

NORTHERN SOUL

More than Manchester: **ADRIAN GILLAN** explores the Queer North's other options and finds a fine fab four.

BLACKPOOL

BRIGHTON it is not; but none the worse for that. Blackpool's claim to be the gay capital of the North may be disputed by Manchester, but that doesn't stop hordes of gay day trippers and weekend breakers swapping stylish Canal Street for some seriously unpretentious end-of-pier camped-up fun on the drag, hen and hagd-dominated scene 'twixt main station and front - in the very shadow of the Tower.

When it first opened, few thought rolling Vegas-on-acid trannie show **Funny Girls** (The Old Odeon Cinema, Dickson Road; T: 01253 291 144) in the old Odeon Cinema would become the big hit it has today. See it, then stroll down the main gay street - Talbot Road - and dip into **Pepe's** (94 Talbot Road; T: 01253 626 691), a sprawling basement bar, with hysterical DJs whooping it up, like pier-end perma-grin coconut shiresters drumming up sales, rain or shine. Just a few doors down, party at vibrant cabaret-disco basement hub **Mardi Gras** (114 Talbot Road; T: 01253 296 262).

Many gather in **The Flying Handbag** (170-172 Talbot Road; T: 01253 625 522) - near the end of your Talbot crawl - to sip and stare at strippers or avoid vicious drag who can reduce you to tears in more ways than one. Last orders and Handbag flings wide its inner doors as happy punters dutifully file through into the cavernous **Flamingo's** (176 Talbot Road; T: 01253 624 901) next door. It's a huge club on - oh - at least four floors, towering up like some gay wedding cake, all overhanging a lower tranny dance space fair writing with Youth.

Then freshen up with a walk along the front. From the War Memorial by the North Pier, follow the pathway north along **Middle Walk**, between the Promenade and Lower Walk - a magic mile of colonnades where men meet men after hours, not least in summer. Or there's **Acqua** sauna (25 Springfield Road; T: 01253 294 610) in winter.

There's no shortage of rainbow-flagged B&Bs in Blackpool but we can certainly recommend the friendly **Tremadoc Hotel** (127-129 Dickson Road; T: 01253 624 001) run by Steve, Tom and Whisky the dog - mere yards from front and feet from fun.

LIVERPOOL Federation

MANCHESTER and Blackpool may have stolen some of Liverpool's gay thunder but there are several new venues around Dale and Victoria Streets - just north of the 'Cavern Quarter' which bore the Beatles but won't bore you - and no shortage of likely lads and scally scousers bulging in trousers to fill fresh space!

The oldest gay bar in town, **Paco's** (25 Stanley Street; T: 0151 236 9737), wears its age well on Stanley Street, the heart of the queer quarter. Clubby if quiet below ground, light and airy above and friendly all over, it's an ideal place to steady your hand and chart a queer course. Then pop round the corner to the **Lisbon Bar** (Corner of Stanley and Victoria Street; T: 0151 231 6831), a spacious, traditionally decorated basement pub, supposedly mixed but certainly rather gay whenever we dropped by.

Or dock at new boy **The Navy Bar** (Stanley Street; no phone) which set sail last November, bobbing stylishly between Paco's and Lisbon, with its talent nights and cheapie booze. This faces yet another recent recruit on the street corner over the way: **Superstar Boudoir** (20-24 Stanley Street; T: 07904 51 21 79) opened last July, and its fab sound system and screens have been luring good taste down its plush basement fair ever since.

Step down likewise into contrasting earthy stalwart **Masquerade Bar** (10 Cumberland St, off Dale Street; T: 0151 236 7786) just around the block on Cumberland Street to set your pulse apace. Routinely packed with gay youth whirling them-



Fibre

selves around the floor, surrendering to the dragged-up hosts who keep the party pumping, coaxing sweet karaoke from the most blushing of babes. However, nearby **Addiction** (Cumberland Street, off Dale Street; T: 0151 236 6508) - which launched last August - has been piling on pressure with a range of new club nights, as if we were short.

A wee walk back past Stanley Street up a back passage, **The Curzon** (Temple Lane, off Victoria Street; T: 0151 236 5160) is probably the most male-dominated gay venue in town, a right gentleman's club complete with porn screens and large bar at ground level, dance and shows above. Visit **G-Bar** (Eberle St., off Dale Street; T: 0151 258 1200) just up over Dale Street for the posing style set and pouting student crowd, partying right through 'til breakfast at weekends - with a busy dancy mass upstairs and a tranny basement beneath.

