

# **An Investigation into the Relationship Between Gay Activism and the Establishment of a Gay Community in Birmingham, 1967-97.**

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### **Abstract**

This study charts the establishment of a gay community in Birmingham from the introduction of the Sexual Offences Act 1967, which partially decriminalised male homosexual acts in England and Wales, to the 1997 general election. This election saw New Labour end eighteen years of Conservative governments in Britain, which had frequently pursued an anti-gay agenda. This investigation examines the impact of the national Gay Liberation movement in Birmingham and particularly how gay activism, as both individual and collective acts of resistance, contributed to the development of a sense of community among the lesbian and gay inhabitants of the city during the 1970s and 1980s. It then documents the moves towards the development of a gay 'village' in Birmingham in the 1990s, with a brief comparison made to Manchester's own Gay Village. This study blends oral history testimonies with archive material drawn from both local and national gay archives, as well as newspapers and local council records. The thesis ends in 1997 with the organisation of the city's first official Gay Pride Festival. The Gay Pride Festival represented a watershed for Birmingham's gay community, symbolising a kind of mass 'coming out' process during which Birmingham's gay community established a long-term physical and cultural location for itself within the city.

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### **Abbreviations**

The following abbreviations appear in this thesis:

BCA	- Birmingham City Archives
BCC	- Birmingham City Council
BCC	- Birmingham Central Library
CHE	- Campaign for Homosexual Equality
GBR	- Gay Birmingham Remembered
GLC	- Greater London Council
GLF	- Gay Liberation Front
HCA	- Hall Carpenter Archive
LGCC	- Lesbian and Gay Community Centre
LSE	- London School of Economics
LAGNA	- Lesbian and Gay Newsmedia Archive
NALGO	- National and Local Government Officers Association
WMCC	- West Midlands County Council

## Chapter One: Introduction

This study will investigate the relationship between gay activism and the establishment of a gay community in Birmingham between 1967 and 1997. This represents the period between the introduction of the Sexual Offences Act 1967, which crucially decriminalised homosexual acts in England and Wales<sup>1</sup> and provided a springboard from which to launch the Gay Liberation movement in the UK, and the 1997 general election. This election saw New Labour end eighteen years of Conservative governments in Britain, which had frequently pursued an anti-gay agenda. It will examine the attempts of lesbians and gay men to establish a gay community in Birmingham and investigate how gay political activism contributed to the development of a sense of community within the city. The investigation ends in 1997 with the organisation of the city's first official Gay Pride Festival, which it will be argued represented a watershed in the development of Birmingham's gay community. The festival symbolised a kind of mass 'coming out' process during which Birmingham's gay community established a physical and cultural location for itself within the city. Birmingham has always had a significant lesbian and gay population, currently estimated at around 60,000,<sup>2</sup> however traditional academic research in this area has focused on the well-established gay communities of London, Brighton and Manchester<sup>3</sup> while conventional histories of Birmingham have completely ignored the presence of the great many homosexuals living and working within the city.<sup>4</sup> This study not only presents an opportunity to contribute to the relatively new field of gay history but also to document a previously invisible side of Birmingham's social history.

While there exists no published research on the gay community in Birmingham there has been a substantial amount of academic material written about the efforts of the British homophile and Gay Liberation movements in constructing a nationwide gay community within the UK. This chapter engages with this pre-existing literature and examines some of the key historical and theoretical debates that have arisen.

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<sup>1</sup> This applied only to homosexual acts which took place in private and between two consenting males above the age of twenty-one. Male homosexuality was not decriminalised in Scotland until 1980 and Northern Ireland in 1982.

<sup>2</sup> Estimate taken from Gay Birmingham Remembered project website.

<sup>3</sup> For recent examples see M. Houlbrook, *Queer London: Perils and Pleasures in the Sexual Metropolis, 1918-1957* (London, 2005); J. Gardiner, *From the closet to the screen: Women at the Gateways club, 1945-85* (London, 2003); and A. Collins, *Cities of Pleasure: Sex and the Urban Socialscape* (London, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> For a comprehensive list of literature on Birmingham see Carl Chinn (ed.), *Birmingham: Bibliography of a City* (Birmingham, 2003).

Dennis Altman was the first activist-turned-academic to write about the gay rights movement in the 1970s. His seminal 1971 work<sup>5</sup> analysed the birth of the American gay movement in New York during the late 1960s and examined the importance of identity, both personal and communal, and the importance of sexual expression and the coming out process to Gay Liberation. He compared the Gay Liberation Movement of the 1970s to the struggle of Black liberationists in America during the 1960s noting that both blacks and gays faced similar forms of oppression at the hands of a dominant white, heterosexual, middle-class culture.<sup>6</sup> He also paralleled the experiences of homosexuals and women noting that they were both ‘oppressed by similar conceptions of masculine and feminine roles and by the assumption that the nuclear family is the ultimate form of achieving happiness.’<sup>7</sup>

Jeffrey Weeks was the first British academic to write about the impact of the American model of Gay Liberation in this country during the 1970s. *Coming Out* (1997) traced the evolution of the gay rights movement in the UK from the efforts of the Homosexual Law Reform Society to promote the recommendations of the Wolfenden report (1957) to the partial decriminalisation of homosexuality in England and Wales and the birth of London Gay Liberation Front (GLF) in 1970.<sup>8</sup> Lucy Power has produced the definitive history of London GLF based on the oral testimonies of such distinguished ex-members as Peter Tatchell, Angela Mason and Jeffrey Weeks, among others.<sup>9</sup> Weeks has since written extensively on sexual politics in the UK and has published a series of books on the subject spanning several decades.<sup>10</sup>

Weeks was also among a number of leading British and American activists-turned-academics to contribute to *Gay Left*, a gay socialist journal with links to London GLF. In 1980 *Gay Left* published a collection of seventeen articles covering various aspects of sexual politics from the previous decade.<sup>11</sup> The articles sum up the gains of both the gay and women’s movements of the 1970s and offer an agenda for the continuation of sexual politics into the 1980s. While generally optimistic, there is a broad sense that the British Gay Liberation movement stalled

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<sup>5</sup> D. Altman, *Homosexual: Oppression and Liberation* (London, 1973).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p.190.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p.216.

<sup>8</sup> J. Weeks, *Coming Out* (London, 1977). For a comparative study of the success of the British and American gay liberation movements see S. M. Engel, *The unfinished revolution: social movement theory and the gay and lesbian movement* (Cambridge, 2001).

<sup>9</sup> L. Power, *No bath but plenty of bubbles: an oral history of the Gay Liberation Front, 1970-73* (London, 1995).

<sup>10</sup> See also J. Weeks, *Sexuality and its discontents: Meanings, myths and modern sexualities* (London, 1985), J. Weeks, *Against Nature: essays on history, sexuality and identity* (London, 1991), J. Weeks, *Making Sexual History* (London, 2000), J. Weeks, *The World We Have Won: the remaking of erotic and intimate life* (London, 2007).

<sup>11</sup> Gay Left Collective (eds.), *Homosexuality: Power and Politics* (London, 1980).



during the latter half of the 1970s. The final essays in the collection describe the backlash against the gay rights movement, in the form of Anita Bryant's national "Save Our Children" campaign and the Briggs Initiative (1978) that sought to remove gay teachers from Californian schools, which had begun to take effect in America by the end of the decade. It was not long before this country experienced a similar backlash.

In 1989 Weeks argued that the social reforms of the 1960s, particularly the legalisation of homosexuality, had become the target of a campaign by Thatcher's Tory Government who saw the reforms as representing an attack on traditional family values and the reason behind the 'moral collapse' of British society in the 1980s.<sup>12</sup> It was in this context that Thatcher introduced several pieces of anti-gay legislation. Weeks also noted that the challenges of the 1980s, namely Thatcher's anti-gay domestic policies and the arrival of AIDS in the UK, branded by the press as a 'gay plague',<sup>13</sup> had actually served to solidify the ties of the UK gay community and mobilise them into collective resistance by the end of the decade.<sup>14</sup>

The first articles criticising Thatcher's handling of the AIDS epidemic appeared in journals in 1987. Neil Small argued that Thatcher's responses to AIDS, albeit belated, constituted a moral panic aimed at homosexuals. He also noted that those social policy responses were more in accord with models of crime and disorder than with illness and treatment. He questioned the extent to which these measures were introduced to isolate and contain, rather than treat the disease.<sup>15</sup> Phillip Thomas argued that Thatcher's government both contributed to and exploited the moral panic generated around the cause and transmission of the HIV virus in order to promote superiority of the heterosexual nuclear family – the key financial unit of the State.<sup>16</sup>

Weeks and Aggleton *et al* have noted that faced with an almost non-existent governmental AIDS policy, initial HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention initiatives came from within the gay community itself. In the early stages of the epidemic AIDS was still very much a 'gay disease' in the sense that it predominantly affected gay men and the majority of AIDS organisations and support groups were private or community funded and staffed by gay men

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., pp.293-294.

<sup>13</sup> J. Weeks, *Sex, Politics, and Society: the regulation of society since 1800* (2nd edn., London, 1989), p.306.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p304.

<sup>15</sup> N. Small, 'AIDS and social policy', in *Critical Social Policy*, Vol. 7, No. 21 (1987).

<sup>16</sup> P. Thomas, 'The nuclear family, ideology and AIDS in the Thatcher years', in *Feminist Legal Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (1993). See also S. Watney, *Policing desire: pornography, AIDS and the media* (3rd edn., Minneapolis; London, 1997).

and lesbians, almost exclusively.<sup>17</sup> As governmental policy began to take effect in the late 1980s and early 1990s however there underwent a 'de-gaying' process whereby AIDS no longer became the sole concern of the gay community and the involvement of gay men and lesbians was downplayed as the voluntary sector became more professionalised and centralised. The mobilisation of the gay community in response to the AIDS epidemic propelled gay politics to the front of the political agenda. The power of the newly galvanised community was soon confirmed in its opposition of Section 28.

Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988 passed into British law on 24 May 1988. It aimed to prohibit the 'promotion' of homosexuality in schools and restrict the provision of state funding to lesbian or gay organisations by local authorities. The repressive nature of the legislation was immediately apparent. In February, Weeks had argued that 'a moral counter revolution has always been close to the heart of the Thatcherite project,' and that although Section 28 would not recriminalise homosexuality, it would provide 'an insistent message' that society was not prepared to tolerate the validity of homosexual relationships as an alternate way of life.<sup>18</sup> He predicted that the introduction of Section 28 represented 'a major crisis for the lesbian and gay community, and almost certainly represented a turning point for sexual politics as a whole.'<sup>19</sup> J.M. Stafford argued that Section 28 would have a particularly harmful effect on young gays and lesbians within the education system by removing the discussion of homosexuality from the school's sex education curricula and would only further legitimise institutionalised forms of homophobia within schools.<sup>20</sup> He argued that Section 28 had been introduced as a reaction to local authority initiatives designed to combat discrimination against homosexuals such as those implemented by Ken Livingstone's Greater London Council (GLC) and Haringey Borough Council.<sup>21</sup>

However just one year after its enactment social commentators were noting the paradoxical effect of Section 28 upon the UK's emergent gay community.<sup>22</sup> David Evans observed that while Section 28 had been clearly designed to inhibit gay politics it had had the opposite

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<sup>17</sup> J. Weeks and P. Aggleton et al. 'Community Responses to HIV and AIDS: The 'De-Gaying' and 'Re-Gaying' of AIDS', in J. Weeks and J. Holland (eds.), *Sexual cultures, communities, values and intimacy* (London, 1996). Bonell and Hilton have also investigated the potential for voluntary sector organisations to act as consumer representatives using the UK based HIV prevention organisation Gay AIDS Action as a case study. See C. Bonell and M. Hilton, 'Consumerism in Health Care: The Case of a UK Voluntary Sector HIV Prevention Organisation', in *International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organisations*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (2002).

<sup>18</sup> J. Weeks, 'Clause for concern', in *Marxism Today*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (1988), p.2.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p.3.

<sup>20</sup> J.M. Stafford, *Homosexuality and education* (Manchester, 1988).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p.29.

<sup>22</sup> D. Evans, 'Section 28: law, myth and paradox', in *Critical Social Policy*, Vol. 9, No. 27 (1989).

intended effect.<sup>23</sup> It served to mobilise lesbians and gay men in never before seen numbers to protest the clause. Mass demonstrations were held in London and Manchester throughout 1988, attracting over 50,000 protestors, both gay and straight, from all over Britain. These were the largest gay rights rallies ever seen outside the US. It also directly led to the formation of the political lobbying group Stonewall which has been at the forefront of the gay rights movement in the UK ever since.

Several historians have defended Thatcherism from the attacks of left wing theorists. Joan Isaac disputed Thatcher's role within the New Right's moral crusade against homosexuality.<sup>24</sup> Isaac suggests that the New Right groups represented little more than a fringe movement within the Conservative Party during this period and maintains that at no point did Thatcher ever let them direct her domestic policies. Martin Durham vehemently challenged Weeks' suggestion that a moral counter-revolution was always close to the heart of Thatcherism, claiming instead that policing sexuality was never a crucial component of Thatcherism and had always taken a back seat to more pressing social and economic policy objectives.<sup>25</sup> Durham also argued that Thatcher's response to AIDS was anything but homophobic, noting that it had actively avoided associating AIDS with homosexuality and had in fact stressed that AIDS represented a threat to everybody, not just homosexuals. He also argued that Thatcher believed that the government's only responsibility was to educate the public about AIDS, while the job of denouncing the permissive behaviour that had contributed to the epidemic should be left to the church.<sup>26</sup> Although it may be possible to dispute whether Thatcher's domestic policies constituted a moral crusade against homosexuality, the fact that her government *did* adopt a series of morally motivated laws designed to limit the rights of lesbians and gay men living in the UK, is undeniable.<sup>27</sup>

In the wake of Section 28 the gay community responded by producing a number of politically charged oral history works. Several collections of gay men's life stories were published in

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<sup>23</sup> Simon Shepherd and Mick Wallis' collection of essays on gay politics *Coming on strong: gay politics and culture* (London, 1989) very nearly did not get published as a result of the introduction of the section 28 legislation.

<sup>24</sup> J. Isaac, 'The New right and Moral Society', in *Parliamentary Affairs*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (1990).

<sup>25</sup> M. Durham, 'The Thatcher Government and the Moral Right' in *Parliamentary Affairs*, Vol. 42, No. 1 (1989), pp.64-65. Durham argued that while the government adopted a moralist stance over certain issues - namely sex and violence on television and homosexuality, this by no means constituted a moral offensive.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.63-64.

<sup>27</sup> Recent popular biographies of Thatcher have tended to ignore the subject of her anti-gay policies altogether. For examples see H. Young, *One of us: a biography of Margaret Thatcher* (London, 1993); E. Evans, *Thatcher and Thatcherism* (2nd edn., London, 2004).

quick succession in Britain during the late 1980s and early 1990s.<sup>28</sup> *Radical Records* (1988) documented thirty years of the gay liberation movement in Britain, featuring contributions from key members of the movement such as Bob Cant, Andrew Lumsden, Jeffrey Weeks and an early article by Lisa Power.<sup>29</sup> One year later the Hall Carpenter Archives published *Walking After Midnight* (1989)<sup>30</sup> with the intention that the work would provide a springboard from which further research could be launched:

History can be a cohesive force. By looking back and seeing how other gay men have lived their lives, struggled and survived, we develop a shared sense of the past, a clearer understanding of the present and an indication of the possibilities of the future. This is particularly pertinent now, given the increasingly virulent anti-gay hysteria and bigotry that are becoming a characteristic of Britain in the late eighties.<sup>31</sup>

Kevin Porter and Jeffrey Weeks published a similar volume two years later that featured fifteen life stories from gay men who had lived between 1885 and 1967 when all forms of homosexual activity were illegal in the UK.<sup>32</sup> It documented the issues and challenges facing homosexuals during this period when 'homosexually-inclined people were forced to come to terms with their desires, construct their personal and social identities, build relationships and discover new ways of life in a situation of illegality, prejudice, ignorance and social hostility.'<sup>33</sup> This was a situation familiar to many gay men and lesbians living in 1980s Britain, but the book also provided hope for the future and the promise of better times ahead. Lucy Robinson has noted how the history of the gay liberation movement, being in essence a loose collection of individuals, has privileged the publication of personal histories rather than traditional academic historical accounts. She suggested that while these represent important political acts in themselves, they symbolise 'a retreat away from changing the future and into recording experiences of the past.'<sup>34</sup>

The Marxist gay historian Nicola Field argued that by the 1990s the UK Gay Liberation movement had lost its revolutionary traditions and had instead acquired a conservative

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<sup>28</sup> See also Jeremy Seabrook's early oral history work *A lasting relationship: homosexuals and society* (London, 1976) and Hugh David's more recent work *On Queer Street: a social history of British homosexuality, 1895-1995* (London, 1997).

<sup>29</sup> B. Cant and S. Hemmings (eds.), *Radical records: thirty years of lesbian and gay history, 1957-1987* (London, 1988).

<sup>30</sup> Hall Carpenter Archives, *Walking After Midnight: gay men's life histories* (London, 1989).

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p.3.

<sup>32</sup> K. Porter and J. Weeks (eds.), *Between the Acts: lives of homosexual men 1885-1967* (London, 1991).

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p.1.

<sup>34</sup> L. Robinson, *Gay men and the Left in post-war Britain: how the personal got political* (Manchester, 2007), p.7.

reformist countenance where ‘the objectives centre on a handful of proposed law reforms which, whilst important, go nowhere near offering any kind of solution to the brutal and pervasive reality of gay oppression in people’s lives.’<sup>35</sup> She illustrated the limitations of this new form of political activism with the example of the failed Stonewall-led campaign to equalise the homosexual age of consent with that of heterosexuals during 1993/4, which Matthew Waites has investigated.<sup>36</sup> Although political lobbying may have replaced direct action as the proffered weapon of the UK gay rights movement by the 1990s, the radical arm of the Gay Liberation movement was not completely silenced. The London based direct action group Outrage! operated throughout the 1990s to promote gay rights issues and Ian Lucas has published an account of their campaigns between 1990 and 96.<sup>37</sup>

Field also questioned the de-politicisation and increasing commercialisation of UK Gay Pride celebrations and called for a repositioning of Gay Pride back onto the radical political agenda.<sup>38</sup> This claim can be examined within the ‘Sexual Citizenship debate’ initiated by David Evans (1993). Evans argued that much of the political and social advance of male homosexuality since 1967 has been due less to the efforts of gay rights campaigners and gay activism than to the increasing commodification of gay men as an exploitable consumer group within Western capitalist societies.<sup>39</sup> He noted that ‘with legalisation gay male sexuality was inevitably affected by material discourses commensurate with men as potent earners, independent workers, with possibly more disposable leisure and lifestyle income than their married [heterosexual] counterparts.’<sup>40</sup> Thus he argued that the British government has conceded certain rights of sexual citizenship to male homosexuals where it has been beneficial for the market and state to do so. This has resulted in an increasingly commodified and de-politicised gay male identity, the effect of which can be seen in the commercialisation of many Gay Pride celebrations across the UK.

This idea of a gay male identity had itself become a subject of debate by the mid 1990s with the advent of queer theory. Queer theory is a branch of critical theory, similar to hermeneutics, which was first applied to the reading of texts. Queer theory rejected the concept of fixed identities based upon single defining characteristics, which queer theorists

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<sup>35</sup> N. Field, *Over the Rainbow: Money, Class and Homophobia* (London, 1995). p.88.

<sup>36</sup> M. Waites, ‘Equality at Last? Homosexuality, Heterosexuality and the Age of Consent in the United Kingdom’, in *Sociology*, Vol. 37, No. 4 (2003); M. Waites, *The Age of Consent: young people, sexuality and citizenship* (Basingstoke, 2005). Waites has also produced a brief history of British Lesbian and Gay Non-Governmental Organisations (including Stonewall) for an as yet unpublished volume edited by N. Crowson and M. Hilton et al..

<sup>37</sup> I. Lucas, *Outrage! An oral history* (London, 1998).

<sup>38</sup> N. Field, *Over the Rainbow*, pp.93-103.

