



The Hellfire Club And Caves

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Throughout history men have formed clandestine clubs where rich young aristocrats met and indulged in drunken orgies, gambling and carousing. But few clubs have attained so much notoriety as the Hellfire Clubs established in Britain and Ireland in the 18th century.

The original Hellfire Club was founded in London in 1718 by the Duke of Wharton, a licentious character who was said to lead two lives—one a “man of letters” and the other “a drunkard, a rioter, an infidel and a rake.” The club was more of a satire meant to mock religion and generally shock the outside world. The members called themselves devils and partook in dishes like “Holy Ghost Pie”, “Breast of Venus”, and “Devil’s Loin”.



“A Rake’s Progress—Tavern Scene” by William Hogarth, circa 1730s.

The most notorious club was formed by Sir Francis Dashwood in 1746 with the motto “Fais ce que tu voudrais” (Do what you wish). The members met at Medmenham Abbey, a 12th century abbey that Dashwood acquired for the purpose. The story goes that Dashwood, along with the 4th Earl of Sandwich, attended a service at the parish church and released a small monkey during congregation, causing panic and chaos.



Francis Dashwood was well known for his pranks. While in the Royal Court in St Petersburg, he once dressed up as the King of Sweden, a great enemy of Russia. The membership of Sir Francis’ club was initially limited to twelve but soon increased to include many prominent members of society such as politician Thomas Potter and Benjamin Franklin, who was said to have attended the club occasionally.

The Hellfire Club soon became infamous for orgies of debauchery and drunkenness. Members dressed themselves as friars and addressed each other as “Brothers”. Prostitutes were dressed as nuns and were obliged to wear masks. Later, there were suggestions of ritual abuse of women, Black Masses and even human sacrifices, but none of these things are proven.

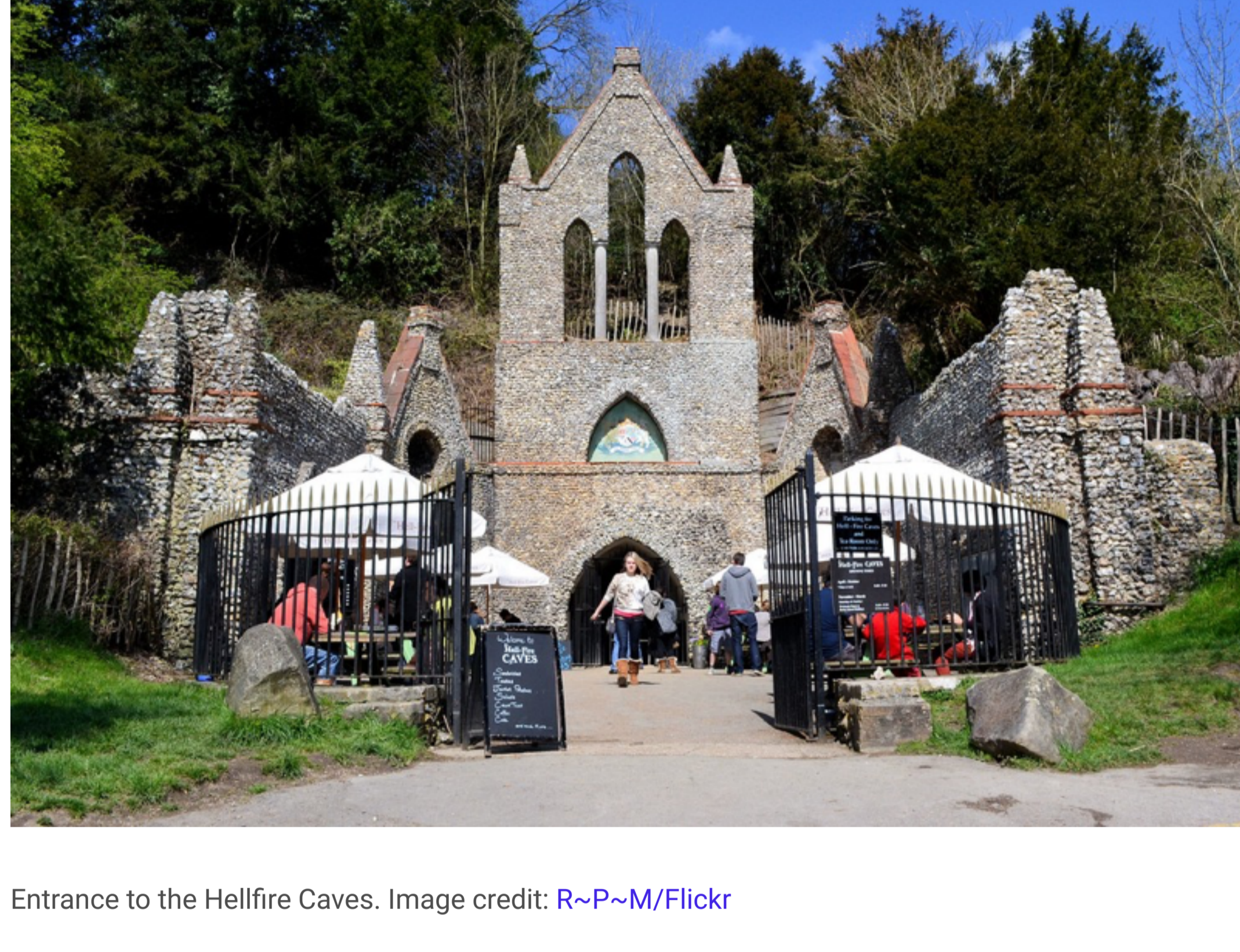


Francis Dashwood portrayed as St Francis at prayer, but the Bible in front of him has been replaced by an erotic novel, a halo above his head shows a picture of his friend, the Earl of Sandwich, a miniature naked woman in front of him lies in what looks like the Ecstasy of Saint Teresa.