The biggest club in town and just across from G-Bar, **Garlands** (8-10 Eberle St., off Dale Street; T: 0151 236 3307) has risen imperiously from the ashes of its old burnt home with the same basic retro design but bigger toilets! It still attracts its usual Saturday hoards for hard dance, funky house, disco and trash. But is it quite so gay as of yore? Or do gays simply now have more options - like **The End** (Stanley Street; no phone) back on Stanley Street, which opened in December with plenty of areas to chill, dance or mix?

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SHEFFIELD

CHECK yourself in at gay-friendly bang-in-the-centre **Rutland Arms** (86 Brown Street; T: 0114 2729003). Then take a short walk south of centre to **Dempsey's** (1 Hereford St, Moorfoot; T: 0114 2552761) - drab outside, fab inside - spine and soul of the city's scene, pulling them in from Rotherham, Bakewell and beyond. Good grub in the bright downstairs bar; friendly, busy club above with cheery music and cruisy airs. But beware: people get mugged in the darker streets around. I did! Once Dempsey's shuts at 2am, busy boys trek north to **Club XS** (© Norfolk Arms, 195 Carlisle Street; T: 0114 275 2469) at the Norfolk Arms - a corner pub in an industrial wasteland north of centre, serving a heady mix of dry ice and dance into the wee weekend hours. And if you don't fancy trekking to XS all the way from Dempsey's, start off at **Ma Bakers** (5 Carlisle Street East; T: 0114 2789547; www.mabakers.co.uk) just over the road - a small yet earthy, friendly and colourful haunt. Or waft in from nearby **Bronx Sauna** (208 Savile Street; T: 0114 278 0383).

And there are always monthly club nights to lift the spirits. Cue **Climax** (Sheffield University Students' Union, Western Bank; T: 0114 222 8777) at Sheffield University Student Union every second or third Friday, with chart in the huge hall and sleaze in the wee room. Or clean up at **Fairy Likuid** (Fairy Likuid © Aqua, Formerly The Roundhouse, Ponds Forge, Sheffield; Fairy Likuid Hotline: 07877 110 362; www.fairylikuid.co.uk) at every second Friday of the month, currently housed at Aqua whilst its City Hall splendour is being restored.

LEEDS

Arch 54

LEEDS' far larger, more vibrant scene clusters together around Lower Briggate - near the station, **Harvey Nichols** and inexpensive hotels like **The Central** (35-47 New Briggate; T: 0113 294 1456). If you fancy upgrading, we recommend **42 The Calls** (address being, um, 42 The Calls) - a gorgeous, intimate and friendly hotel favoured by visiting celebrities like Liv Tyler and the like.

For drinking, there's a natural pub crawl trail. If you're feeling delicate or like your scenes gene, start down on Bridge End with **The Old Red Lion** (Meadow Lane; T: 0113 242 6779) - a.k.a. 'Old Dead Lion' on account of its quiet demeanour and stately clientele. A few doors up and another world: **The Base** (24-32 Bridge End; T: 0113 3684648) has boogie floor, bar-in-the-round and a Sunday cabaret to travel for. Yet further up, **The Bridge** (1-5 Bridge End; T: 0113 244 4734) is packed with a heaving, petting crowd. Around the corner and refurbished **New Penny** (57 Call



Mission

Lane; T: 0113 243 8055) is worth checking out.

Popular and oh-so-stylish gay (many claim mixed) **Bar Fibre** (168 Lower Briggate; T: 0870 200 888) over the way is a bar-cum-club across two floors, in no small part attracting oh-so-fashionable straight girls with their hety pals in tow. Across the brightly-lit courtyard is the gayer, more earthy **Queens Court** (Lower Briggate; no phone), with its popular lower bar and club above. Revamped: but as cheery and cruisy as ever.

This pulsating city boasts several weekly and monthly gay club nights, all nearby, including **Club Mission** (Heaton's Court; www.clubmission.com) - housed in five railway arches, with four dance areas and two bars (see website below for full details); and **Federation** (The Dark Arches; T: 0870 1200888) - held every first Saturday of the month, themed with anything from the Nativity to Alice in Wonderland, complete with tarts and bunnies!

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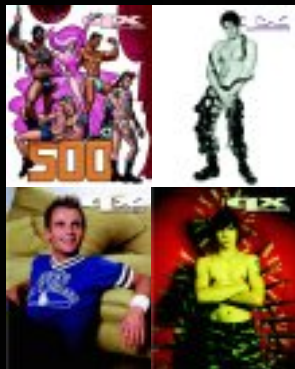
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