



PRIDE & PRIVACY

Three new members' clubs that promise to be bigger, better and starrier than any before are opening in Mayfair, pitting old money against new and progress against tradition. As the battle heats up, **John Arlidge** asks which will win the war of W1

In the corner of St James's Street and Piccadilly sits one of London's grandest buildings, all fluted columns and heavy oak doors. Inside, a small army is working around the clock to transform it into one of the grandest addresses in the capital at 50 St James's Street. 'There's nowhere else like it,' declares the man with the blueprints, Luca Del Bono, investor and general stylish fella about town.

Around the corner, on Hertford Street, stands a 28,000sq ft Victorian house that takes up an entire block behind the Curzon Mayfair cinema. Inside stands another big man with big plans. Six foot three inches tall, Robin Birley – son of Mark Birley, who created Annabel's nightclub, Mark's Club, Harry's Bar and George – declares 5 Hertford Street will be 'like no other address in London'.



Meanwhile, a bread roll's throw away, on Dover Street, the doors have just reopened on another Mayfair landmark: The Arts Club. Inside, its owner Arjun Waney and his creative director Gwyneth Paltrow are celebrating what they believe to be the finest new club in London. 'The vibe is right,' says Paltrow. 'The interiors are perfect, the food is delicious and the people are those you want to see and have a laugh with.'

London's ritziest neighbourhood is shrugging off its stuffy reputation (and the recession) and creating lavish new private members' clubs. In a few months' time, 50 St James's Street and 5 Hertford Street are set to go head to head with The Arts Club, all the outposts of the Annabel's group, Morton's on Berkeley Square, and Alfred's, the private club run by Dunhill. It will be a highly charged battle, pitting class against cash, new money against old, nation against nation, old against young.

Join us Gwyneth Paltrow and Cameron Diaz at the relaunch of The Arts Club in October

In the blue-blooded corner is Birley, 53, the son of Lady Annabel Vane-Tempest-Stewart, daughter of the 8th Marquess of Londonderry, and her first husband Mark Birley, son of the society portraitist Sir Oswald Birley. His half-sister is Jemima Khan and he is married to Bryan Ferry's ex-wife Lucy Helmore. He has so far sold 400 lifetime memberships at £25,000 a pop – that's £10 million. As membership applications grow, he poses an increasing threat to the biggest player on the block, Johann Rupert, 61, boss of the luxury goods conglomerate Richemont. Rupert can often be found puffing on a cigar at Alfred's (the Duke of Westminster's former residence on the corner of Berkeley Square), one of Dunhill's private 'homes', where the true aristocracy and the aristocracy of entertainment and business rub Savile Row-clad shoulders.

In the arty corner sits Waney, 72, an entrepreneur who has made millions running dozens of businesses worldwide. He is best known for setting up some of London's leading restaurants, notably Zuma and La Petite Maison. At his side are Paltrow and designer Stella McCartney, an unofficial adviser, and producer and DJ Mark Ronson, who curates the club's music programme. It attracts a bohemian crowd. The late Amy Winehouse's band play regularly and the Red Hot Chili Peppers and even Paltrow herself have made appearances.

With contemporary art covering the walls, The Arts Club poses a challenge to Lebanon-born Anglophile Marlon Abela, the 35-year-old owner of Morton's, who also fancies himself as a bit of a collector. The first-floor dining room of Morton's is hung with Julian Opie paintings, but Abela's first love is food and his club is home to one of the best restaurants in London, with one of the most extensive wine lists. He also owns the Japanese restaurant Umu and the Michelin-starred Greenhouse, both also in Mayfair.

Del Bono, 38, is Mr International: Sicilian by birth, with a British mother, he is now backed by lashings of Russian cash from one of Moscow's richest families. He won't say which. A co-founder and investor in the luxury concierge outfit Quintessentially, Del Bono is targeting the kind of international monied elite that he hopes will make 50 St James's Street the Annabel's of today – the place to belong to.