<sup>39</sup> D. T. Evans, *Sexual Citizenship: the material construction of sexualities* (London, 1993), p.89/90.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p.101.

argued underestimated the myriad socio-cultural factors affecting an individual's sense of identity and how individuals interpreted their position and role within society. It specifically questioned the weight of identities based solely upon sexual preference. In the age of queer the concept of identity was reconceptualised as a cultural fantasy or myth characteristic of modernity.<sup>41</sup> Queer theory raises a number of interesting points for consideration in this study. It called into question the established concepts of gay and lesbian identities which underpin existing gay communities in Britain, and threatened an end to any further potential for social change by removing the bond of shared sexual identity which has traditionally been what held the Gay Liberation movement and gay communities together.<sup>42</sup> Queer theorists argued that early gay liberationists embraced an identity along the lines of the 'ethnic model' whereby gay men and lesbians were recognised as a distinct yet marginal group within society where heterosexuality is the norm.<sup>43</sup> Queer theory rejected this and any further marginalisation of minority groups through categorisation.<sup>44</sup>

However several gay theorists have challenged queer theory's critique of role of sexual identities and the continued function of the Gay Liberation movement in post-modern societies. M. H. Kirsch has argued that the introduction of queer theory does not mean an end to lesbian and gay identities and maintained that the capacity for radical social change still exists in the queer era.<sup>45</sup> Similarly Michael Warner has suggested that queer politics need not replace existing lesbian and gay identities but should instead serve to supplement traditional understandings of oppression and provide new opportunities for resistance.<sup>46</sup> Interestingly queer theory also rejects traditional heterosexual concepts of masculinity and femininity, the removal of which is at the heart of both the Gay Liberation and women's movements. Moreover Weeks continues to defend the importance of lesbian and gay identities, noting that while sexual identities may well be historical fictions, for many lesbians and gay men they represent substantial sources of solidarity, strength and power.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p.78. For a further discussion of the impact of queer theory upon current sociological discourse see S. Seidman (ed.), *Queer theory/sociology* (Cambridge, Mass; Oxford, 1996).

<sup>42</sup> A. Jagose, *Queer Theory: An introduction* (New York, 1996), p.43.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p.62.

<sup>44</sup> The rise of queer studies has also led previously marginalised ethnic groups to demand recognition of their place within the British gay community as a whole and an exploration of their own cultural and historical identity. This has resulted in the publication of a number of groundbreaking studies on homosexuality in different societies and cultures. For discussions of homosexuality in Indian culture see J. Seabrook, *Love in a different climate: men who have sex with men in India* (London, 1999) and R. Vanita, *Queering India: same-sex love and eroticism in Indian culture and society* (New York; London, 2002).

<sup>45</sup> M. H. Kirsch, *Queer theory and social change* (New York, 2000).

<sup>46</sup> M. Warner, *Fear of a queer planet: queer politics and social theory* (Minneapolis, 1993).

<sup>47</sup> J. Weeks, 'History, desire and identities', in R. G. Parker and J. H. Gagnon (eds.), *Conceiving sexuality* (London, 1995), pp.43-44.

Examination of the secondary literature revealed that the field of gay history is still very much in its infancy. Although there has been some important research conducted on the UK Gay Liberation movement this has tended to focus on London, as the nation's capital, which has resulted in a somewhat distorted view of the national experience of Gay Liberation. As with all minority history there remains a need for much research at the local level. One area that has received recent academic attention is the emergence of sexual urban space outside the major North American gay centres.<sup>48</sup> Some important work has been done in relation to the development of Manchester's Gay Village in particular.<sup>49</sup> This study will attempt in some small way to address this imbalance within the current literature. It will investigate the impact of Gay Liberation in Birmingham and examine how political activism, as collective acts of resistance, contributed to the development of a gay community within the city.

Researching the development of a gay community in the city presents a number of important methodological questions. First, how does one identify and define a gay community and what is it that differentiates a gay community from the rest of straight society and is a gay community different to a gay subculture and at what point does this subculture become a community? Kenneth Plummer (1975) has identified what he considers as the main features and characteristics of homosexual subcultures in the UK as well as postulating several theories on how and why these subcultures develop as they do.<sup>50</sup> These parameters offered by Plummer can be applied to ascertain whether a homosexual subculture existed in Birmingham at the beginning of the 1970s but there remains the problem of establishing if, and at what point, this homosexual subculture developed into a 'real' gay community. Weeks (2000) has suggested that a community provides 'a vocabulary of values through which individuals construct their understanding of the social world, and their sense of identity and belonging.'<sup>51</sup> He compared the concept of a sexual community with Foucault's notion of a 'critical community', which exists within the confines of 'normal' culture yet finds something 'intolerable' about this dominant code and thereby refuses to participate in it.<sup>52</sup> Thus the gay community exists solely because participants in it feel it *does* and *should* exist. Weeks has

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<sup>48</sup> For a review of progress in this field see J. Binnie and G. Valentine, 'Geographies of Sexuality: a review of progress', in *Progress in Human Geography*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (1999).

<sup>49</sup> See J. Binnie and B. Skeggs, 'Cosmopolitan knowledge and the production and consumption of sexualised space: Manchester's Gay Village', in J. Binnie, J. Holloway, S. Millington and C. Young (eds), *Cosmopolitan Urbanism* (London, 2006); or A. Jones, *Lesbians in the Shadows: Gender, Sexuality and Space in Manchester's Gay Village* (1998), MA Thesis, University of Manchester. For a discussion of the development of Soho as London's gay village and a comparison with the promotion of Amsterdam as a gay destination, see J. Binnie, 'Trading Places: consumption, sexuality and the production of queer space', in D. Bell and G. Valentine (eds), *Mapping Desire: geographies of sexualities* (London, 1995).

<sup>50</sup> K. Plummer, *Sexual Stigma: an interactionist account* (London, 1975).

<sup>51</sup> J. Weeks, *Making Sexual History* (London, 2000), p.181/2.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p.82.

also noted that the strongest sense of community often develops in groups that find the premises of their collective existence threatened and who construct out of this a community of identity that provides a strong sense of resistance and empowerment.<sup>53</sup> This is the exact situation in which British lesbians and gay men found themselves in the 1980s. By the end of this decade the gay community as it is understood today had firmly established itself in the UK.

Second, how is one to identify members of a gay community when their only shared characteristic is their sexuality? Because sexuality is such a personal aspect of an individual's personality it is difficult to identify a person as homosexual unless that person chooses to inform you of the fact. There are various methods by which individuals can declare their homosexuality. One obvious method is through participation in Birmingham's gay bar/club scene. However, this can provide a distorted image of the city's gay community as it often obscures the vast and complex network of social and cultural interactions that constitute a community. Another method is through active membership of gay groups and organisations. Since the 1970s dozens of lesbian and gay groups have sprung up in Birmingham catering for all manner of social and political interests. Membership of these groups has typically favoured those sections of the gay community that were politically active or those marginalised by the commercial, male dominated gay scene. There are other communities of gay people: friendship networks, self-help/counselling groups, health (particularly HIV/AIDS) and workplace-based groups are worth noting here. Many of these groups produced newsletters featuring accounts of the activities of their members, some of which survive today for use by the historian. Recently, the advent of the Internet has provided new opportunities for gay communities throughout the UK to document their own histories. Online oral archives such as these have made it far easier for historians to identify and interact with members of local gay communities, past and present.

A number of archives were utilised during the course of this investigation. The Hall-Carpenter Archive is the largest archive of lesbian and gay activism in the UK and contains a vast amount of useful material on Birmingham in the form of records and publications from gay organisations/individuals, lesbian and gay newspapers and magazines, and various other ephemera relating to gay life donated by private individuals and organisations. The Gay Birmingham Remembered (GBR) project<sup>54</sup> has also collected a vast amount of material on the experiences of gay men and lesbians in Birmingham and the West Midlands from the 1940s to the present. The project has collected a large amount of original material in the form

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> <<http://www.gaybirminghamremembered.org.uk>>



of community organisation newsletters and various other publications, which proved invaluable to this investigation.<sup>55</sup> One of the major problems associated with archives such as these is that the material contained within them, which has largely been deposited through individual donations of personal collections of material. Much of this material is ephemeral and is by nature incomplete. As a consequence there exists no complete record of lesbian and gay activism in the UK. One way to fill in the gaps in the historical record left by the absence of printed material is to use oral interviews and memoirs. The GBR project has conducted a substantial number of oral interviews and published a number of written memoirs from among members of Birmingham's gay community, all of which are available on the project's website.<sup>56</sup> These proved invaluable during the course of this investigation. As such personal memories are often quoted throughout this essay. In one instance it was necessary to follow up one of the interviews with an additional interview of my own. For reference, a transcript of the interview has been included (Appendix 1).

This investigation also references both national and local newspapers. The Lesbian And Gay Newsmedia Archive at Middlesex University has a collection of over 200,000 press cuttings relating to gay life from the 1930s to the present, although much of this material is as yet uncatalogued and only a small percentage directly relates to Birmingham and the West Midlands. However, *Birmingham Post* and *Mail* provide a regular, if predominantly one-sided, commentary on lesbian and gay issues relating to Birmingham and the West Midlands throughout this period. In addition to the above sources, this thesis also draws upon Birmingham City Council and West Midlands County Council records.<sup>57</sup>

This investigation will follow a broadly chronological approach while each chapter will focus upon a specific theme in the development of Birmingham's gay community. Chapter two will investigate the impact of Gay Liberation in Birmingham and the attempts of lesbians and gay activists to establish a gay community in the city in the 1970s. Chapter three will trace the evolution of Birmingham City Council's equal opportunities policy during the 1980s and examine the City Council's attitude and policy towards the city's emergent gay community. Chapter four will document the effect of HIV/AIDS and Section 28 in the 1980s and establish how these events encouraged the development of a sense of community between Birmingham's lesbian and gay population. Finally chapter five will chart the development of

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<sup>55</sup> This material is due to be deposited in Birmingham Central Library in the near future.

<sup>56</sup> The MillenniBrum oral history project has also conducted a small number of oral history interviews with members of Birmingham's gay community. Transcripts of which are available in Birmingham Central Library.

<sup>57</sup> The records of both Birmingham City Council and West Midlands County Council are housed within Birmingham Central Library.

Gay Pride celebrations in Birmingham. This chapter will also investigate the move towards the establishment of a gay 'village' in the city towards the end of the 1990s and examine in detail the organisation and impact of Birmingham's first official Gay Pride Festival in 1997.

## Chapter Two: Gay Liberation in Birmingham

*We will show you how we can use our righteous anger to uproot the present oppressive system with its decaying and constricting ideology, and how we, together with other oppressed groups, can start to form a new order, and a liberated life-style, from the alternatives which we offer. – GLF Manifesto, 1971*

### Introduction

This chapter charts the impact of the British Gay Liberation movement in Birmingham in the 1970s and 1980s and examine the ways in which it contributed to the creation of a gay community in city. This chapter will begin by first illustrating the existence of a clearly recognisable homosexual subculture, as described by Plummer, in Birmingham at the end of the 1960s. Plummer postulates that similar homosexual subcultures might be found in almost any town or city of substantial population in the UK. Until the arrival of Gay Liberation in the UK such homosexual subcultures were the single means of contact with other homosexuals. It would not be until the advent of Gay Liberation that homosexuals first attempted the creation of a gay community within the UK. Birmingham had a prominent Gay Liberation Front (GLF) that was politically active between 1972-1977. This chapter will explore the activities of Birmingham GLF and its goal to offer its members an alternate social environment to Birmingham's commercial gay scene, which had developed considerably since homosexual acts were legalised in the UK in 1967. The main body of this chapter will focus upon the establishment of Birmingham Gay Community Centre that existed, in its various forms, for over a decade from the time it opened in 1976 to its closure in 1987. Particular consideration will be given to the circumstances surrounding the Centre's demise.

