

HSBC Group Archives



P. G. Wodehouse and HSBC

P.G. Wodehouse, creator of classic characters such as Jeeves and Wooster, is widely regarded as one of last century's greatest comic authors. It is little known, however, that he spent part of his early career bent over the ledgers at The Hongkong and Shanghai Banking Corporation!



P. G. Wodehouse

Wodehouse, or Plum as he was affectionately nicknamed, was born in 1881. Christened Pelham Grenville, he was the son of a Hong Kong magistrate. As a boy Plum was educated at Dulwich College, where his love of writing was put to good use as editor of the school magazine.



Illustration from Psmith in the City

Early career

In 1900, due to a shortage in the family's funds, Wodehouse was forced to pursue a career in banking, and could not, like his brother before him, take up a place at University. Instead, his father put his name forward for HSBC. Plum duly joined the London office at Lombard Street that year.



Lombard Street around 1900

Wodehouse's career with the bank was short-lived and far from glittering; and yet memorable for all concerned. In his first year he was late for work on 20 days (excluding 'foggy mornings', which did not count) - a number only exceeded by two of his 56 contemporaries!

As to his daily banking work, he later admitted in a memoir for HSBC's staff magazine that:

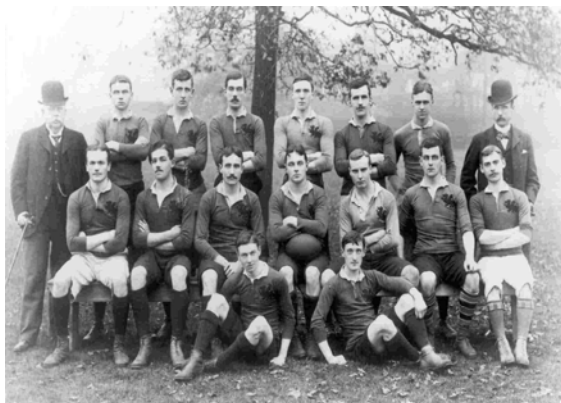
"If there was a moment in the course of my banking career when I had the remotest notion of what it was all about, I am unable to recall it. From Fixed Deposits I drifted to Inward Bills - no use asking me what Inward Bills are, I never found out..... My total inability to grasp what was going on made me something of a legend in the place."

Wodehouse recalled another occasion during his time with the bank, when he took delivery of a new ledger...

Upon seeing the pristine new ledger before him, he could not resist the chance to write a comical piece on the front page. He thought better of it afterwards and cut out the page with his pen knife. The head cashier came across the damaged ledger some days later, immediately putting the blame upon the bank's stationers. The stationers argued that the page had been cut out. Wodehouse remembered the incident:

"'Absurd', the head cashier replied, 'nobody but an imbecile would cut out the first page of a ledger'. 'Then you must have an imbecile in your department. Have you?'. 'Why, yes', the cashier admitted, for he was a fairminded man. 'There is P G Wodehouse.' They got me under the lights and grilled me, and I had to come clean."

Whilst unsuccessful at banking, Wodehouse did excel at sporting pursuits, especially cricket and rugby.



HSBC's rugby team 1901, with Plum (middle row, 2nd from right)

Plum's aptitude for sport was noted by the bank and he was a key member of HSBC's London Office rugby team, playing at the New Beckenham ground during his time of employment.

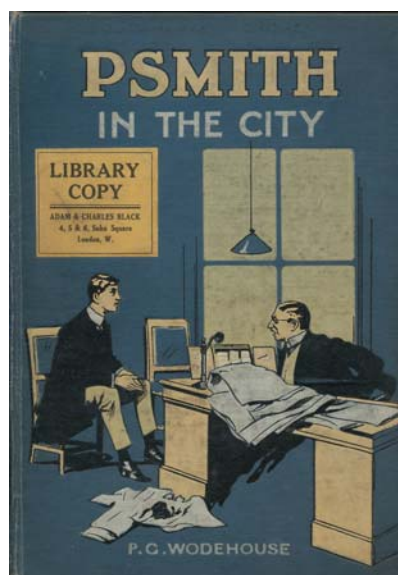
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Psmith in the City

Whilst working for the bank, Plum began to develop his literary career. During his time at Lombard Street he wrote short stories, articles, lyrics, poems and jokes for dozens of magazines which were then trading in London. In 1902 he decided to take the plunge, leaving the bank to become a full-time writer.



Front cover of the first edition of Psmith in the City

Wodehouse immortalised his time in the Square Mile in his work *Psmith in the City*. HSBC is portrayed in the book as the New Asiatic Bank, where Psmith features as the reluctant banker. Published in 1910, the book brings to life Psmith's adventures in the bank, in the inimitable comic style we have grown to love of Wodehouse.

Psmith in the City gives the current generation of bankers a glimpse into a bygone age of banking, a far cry from the modern business world of today - where ledgers were balanced meticulously by hand and pen and ink was the order of the day. Not a laptop or BlackBerry in sight!