



Proprietor Greg inside Gl'amour boutique (circa 1985)

Gl'amour at 56 Hoxton Square



In the third of a series in which he explores London's gay ghettos, Haydon Bridge rediscovers lost gay Cockneys

THE MYSTERIOUS EAST

East London has generally kept its gay history secret...until now!

IN 1593 gay playwright Christopher Marlowe, who said, "All thei that love not tobacco and boys are foolcs," was murdered in a tavern in Deptford. Nothing much gay happened in London's East End for the next 400 years. Then, in 1995, Michael Barrymore came out on the stage of the *White Swan* in Whitechapel. Since then it's all gone a bit quiet again out East...

"Police tried to prove that queers were taking over the streets and that law-abiding citizens weren't safe. Of course it was fucking nonsense because most of the guys in the toilets were married with kids. I certainly was."

OK, all of the above is something of an exaggeration, a reflection of the fact that most of the best-known gay history has been created

by people who lived in more fashionable areas of London. Perceived as poor and dangerous, inhabited by foreigners and gangsters (notably the Krays), East London was a no man's land for the rest of the capital until London property prices forced artists and media folk away from trendy addresses. "When I moved into Limehouse [in the 1950s]," said gay writer and TV presenter Daniel Farson, "the East End was a separate country." Gay East Enders lived in a world of their own. It's only in recent years, as part of the campaign to rescue queer history from oblivion, that stories have emerged about pubs for gay sailors, men who lived as women during the Blitz, and an underground drag scene in Hoxton. It's almost as if a better title for EastEnders would be RearEnders. I can't believe I wrote that. The longest-running queer pub in the East End was in Limehouse. It was called **Charley Brown's**, after the retired seaman who bought it, and it survived from the 1920s until it was demolished in 1990. In Daniel Farson's 1997 autobiography, *Never a Normal Man*, there's a photo of Farson, gay artist Francis Bacon, and a couple of dockers posing outside the gents'

at Charley Brown's. Despite the fact that there were usually a few rent boys among the customers, the pub never got into trouble. Also it never appeared in the gay listings. You wouldn't have known about it unless you were a local. Another vital meeting place for the East End gay community was the **Royal Oak** in Columbia Road, Hackney. While researching local history, Columbia Road resident Linda Wilkinson learned about Lil and Maisie, a transvestite couple, who lived in Hackney throughout World War II and performed at the Royal Oak while the bombs were falling. What's remarkable about Lil and Maisie is that they were accepted by their neighbours. No stories have come to light of a similar working class gay couple anywhere else in London at this time. Lil and Maisie were still performing in drag at the Royal Oak in the 1960s. Linda Wilkinson told their story in a radio play, *Diamond*, which was then adapted for the stage. It's had two successful runs at Islington's King's Head theatre, with *White Swan* stalwart Dave Lynn as Lil. The Royal Oak enjoyed a brief resurgence a few years back when gay landlord Colin Denwood took advantage of the pub's special licence (it can open at



← ...and Gl'amour today.

Cockette-inspired drag:
a mock glamorous/clone hybrid →



THE LONDON APPRENTICE



← The L A



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7am on Sundays for Columbia Road's famous flower market) to host a party for Saturday night clubbers who didn't want to go home. After two years of craziness, Denwood moved the Sunday party around the corner to the **Victoria** in Ravenscroft Street, where it continues.

"Many of the acts on the circuit today pretend to be whores or slappers, an acknowledgment of the time when prostitutes and queers hung out together in the same pubs."

One of the most famous pubs in London, the 18th century Prospect of Whitby in Wapping, was queer in the 1950s (but you won't find any mention of this in its publicity). Also by the 1950s Bermondsey's **Turkish Baths** were gaining a reputation. Carry On star Kenneth Williams heard about them and in his diaries he rates them "quite fabulous." In 1962, after making a TV film, *Time Gentlemen Please!*, about East End pub entertainment, Daniel

Farson opened a pub of his own. Although it was only in business for a year, the **Waterman's Arms** in the Isle of Dogs was a huge success that made a star of its gay comic Ray Martine. He went on to present the TV show *Stars and Garters*. The media descended on the East End, looking for more Cockney talent. But the novelty soon wore off. In the 80s the Waterman's Arms tried and failed to go gay again.