DEL BONO DISMISSES ANNABEL'S AS 'THE KIND OF CLUB WHERE YOU GO FOR A SPECIAL OCCASION. THAT'S NOT A REAL CLUB'

So, three new openings (total cost: an eye-watering £100 million) and three battles under way. The cost of opening and operating the existing clubs in Mayfair, and their associated outposts and restaurants, is at least as much again. That's the best part of a quarter of a billion pounds' worth of doors that remain firmly locked to all but the carefully vetted and selected. To belong to any of these establishments, you have to be invited, approved by the membership committee and stump up a joining fee, ranging from a few hundred pounds to £2,000, plus annual subs of between £1,000 and £3,000.

entrepreneurs and the fashionable. These new-money nomads already live in the breakaway state of Richistan, so the idea of places where they can relax in luxurious privacy – especially when the world outside is hurting – is highly attractive.

With big bucks, big names and even bigger egos at stake, it's scarcely surprising that the battle to be crowned king of Mayfair is becoming anything but gentlemanly. Robin Birley has been at loggerheads with multimillionaire entrepreneur Richard Caring, after Caring spent £100 million snapping up the Annabel's Group shortly before Mark Birley, the group's founder and

THE NEW ARRIVALS IN W1



Sense of belonging The brasserie and oyster bar at Arjun Waney's (top) new Arts Club on Dover Street



Gold member Robin Birley at his new club 5 Hertford Street, and his half-sister Jemima Khan



Mr International Luca Del Bono and 50 St James's Street, which Gemma Arterton (right) recently visited for a party

Why now this W1 gold rush? Members' clubs in Mayfair and Pall Mall were once places where old men went to take snuff and then snuff it. All the action used to be on the other side of Regent Street at celebrity hotspot Soho House, created by Nick Jones, and the actors' sanctuary Century, brainchild of Pierre Condou. But the combination of Mayfair's central location, its elegant architecture, the hotels – Claridge's, The Connaught and The Dorchester – the shopping on Bond Street, the restaurants on Mount Street, the boutique finance houses and the area's sense of privacy and discretion has attracted international financiers,

Robin's father, died in 2007. The irascible but visionary Mark disinherited Robin after falling out with him over Robin's decision to hire a private detective to investigate his sister India Jane's new boyfriend.

Birley is furious to have lost a business he considered his birthright and is 'effing affronted' that Caring has trademarked the Birley name. Robin and Jemima Khan fought a campaign to force 'Richard unCaring' to allow Robin to use his surname for 5 Hertford Street but Caring, who knows the power of the Birley name and how determined Robin is to replicate what his father did, won't budge, prompting Birley to dismiss him as 'a machine, a steamroller, who is so rich he assumes he can simply get away with whatever he wants'.

At The Arts Club, Arjun Waney, who was born in pre-partition India and is, therefore, more British than the British, also regards Caring as somewhat brash. 'His Ivy Club is very flashy and always suspiciously full of very long-legged Russian girls. Why ever can there be so many in there?' he wonders from his Belgravia apartment. While from his lofty eyrie at 50 St James's Street, which he hopes will soon be the finest and only real rooftop bar in Mayfair, Del Bono dismisses established Mayfair clubs, such as Annabel's, as 'the kind of club where you go for a special occasion. That's not a real club. A real club is a place that is a home from home.'

Abela's rivals concede that he does food and wine better than anyone but say he has created 'a dining club not a members' club'. Johann

MAYFAIR'S OLD GUARD



The home of glamour The restaurant at Annabel's



Grand design Alfred's: the Dunhill members' club at Bourdon House



Private dining Marlon Abela in the restaurant at Morton's

Rupert's super-strict invitation-only membership policy - if you so much as enquire about membership you are blackballed - has, his detractors say, turned Alfred's into a place that 'is so empty it feels like a mausoleum'. Waney sniffs: 'I went there once on a Saturday night and there was one person there.' For their part, Waney's detractors accuse him of giving away memberships to ensure his club is full all the time. And every operator wonders out loud whether Robin Birley has inherited his father's magic. 'I like Robin and wish him all the best,' they say, before adding *sotto voce*, 'but his old man disinherited him and sold to Richard Caring.'

Not content with slugging each other off at every turn, the new operators have also started a talent war. Waney has pinched Nigel Stowe, former manager of The Club at The Ivy, to run The Arts Club. Birley has lured away Alfredo Crivellari, his father's right-hand man at Annabel's,

and also Alberico Penati, the chef at Harry's Bar for 20 years, in spite of Caring's attempts to prevent old-timers from jumping ship.