### A Homosexual Subculture in Birmingham

At the time of the introduction of the Sexual Offences Act 1967, there existed a homosexual subculture in Birmingham similar to those that might be found in many cities in Britain at this time. At its heart were a small, yet significant, number of bars and members clubs frequented largely by the city's (male) homosexual population.<sup>58</sup> Plummer, one of the first to study the homosexual subculture in Britain defines subcultures as 'consequences of complex, pluralistic societies where the existence of a unitary value system among societal members cannot be

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<sup>58</sup> The homosexual subculture developed similar patriarchal characteristics to many dominant cultures within Western society and as a consequence women were largely excluded from participation. They would not begin to become a visible component of the city's homosexual population until the advent of Gay Liberation in the early 1970s.

taken for granted'<sup>59</sup>, or more simply it can be taken to refer to 'any lifestyle involving shared norms and values that differ in significant ways from a dominant culture.'<sup>60</sup> For Plummer, the subculture of homosexuality referred to 'a relatively stable lifestyle involving a number of interactants around the homosexual experience.'<sup>61</sup> For the purposes of this study 'homosexual experience' shall be taken to mean participation in sexual acts between two or more members of the same sex. The concept of a distinct 'gay identity' shall be explored later in this thesis.

Plummer identified two generally observable 'levels' of the homosexual subculture. First, he identified the public/visible levels that were organised around specific behaviour settings and institutions. These are places where aspects of the homosexual subculture are visible existing within the institutions of the dominant culture but often away from the public gaze. Such institutions include bars, public meeting places such as public conveniences (cottages) and the homophile movement, among others. However he notes that involvement in one of these activities does not necessarily denote involvement in the others. Indeed, Plummer notes that 'many homosexuals, for example, may become involved in bars, while remaining totally uninterested and even unaware of the existence of homophile movements.'<sup>62</sup>

At the beginning of the 1970s there existed a small number of bars and clubs in Birmingham frequented by the city's male homosexual population. Most of these were not officially 'homosexual' bars, in the sense that they were owned by homosexuals and catered specifically for homosexual clientele. The majority were simply run by enterprising landlords willing to 'tolerate' the homosexual crowd as long as they caused no trouble and as long as it proved profitable. The most popular venues in Birmingham at this time were the Imperial Hotel bar and the Trocadero pub on Temple Street, the Victoria Arms on Station Street and the Nightingale Club on Camp Hill. In fact only the Nightingale club, opened in 1967, was owned and operated by homosexuals for homosexuals. It was allegedly opened in reaction to the exploitation and harassment of homosexuals in the city's pubs and bars catering for the homosexual crowd, in particular the Queen Victoria Club in Victoria Square.<sup>63</sup> One of the few venues with a genuinely mixed homosexual crowd was the Viking on Smallbrook Queensway. Although the bars were distributed across the city centre, the most popular establishments were those situated near to the city's network of cottages.

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<sup>59</sup> K. Plummer, *Sexual Stigma*, p.154.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p.154/5

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p.155.

<sup>63</sup> Alan, interviewed 2007 for GBR project.

Birmingham's cottages were predominantly situated around the city's two main railway stations, New Street and Snow Hill. Plummer has suggested that cottages often develop in areas 'shielded by sheer numbers – where crowds render the activity of a few individual invisible...' and notes that railway terminals often proved popular locations.<sup>64</sup> Indeed both New Street and Snow Hill stations had well-known cottages. One of Birmingham's most infamous cottages was the Silver Slipper situated on Station Street, which remained popular among Birmingham's homosexual population throughout this period, until it was eventually filled in by the City Council in 1987. Robin McGarry recalls:

The Silver Slipper had two entrances and absolutely palatial marble stands and marble tiles but occasionally it would get raided by the cops and emptied into vans and then, of course, everybody would come rushing into the bar. 'The Slipper's been raided' so nobody would go there for a couple of days. Most of the little cottages around Birmingham would be very busy, very busy indeed because it was where we met, we had the odd bar but we didn't have many bars and the landlords were making money, that was all they were interested in but, the moment there was any threat to them or their licence, they would pull out and they wouldn't be gay anymore.<sup>65</sup>

Cottages performed an important social as well as physical function within the homosexual subculture. Not only do they serve simply as sites of sexual release and self 'affirmation' but also more importantly they provided an alternative means of meeting other homosexuals away from an often seemingly remote and inaccessible bar scene, which brought with it the opportunity for homosexual men to form mutually supportive friendship groups. For many homosexual men cottaging was often the only way they knew of to meet other homosexuals.

The second of the 'levels' of the homosexual subculture are the private/invisible levels organised around relationships and friendship cliques. Although he notes that not all sociologists would agree with his inclusion of this private level within the rubric of subculture he nevertheless argued that this 'homosexual relational network' is in fact the most important aspect of the homosexual subculture. As such he suggests that the homosexual subculture is best characterised as 'a series of friendship cliques only loosely connected with the public institutions just described. Thus homosexuals may occasionally go to a gay bar, or the local cottage, but most of their life is spent among friends and acquaintances, as indeed is a

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p.167.

<sup>65</sup> Robin McGarry, interviewed 2007 for GBR project.

heterosexuals.’<sup>66</sup> It was this ‘homosexual relational network’ that provided the basis for the gay communities that emerged in many UK cities during the 1970s and 1980s.

### **Birmingham Gay Liberation Front**

The arrival of Gay Liberation in the UK in the 1970s marked a significant turning point for gay politics in this country. Weeks has suggested that the homophile organisations (for example the Homosexual Law Reform Society, founded in 1958) that had ‘tiptoed’ through the liberal 1960s were swiftly replaced by a new type of radical movement in 1970, which had originally developed in the US and was now closely associated with the emergent UK counter culture. Gay Liberation stressed ‘openness, defiance, pride, identity – and, above all, self activity.’<sup>67</sup> John Shires, former member of Lancaster GLF, has similarly noted that ‘Gay liberation presented a new way of being homosexual...We were from now on ‘gay’; a term which we had chosen. We no longer had to live in the closet, furtively meeting in the shadows. Our sexuality could be expressed openly.’<sup>68</sup> The introduction of the term ‘gay’ as a means of self-identification was one of the most significant achievements of the Gay Liberation movement. It marked ‘a decisive break with the institutions and discourses of heresy and disease within which all homosexuals were, by definition, previously confined.’<sup>69</sup> In autumn 1970, several members of the then radical London School of Economics founded London GLF. By 1972/3 numerous regional groups had established themselves in cities throughout the UK, all based upon the London model.

Birmingham GLF was established in 1972 and was particularly active during the mid 1970s. One of the leading figures behind the founding of the group was Nick Stanley, a friend of Aubrey Walters, co-founder of London GLF. Stanley was involved with Wolverhampton Campaign for Homosexual Equality (CHE) before attending a GLF conference at Lancaster University in 1971/2 that prompted him to set up a GLF group in Birmingham.<sup>70</sup> Birmingham GLF originally met at the Quakers Meeting Centre, relocating two years later to the Birmingham Peace Centre at 18 Moor Street where it remained until the closure of the Peace Centre c.1975/6. Stanley recalls:

Meetings would attract...sometimes as many as thirty...There was a mixture of the sexes and there was a prominent women’s group who made a great impression on

<sup>66</sup> K. Plummer, *Sexual Stigma*, p.156.

<sup>67</sup> J. Weeks, *Coming Out*, 1990, p.185.

<sup>68</sup> J. Shiers, ‘One step to heaven?’, in Cant, B, and Hemmings, S (eds), *Radical Records*, p.234/5.

<sup>69</sup> S. Watney, ‘The Ideology of GLF’, in Gay Left Collective (eds), *Homosexuality: Power and Politics*, p.64.

<sup>70</sup> Nick Stanley, interviewed 2007 for GBR project.

things. There was the third gender of male to female transsexuals and whenever they were at the meetings the agenda was theirs...Membership of the group fluctuated. There was a central core of two-dozen members made of mixed ages including two or three people who were retired.<sup>71</sup>

Birmingham GLF was one of the country's most active GLF groups, behind London. From the early 1972 until 1977 Birmingham GLF published a sporadic newsletter called *Gladrag*. The group's Gay Education Group also published a number of leaflets including a sex education pamphlet called *Growing Up Homosexual*. One of the pamphlets original authors, Malcolm Gibb, recalls: 'we spent months writing it and thinking over the political implications of every word, practically. That was aimed at young people; if they thought they were gay this was what it was about really.' This groundbreaking pamphlet was one of the first of its kind to be produced in Britain.

One of the underlying principals of Gay Liberation was the idea of 'coming out'. For the GLF, 'coming out' was 'the only way to effectively challenge stereotypes was to show the diversity of gay people. It was about bringing it to the front of your lived life and challenging people's perceptions.'<sup>72</sup> Some of the most successful events organised by Birmingham GLF were the unofficial 'Gay Days' of the mid 1970s during which members of the group occupied local parks, picnicked, played instruments, organised street theatre and generally had a good time, 'the idea being to prove to heterosexuals that we really are everywhere.'<sup>73</sup> One such event was the 'Gay Sunshine Event' at which a number of members had '...bought several crates of oranges and held a demo in Cannon Hill Park where we gave an orange to everyone we met to celebrate the 'Goodness of Being Gay'.<sup>74</sup> London GLF had pioneered these 'Gay Days'. They were politically motivated demonstrations, but they were designed to be fun and enjoyable at the same time: 'Gay Days seem to me to provide a perfect fusion of self-liberation and external campaigning. They are a celebration of our growing love for one another, and an enjoyment of our new-found freedom. At the same time they look outwards. We do our thing in the public parks. We show our gay pride to the world, and most importantly, to our gay sisters and brothers who have not yet joined us.'<sup>75</sup>

Another key tenet of Gay Liberation was the establishment of an alternative to the commercial gay bar scene, which was seen as exploiting their gay clientele. Birmingham GLF

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Malcolm Gibb, interviewed 2007 for GBR project.

