



Vauxhall Cross

Union Jack Club



Interior of a Rowton Hostel



The second in a series tracing the history of London's gay ghettos - North, South, East, West and Central. This week:

# SOUTHERN COMFORT

Until early morning clubbing took off in the 1990s there was no gay scene in South London. Or was there?

By Haydon Bridge

THE River Thames is almost like the border between two countries. People north of the river have never had much in common with those on the south side. This is because of different priorities. If you choose to live in North London, you want to be close to the action: the West End, the seat of Government, rail access to the rest of the country. Most South Londoners have made the decision to remain apart from all this. Consequently, the rebels, the crusaders and the adventurers who created gay history have tended to live in North London.

Although there's little documented evidence, it's possible that one of the first haunts of gay men in South London was Southwark, where theatres were built in the late 16th and early 17th centuries. They employed pretty boys to play women's roles. Marlowe definitely liked the boys, Shakespeare probably did too, and these arty bisexuals can't have been the only ones. Nicholas Wright's 2000 play, *Cressida*, speculated about the lives of the boys who worked in women's clothes.

South London is a mirror image of North London in that it has posh suburbs (Putney, Barnes) in the West and poor areas (Bermondsey, Deptford, the Old Kent Road) in the East. In the 19th century, the middle ground (Vauxhall, Kennington, Clapham), where rich and poor met, became semi-fashionable. The Old Vic theatre and the Oval cricket ground opened there. With two enormous railway stations (Waterloo, Clapham Junction) nearby, and the notoriously cruisy Strand just a few minutes' walk over Waterloo Bridge, it was inevitable that this is where South London queer life should take root.

The first reports of gay cruising south of the river come from the **Vauxhall Pleasure**

**Gardens.** Pleasure gardens were parks where the aristocracy and workers mingled to enjoy all kinds of entertainments. The Vauxhall Gardens, which opened in 1661, were London's most fashionable, but by 1712 were attracting prostitutes. Later, brothels opened nearby. In the 19th century, the area had become "unsavoury"; gentlemen came here to pick up working lads. The Vauxhall Gardens closed in 1859 and all that now remains of them is Spring Gardens, the famous 'grassy knoll' next to the **Royal Vauxhall Tavern**, South London's oldest surviving gay pub.

In a London guide book, published in 1855, there is the first mention of "pooffs" (sic), recognisable by their "effeminate air and fashionable dress." They operated in Fleet Street, the Strand and Charing Cross, but not, it seems, south of the River. This was to remain the stamping ground of working class queers. By the turn of the 20th century, homosexuality was common in Lord Rowton's poor men's hostels (South London had two, in Vauxhall and Elephant & Castle) and apparently rampant in the **Union Jack Club**, the military hostel in Waterloo Road. Men in uniform were highly desirable and so promiscuous that in 1903, an Army order prohibited soldiers from loitering in the royal parks after dark. They began going further afield for trade, and from the early years of the 20th century arrests increased in South London's open spaces, particularly Battersea Park.

**Clapham Common**, where MP Ron Davies had "a moment of madness" in 1998, is probably London's second oldest, continuously visited cruising ground. (Only Hyde Park has a longer history). According to historian Matt Houlbrook, the Common was notorious by 1926. In his 1960 book, *A Minority*, author

Gordon Westwood recounts the experiences of a man who had particularly risky encounters on the Common with police officers. "One night they want sex," he claimed, "and the next night they'll run you in." Unlike North London's Hampstead Heath, which has supported a gay pub, the King William IV, since before World War II, Clapham was without gay bars until relatively recently. The **Dorset Arms** in Clapham Road had drag shows in the 1970s, but the first successful pub was the **Two Brewers** in Clapham High Street, taken over by Phil Starr in 1981. Having recently celebrated its 25th anniversary, the pub's Phil Starr Cabaret Bar honours the late drag legend. Starr later went on to manage the **Prince of Wales** pub in Brixton.

Recently, Clapham's reputation as a civilised,

The first reports of gay cruising south of the river come from the Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens. Pleasure gardens were parks where the aristocracy and workers mingled to enjoy all kinds of entertainments.

elegant retreat for gay professionals has been tragically tarnished by violence. 24-year-old bar manager Jody Dobrowski was murdered on the Common last October, and there have been further homophobic attacks on the Common and in Clapham High Street. Clapham may have been targeted by queer-bashers because solitary gay men make easy pickings. Cowardly thugs steer clear of



Cremorne Gardens

Kennington public toilet



The Market Tavern



Vauxhall and Kennington, now invaded by thousands of us every weekend.

