

The last in HAYDON BRIDGE's series on London's gay ghettos...



Armistead Maupin

Armistead Maupin wrote about the Coleherne in his Tales of the City series



JM Barrie



Noël Coward



Oscar Wilde



Radclyffe Hall



Alan Turing

JM Barrie, Actor Noël Coward, writers Oscar Wilde, lesbian poet/author Radclyffe Hall and mathematician Alan Turing all lived in West London.



# go west, young man

Pretty and fashionable — West London is just like the gay men who've lived there!

WITH their attractive avenues lined with gracious town houses, West and South West London have always appealed to the rich and fashionable. Early in the 20th century, Chelsea and surrounding districts became established as a haven for artists, intellectuals and free-thinkers. Inevitably the fashionable/artistic combination lured people like us. Two of the UK's most famous gay men, Oscar Wilde and Noël Coward, lived here, as did the UK's most famous lesbian, Radclyffe Hall. Others included such diverse talents as writers J.M. Barrie, E.M. Forster and Henry James; mathematician Alan Turing; artist Lord Leighton; Frankenstein film director James Whale; and Queen's Freddie Mercury. The needs of gay residents have long been a priority and, on occasion, the queers of the Wild West got away with far more than was allowed in other parts of London. From 1926, men in drag flocked to the annual Chelsea Arts Ball, the height of decadence. (High camp — as opposed to the low camp of East London pub drag — has flourished for decades in West London). Chelsea's **Queen's Head** is arguably London's oldest gay pub. Nearby was the **Gateways**, London's best-known lesbian bar, although it closed in 1985. During the swinging Sixties, Chelsea's King's Road was a classier version of the West End's equally gay Carnaby Street. Simultaneously in Earls Court, the **Coleherne** gave birth to the leather scene. But it hasn't all been gay abandon way out West. Its high-profile gay community has been terrorised by nut cases (one of them a serial killer) and persecuted by the police. The most celebrated arrest was of Oscar Wilde in room 53 of the Cadogan Hotel in Sloane Street in 1895; but the arrest of John Gielgud in a Chelsea cottage in 1953, comes a close second. Less prominent citizens have also been rounded up in West London's gay bars. Briefly the mecca for party-loving gay men and lesbians from all over the world, West London has now been eclipsed by Soho and Vauxhall. But gay life is far from dead in the West. In London, only Westminster has performed more civil partnerships than Kensington and Chelsea.

Queer life in West London may well have been helped along by the proximity of the ancient cruising ground of **Hyde Park** and its barracks. Soldiers certainly feature in a lot of memoirs and newspaper reports from the late 19th century onwards. One of the first scandals occurred in 1881,

when Cpl John Cameron of the Scots Guards was accused of committing an "atrocious offence" in a coffee house in Sloane Street with Count Guido zu Lynar, a secretary at the German embassy. By the turn of the 20th century, Earls Court already had a reputation as a place to pick up. In 1901 writer George Ives visited the relatively new Exhibition Hall and recorded in his diary, "Many pretty things all around, but no adventures." One of painter Archibald Wakley's adventures ended in his death in 1906 when a soldier, whom he'd met in Hyde Park and taken back to his flat at 76a Westbourne Grove, murdered him. The police found spur marks on Wakley's thighs (but the case was never solved). West London's artistic community (the first Chelsea School of Art opened in 1895) loved dressing up. This was just about acceptable at the **Chelsea Arts Ball**, but it occasionally got out of control elsewhere. In 1933 sixty men were arrested at a drag ball in Holland Park. (West London drag was revived in the late 1960s by Ron Storme, who held dances at the **Porchester Hall** in the appropriately named Queensway. Thai ladyboys have been a feature of Earls Court's gay **Philbeach Hotel** since the 1970s). Part-Georgian, Paddington had an elegant charm which also appealed to artistic queers. Poet John Addington Symonds, who inspired Wilde, was one who lived here. But its railway station attracted the hoi-polloi. In the 1930s, Irish families, straight off the boat train, began settling here. By the 1940s, men from other parts of London were visiting Paddington mainly for the prostitutes of both sexes. The Irish boys were particularly popular. But the area was in decline. This and World War II brought about a major shift in gay demographics.

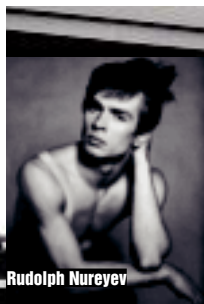
Bomb damage in London during the War created a serious housing shortage. Surviving Victorian family homes, which no longer had servants to run them, were sold and divided into bedsits. They all offered cheap accommodation, but those in West London were among the most desirable. Queers in sleazy Paddington moved further West to Notting Hill and Earls Court. They were joined by other disenchanting homosexuals. (By the late 1950s, the queer scene in the West End had been reduced to a few sedate pubs, most of which would soon give up the battle against an onslaught of hetero strip clubs. The word spread that a more exciting, daring, colourful