The club later met at a new place, a few miles north of Medmenham Abbey. Here, Francis Dashwood carved an elaborate network of caves from an existing chalk cave, with little caverns and alcoves built along narrow corridors for club members to indulge in immoral and promiscuous activities. A quarter mile down the passage and some 300 feet beneath the hill surface lied the Inner Temple, reserved for only the major members of the club. It was at the inner sanctum where some of the most wicked stories associated with the club was supposed to have taken place.

The Hellfire Club existed for about two decades, after which a series of political mishaps undid the club. By the mid-19th century, the Hellfire Caves were already a tourist attraction. The cave’s unusual design and debauchorous history brought visitors from all around Britain.

The entrance to the caves looks like a ruined church. The various chambers inside are named after prominent members of the club, such as Steward’s Chamber and Whitehead’s Cave, and Lord Sandwich’s Circle and even Franklin’s Cave (named after Benjamin Franklin). Today, they are filled with exhibits and mannequins recreating scenes from the parties.



Entrance to the Hellfire Caves. Image credit: R~P~M/Flickr



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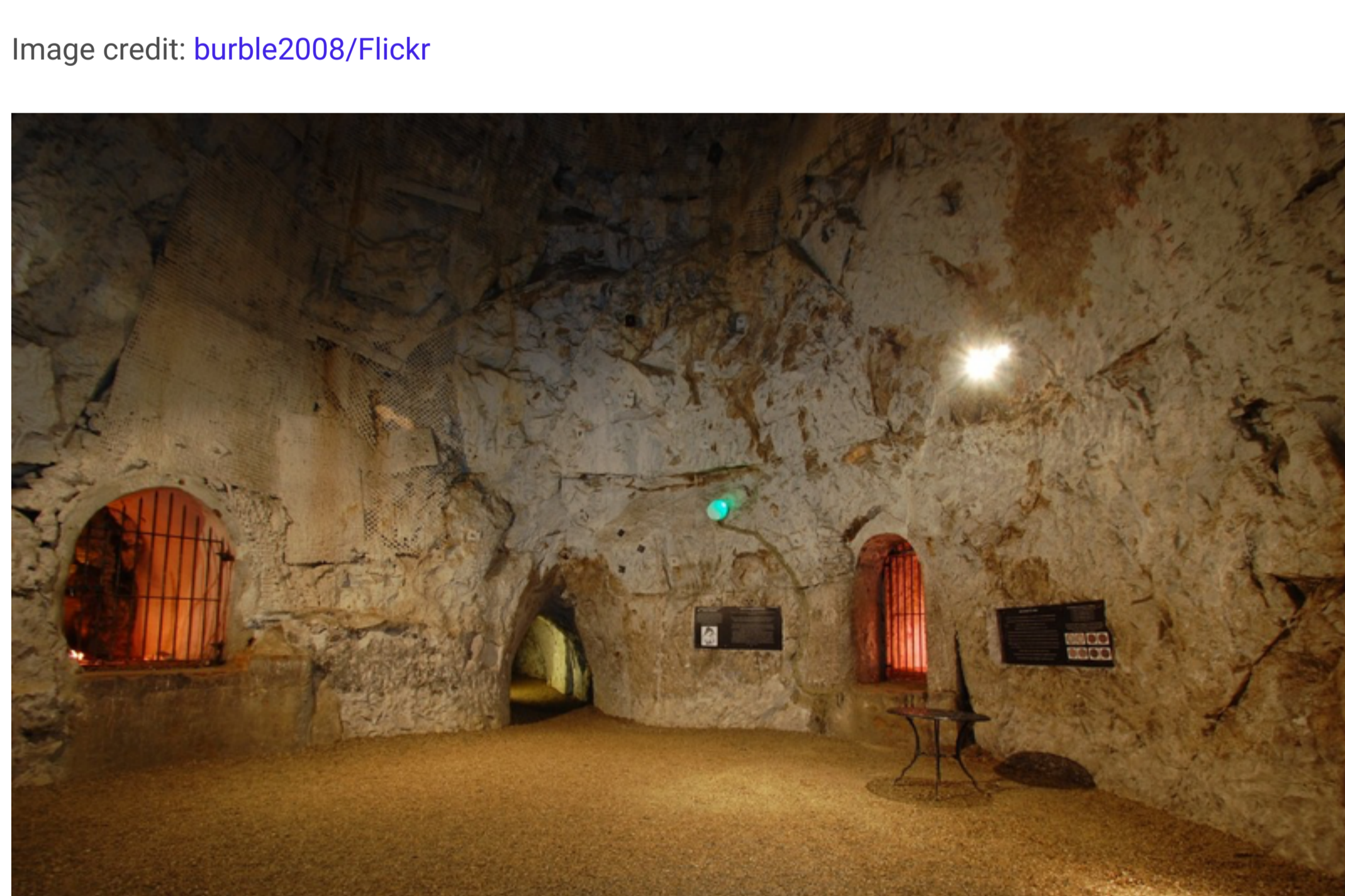