Today it's hard to imagine that gay presence in the area was once very discreet, just a couple of drag pubs and a few cottages. The pubs were the **RVT** and the nearby **Elephant & Castle**. Perhaps one of the most important moments in London's gay club history to note is that the very first gay disco was at a venue called the **Father Red Cap** in Camberwell, promoted by Tricky Dicky in the 1970s. (And if you wanted to meet Tricky Dicky himself, pop into Trax Records on Greek St in Soho and ask for owner Richard Skanes).

A surviving cottage that must be mentioned is at the junction of Kennington Lane and Kennington Road. It closed in 1987 and was about to be demolished when local resident, Celia Stothard, drew English Heritage's attention to the toilet's rare mosaic floors and marble urinals. Within months it had been Grade II listed! In 2004 it re-opened briefly as part of the Vauxhall Festival. There were suggestions that the cubicles, replete with glory holes and graffiti, should be saved for London's gay museum.

The **RVT** was an early Victorian music-hall which, by the 1970s, had gone over to drag. Almost every drag act of the period worked here, although only Lily Savage stood the test of time. Nearby in Camberwell, the **Union Tavern**, was commonly regarded as the drag pub of the 1970s, and rivalled the RVT, with performers often switching allegiances between the two!

Ten years ago, with regulars deserting in droves for the bright lights of Soho, the RVT took a huge risk by booking Simon Casson's avant garde cabaret night **Duckie**. The rest is history, with Duckie events crossing over to

the West End and now internationally. In 2005 the crumbling building was threatened with redevelopment; but it was bought by two gay businessmen who are committed to restoring the venue and opening it seven nights a week. By the 1980s there were other pubs operating in the area. Notably the **Market Tavern** had special opening hours (due to the location of the nearby New Covent Garden fruit and veg markets on Nine Elms Lane) and became a hugely important venue, especially popular as a post-Trade party. Nearby, the **King's Arms** and **Duke's** had a loyal following, too, however, the birth of modern Vauxhall as an alternative gay village can be said to date from 1996, with the start of Duckie and the opening of **The Hoist**. In 1998 **Crash** opened, kick-starting the House music based club formula that dominates the area today. Legal, afterhours clubbing may have begun in North London, at Trade, in 1990, but it was Vauxhall that made staying up from Thursday night through to Tuesday morning a phenomenon, notably at the venue **Fire** (formerly the **Viaduct**, formerly fetish club **The Dungeon**). The success of Saturday morning afterhours session **A:M** and Monday morning **Orange** (which started life in a run-down pub in Rotherhite in the late 90s) have changed the way we party at the weekend. However, who could have foreseen that in 2006 clubs like **Gravity** and **Open** would be keeping us dancing into the early hours of Thursday and Tuesday morning respectively! By the 21st century, Vauxhall and Kennington comprised the world's weirdest gay town, stretched over a vast, mostly unlovely area of railway arches, warehouses and building sites, and functioning only at weekends. Between Tuesday and Thursday, gay Vauxhall seemed to disappear, like Brigadoon.

In 2006, Vauxhall seems to have come through a sometimes shaky transitional period during which feuds, licensing problems and failed ventures made some of us wonder what the future held for gay life in South London. Big investments have all but destroyed that early alternative feel; but Vauxhall is developing a vibrant personality of its own. It's London's boys' town. (There are only two girls' bars, one of which, **Southopia**, is on the outskirts). The main action is split between the mega-venues - **Club Colosseum**, the **Renaissance Rooms** and **Fire** - and the more cruisey clubs - **The Hoist**, **Crash** and **Club Factory**. Other gay businesses include the **Paris Gym** and the newest branch of the **Chariots** sauna chain. The **King's Arms** has smartened itself up as a friendly mixed pub, the **Little Apple**, and Duke's now has a completely new wild and horny image as **South Central**. Several venues are now open mid-week. The latest arrivals are **Wyvils Bar**, **Barcode Vauxhall** and **Area**.

What Vauxhall lacked, because people were coming south for the weekend and then going back north again, was a sense of community. That too is changing, says Wyvils manager Eren Hassani, who came to Vauxhall after shaking up Hackney with his early Sunday sessions at the Royal Oak, Columbia Road. Eren claims he's now the happiest he's been in two years. "I'm so surprised there's so much gay life here," he declares. "Sainsbury's in Vauxhall is a pick-up joint!"

**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.**