



Eros On Piccadilly - so named after the Greek god of love because it was notoriously surrounded by hookers



Soho Square in 1816

Starting this week, QX traces the history of London's gay ghettos - North, South, East, West and Central. This week...

WEST END BOYS

What's made Central London such a magnet for gay men for 300 years? HAYDON BRIDGE reveals all...

IF you're not doing anything one Sunday, you can take a tour of historic gay Soho courtesy of Kairos. But it's a bit of a cheat. Although today it's camper than Jordan's and Cheryl Tweedy's weddings put together, Soho has been gay for only twenty years. The surrounding vicinity, however, is another matter. British gay life as we know it began in London's West End 300 years ago, and virtually every significant event in British gay history ever since has occurred either here or in the City of London. Why? As we'll see, one thing leads to another.

Perhaps because London in the 18th century was not only a centre of culture, but also multi-cultural (foreigners came to London to escape religious persecution in the rest of Europe), a new concept of sexuality developed here: men began regularly to solicit sex with other men. Just to prove that there's nothing new under the sun, a Court report of 1706 tells us that Edward Barker was prosecuted for poking his cock through a hole in the wall of a cubicle of a "bog-house" in the Temple!

In 1709 journalist Ned Ward revealed that the back room of a brandy shop in Jermyn Street was used by men who enjoyed the company of "mollies" (female impersonators). Publicity must have helped establish London as the place to enjoy these new thrills. In 1726 the London Journal reported that there were twenty "molly houses" in operation, and that men were cruising for sex in Covent Garden, Lincoln's Inn, Moorfields and the south side of St James' Park.

A Christian group, the Society for the Reformation of Manners, placed agent provocateurs in the cruising areas and helped indict Margaret Clap, whose molly house, in Field

Lane, Holborn, was raided in 1726. (Although this area was swept away long ago, it's now occupied by the London School of Economics, which hosts the gay Latino club Exilio).

Prosecutions, and indeed executions, of gay men did little to deter others. In A View of Society and Manners in High and Low Life (1781), writer George Parker deplored the men "who signal to each other in St James' Park, and then retire to satisfy a passion too horrible for description." In 1791 there was a call for the park to be locked at night. The next big scandal came in 1810, when at least twenty men were arrested at the White Swan pub in Vere Street, off Oxford Street.

Then as now, some of those who appeared to be upholders of traditional values were hypocrites. In 1822 the Bishop of Clogher was found with a guardsman in the White Lion Tavern in the Haymarket. In 1825 John Muirhead, a member of the Society for the Suppression of Vice, was arrested for picking up a man in Sackville Street, off Piccadilly. From 1829 we know much more about London cruising patterns because the newly-formed Metropolitan Police recorded them. In the 1830s the police began raiding pubs that catered for men who brought back soldiers they'd met around Horse Guards Parade.

The main cruising areas in the City at this time were St Paul's, Bishopsgate and Finsbury Square. In the West End, Piccadilly and Covent Garden were still popular, but the fashionable Strand and Hyde Park were also mentioned. Probably more than 200 years old, Hyde Park's cruising ground is easily London's oldest. The Rose Garden on the south east corner remains busy today. Visit

www.pinkuk.com and a recent posting reads, "I'm a Special for the Royal Parks Unit for the Metropolitan Police. We only visit the cruising area to deter the criminals. If you get robbed, please report it. We will be discreet and you will be treated sensitively."

Historian Matt Cook says that it was the construction of the railways, from 1837 to 1876, that brought about the next advance in gay society. Suddenly, there were a lot of strangers in London, men who were in the capital only to work or to have a night out. The possibilities for anonymous contact were increased, especially around railway stations. Later, servicemen on weekend leave poured off the trains and into the toilets. In the 1880s, the West End changed when slums were razed for the construction of Shaftesbury Avenue. Beautiful new theatres, which lined the avenue, attracted rich men, who in turn attracted prostitutes of both

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sexes. The Angel of Christian Charity, erected to honour the 7th Earl of Shaftesbury, was nicknamed Eros (the Greek god of love) because it was constantly surrounded by hookers who serviced the theatre crowds! Meanwhile toffs who preferred sex with their own class frequented the Turkish baths. One

