

Meet the PRESIDENT

Before taking charge of *The Twenty Club*, Wendy Hallett opens the door on this select event

Words by CATHERINE NEILAN

The Twenty Club is one of retail's most exclusive networking events, and this autumn Hallett Retail managing director and NatWest Everywoman Award-winner Wendy Hallett will take the reins as president. For her two years in charge she plans to target new retailer and start-up retailer members and grow the club's female participation.

For those not among the select few to have already been inducted to the world of The Twenty Club, it is a "work-related but also very social" group, says Hallett. The original 19th-century club started out with a 20-member maximum - which lent the club its name - but this has gradually been extended to a limit of 60, meaning new members have to prove their worth to be admitted by the committee.

Meeting at members club Home House on Portman Square in London's West End, it operates under Chatham House rules - meaning the information can be used but the source cannot be revealed - allowing rival retailers to offload about their problems and challenges without fear of the wider world finding out. Journalists need not apply.

The club dates back to 1897, when John Lewis was turning 33 and young upstart Marks & Spencer was a year younger than Asos is now, aged just 13. The original members were worthy independent store owners from London suburbs, but during the inter-war period this was extended to West End names and today includes retailers of all stripes. This rich history plays a crucial part in the ethos of the event, which runs five times across the key seasons from September to March and bills itself as the social meeting forum for top retail leaders.

"One of the really important things when you take over something like this is to respect the tradition of the club, which has been going 117 years," says Hallett. "It's run on quite traditional lines. There is a very smart dress code, a set format for speaker and questions and just a certain way of doing things. I think it's really important that anyone who comes in to do the presidency respects that, and understands some of the members have been members for an awfully long time."

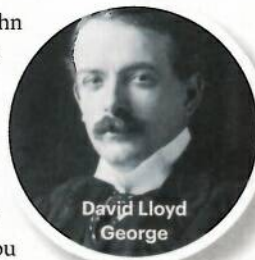
These include outgoing Aurora Fashions chairman David Lovelock, former Harvey Nichols chief executive Joseph Wan, former chief executive of

Debenhams Rob Templeman and John Lewis managing director Andy Street. Bringing competitors together could lead to fireworks, but Hallett says The Twenty Club is a more civilised affair. "They all know each other. Often they have worked with each other before, so you never see any heated arguments. Even though you have formality of tradition, people see it as a relaxed event."

AMONG HER DUTIES, Hallett will be charged with finding key speakers, who can be industry people but also include sporting and political figures. Previous speakers have included former prime ministers David Lloyd George and Harold Wilson, far-right politician Oswald Mosley, newspaper baron Rupert Murdoch, high-speed racer Sir Malcolm Campbell, poet John Betjeman - who spoke on the subject of shop fronts - and Basil Spence, the architect of Coventry Cathedral. Designers including Hardy Amies, Terence Conran and Zandra Rhodes have also spoken at the dinners.



Club together: Hallett wants to continue to attract speakers as prestigious as the former ones below



David Lloyd George



Malcolm Campbell



Hardy Amies

When she takes over from David Carter-Johnson, former chief executive of Adams, Hallett says she would like to focus on attracting similarly high-profile names - London mayor Boris Johnson is on her wish list, as is former Liberal Democrats leader Lord [Paddy] Ashdown.

Despite her respect for tradition, during her presidency Hallett plans to keep one eye on changes taking place in the present by targeting new members from among retailers, start-up retailers and particularly women.

"Last year 25% of members were female, which is not bad, but obviously that is something I would like to see grow," she explains. Mostly this will take place through an initial invitation as a guest, through which route Hallett herself first joined the club four or five years ago. "I came as a guest of Nigel Rothband, who was chief executive of [charity] Retail Trust at the time, and the next season I was asked to join. Bringing guests is another lovely part of the tradition - of course you get to know the other members well but you also get to meet new people."

PHOTOS: ALAMY