



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

London in the 18th century was not only a centre of culture, but also multi-cultural... a new concept of sexuality developed here.

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

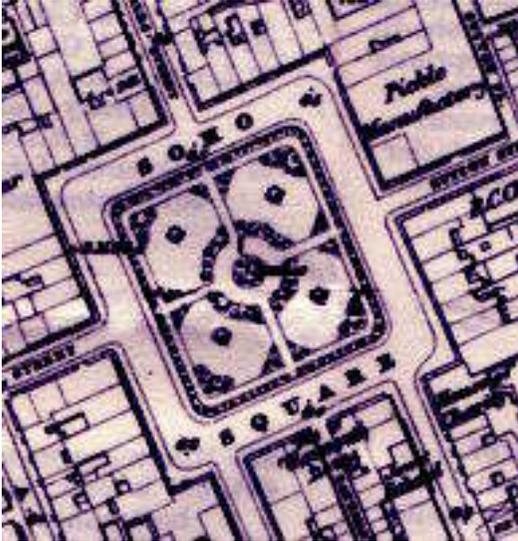


of the earliest gay haunts, opened in Jermyn Street in 1857, survived until the 1970s. Apparently Rock Hudson was a regular.

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",

Then as now, some of those who appeared to be upholders of traditional values were hypocrites. It was alleged that in 1888, a prostitute named Jack Saul had solicited the Earl of Euston.

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



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

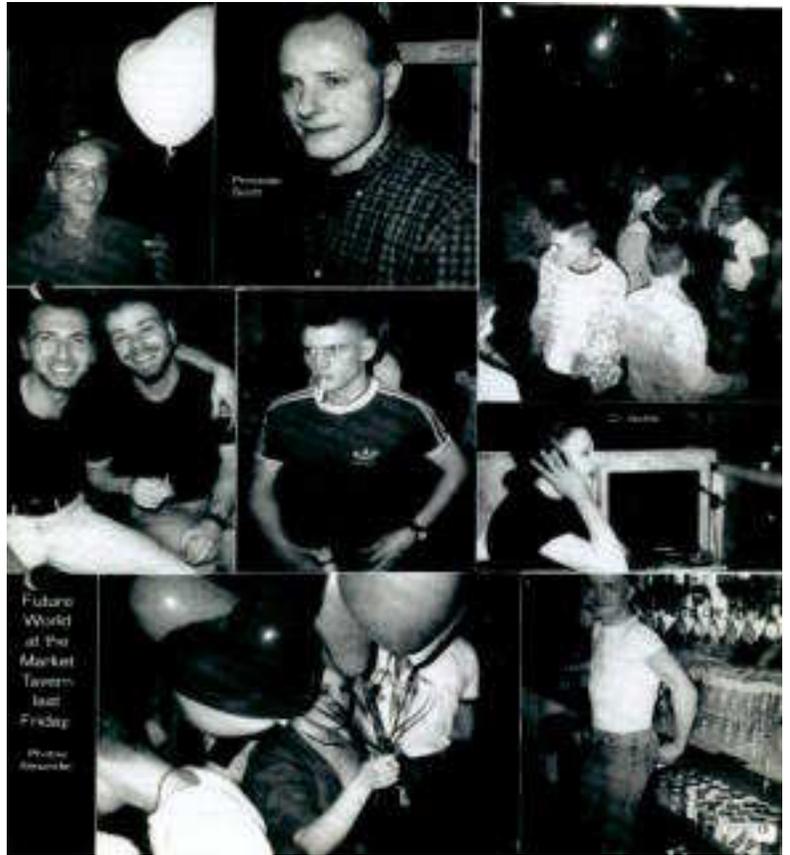


Cremorne Gardens

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**.



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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+ Savvas

Saturday 26th
Cover Girls

Sunday 27th February
Danny O'Dell
+ Roy Alvis (lunch)

Monday 28th January
Raquel's
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← Knave Club

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 **Skinner's 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,

"We got a lot of straight guys who'd never trannied up before. 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."

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

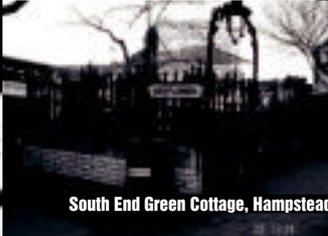
In the fourth of a series in which he explores London's gay ghettos, HAYDON BRIDGE surveys his own manor



Joe Orton

Joe Meek

Joe Orton frequented cottages in north London, in particular this one on South End Green, Hampstead. Other popular cottages included one under the railway bridge in Holloway Road, frequented by another gay legend, record producer Joe Meek.