Jermyn St Turkish bath

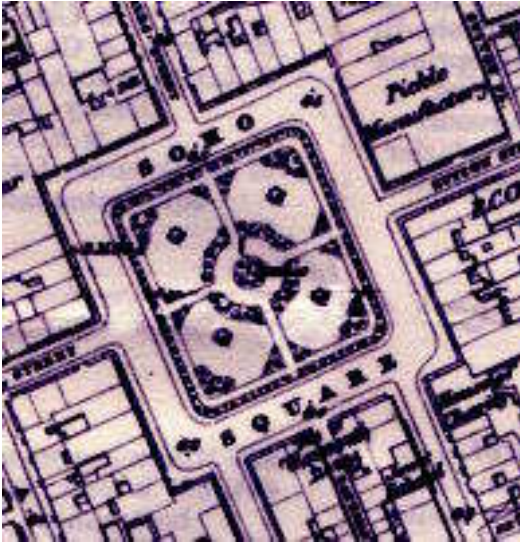


of the earliest gay haunts, opened in Jermyn Street in 1857, survived until the 1970s. Apparently Rock Hudson was a regular.

WILDE DAYS: PICCADILLY RENT AND A RIGHT ROYAL SCANDAL

BY the late 19th century, Piccadilly was notorious for its “renters”. The area was known as “the Meat Rack.” Cards were distributed here for a male brothel at 19 Cleveland Street. In 1890 a case was heard at the Old Bailey that potentially could have brought down the Government and implicated the Royal Family. It was alleged that in 1888, a prostitute named Jack Saul (subject of a ghosted 1881 autobiography, *Sins of the Cities of the Plain*) had solicited the Earl of Euston in Sackville Street and taken him to Cleveland Street, where they had sex. The jury chose to believe the Earl’s denial, which was just as well for the establishment. Other clients at Cleveland Street included Lord Arthur Somerset, at least two MPs and possibly – although it has never been proven – Prince Albert Victor (“Eddy”), grandson of Queen Victoria. Rumours also circulated that another client was Oscar Wilde. In 1894 brothel keeper Alfred Taylor, who indisputably catered for Wilde, was arrested at 46 Fitzroy Street.

The trials of Oscar Wilde in 1895 were a foregone conclusion because the playwright had been so indiscreet. There was evidence that he had kissed a waiter at the Soho restaurant Kettner’s and, worse still, had orgies with renters at the Savoy Hotel in the Strand. But Wilde’s conviction seems to have had no effect on gay life in London, which continued as normal. Gay men had sex in the cubicles



← Soho Square in 1870



← Lyons' Corner Houses



↑ A flyer for an early gay club

↑ The Caravan Club - "London's greatest Bohemian rendezvous"



↑ Old Compton Street in the 1920s



► of the swimming baths at the Regent Street Polytechnic (now the University of Westminster). It's been suggested that the Poly's founder, Quintin Hogg, killed himself in 1903 because he was about to be outed. Possibly the first "gay bar" as we know the term was Madame Strindberg's Cave of the Golden Calf in Heddon Street, off Regent Street, which was open before World War I. (Gay performance artist Ryan Styles uses its name as the title of one of his shows).

20TH CENTURY SEX

FROM the beginning of the 20th century, the West End, with its wide variety of gay-friendly locations, became the heart of British gay life. Adventurous queers exposed themselves in French-style, cast iron urinals, erected in streets throughout the capital. In his 1973 autobiography, actor Emyln Williams recalls how an antique dealer described these pissoirs as "the comfort stations of the cross." The most famous, in Dansey Place, off Wardour Street, featured in "Horton vs Mead, 1913",

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the leading case on male/male soliciting. It was less dangerous to pick up in the street because this didn't involve indecent exposure. In his 1968 autobiography, radio producer J.R. Ackerley, who prowled Marble Arch and Hyde Park Corner for guardsmen, remembers the prices during the 1930s: "A pound was the recognised tariff for the Foot Guards then; the Horse Guards cost rather more." But the risk was minimal in venues where most if not all the clientele was queer. For more than twenty years from 1916, cultivated gentlemen met on Sunday mornings in the Long Bar of the Trocadero on Piccadilly Circus. Also popu-

lar were Lyons' Corner Houses, particularly in Coventry Street and the Strand. In 1925, John Bull magazine exposed six notorious homosexual hang-outs including the Hotel de France in Villiers Street (world-famous since 1979 as the location of Heaven).