From police records, we know that the **Kent Arms**, North Woolwich, was queer in 1965 (when the landlord was prosecuted for keeping a disorderly house). Prosecutions against gay men rose dramatically in the years leading up to the legalisation of homosexuality in 1967. "The police were determined this legislation wasn't going to be passed," says George Ainsworth, who was arrested three times in Peckham cottages in the 1960s. "They tried to prove that queers were taking over the streets and that law-abiding citizens weren't safe. Of course it was fucking nonsense because most of the guys in the toilets were married with kids. I certainly was."

Another revelation, gleaned from the listings in the pioneer weekly, **Gay News**, is the num-

ber of drag pubs operating in London by the mid-1970s. Before male strippers, before the disco boom, drag was the main gay attraction seven nights a week, and many of the venues were in the East End. All are now either closed or straight, but the names will ring a bell with gay men of a certain age: the **Duke of Fife**, Upton Park; the **Knave of Clubs**, Bethnal Green; the **Bird Cage**, Columbia Road; and the **Union Tavern**, the **Father Red Cap** and the **Skinners' Arms**, all in Camberwell. (The last two were both managed in later years by Colin Denwood). Men have always dressed up as women, usually to entertain heterosexuals. But the gay drag that derived from music-hall (early drag stars like Mrs Shufflewick played the halls and the pubs) has remained a working-class, and often Cockney, thing. Many of the acts on the circuit today pretend to be whores or slappers, an acknowledgment of the time when prostitutes and queers hung out together in the same pubs.

Perhaps coincidentally, a branch of gay drag – a mock glamorous/clone hybrid introduced by The Cockettes on the U.S. West Coast – also thrived in the East End. But as it was



Ghetto Girl, Nova and Glamour Girl in Gay Times, 1987

Greg Slingback, Hoxton Square circa 1985



Dave Lynn as the Royal Oak's Lil in the play 'Diamond' (June 2006)

Gay artist Francis Bacon was a regular at Charley Brown's, Limehouse

"Quite fabulous": Kenneth Williams on Bermondsey's Turkish Baths



► based in derelict Hoxton, years before the Brit Art explosion. It never made the national press, and has been forgotten until now. One of its instigators was **Greg Slingback**, who now DJs at South Central, Vauxhall. In 1985 he came to London from California to study fashion design, and ended up squatting with other trannies in 56 Hoxton Square, previously occupied by leather/rubber shop **Expectations** (which moved to nearby Great Eastern Street). Number 56 became **Gl'amour**, a second-hand clothes shop, where Lily Savage bought his first pair of thigh-length boots. The basement became a den of iniquity. "We had a listing in Time Out and we got a lot of straight guys who'd never trannied up before," Greg recalls. "We dressed them up, got them well-oiled, and gave them the confidence to go for a walk up to the **London Apprentice**. We were getting these big, burly Irish builders off the sites, who were trying on lingerie and having a wank. A footballer wanted to get fucked in the bathroom in stockings and

suspenders." Gl'amour closed in 1988 "because we weren't making any money." But to see how the Gl'amour concept moved on,

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check out **Jonny Woo**, whose **Gay Bingo** sessions now take place in nearby Shoreditch. In 2006, the East End is no longer a separate

country. The Docklands Light Railway has made much of it easily accessible. Along with what is now the oldest gay pub, **BJ's White Swan**, there are other great venues such as the **Angel**, the **King's Head** and the **Spread Eagle** in Stratford; the **Black Horse** in Mile End; **Bistrotheque** in Hackney; and **The East** and **The Fallen Angel** in Walthamstow. **Chariots** also has a branch in Limehouse as well as Shoreditch; leather men meet at **BackStreet** in Mile End; and trannies at **Storme's** and the **Way Out Club** in Aldgate. EastEnders has conceded that there are such people as gay Cockneys. But how could it be otherwise? Albert Square was modelled on Limehouse's York Square, which has a gay pub, the **Old Ship**, on one corner!

Read more about London's gay history in Matt Houlbrook's Queer London (£20.50), available at Gay's the Word, 66 Marchmont Street, London WC1