South End Green Cottage, Hampstead



Ossie Clark



George Michael

"Met a wonderfully muscular guy in ripped vest and peaked cap called Dennis, a banker from Victoria." Ossie Clark on Hampstead Heath

"This is my culture!" George Michael to a News of the World reporter on Hampstead Heath. Never was a truer word spoken.



northern exposure

For London's newest gay village and most famous cruising ground head north...

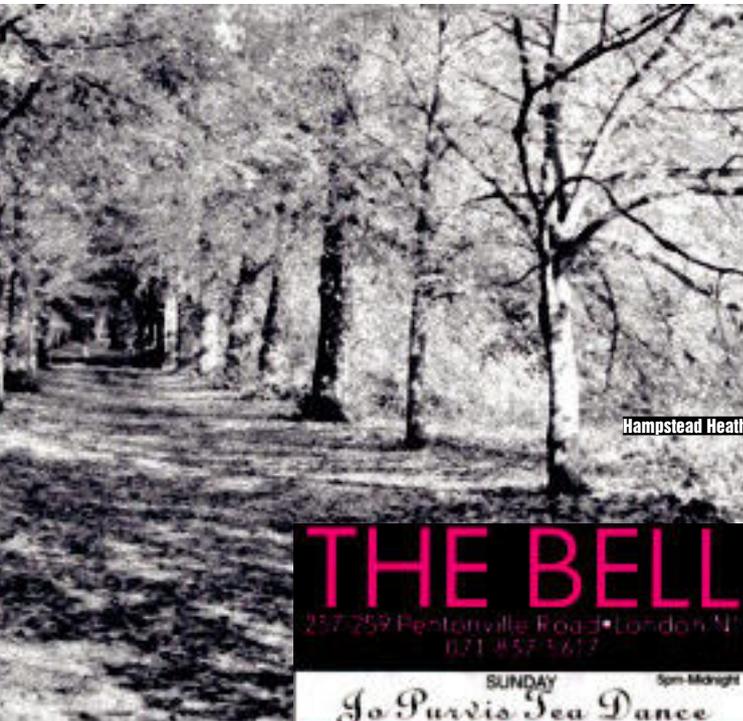
ACCORDING to the 2001 census, there are more cohabiting same sex couples in Islington than anywhere else in the country. Gay rights group, Stonewall, recently named Islington Council the most gay-friendly in London. No wonder then that Islington has been dubbed London's newest gay village. But if Islington conjures up images of well-heeled couples flitting from **The Green** to The Screen On The Green, think again. Inner London's biggest borough also includes the mean streets of Holloway and Finsbury Park to the north and the monster construction site of King's Cross to the south. Down-and-going for years, this area is now up-and-coming in readiness for the opening in 2007 of the new Channel Tunnel rail link. Visitors from across Europe will be able to pile out of St. Pancras station and into gay shops, bars and restaurants, perhaps even the UK's first gay museum. The chances are it'll be housed in the derelict stables next door to Central Station, the bar that claims it was the first to re-introduce a dark room (**Glory Hole**) in 1993. "They were queuing round the block," says co-manager Mark Graham. Central Station is just one of the landmarks that made north London a gay destination decades before Islington Green became chic. A working-class area, with cheap housing for the men who laboured on the canal, the railways, and the factories and warehouses that grew up around them, Islington was once literally a dump. Until 1826 there was a huge dust heap at the end of what is now Gray's Inn Road. As late as 1902, journalist Robert Machray claimed that Euston Road had "as malodorous a reputation as any in London." This was not the place for well-off gentlemen to hunt for soldiers and telegraph boys. That happened in the West End. But in Islington, gay working-class men found each other. Historian Matt Houlbrook discovered that **Collins' Music Hall** on Islington Green was "one of the most important cruising sites in the early 20th century." Lord Rowton's poor men's hostels, built in the 1890s, became notorious for rough sex. There was one hostel in King's Cross, another in Vauxhall (also destined to become a gay ghetto). George Orwell writes disapprovingly of Rowton House homosex in his 1933 book *Down And Out In Paris And London*. It's possible that

Islington's first "gay" pub was the **Duke Of Cambridge** in St Peter's Street. Drag-artists appeared here in 1954.