<sup>73</sup> *In The Pink*, Issue 21, October 1989.

<sup>74</sup> Graham Allen, contributor to *Gay Birmingham Remembered*.

<sup>75</sup> Unknown London GLF member cited in J. Weeks, *Coming Out*, p.195.

also held weekly discos in various pubs across Birmingham including the Shakespeare Pub on Summer Row, the Eagle and Tun and Old Crown pubs in Digbeth and the Black Horse in Aston, among others. The venues for the discos largely depended on the cooperation of sympathetic (or enterprising) landlords, although regular larger dances were independently held at Digbeth Civic Hall.<sup>76</sup> The GLF discos also provided ‘a good alternative to the dreary meat-rack pub routine’ which was all that was available to gay people in Birmingham in the 1970s.<sup>77</sup> Graham Allen remembers: ‘[the discos] were really Heath Robinson affairs, like taking in our own record players in and setting them up... We used to hire an upstairs room. It was very mixed and it was not like the gay scene, it was there in its own right.’<sup>78</sup> The discos were dependent upon the temperament of the city’s landlords. Their support of GLF discos was often fickle and it was not uncommon for landlords to happily take the groups money one week and abruptly refuse to accommodate them the next.

Despite these setbacks regular discos were maintained throughout the mid 1970s and in June 1976, Ken Jones and Malcolm Gibb, petitioned to have Birmingham City Council (BCC) include details of GLF discos in the council’s *What’s On* publication. The city’s Chief Publicity Officer and Cllr. Blumenthal, then head of BCC General Purposes Committee (the body responsible for processing requests of this nature), rejected the request owing to the ‘exclusive’ nature of the GLF discos.<sup>79</sup> It later transpired that Cllr. Blumenthal had failed to put the request to the General Purposes Committee and had refused the request out right and with seemingly no legitimate reason.<sup>80</sup> A request was subsequently put directly to the BCC General Purposes Committee in December and with the support of several Labour committee members the request was granted. The GLF discos were listed in the council’s *What’s On* publication the following year. This was the first time any gay event had been listed in any official government publication in Birmingham and was a significant political victory for the Birmingham group.

Birmingham GLF ‘petered out’ around the end 1977 as many of its original members<sup>81</sup> settled down and went into employment. Stanley has even suggested that the group had all but ‘evaporated’ as early as 1975/6, following the closure of its headquarters at the Peace

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<sup>76</sup> Malcolm Gibb, interviewed 2007 for GBR project.

<sup>77</sup> Birmingham GLF Newssheet, August 1973, BCA, LBF 22.85.

<sup>78</sup> Graham Allen, interviewed 2007 for GBR project.

<sup>79</sup> Mr Green (Chief Publicity Officer) to Mr Jones, 24 June 1976, GBR project archive.

<sup>80</sup> Cllr. Mrs Stewart to Mr Jones and Mr Gibb, 29 November 1976, GBR project archive. When confronted about the matter by Labour Cllr. Stewart, Cllr. Blumenthal is alleged to have said: “Oh, yes – I don’t mind either way – I just thought – er people suggested it would be putting the official stamp on – er – it is what I think it is? We’d better put it to the General Purposes Committee – tell them to put it on the next agenda – I think I put it to my group – lets have it decided by G.P.”

<sup>81</sup> By and large students or the young and out of work. Malcolm Gibb, interviewed 2007 for GBR project.



Centre.<sup>82</sup> However, the exact date of the demise of Birmingham GLF is unimportant. What is important is that out of Birmingham GLF arose plans for a gay community centre in Birmingham, the first of its kind in Britain. Many of those involved in the founding of Birmingham Gay Community Centre had cut their political teeth as members of Birmingham GLF.

### **Birmingham Gay Community Centre**

Opened in December 1976, Birmingham Gay Community Centre (Bordesley Street) was the first gay community centre to be established in Britain. Its example paved the way for similar gay centres opened in the 1980s in cities such as London and Manchester. For over ten years it provided a physical institution (if not always a physical location) around which a gay community could develop in Birmingham. The objective of the Centre in 1976 was recorded as being ‘to promote the benefit and welfare of those people being or considering themselves as being homosexual or bisexual, and in particular, the promotion, maintenance, improvement and advancement of education with the object of improving the conditions of life of the said persons.’<sup>83</sup> This is a clear statement of the intention of the Centre’s founders to build a mutually supportive community of lesbians and gay men in the city, with Birmingham Gay Community Centre at its very heart.

In keeping with the traditions of Gay Liberation one of the key functions of the Centre was to provide an alternative to the city’s commercial gay pub/club scene. It aimed to provide a safe and supportive environment in which both lesbians and gay men could ‘relax and feel at home [while] having the choice of joining in various groups and activities or simply chatting over a cup of tea in a friendly atmosphere.’<sup>84</sup> Thus the Centre would not only cater for those already ‘out on the scene’ by providing them with an alternative to pubs and clubs, but more importantly it would also cater for the thousands of socially isolated lesbians and gay men who did not know any other gay people and did not have access to any support structures.<sup>85</sup> Initially the Centre’s facilities included a ground floor coffee bar, television room, games room, women’s room, and various other meeting rooms available for hire. Weekly Saturday night discos were held in the Centre’s basement. To compliment these the Centre regularly

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<sup>82</sup> Nick Stanley, interviewed 2007 for GBR project.

<sup>83</sup> Birmingham Gay Community Centre Annual Report, February 1976-March 1978, HCA, LSE, HCA/CHE/7/132.

<sup>84</sup> *Gladrag*, Summer 1977 issue, GBR project archive.

<sup>85</sup> Birmingham Gay Community Centre Annual Report, February 1976-March 1978, HCA, LSE, HCA/CHE/7/132.

held a variety of one-off events including plays, film nights, lesbian folk evenings, wine and cheese nights and numerous other themed parties.<sup>86</sup>

The Centre also housed the majority (if not all) of the city's gay groups and organisations, including most notably: Birmingham GLF (following the closure of its headquarters at the Peace Centre); Birmingham, Wolverhampton and Walsall CHE groups; Birmingham Lesbian and Gay Switchboard, a telephone help line providing information on lesbian and gay services available in Birmingham and the West Midlands; and Friend West Midlands, a counselling service and befriending group committed to helping lesbians and gay men experiencing difficulties concerning their homosexuality to 'come out' in confidence. Switchboard and Friend often worked closely together and it was partly out of the need to provide these groups with suitable joint premises that the idea behind a gay community centre first came about.

The lease on the Bordesley Street premises expired in September 1979. For the next four and a half years the Centre was without permanent headquarters. From 1981 to 1984 the Centre operated out of offices provided by the Nightingale Club at its Thorpe Street premises. During this period membership numbers and attendance of the Centre's two monthly discos declined significantly.<sup>87</sup>

### **Birmingham Lesbian and Gay Community Centre**

In 1984 the lease was purchased on a former clothing factory on Corporation Street, near Aston University, and the all new Birmingham Lesbian and Gay Community Centre (LGCC) opened (officially) one year later.<sup>88</sup> Almost immediately after the purchase of the Corporation Street building, membership of the Centre began to rise. By May 1984 membership of the Centre had risen to one hundred and fifty-one, which represented a 'very encouraging' forty per cent increase on the previous year and total income from membership subscriptions for the year 1983/4 equalled £1598.20 compared with £1336.5 for the previous year.<sup>89</sup> However, this renewed interest in the Centre proved only a temporary phenomenon.

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<sup>86</sup> *Gladrag*, Summer 1977 issue, GBR project archive.

<sup>87</sup> Birmingham Lesbian and Gay Community Centre Annual Report, April 1982-March 1983, HCA, LSE, HCA/EPHEMERA/41.

<sup>88</sup> The Centre had changed its name in June 1984 in recognition of the role played by lesbians in the Gay Liberation movement and the relative poor visibility of lesbians within the gay community in Britain. It also followed the announcement by the Greater London Council of plans for the creation of London Lesbian and Gay Community Centre that same year.

<sup>89</sup> Birmingham Lesbian and Gay Community Centre Annual Report, April 1983-March 1984, HCA, LSE, HCA/EPHEMERA/41.

The Corporation Street premises suffered from a number of serious deficiencies. The building was far from ideal, having been purchased out of 'desperation' at the sharp decline in membership of the Centre between 1979-84. Apart from the generally poor condition of the building, there was also the problem of the Centre's location. Situated just outside the city's Inner Ring Road access to the Centre was through subways that were often unsafe at night. This put off many prospective visitors and particularly discouraged the Centre's female members.<sup>90</sup> Moreover the Centre was generally considered to be too far from Birmingham's commercial gay scene, which had increased considerably in both size and popularity among gay men by the early 1980s. These factors combined to have a negative effect on footfall.

There is certainly no excuse for people who've been drumming for a new gay centre to be opened not to visit it now that it is open but they could well be excused for not going again. 291 Corporation Street has one major inherent disadvantage: its location...while it may be only ten minutes from the city centre it might as well be ten miles away and so for all intent and purposes in the middle of nowhere.<sup>91</sup>

By the 1980s Birmingham's gay scene had become centralised around the top of Hurst Street. Most of the bars that had been frequented by homosexuals in the 1960s and early 1970s had either been demolished or abandoned by their homosexual clientele and by the early 1980s there existed a brand new set of bars available to gay men.<sup>92</sup> The Windmill (Hurst Street) and The Jester (Holloway Circus) had both become popular among young gay men around the mid 1970s. Powerhouse club (Hurst Street) catered largely for the 1980s alternative crowd but ran a gay night once a week, and the Nightingale Club relocated to its Thorpe Street premises in 1981. There were a handful of gay venues outside the city centre, including the Jug on Albert Street and the Grosvenor House Hotel on Hagley Road, but Hurst Street was fast becoming the city's unofficial gay district. By the 1980s the commercial scene took on many of the social roles that had originally been catered for by the Bordesley Street centre. It should also be remembered that for the past four and a half years the Centre had been located at the heart of this rapidly developing gay scene. Moving the Centre away from Hurst Street would prove to be a fatal mistake.

The Centre's financial difficulties began almost from the moment the lease on the Corporation Street premises was agreed upon. From the outset the Centre's continued

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Extract of a letter written by Ken Jones to the editor of the Centre's newsletter, date unknown. Jones goes on to suggest that serious failings in the Centre's facilities, particularly the coffee bar, also contributed to poor visitor numbers at the Centre. Take from GBR project archive.

