

STYLE


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*TOFF TURF
WARS*
THE BITCHY BATTLE
FOR MAYFAIR'S
PARTY SET

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OH SO VAIN
WILL YOU TRY
THE NEW
ANTI-AGEING DRIP?
.....

*EVERYTHING
CHANGES*
GARY BARLOW
TURNS RESTAURANT
CRITIC



FIGHTING Spirit

HONED, TONED AND GOING FOR GOLD

MEET BRITAIN'S BRIGHTEST OLYMPIC STARS

WHEN POSH comes to shove

SEVERAL NEW PRIVATE MEMBERS' CLUBS ARE OPENING IN SWANKY MAYFAIR. YET AN UNSEEMLY SCRAP HAS BROKEN OUT IN THE FIGHT FOR BUSINESS. **JOHN ARLIDGE** REPORTS ON THE TOFF TURF WARS

The worst recession in living memory might seem an odd time for a private members' club gold rush in W1. But Mayfair doesn't do recession. The area is home to the new-money nomads who live in the breakaway state of Richistan, and there are more hedge funds based here than anywhere else in Europe. Money does not matter much to these footloose financiers, or the area's other wealthy elite. What does matter is finding places where they can relax in luxurious privacy, and Mayfair's rival hosts are vying for their patronage with a rash of exclusive new establishments. But there's no love lost between the clubbrati of W1, where money, power, snobbery and connections are the weapons of choice in Mayfair's new turf war.

Robin Birley opens the door to 5 Hertford Street. "I hope Pap would be proud," he says. "It would have been his birthday this week." "Pap" is Mark Birley, his late father and the man who practically invented modern private members' clubs, with the likes of Annabel's, Mark's Club, the George dining club and Harry's Bar. Robin, 54, never thought 5 Hertford Street would be his first private members' club — he'd always imagined he would take over the family firm — but his father sold Annabel's and all his other clubs to the rag-trade billionaire Richard Caring for £2,000,000 before his death in 2007. Then, to add insult to injury, he disinherited Robin. Father and son had fallen out over Robin's decision to hire a private detective to spy on his sister, India-Jane, and do a background check on the father of her love child. Shortly after the deal was signed, Caring trademarked the Birley name for his own use, despite Robin's protestations.

It has taken Birley five years to raise the £25m to build 5 Hertford Street. But now he's done it. "An so proud of my brother Robin. Birley's new club is the most charming, chic, original place I've ever been," tweeted his half-sister Jenima Khan. The club is an elegant mix of modern English country house-style drawing rooms, an oyster bar, a cigar lounge, a courtyard and a lounge basement bar, restaurant and nightclub designed by Rifat Ozbek. It looks like Annabel's *de nos jours*, and that's exactly the way Birley wants it.

Ever since Caring acquired his birthright and his name, Birley has dreamt of creating a successor to Annabel's to prove that he has inherited the Birley magic — and to put one over on his nonnaive rich nemesis. He dismisses Caring as "a steamroller who thinks he can use his money to get whatever he wants". To re-create the Annabel's atmosphere, Birley has poached some of Caring's key staff, including Alfredo Crivellari, Birley Sr's right-hand man at Annabel's, and Alberico Penati, executive chef of Harry's Bar for 20 years. Former Annabel's habitués have also been signed up as members, including Sir David Tang, Lulu Guinness and Hugh Grant.

"It will be a family affair. Annabel's always felt like one big family," Birley says. Caring's response? He has just opened a new club of his own on the opposite corner. Little House, part of the Soho House Group, of which Caring owns a 30% stake, is smaller and hipper than 5 Hertford Street, and blows a raspberry at Birley's unashamedly old-fashioned club.