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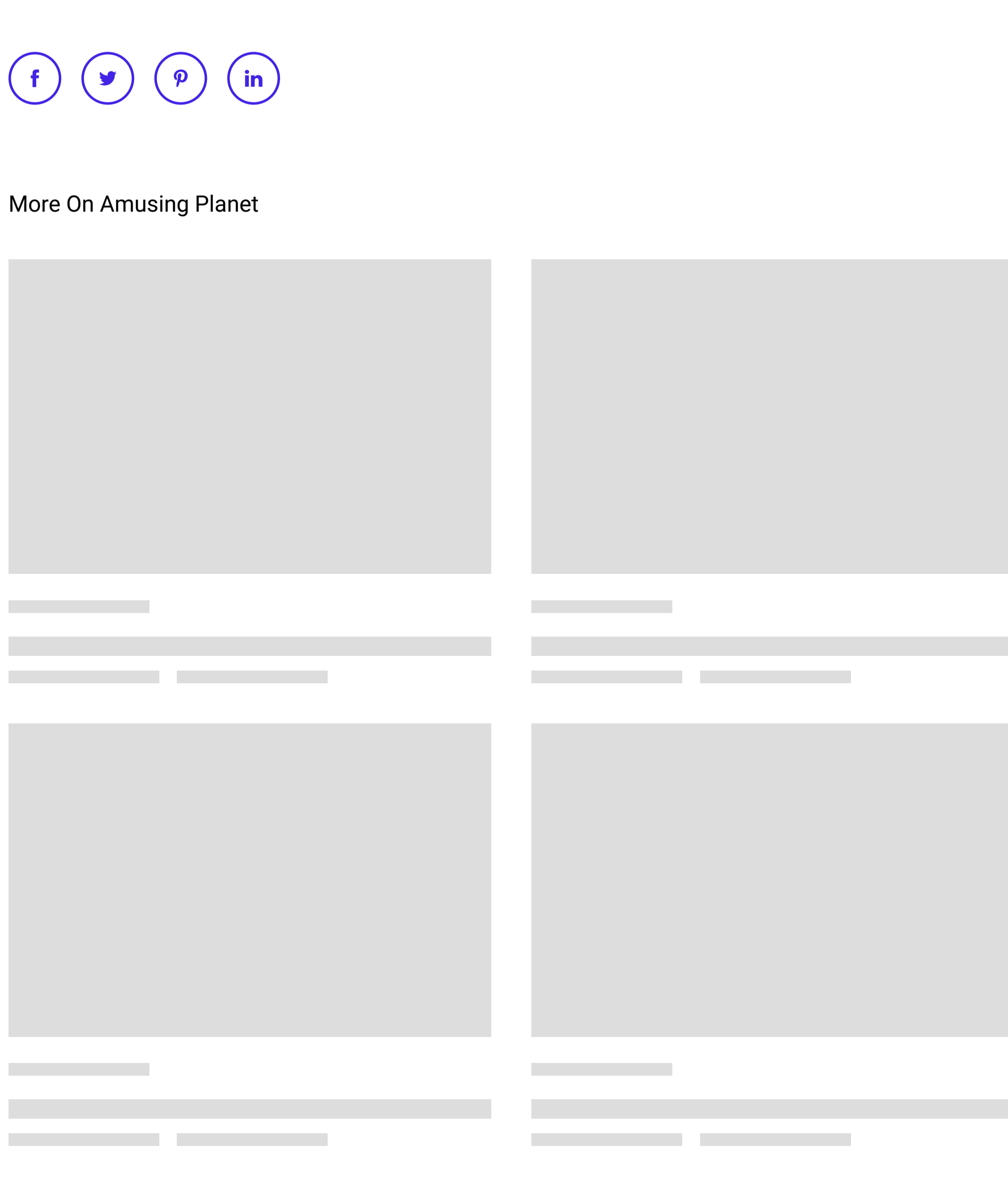
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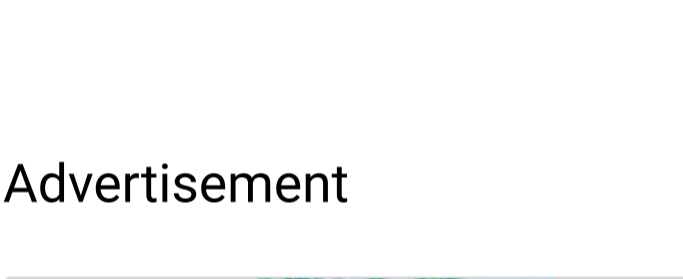
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