In 1959 Islington was still regarded as a slum. One of its dirt cheap flats, at 25 Noel Road, was bought by impoverished actor Kenneth Halliwell, who shared it with his lover, playwright Joe Orton. In 1962 the pair were jailed for six months for defacing the dust jackets of books borrowed from Islington libraries. Today the jackets are so valuable that visitors to the Joe Orton Collection at the Central Library, Fieldway Crescent, are shown photocopies. Although, in the 1960s there were no gay bars in Islington, there were plenty of cottages, and Orton trolled them all, most famously one under the railway bridge in **Holloway Road**. This was also frequented by another gay legend of the period, speed freak record producer Joe Meek. There's a plaque on his flat-cum-studio at 304 Holloway Road.

Most of the cottages are now gone, but an important survival can be seen at **Highbury Fields**. Here, in 1970, a prominent Young Liberal, Louis Eakes, was arrested for cruising. A protest, held on 27th November 1970, by the fledgling Gay Liberation Front, was, according to Peter Tatchell, "a milestone in gay history. For the first time in Britain, gay people demonstrated to demand human rights." In 2000 OutRage! unveiled a plaque on the disused loo. The only public toilet known to have been used by Joe Orton and still open for business is at **South End Green, Hampstead**.

In the 1970s King's Cross was a centre for gay activism. The GLF held discos at the **Prince Albert** pub in Wharfedale Road. (You know it today as Central Station. Why the name change?) The London Lesbian and Gay Switchboard began in **Housman's Bookshop** in Caledonian Road in 1974. The most famous gay pub was **The Bell** in Pentonville Road, which later serviced the freaks (one of whom was me) who got up to all kinds of hanky-panky in the nearby **Scala** cinema. The Bell became **Sahara Nights**, which made several attempts to get back to its gay roots until it closed earlier this year. The Scala became a dance club, which is still renowned for its polysexual indie night **Popstarz**.



THE BELL
257-259 Pentonville Road • London N1
021 852 3677

SUNDAY 5pm-Midnight
Jo Purvis Sea Dance

MONDAY
with DJ Billy

TUESDAY
Fantasy Island

WEDNESDAY
indie night with Mel

THURSDAY 9pm-1am
Sound & Vision with Heathcliff

FRIDAY
with Jo Purvis

Up in Islington, the oldest surviving gay pub is the **King Edward VI** in Bromfield Street, which, despite refurbishment, thrives on 1980s charm. It's described by a contributor to one pub website as "How the scene used to be before all the pubs were run by chains." The only reason for gay men to visit Finsbury Park was to cruise the **Parkland Walk**, a disused railway line with "ghost" stations, that heaved in the evenings. Following a series of muggings, it was closed... Thanks for spoiling it for the rest of us, you creeps. Islington seemed to change overnight from a dilapidated no-man's-land ruled by gangsters to the ultra-fashionable birthplace of the chattering classes. The process, which in fact took about a decade, was probably kick-started by this famous statement in 1984: "My name is Chris Smith, I'm the Labour MP for Islington South and Finsbury and I'm gay." By the 1990s Islington had a couple of gay bars and the fetish shop **Regulation**; but in 2004 Martin Chadderton told QX that he opened "London's first gaystropub", **The Green**, because "Islington has loads of affluent gay men and women and, at the moment, there isn't that much for them."

King's Cross took longer to clean up its act, and it wasn't until the 21st century that the hookers and dealers mostly disappeared from the streets. Now some of the restored buildings look very elegant. But dominated as it is by its three mainline stations, King's Cross probably will always attract a far more diverse gay crowd than snobbish Islington. While the **Play Pit** and **Oscar's** cinema recall the sleazy past, the drop-in centre, **London Friend**, provides one of the few alternatives to the commercial scene, and Central Station, now established for 14 years, caters for fetishists downstairs and such groups as OutRage! and Stonewall Football Club in the meeting rooms upstairs. Everyone seems to get along. Once scary, King's Cross is now pretty trouble-free. Adjacent Euston has several important gay connections. The gay dis-

THURS 9th
11pm - 3am
entry £3

Central Station,
Wharfedale Rd,
King's Cross N1

DJ
Stewart Who?

