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## FEATURES

# I say, Carruthers, there are meeja luvvies right next door

Can a Soho House club thrive in the heart of old-money Mayfair?

John Arlidge Published: 22 April 2012

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Nick Jones says: 'This is a little club, in a little street, for little people' (Patrick Fraser)

MEMBERS' CLUBS in Mayfair used to be places where old men in old suits and ties went to take snuff — and then snuff it. You still have to wear a tie to get past many doormen. So who let in Nick Jones, founder of the fashionable Soho House private clubs, dressed in his usual jeans, polo shirt and loafers?

He did. Soho House, which Jones created as the opposite of an old-world establishment, has moved into the heart of pukka London.

Little House, just off Curzon Street, opens tomorrow. It is the boldest move Jones has made since he borrowed £1m from Paul Raymond, the late porn baron and property tycoon, to set up Soho House 20 years ago. "I never thought I would end up here, but here I am," he said.

It was Richard Caring, a big investor in Soho House — who also owns Annabel's nightclub and Le Caprice and Scott's restaurants in Mayfair — who suggested Jones should head west. Caring had snapped up a former estate agent's premises and got permission to turn it into a restaurant.

Initially Caring wanted to open a branch of the Ivy, the Covent Garden restaurant that he also owns, but changed his mind. He suggested to Jones that he might open a central London franchise of his popular Pizza East restaurant. Jones said he would rather add to the Soho House empire.

Caring agreed — partly because it meant he would have a club opposite the new private members' club set up by his arch-rival, Robin Birley. Caring bought Annabel's from Mark Birley, Robin Birley's father, for £100m in 2007, depriving Robin of his chance to take over the family business. Robin responded by setting up a rival to Annabel's, called 5 Hertford Street.

Jones says the time is right to move into Mayfair because clubs in the area are changing dramatically. In recent years several new, modish places have opened.

Arjun Waney, who set up some of London's leading restaurants, notably Zuma and La Petite Maison, refurbished and re-opened the Arts Club on Dover Street last year. Thanks to the involvement of Gwyneth Paltrow, the actress, and Mark Ronson, the music producer and DJ, it attracts a bohemian crowd.

Marlon Abela, the Lebanon-born Anglophile, has modernised Morton's, the private members' club on Berkeley Square, and a hospitality investor, Luca Del Bono, is using lashings of Russian cash to turn premises in nearby St James's into the finest club in the traditional home of men-only establishments in London. Women will be welcome and members will be allowed to wear — *gasp* — trainers.

"I always thought the area was a bit big, swanky and stiff but I like it these days," said Jones. "In fact, I'm a member of the Arts Club. They've done a great job."

The social mix and style of the area is changing, too. Jones points to the arrival of fashionable boutiques in Mayfair, notably Stella McCartney on Bruton Street and Marc Jacobs on Mount Street, and the opening of galleries.

"There's a lot of art and fashion round here these days. A lot of our key demographic, creative people, come to Mayfair now. In fact, some rarely venture east of Regent Street."

However, he concedes the move into the heart of old money London is a gamble for a club that prides itself on youth and edginess. "Of course I'm nervous. It might not work. We'll find out on Monday."

Tellingly, Jones is not calling the new club Mayfair House, in line with all the other branches of Soho House that have their location in the title.

He says he does not want to attract "big people" to Little House. Bond Street hedge fund managers need not apply. "This is a little club, in a little street, for little people."

Those who are members of other Soho Houses will be able to use the club, which will be open from breakfast through to the early hours of the morning.

The £2.5m funding for Little House came from Caring, Jones and Soho House's new majority shareholder, Ron Burkle, a California-based investor who has made billions of dollars in supermarkets, hotels, jewellers and celebrity fashion labels. In a deal earlier this year, Burkle bought 60% of the Soho House Group, reducing Caring's stake from 80% to 30% and halving Jones's 20%. The deal valued the company at £250m.

Analysts say Jones and Caring needed fresh capital after running up debts of £180m opening big new clubs in Miami, Los Angeles and Berlin. Jones denies the group needed re-financing. "We didn't need to do the deal. In fact, Richard [Caring] was quite reluctant. I had to persuade him that it was just a good option, a good offer."

However, he conceded: "When we did the deal we renegotiated our position with the bank and that was it. Like a lot of businesses out there, debt has been reduced. We are in good health. We are very profitable."

Despite reducing his stake by more than half, Caring will still play a big part in the business. Jones said: "He loves it and gets on well with Ron."

New branches of Soho House will open soon in Toronto, Chicago, Istanbul, Barcelona and Mumbai. "Our aim is to have a home in every city," said Jones.

The opening of Little House coincides with Jones's move from Notting Hill in west London to an Oxfordshire village, where he now lives with his wife, the Desert Island Discs presenter Kirsty Young, and their children.

Mayfair? Oxfordshire? Is the style arbiter from Soho turning his back on his urban roots and becoming posh?

"God, no," said Jones. "I'm not posh. Never will be. And nor is this place. Look around. It's not stuffy. The staff wear jeans and Converse sneakers, not white waistcoats.

"We're not going to be a gentlemen's club. But we're confident enough to try our hand here now."

**£2.5m** - Investment in Little House

**£250m** - Value of the Soho House Group