Caring and Birley may be slugging it out to earn the title of king of Mayfair, but they are not the only contestants. Morton's, on Berkeley Square, owned by the Lebanon-born Anglophile Marlon Abia, continues to set new standards for food and wine. The Arts Club on Dover Street, owned by the

Indian-born investor Arjun Waney, underwent a multimillion pound revamp last autumn, which brought with it a slew of artists and celebrities, including Mark Ronson, David Beckham and Gwyneth Paltrow, the club's creative director. And a bread roll's throw away on St James's Street, the investor and professional Italian about town Luca Del Bono is using pots of Russian cash to turn one of London's grandest buildings into one of the grandest — if not the grandest — addresses in the capital: 50 St James. When his club opens next year, Del Bono wants "a broad mix of stylish, interesting international people who have made London their home". Expect to see Russia's leading restaurateur and Belgravia resident Arkady Novikov rubbing Savile Row-clad shoulders with the fashion designer Tom Ford and the Italian chef Giorgio Locatelli.

There is more than bragging rights at stake in Mayfair's real-life game of Monopoly. Whoever pours the martinis for London's elite stands to make a tidy sum. You can spend £300 on dinner for two at a club without trying very hard these days, and life memberships now fetch £25,000 — prices that have doubled in the past decade. With so much at stake, even business partners are at each other's throats. The Barclay brothers are currently embroiled in a legal spat with the Irish property tycoon Paddy McKillen over who has control of Royal's. Frequently by a fashionable crowd including Kate Moss, David Williams and Lara Stone, it's also set to be a second home for many clays and heads of state visiting the Olympics.

So who's winning the battle? The word on the street is that Annabel's is so keen to get skinny bums on well-upholstered seats, you don't have to be a member to get in. You just have to make it onto an approved list, as Kelly Brook and the singer Duffy have. "They're letting in anyone these days," scoff Birley. It's well-heeled crowd.

Caring dismisses Birley and his pukka pals as chineese upper-class "twits" who cannot make 5 Hertford Street a success. By contrast, he says, his new club, Little House, is already a hit. He's right. It's full most of the time, but it has attracted criticism. Some Soho House members say Mayfair is the last place where a club for creative media types should open. Nick Jones, the founder of Soho House, has also been accused of breaking the cardinal rule of club membership: excluding members. Only a few Soho House members were initially invited to join Little House.

The Arts Club is busy, all right, but some say its starry membership makes it more of a celebrity hangout than a club of like-minded cultural types. As one disgruntled member puts it: "The only art on show is the art of plastic surgery." Critics of Morton's say it lacks the homely atmosphere of a club. "Being a posh dining club is not enough. A great club needs soul, not just soul food," says one member.

For now, all eyes are on Birley. He is convinced there is a market for a traditional English club, like the one his father created. When it opens its doors tomorrow, 5 Hertford Street will be "half English, half foreign, drawn mainly from the upper classes, the banks, the racing fraternity and the arts world. 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".

Not for nothing is 5 Hertford Street called a private members' establishment rather than a club. Birley hopes it — and the Birley name — will once again be the most established in Mayfair. ●



CLARIDGE'S



Who owns? Moot point. The Barclay brothers think they do
Who goes? Kate Moss, DVF, David Williams and Lara Stone, and Royal out-of-towners jetting in for the Olympics



ARTS CLUB



Who owns? The Indian entrepreneur Arjun Waney
Gwyneth Paltrow (second left) is creative director
Who goes? The A list love it. Prince Harry, Cameron Diaz and David Beckham have all been spotted there



ANNABEL'S



Who owns? Rag-trade-to-riches-to-restaurants tycoon Richard Caring (second from right)
Who goes? Toffs rub shoulders with the likes of Duffy, Tamara Ecclestone and Kelly Brook



5 HERTFORD STREET



Who owns? Robin (far left), son of the late Mark Birley, the man who founded Annabel's in 1962
Who goes? The original Annabel's crowd and old-school toffs including Lulu Guinness, Hugh Grant and Jenima Khan



LITTLE HOUSE



Who owns? Soho House founder Nick Jones (with wife Kirsty Young, centre) and Richard Caring
Who goes? With limited capacity, few Soho House regulars can get in, plus to their annoyance, Keira Knightley and Robert Pattinson managed it



MAP ILLUSTRATION: RICHARDSON AND FEE ILLUSTRATIONS: GUY LAWRENCE; PHOTOS: GREGG DEGETTE; CLARIDGE'S: OPTIMUM; ANNABEL'S: MARIKA; 50 ST JAMES: ANDREW DUNN; LITTLE HOUSE: KEVIN MAZUR