cos begun in 1968 by Richard Scanes (Tricky Dicky) at the **Euston Tavern**, now an O'Neill's pub, are said to have been the UK's first. The **Glass Bar**, outside Euston Station, is London's pre-eminent lesbian club. **Gay's The Word** in Marchmont Street has been London's leading gay bookshop for more than 25 years. North of Euston, Camden Town's **Black Cap**, dating from 1776, has been famous for its drag acts – Mrs Shufflewick, Hinge and Bracket, Regina Fong – since the 60s. And of course no survey of north London would be complete without a tribute to **Hampstead Heath**. The area behind the Jack Straw's Castle apartments is by no means London's oldest cruising ground. Matt Houlbrook's research through police records suggests that the Heath didn't begin to attract gay men in any numbers until the 1930s. Rapidly, however, its fame eclipsed more venerable grounds, such as Hyde Park and Clapham Common. It's name-checked in many a celebrity memoir. Tragic fashion designer Ossie Clark (like Joe Orton, murdered by his lover) couldn't keep away throughout the 1980s. ("Later went to the heath...met a wonderfully muscular guy in ripped vest and peaked cap called Dennis, a banker from Victoria.") Famous men, most recently George Michael, continue to hide among the Heath's shrubbery. "Are you gay? No? Then fuck off!" George screamed at a News of the World reporter last month. "This is my culture!" Never was a truer word spoken.

Surprisingly, despite this army of presumably exhausted and thirsty lovers, Hampstead has only ever had one successful gay pub, the **King William IV** in Hampstead High Street. This 17th century tavern turned discreetly gay before World War II specifically to cater to men visiting the Heath. This makes the Willie one of the three oldest gay pubs in London and a vital part of the capital's gay history.

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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 disenfranchised 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

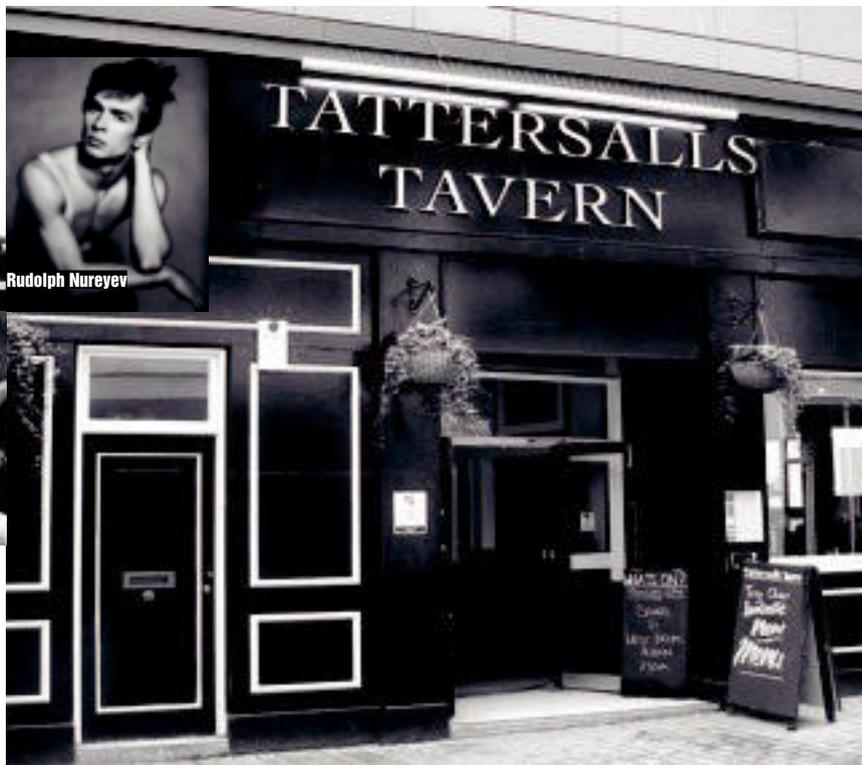


Rudolph Nureyev



Kenny Everett

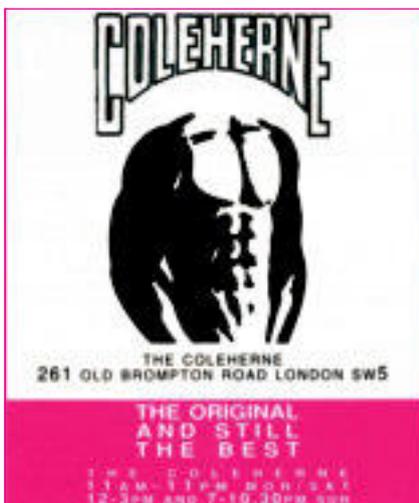
Rock star Freddie Mercury, comedian Kenny Everett and ballet dancer Rudolph Nureyev were all Coleherne regulars.



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) 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 WCI

All five parts of QX's gay history series are available online at qxmagazine.com