<sup>92</sup> In the 1980s Birmingham's gay scene remained predominantly male orientated.

existence was totally reliant upon a number of sizable grants from the West Midlands County Council (WMCC).<sup>93</sup> In May 1985, as one of its last acts as a County Council, WMCC pledged £23,500 to pay off the mortgage on the Corporation Street premises, which would, upon payment make the Centre financially self sufficient.<sup>94</sup> It was intended to be the legacy of the ill-fated County Council. However, WMCC was abolished at the end of March 1986 (along with five other metropolitan County Councils and the Greater London Council) *before* the grant to the Centre could be concluded. Consequently WMCC's assets were split between the West Midlands Residuary Body (a department of BCC) and the various West Midlands borough councils.

In April the Department of the Environment finalised the transitional grant expenditure allocations in connection with the funding of voluntary organisations previously grant aided by Metropolitan Counties. BCC's expenditure allocation was a mere £556,000 compared to an original bid, made in October, of £2,768,567 and a final bid, submitted in December, of £1,027,048.<sup>95</sup> Consequently a large number of applications by voluntary organisations provisionally approved for financial support had to be refused (for a list of organisations approved grants 'in principal' by BCC as of April 1986 see Appendix 2) and in October 1986 West Midlands Residuary Body withdrew the Centre's £23,500 grant.<sup>96</sup> As a result the Corporation Street building had to be put on the market and in March 1987 the Centre ceased to operate out of the Corporation Street premises. Birmingham LGCC was formally wound up the following year due to mounting debts a widespread lack of support for the Centre's weekly social evening, 'Pinkies', which had continued to run for several months after the Centre's closure. One former Centre member stated: 'We have been beaten by the combination of a council that won't fund lesbian and gay projects and apathy of the local gay community – it's a sad day for Birmingham.'<sup>97</sup> It is worth noting that BCC provided zero funding to any lesbian or gay group or organisation during the 1970s and 1980s. It has been alleged that in 1986 Sir Richard Knowles, leader of BCC's controlling Labour group stated, 'no gay organisation would get any funding except over his dead body!'<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> As early as July 1982 a £5,000 grant was needed in order to help facilitate the purchase of the Corporation Street premises. The grant was largely down to the efforts of Labour County Councillors Terry Donovan and Carole Yapp. In April 1984 the Centre received £1000 from the City Planning Department's Community Scheme for renovations to the building and in March 1985, with the Centre facing the very real possibility of closure due to mounting debts, a further grant of £5000 was secured from WMCC to help with the Centre's mortgage repayments and unpaid rates.

<sup>94</sup> *Birmingham Evening Mail*, 25 July 1985.

<sup>95</sup> Report of the City Treasurer to BCC Finance and Management Committee, 21 April 1986, BCA, Box Ref., Finance and Management Committee 1985-6.

<sup>96</sup> In July 1987 the gay newspaper *In the Pink* alleged that Cllr. Richard Knowles had personally halted the rescue grant to the Centre.

<sup>97</sup> *In the Pink*, Vol. 2, No. 6, May 1988, HCA, LSE, HCA/EPHEMERA/946.

<sup>98</sup> Lyn David Thomas, interviewed 2007 for GBR project.

It is worth at this point briefly comparing BCC with its Manchester counterpart. While BCC was withdrawing the rescue grant to Birmingham LGCC provided by WMCC, Manchester City Council sought to promote the welfare of their city's lesbian and gay population by funding the establishment of Manchester Gay and Lesbian Centre. The motivation behind BCC's decision not to provide funding to Birmingham LGCC might be explained by the presence of a significant number of vocal Tory council members, as well as pressure on Labour controlled councils from central government to cut spending on leftist issues. Funding of a lesbian and gay Centre would certainly have fallen within this description. There had been an outcry when BCC Finance and Management Committee voted to grant Birmingham LGCC twenty-five per cent rate relief in December 1985.<sup>99</sup> Several prominent Conservative Councillors had publicly expressed strong opposition to the decision. Cllr. Blumenthal told *Birmingham Evening Mail*: 'It is quite clear this community's activities are sexual in nature. If you support it, you are supporting an organisation because of their sexual activities. There is a great deal of need for support in other directions without handing out rate relief to a lot like this.'<sup>100</sup> If this was the level of opposition met by the City Council when granting twenty-five per cent rate relief then it is little wonder that they chose to withdraw a grant of £23,500 of public money. The attitude of BCC towards lesbians and gay men will be explored in further detail in the next chapter.

## Conclusion

The arrival of Gay Liberation in the UK in the 1970s brought with it a new 'gay' identity and self-confidence imported from the US as well as a belief in the power of radical politics and its ability to overthrow the existing world order. Gay Liberation saw the first attempts by gay people to create a gay community based on the equality of all people. Birmingham had a particularly prominent GLF group that was politically active from 1972 until membership of the group began to decline around the middle of the decade. The group organised a full programme of events for its members during its five-year history and by the end, GLF discos were being listed in the council's *What's On* guide. Birmingham GLF succeeded in providing an alternative to the city's commercial gay scene and laid the foundations of the establishment of a gay community in the city. In 1976 this endeavour was given a massive boost by the foundation of Birmingham Gay Community Centre. It was the first of its kind in the UK and is something of which the city's gay community should remain particularly proud. For over a decade, the Centre, in its various guises, provided a physical location around which

<sup>99</sup> Minutes of BCC Finance and Management Committee meeting, 16 December 1985, BCA, Box Ref., Finance and Management Committee 1985-6.

<sup>100</sup> *Birmingham Evening Mail*, 19 November 1985.

Birmingham's embryonic gay community could develop, before eventually closing its doors in March 1987 largely because of an apparent lack of support on the part of the very gay community that it had done so much to help create.

## Chapter Three: Birmingham City Council

*I have always described Birmingham as being conservative, small 'c' and homophobic, small 'h', I think things have moved on, where we are now it's probably unfair to call Birmingham homophobic, small 'h', it's that kind of city. – Former Birmingham City Councillor Steve Bedser*

### Introduction

This chapter examines the development of Birmingham City Council's (BCC) equal opportunities policy in the mid 1980s in an effort to establish what, if any, provision was in place to protect lesbians and gay men from discrimination on grounds of their sexual orientation during this period. Between 1984 and 2004 BCC was controlled by a Labour administration, but throughout the 1980s the council also contained a significant number of Tory council members, quick to condemn any policies that could be construed as 'looney'. As a result it appears that the council's Labour group, fearful of losing their majority control of the council, adopted a distinctly conservative mentality in relation to gay rights issues. In stark contrast to this West Midlands County Council (WMCC) was one of the most progressive councils in the country and an aggressive promoter of lesbian and gay rights until its abolition in 1986. In 1984 WMCC was one of the first councils in the country to adopt an equal opportunities policy which specifically included the term 'sexual orientation'. In March 1986 the County Council held a conference on lesbian and gay employment rights which recommended a number of measures designed to improve the legal status of gay people within the various West Midlands regional authorities. The conference directly led to the formation of BCC's first official equal opportunities policy which, when adopted in 1987, did include the term 'sexuality'. This chapter will establish how this came about and what it meant for lesbians and gay men living and working in Birmingham.

### Background

The 1970s saw the introduction of several pieces of equal opportunities legislation in the UK. The Equal Pay Act 1970 guaranteed employee rights to equal pay and benefits irrespective of gender. The Sex Discrimination Act 1975 prohibited discrimination on the grounds of gender in employment, education and the provision of goods and services. The Race Relations Act 1976 also made it unlawful to discriminate against individuals on grounds of race, colour, nationality or ethnic (or national) origin in reference to training, housing, education and the provision of goods, facilities and services. However, no such national legislation was

introduced to protect individuals from discrimination at work on the grounds of sexual orientation. So it was that in 1972 BCC's Head of Personnel allegedly told Birmingham Gay Liberation Front that 'we are sure we do not employ any homosexuals and we would not knowingly do so.'<sup>101</sup> It would not be until the introduction of Employment Equality (Sexual Orientation) Regulations in 2003 that it became unlawful to discriminate against lesbians, bisexuals and gay men in the workplace.

Until the 1980s BCC had no formal policy or set of guidelines to deal with equal opportunities issues among its workforce. However during the early 1980s trade unions mounted increasing pressure upon local authorities to adopt official equal opportunities policies as well as procedures for the protection of lesbians and gay men from discrimination. The National and Local Government Officers' Association (NALGO) spearheaded this campaign. In July 1982 the Birmingham branch of NALGO petitioned the then Conservative controlled BCC to introduce a comprehensive equal opportunities in employment policy that would include, among other things, a statement of intent by the council not to discriminate against lesbians and gay men on grounds of their sexual orientation.<sup>102</sup> However, Birmingham Councillors twice turned down the union's request. Cllr. George Chaplain (Con. Perry Barr), a member of BCC Personnel Committee, reportedly stated: 'I don't think we will be changing our attitude on this. Our view is that we do not discriminate against anyone, and since that is the situation there is no point in putting it in writing.'<sup>103</sup>

Despite this, in 1984 BCC did adopt a formal statement regarding its equal opportunities in employment policy, which read:

[Birmingham] City Council policy is that it will assess applicants for appointment and promotion on the basis of their suitability for the job without regard to sex, marital status, race, religion or colour. The council welcomes applicants from disabled and handicapped people and is concerned to ensure that those who become handicapped during employment are assisted in remaining in their job or guided to alternative work.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Graham Allen, interviewed 2007 for GBR project. Unfortunately the letter in question does not appear to have survived so this claim cannot be verified. A copy of the letter could not be found among the records of the Birmingham GLF held at Birmingham Central Library or among the material in the GBR project archive.

<sup>102</sup> *Birmingham Post*, 26 July 1982.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>104</sup> Report of BCC Race Relations and Equal Opportunities Committee, 30 May 1986, BCA, Box Ref., Race Relations and Equal Opportunities Committee 30 May 1986-20 February 1987.



This policy statement was later developed into a much more detailed document entitled, *Recruitment and Selection: Notes of Guidance for Managers and Supervisors*,<sup>105</sup> which was implemented across all council departments in August 1984. These guidelines on recruitment and selection represent an early form of equal opportunities policy and were certainly a vast improvement upon the City Council's previous only verbal commitment to non-discrimination. However the document was by no means comprehensive and contained no pledge to protect employees from discrimination on grounds of their sexual orientation.