The trash-talking is, of course, all good sport. But there is a point to the insults. Even in such a monied neighbourhood, the new owners know it is going to be tough to attract the right people. So each is trying to set out his stall differently. Birley wants to recreate the family-run atmosphere of Annabel's. He will live above the club and welcome people 'as if to my home'. The financing is largely in the family, too. Robin and his family and friends have put up the bulk of the £25 million build cost and Robin is the majority shareholder and chairman of the committee that approves, or blackballs, members. As at Annabel's the crowd will be 'half English, half foreign, drawn mainly from the upper classes, the banks, the racing fraternity and the arts world,' Birley promises. 'The feel will be

English, because it will be run by me. I'm quintessentially an Englishman. I want to establish a place for people who dress properly, with staff who are immaculate.'

Waney wants the most interesting crowd, as befits a club whose founder member was Charles Dickens. He particularly wants women, who tend to shun private clubs in favour of restaurants and bars. Hence his decision to appoint Paltrow. Around half of the 2,800 members are women. And while big brains are welcome, big egos aren't. 'We ask everyone who applies to give us a little résumé. If anyone refuses or suggests, as one woman did, that we Google them, the application goes to the bottom of the pile,' says Waney. He is well on the way to creating a compelling mix of characters. The Duke of Edinburgh, the club's patron, was recently serenaded by Paltrow at one of the club's many opening parties with 'F*** You' by Cee Lo Green. The Duke confessed that he'd 'rather enjoyed the language'.

At 50 St James's Street, Del Bono is aiming for a club-cum-hotel vibe. There are plans for 14 plush suites for guests who want to stay the night, and complimentary cars home for those who don't. He is shunning a nightclub in favour of a hyper-modern spa. He is also trialling a hybrid 'open door' policy; he wants to open the ground-floor coffee bar and brasserie to the public, but only members will be able to go upstairs. 'I don't like the idea of being totally exclusive,' he says.

All the owners' ambitions are on a global scale: Nick Jones has proved that if you create a great club, you have a brand that can travel - and make hundreds of millions of pounds in the process. Jones, backed by Caring (who now owns 80 per cent of the Soho House Group), has five outposts in Britain, and clubs in Berlin, New York, Miami and Los Angeles, with Mumbai and Singapore in the pipeline. Johann Rupert's Alfred's has branches in Shanghai, Tokyo and Dubai. Caring is opening an Annabel's in Dubai. Del Bono wants to export 50 St James's Street and Birley aims to forge links with the most upmarket clubs in New York.

So who in this real-life game of Monopoly will end up 'owning' Mayfair's nightlife, pouring the Martinis and grilling the molluscs for London's elite? Bragging rights to WI nights are up for grabs. Stand by for some dirty fighting when Birley and Del Bono open their doors in a few months' time. It will be the best free entertainment highfalutin' London has seen in years. **ES**

If your name's not down... get on the waiting list

THE ARTS CLUB**Size** 12,000sq ft**Design** Designed by David D'Almada, with an Art Deco brasserie and oyster bar, and a spectacular white marble staircase.**Food and drink**

'R' de Ruinart house champagne (£55) and the house cocktail 'Twinkle': elderflower,

vodka and champagne with a twist of lemon (£12.50).

Extra features

Contemporary art exhibitions. A live band every night.

Accommodation No.**Membership** Three-month waiting list, two referees required. £1,500 per year. (theartsclub.co.uk)**5 HERTFORD STREET****Size** 28,000sq ft**Design** The building wraps around a mosaic courtyard. The basement restaurant, bar and club are designed by Rifat Ozbek, with flourishes by Manolo Blahnik.**Food and drink**

Alberico Penati,

formerly of Harry's Bar, will oversee the French/British menu.

Extra features A nightclub in the basement and a cigar shop on the ground floor.**Accommodation**

Yes.

Membership

£1,200 per year. (herfordstreet.co.uk)

50 ST JAMES'S STREET**Size** 30,000sq ft**Design** Timothy Hatton is the architect; the designer is still under wraps. Art will play a prominent role.**Food and drink**

Nothing confirmed, but they are in discussion with Berry Bros & Rudd

wine merchants.

Extra features An underground hammam spa.**Accommodation**

Two floors of the club will be run as a hotel.

Membership The list is yet to open, but membership will be exclusively by invitation. (no website yet)