stocks was later sold. He and Marilyn now divide their time between Belgravia, London, and the Upper East Side in New York.

However, this month, both will be present for the opening of the new Playboy Club London on Old Park Lane. Design nods to the original club are implied rather than imposed, but the feel will, says club director Adam Roberts, be true to the Playboy ethos: upscale, adult, sophisticated and refined. This time round, the Bunny costumes have been designed by Marchesa, and mixologist Salvatore Calabrese and UK Iron Chef Judy Joo have been brought in to run the cocktail bar and dining room respectively.

Meanwhile, across town, on the site of the old Talk Of The Town, another, larger casino opens in the autumn, following a £15m investment by developer Simon Thomas. The all-new Hippodrome Casino will feature a 150-seat cabaret room and fine dining operated by American operator the One Group. Something in the air? For his part, Hefner - who has spoken of his desire to take Playboy Enterprises private - has every reason to hope the new Playboy London heralds a return to the golden age of sophisticated adult entertainment London last knew in the Seventies.

"It's hard to compare," says Hefner, "because these are different times, but what's fascinating to me is that after all these years, so many people in England remember - people who weren't even there... And it's a chance to recapture the dream. It has a retro-chic quality about it. And in terms of anticipation, like the Beatles, the Bunny in London was a big deal. And it'll be a big deal again." Playboy Club London opens on 4 June. 14 Old Park Lane, London W1. playboyclublondon.com

After all these years, so many people in England remember, says Hefner. It's a chance to recapture the dream