### **Rugby and Sandwell Borough Councils**

Furthermore in September 1984, in an overtly homophobic act, the Conservative controlled Rugby Borough Council voted to remove the term 'sexual orientation' from its newly drafted Equal Opportunities Policy.<sup>106</sup> The removal of the term left gay people open to instant dismissal from their posts within the council if their sexuality was discovered.<sup>107</sup> The announcement of the council's decision was quickly followed by an editorial in *The Sun* newspaper congratulating Rugby Council on its bold move, dismissing the national gay rights movement as 'sick nonsense'.<sup>108</sup> The article urged: 'lets ALL follow Rugby in fighting back'.<sup>109</sup> One month later Sandwell Borough Council announced its own plans to insert a clause into its equal opportunities policy that would allow it to actively discriminate against gay people applying for 'caring posts' including teaching and social services childcare departments.<sup>110</sup>

The announcements provoked widespread condemnation from both NALGO and local lesbian and gay groups.<sup>111</sup> On 10 November one thousand gay activists and trade union members took to the streets of Rugby in protest over the council's perceived anti-gay resolution.<sup>112</sup> The

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<sup>105</sup> *Recruitment and Selection: Notes of Guidance for Managers and Supervisors*, from report of BCC Race Relations and Equal Opportunities Committee, 30 May 1986, BCA, Box Ref., Race Relations and Equal Opportunities Committee 30 May 1986-20 February 1987.

<sup>106</sup> *Solihull Evening Mail*, 26 September 1984.

<sup>107</sup> Cllr. Jeff Coupe, a leading member of the Council's Labour group stated: "It proves what I have suspected for some time – that Rugby Borough Council is not interested in equal opportunities at all." See *Solihull Evening Mail*, 26 September 1984.

<sup>108</sup> *The Sun*, 28 September 1984.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>110</sup> *Birmingham Evening Mail*, 14 November 1984.

<sup>111</sup> NALGO responded by urging its members to boycott their jobs in a bid to reverse Rugby Council's decision while Birmingham LGCC described the Council's ban as a clear 'breach of civil liberties, reminiscent of Nazi Germany in the 1930s' and warned its members that 'if this is left unchallenged, it will spread to other local authorities; teachers, social workers, architects, cleaners, planners, drivers, caretakers, gardeners, clerks, administrators, pool attendants, and many more workers are affected by this.' See *Birmingham Lesbian and Gay Community Centre Newsletter*, November 1984, GBR project archive.

<sup>112</sup> *Kidderminster Evening Mail*, 10 November 1984.

demonstration resulted in eighteen arrests after protestors broke through police lines and marched on Rugby town centre ‘bringing traffic to a standstill’.<sup>113</sup> Despite these protests, three days later Rugby Council voted to reaffirm their decision not to include the term ‘sexual orientation’ in their equal opportunities in employment policy, although Sandwell Council voted to refer the matter of the clause back to the Council’s Personnel Sub-Committee for further discussion. It does not appear that the clause ever made it beyond the committee stage.<sup>114</sup>

### **West Midlands County Council**

Until its abolition on 31 March 1986, WMCC was the most vocal supporter of lesbian and gay rights issues in the region. The County Council was one of the Labour party’s strongest socialist councils together with Ken Livingstone’s Greater London Council (GLC) and Greater Manchester Council. Ken Young has suggested that the metropolitan councils functioned as launch pads from which Labour waged a ‘guerrilla war’ against Thatcher’s Conservative Government during the 1980s.<sup>115</sup> It was this conflict with central government (particularly in the case of the GLC) that eventually led many of them to be abolished in 1986. WMCC adopted its first formal equal opportunities in employment policy in 1981 and revised it towards the end of 1984 to include homosexuals. This revised policy statement, published in January 1985, read: ‘The aim of our policy is to ensure that no job applicant or employee receives unfavourable treatment on the grounds of racial origin, nationality, disablement, religion, trade union or political beliefs or activity, age, marital status, dependents, gender, sexual orientation or is disadvantaged by conditions or requirements which cannot be shown to be justified.’<sup>116</sup>

In October 1985 the GLC published a charter for gay and lesbian rights entitled *Changing the World*. It challenged society’s inherent ‘heterosexism’ (the assumption that only heterosexual behaviour is normal and natural and that homosexual behaviour is therefore abnormal and unnatural), which it believed to be the rationale behind the continued oppression of the UK

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<sup>113</sup> *Birmingham Evening Mail*, 12 November 1984.

<sup>114</sup> *Birmingham Lesbian and Gay Community Centre Newsletter*, November 1984, GBR project archive.

<sup>115</sup> K. Young, ‘Local Government’, in D. Kavanagh and A. Seldon (eds), *The Thatcher Effect: A decade of change* (London, 1989), p.130.

<sup>116</sup> From *West Midlands County Council Revised Code of Practice For the Recruitment and Selection of Employees Having Regard to the Equal Opportunities Policy January 1985*, from report of BCC Race Relations and Equal Opportunities Committee, 30 May 1986, BCA, Box Ref., Race Relations and Equal Opportunities Committee 30 May 1986-20 February 1987.

gay community.<sup>117</sup> The charter suggested one hundred and forty-two recommendations as to how discrimination against lesbians and gay men could be identified and eliminated. One of these recommendations stated that ‘lesbian and gay students should see reflected in the curriculum the richness and diversity of homosexual experience and not just negative images.’<sup>118</sup> This would later be one of the main motivations behind the introduction of the infamous Section 28 legislation.

On 8 March 1986 (just three weeks before WMCC’s scheduled abolition) the County Council held a conference on ‘Lesbian and Gay Aspects of Equal Opportunities’. This conference was attended by forty representatives of West Midlands lesbian and gay organisations,<sup>119</sup> eight County Councillors, two Birmingham City Councillors and a representative of Birmingham City Personnel Department. The purpose of the conference was to consider ‘the role of the West Midlands County Council and the GLC charter for lesbians and gays *Changing the World* as a base for promoting equal opportunities issues within the seven district councils of the West Midlands County area and within the various joint boards set up to run services after the abolition of the County.’<sup>120</sup> The conference recorded several promising resolutions including, the allocation of £2,500 by WMCC for the creation of a lesbian and gay rights network, the allocation of funding by BCC for the post of development worker at the Birmingham LGCC and the inclusion of references to lesbians, gay men and bisexuals in the equal opportunities policies of the seven district councils, as well as a revision of their conditions of service and codes of practice for recruitment, promotion and grievance procedures, to take account of an equal opportunities policy for lesbians and gay men.<sup>121</sup> However, there is absolutely no evidence that any of the resolutions decided at the March conference were ever put into effect. Following the abolition of WMCC at the end of the month there was no official body in place to ensure that the recommendations were followed through and as a result it appears that few (if any) of the resolutions were ever actually implemented by any of the local authorities.

The March conference represented a real attempt by the County Council to address some of the issues highlighted by the GLC charter and secure the implementation of at least some of its recommendations by the city and local district councils before its abolition at the end of that month. It is likely that the council wanted to leave one final socialist mark on the region

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<sup>117</sup> S. Jeffery-Poulter, *Peers, Queers and Commons: the struggle for gay law reform from 1950 to the present* (London, 1991), p.205.

<sup>118</sup> J. Weeks, *Coming Out*, p.239.

<sup>119</sup> The document does not name which lesbian and gay organisations attended the conference.

<sup>120</sup> Notes of conference ‘Lesbian and Gay Aspects of Equal Opportunities’, 8 March 1986, LSE, HCA/EPHEMERA/739.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*

by helping initiate policies protecting disenfranchised minority groups from discrimination in employment. It should be remembered that it was also around this same time that WMCC had issued a £23,500 grant to Birmingham Lesbian and Gay Community Centre. It is unfortunate that neither resolution would ever come to pass. The abolition of the County Council silenced forever the main promoter of gay rights within the region.

### **Birmingham City Council**

The March conference succeeded in prompting the City Council to reevaluate its existing equal opportunities provision. In May, a BCC report concluded that ‘there is no City document on equal opportunities in employment which is directly comparable to the WMCC’s Code of Practice,’<sup>122</sup> and less than a month later the City Personnel Officer was instructed to draw up a draft equal opportunities in employment policy and code of practice. A member of BCC Race Relations and Equal Opportunities Committee, Cllr. Foster, called for lesbian and gay men’s issues to be included within the new Code of Practice and suggested the adoption of a policy similar to that of the now defunct WMCC.<sup>123</sup> However, by the time draft documents were circulated four months later, it seems that Cllr. Foster’s recommendation had been sidelined. The draft equal opportunities policy statement (November 1986) read:

Birmingham City Council will ensure that all existing and potential employees receive equal consideration, and is committed to the elimination of unlawful and unfair discrimination on the grounds of sex, race, disability, ethnic and national origin, nationality, marital status, responsibility for dependents, religion and age (up to 65).<sup>124</sup>

Around the same time BCC also introduced several other pieces of equal opportunities provision, none of which included references to lesbians or gay men. In December, BCC requested statements outlining the implication of all department policies for women, black people and ethnic minorities and disabled people be included in all reports to council committees.<sup>125</sup> The council also instructed all departments to employ on average no less than twenty per cent of all new recruits from the ethnic minority communities, and a new detailed

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<sup>122</sup> Report of BCC Race Relations and Equal Opportunities Committee, 30 May 1986, BCA, Box Ref., Race Relations and Equal Opportunities Committee 30 May 1986-20 February 1987.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Report of the City Personnel Officer to BCC Women’s Committee, 21 November 1986, BCA, Box Ref., Women’s Committee 1986-7.

<sup>125</sup> Minutes of BCC Finance and Management Committee, 20 March 1989, BCA, Box Ref., Finance and Management Committee December 1988-March 1989.

recruitment and selection information recording procedure was introduced.<sup>126</sup> However, this new recruitment policy did not stretch to the gay community.

During subsequent consultations with the Women's Committee, the Race Relations and Equal Opportunities Committee and the Forum on Equal Opportunities discrimination of lesbians and gay men was once again raised. BCC Women's Committee were some of the strongest supporters of lesbian and gay rights within the council. The Women's Committee had a prominent socialist core and had been committed to promoting equality issues since its establishment in 1984.<sup>127</sup> In November 1986 a report by the head of the Women's Unit had recommended, among other things, ending discrimination of lesbians in terms of recruitment practices, promotion, training and job opportunities and including lesbians within equal opportunities policies as one method of reducing incidents of violence directed towards lesbians.<sup>128</sup> This, as well as other recommendations contained within this report is almost certain to have influenced the final wording of the equal opportunities policy.