In the 1930s the West End's most famous gay pub was the Running Horse in Shepherd Market. The Caravan, in Endell Street, described itself as "London's greatest Bohemian rendezvous." But this was a euphemism for gay bar. A witness who found men dancing together here in 1934 described the club as "an absolute sink of iniquity." During the blackouts of World War II, London was, for many queers, the biggest and best dark room in gay history. During the day, cinemas were used. The best were the little news theatres, which never put up the lights during continuous screenings of newsreels and cartoons. One cinema in Victoria, England's first cinema The Biograph (originally the Bioscope), was known as the Biogrope until it was demolished in 1983.

After the War, the Salisbury, in St Martin's Lane, was the pre-eminent queer pub, so well-known that it was used as a location for the groundbreaking 1961 film Victim, starring Dirk Bogarde as a gay barrister who exposes the blackmailers that caused his ex-boyfriend's suicide. There were a few other discreet gay bars in the West End. But mainly for economic reasons (cheaper accommodation, for example), the gay scene had begun moving West, to Paddington, Notting Hill and finally Earls Court, where the twilight world of the homosexual was soon to burst into the light. But what of Soho?

SOHO: THE DIRTY SQUARE MILE

THE so-called Dirty Square Mile has had gay connections since about the 1890s. Wilde bought gay porn here, and Jack Saul lived in Old Compton Street. During the Bohemian 1920s and 30s, there were several gay-friendly cafés in Soho. Quentin Crisp writes about sitting for hours with his friends in the Black Cat in Old Compton Street. In 1941 the Arts and Battledress Club opened in Orange Street, behind the National Gallery. It later moved to Soho and was still going, as the A&B, in the 1970s. It's up there with the Salisbury and the still flourishing Quebec as one of the West

End's most historically important gay bars. But in the post-War years, Soho was the place for old men who liked young girls. It was a homo no-go zone. In the 1950s, the Swiss Tavern in Old Compton Street was not entirely straight. But even as late as 1976, Gay News listed only two gay bars (the A&B and the Golden Lion) in the whole of Soho. Opened in 1981, Subway, in Leicester Square, the only attempt during the period to replicate in London a New York-style sex disco with dress code, became a hotbed of controversy when it was accused of helping to spread AIDS. Subsequently all gay discos were tarred with the same brush; Heaven was one of the few that managed to survive.

Why did Soho go gay? Thank the puritans of the Tory-run Westminster City Council. At the beginning of the 1980s Soho was overrun with unlicensed hetero sex traders. Many had turned ancient delicatessens and restaurants into porn shops and peep shows, and some powerful local residents were unhappy. Accordingly, the Government gave the Council powers to put the porn barons out of business. By 1987, Soho's sex industry had been reduced to five shops, three strip clubs, two soft porn cinemas – and a lot of empty premises. It just so happened that simultaneously gay business was getting into its stride. The gay scene was fading in other parts of London, and Soho, with its saucy reputation, in need of regeneration, had potential. The Swiss Tavern became Comptons in 1986 and the rest is gay history. In a very short time Soho has become a world-class gay village, one that has survived a tragedy (the bombing of the Admiral Duncan in 1999) to become stronger, louder and prouder than before. Begun in 2003, the annual Soho Pride already attracts large numbers – an estimated 50,000 – that rival the main Pride London event. There's something about Soho.

Read more about London's gay history in Queer London by Matt Houlbrook and London and the Culture of Homosexuality by Matt Cook, available from Gay's the Word, 66 Marchmont Street, London WC1.

For a tour of gay and lesbian Soho, go to www.kairosinsoho.org.uk