Brompton Cemetery, London's weirdest cruising ground



Freddie Mercury

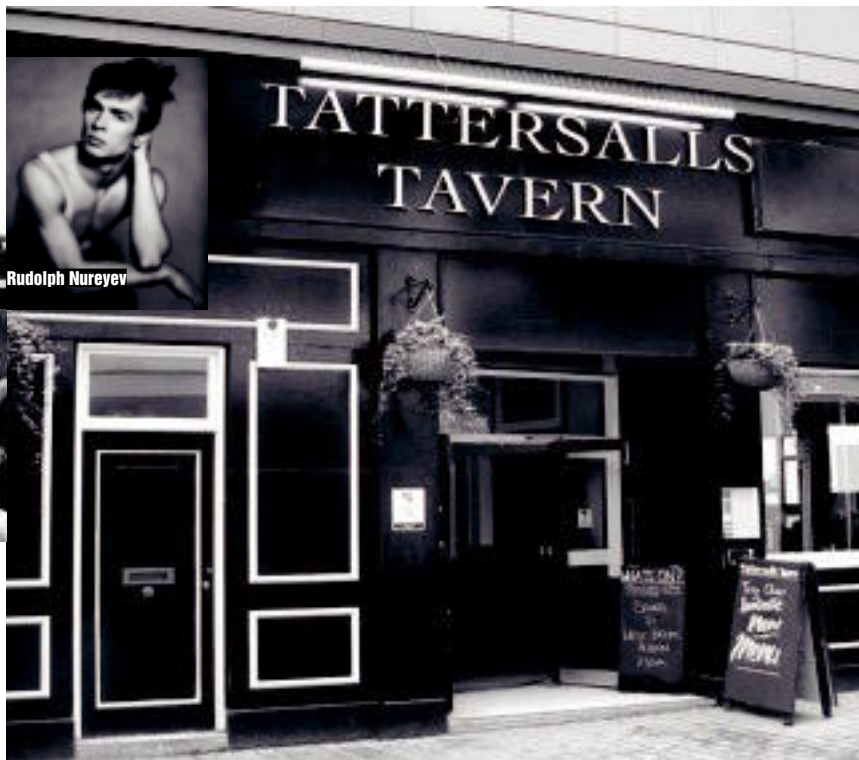


Rudolph Nureyev



Kenny Everett

Rock star Freddie Mercury, comedian Kenny Everett and ballet dancer Rudolph Nureyev were all Coleherne regulars.



Tattersall's today: in the 1960s it was the place to rent a soldier.

queer scene was developing in West London). Notting Hill residents interviewed by Gordon Westwood for his 1960 book, *A Minority*, thought they'd died and gone to heaven. "Picking up queers in Notting Hill Gate is like shooting birds in a game reserve," said one. Another said he felt he was "at a gigantic homosexual party." Pubs like the **Chepstow** and the **Champion** turned gay (both are now straight again). **Man to Man** was possibly London's first gay bookshop. Meanwhile Chelsea, where West London's queer scene originated, was also becoming bolder. There were still the traditional boozers. According to one source ([www.stradivarius-london.co.uk](http://www.stradivarius-london.co.uk)) the Queen's Head in Tryon Street is "the oldest continuously gay pub in London." Another was the beautiful, bow-fronted **Markham Arms**, gay Chelsea's focal point during the King's Road's 1960s heyday. (It's now a branch of the Abbey building society). These pubs remained largely respectable. But some lesser-known dives took astonishing risks. When a coffee bar, **The Other Place**, was raided in 1966, a witness said of the male clientele, "Some were kissing passionately and fondling each other in an indecent way." This was chicken-feed compared to the orgies that took place at the **Gigolo**, where, according to one participant, "There'd be 40 or 50 men with their trousers round their ankles." Continuously raided, the Gigolo was eventually closed down. In Knightsbridge, **Tattersall's** was the place to rent a soldier. In 1968, Trooper Brooks, 21, told a Court, "I heard in the bar-room that if you wanted to make a few bob you went to Tattersall's Tavern opposite the barracks and met the queers." The judge discharged him conditionally because "30 or 40 others have escaped standing in that dock." A few years later, up the road in Kensington, the **Sombrero** catered for men who liked foreign student types. It was sometimes called "the Chinese take-away." This too is now an Abbey branch. Earls Court's fame as a gay ghetto can be traced back fairly easily to the **Coleherne**. It probably turned gay in

the mid-1950s. Gary, a regular since 1958, remembers that in those days the pub was segregated: straights in one bar, local gay men in the other. Gradually it developed a sexy new image: leather, key chains, hanky codes. In 1981 Francis Gibbery took a photo of the hunks outside the Coleherne, and the image went round the world. Soon Freddie Mercury, Kenny Everett, Rudolph Nureyev and Anthony Perkins were drinking here. So was Armistead Maupin, who put the Coleherne in his *Tales Of The City* book *Babycakes*. Tragically, serial killer Colin Ireland was another customer. In 1993 it was revealed that the monster had found all of his five victims here. Today leather men still visit the Coleherne, some of them perhaps unaware that the scene has moved on to The Hoist and Backstreet. Other venues that sprang up in the Coleherne's shadow have also disappeared: The **Boltons**, the **Catacombs**, the **Copacabana**, **Graffiti**. But if you're tired of the hurly-burly of Soho, Islington and Vauxhall, Earls Court offers an oasis of calm. It's a genuine gay village. Within a couple of blocks of the Coleherne are **Bromptons**, **Clone Zone**, **Balans**, the **Soho Gym** and **Adonis Art**, the UK's first gay art gallery. And, no, I haven't forgotten **Brompton Cemetery**, London's weirdest cruising ground. How could I? I was cruised while I was photographing it.



With sincere thanks to the many people who shared memories for this series, particularly the ever-accommodating staff at **Gay's the Word**, 66 Marchmont Street, London WC1

All five parts of QX's gay history series are available online at [qxmagazine.com](http://qxmagazine.com)