Teachers were particularly concerned about the absence of lesbians and gay men in the council's equal opportunities policy.<sup>129</sup> In December a representative of the Teacher's Joint Consultative Committee (J.C.C) submitted to the Forum on Equal Opportunities that the group were disappointed that the policy made no mention of discrimination on the grounds of sexuality. She had recommended that this be included in the final document and apparently this view had been 'generally strongly supported' among committee members.<sup>130</sup> That teachers were keen to secure legal protection from discrimination on grounds of their 'sexuality' in 1987 may be seen as a consequence of the introduction of Section 28, an early form of which was being debated in the Commons around this time.

As a result of this consultation process the equal opportunities policy adopted by the BCC in March 1987 included the following terms: 'gender' replaced 'sex'; and 'colour', 'sexuality'

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<sup>126</sup> Report of the City Personnel Officer to BCC Personnel Committee, 14 April 1987, BCA, Box Ref., Personnel Committee 1976-87.

<sup>127</sup> BCC Women's Committee had been established in May 1984 in order to 'promote the welfare and interests of women and women's rights' and 'to work for the elimination of discrimination against women in legislation, policies and practices', among other aims. At its conception, similar women's committees existed on nine Labour controlled London Borough Councils, Newcastle-Upon-Tyne City Council and WMCC. From *Local Government Policy Making, November 1983*, from inaugural meeting of BCC Women's Committee, 25 May 1984, BCA, Box Ref., Women's Committee May 1984-April 1986.

<sup>128</sup> Report of Head of Women's Unit to BCC Women's Committee, 21 November 1986, BCA, Box Ref., Women's Committee 1986-7.

<sup>129</sup> Minutes of the Forum on Equal Opportunities, from meeting of BCC Personnel Committee, 20 January 1987, BCA, Box Ref., Personnel Committee 1976-87.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

and ‘trade union activity’ were all added to the policy statement.<sup>131</sup> The finalised Code of Practice also warned that ‘interviewees [presumably a typing error which should instead read ‘interviewers’] must avoid preconceptions and assumptions about individuals because of their gender, ethnic origin, disability, sexuality or age, or presume characteristics which would suggest unsuitability for employment.’<sup>132</sup> However, what ought to have been a significant step forward for equal opportunities provision for gay people within the city was severely limited by the council’s abject refusal to include the term ‘sexual orientation’ (as opposed to ‘sexuality’) or include specific references to discrimination against lesbians and gay men in the city’s Code of Practice. This would not occur in Birmingham for over a decade.

The reluctance of BCC to include specific references to lesbians and gay men may well be explained as part of a wider move within the Labour party as a whole to distance themselves from the gay rights agenda in the context of the 1987 general election. As a result of the activities of the GLC and several other radical Labour controlled councils in the mid 1980s the Labour Party had gained a reputation as a supporter of gay rights. This reputation was exacerbated by the tabloid press who were, according to Weeks, ‘ever ready to mingle a bit of gay-baiting with attacks on the ‘loonie left’ [sic]’.<sup>133</sup> In the run up to the election, the Conservative Party eagerly exploited Labour’s ‘looney left’ image. At the October 1987 Conservative Party Conference Thatcher specifically criticised the pro-gay policies of local authorities stating that ‘children who need to be taught to respect traditional moral values are being taught that they have the inalienable right to be gay.’<sup>134</sup> The Greenwich by-election had been lost in February 1987 due in no small part to the Labour candidate, Deirdre Wood’s, pro-gay stance.<sup>135</sup> It is in this context then that BCC introduced its equal opportunities policy and it is hardly surprising that the council sought to limit provision for gay people to a couple of references to the term ‘sexuality’. It should also be remembered that it was at this time that BCC withdrew a rescue grant to Birmingham Lesbian and Gay Community Centre, which ultimately resulted in the Centre’s closure. The Women’s Committee was also abolished following the adoption of the equal opportunities policy in an apparent bid to reduce the council’s ‘looney’ image.<sup>136</sup> The impact of the policy, for gay people at least, was therefore negligible.

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<sup>131</sup> BCC Equal Opportunities in Employment Policy, from meeting of BCC Finance and Management Committee, 9 March 1987, BCA, Box Ref., Finance and Management Committee November 1986-April 1987.

<sup>132</sup> BCC Equal Opportunities in Employment Code of Practice, from meeting of BCC Finance and Management Committee, 9 March 1987, BCA, Box Ref., Finance and Management Committee November 1986-April 1987.

<sup>133</sup> J. Weeks, *Coming Out*, p. 239.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> Steve Bedser, interviewed 2007 for GBR project.

## Conclusion

The introduction of BBC's Equal Opportunities in Employment Policy by in 1987 should be viewed as part of a nationwide union led campaign to encourage the adoption of equal opportunities policies by local authorities in the 1980s. As Birmingham was already home to a significant immigrant population at this time it is unsurprising that the equal opportunities policy introduced in 1987 was primarily geared towards the prevention of discrimination of ethnic minority groups. It was likely part of a wider effort to promote Birmingham as a multicultural and diverse city during the 1980s. The introduction of the council's twenty per cent ethnic minorities recruitment target in December 1986 would certainly appear to support this view. The adoption of BCC's equal opportunities policy was also influenced in no small part by the radical leftist WMCC. The County Council's March 1986 conference on lesbian and gay employment rights was directly responsible for the formation of BCC's draft equal opportunities policy and code of practice later that year. However, that these initial policy documents contained no mention of lesbians and gay men is testament to the conservative nature of the City Council at this time. It is apparent that the council's Labour group, fearful of attracting the label 'looney', deliberately downplayed any reference to lesbians and gay men. Had it not been for the intervention of the Women's Committee and the Teacher's J.C.C towards the end of 1986 it is probable that the final equal opportunities policy would have excluded gay people entirely. Although this final policy, provisionally adopted in March 1987, did include the term 'sexuality' it contained no specific references to the prevention of discrimination of lesbians or gay men. The reluctance of BCC to associate themselves with lesbian and gay rights is representative of the national Labour Party at this time. The Party's association with the gay rights agenda was largely responsible for Labour's third consecutive election defeat in June 1987. There is no evidence to suggest that the legal status of lesbians and gay men in Birmingham improved at all as a result of the introduction of BCC's new equal opportunities policy. In fact, with the impending introduction of Section 28 the legal status of gay people in the UK was about to take a universal turn for the worse.

## Chapter Four: The Impact of AIDS and Section 28

*We're out, we're gay, but we ain't going shopping!* – Gay activist slogan

### Introduction

This chapter examines the social and political effect of AIDS and Section 28 on the UK gay community in the 1980s. The arrival of AIDS in the mid 1980s shook the highly sexualised and hedonistic gay community to its very core. By the end of the decade there were two thousand seven hundred and seventy-nine reported cases of AIDS in Britain and a further thirty to fifty thousand cases of HIV infection.<sup>137</sup> Most of these were young gay men. Thatcher's Conservative Government was initially slow to react to the arrival of the epidemic in Britain and as a consequence much of the initial response to AIDS came from within the gay community itself. Small has argued that the implementation of the government's AIDS policy only served to instigate a moral panic surrounding homosexuality, whereby gay men were relentlessly portrayed as predatory 'others' who threatened the moral fabric of society. It was in this context that Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988 was introduced which prohibited the 'promotion' of homosexuality by local authorities. Section 28 produced an unprecedented reaction from the gay community. The anti-Section 28 marches that preceded the passing into law of the Act were the largest gay rallies this country had ever seen. This chapter will also seek to establish how collective acts of resistance to the challenges of AIDS and Section 28 facilitated the development of a sense of community among the lesbian and gay inhabitants of Birmingham.

### HIV/AIDS

The first deaths in this country as a direct result of AIDS were reported in 1982.<sup>138</sup> Initially most cases of infection were confined to the Greater London area, however it did not take long for the disease to spread to the rest of the country. In November 1984 the first confirmed cases of AIDS were reported in Birmingham. Doctors concluded that there was very little point in tracing the patient's former sexual contacts, as this was unlikely to halt the spread of the disease: 'You have to be realistic in life. You can't alter people's habits. Homosexuals are homosexuals and that's all there is to it.' He concluded, 'AIDS is not like ordinary VD which you can treat. You can't make them better, you only frighten them to death, and so you may

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<sup>137</sup> J. Weeks, *Coming Out*, p.244.

<sup>138</sup> Terrance Higgins Trust, the UK's leading AIDS charity, was established in 1982 in memory of Terry Higgins, believed to have been first gay man to die as a result of AIDS in this country.



just as well leave them to present themselves if they actually end up having AIDS. They are alarmed enough, and informed enough. I can assure you the homosexual population knows more about AIDS than you or I.’<sup>139</sup> Although such a reaction by the medical profession appears alarming now, at the time it was characteristic of the wider government response to the spread of the disease.

Not surprisingly, because AIDS appeared initially to only affect members of what was a ‘deviant’ sexual minority, the Thatcherite Government was slow to react to the impending health crisis. Thatcher herself reportedly vetoed an early advertising campaign around AIDS, commenting, ‘it’s like writing on a lavatory wall.’<sup>140</sup> In the absence of an official government response to AIDS early preventative initiatives and support groups had to come from within the gay community itself. In Birmingham, a conference on AIDS was organised by Friend West Midlands and held at the Nightingale Club on 9 December 1984. Around seventy people including several doctors, members of local gay counselling groups and many concerned gay men attended the event. Speakers that included Dr. Thomas McManus of Birmingham’s Saint Mary’s Hospital and Tony Whitehead of the Terrance Higgins Trust gave talks and addressed audience concerns. The meeting led to the establishment of the city’s first AIDS counselling group, AIDSline West Midlands.<sup>141</sup> Like most community organisations AIDSline West Midlands relied on volunteers, by and large gay men themselves, to offer support to other gay men who had become isolated from the rest of the gay community as a result of the stigma surrounding the disease.

Towards the end of 1986 the government launched its infamous £12.5million ‘Don’t Die of Ignorance’ television and newspaper campaign designed to increase the public’s level of knowledge concerning AIDS. In the New Year, Birmingham City Council’s Environmental Health Committee established an AIDS Liaison Group to co-ordinate the council’s action on AIDS in the city. Birmingham AIDS Lifeline was subsequently set up to coincide with the start of the distribution of a government produced AIDS pamphlet.<sup>142</sup> Birmingham AIDS Lifeline was a joint venture between Birmingham City Council and the five Birmingham District Health Authorities. AIDS Lifeline was a telephone advice line staffed by volunteers drawn from the Health Authorities and designed to supplement the pre-existing advice/counselling services already operated by gay organisations in the city, namely, Birmingham Gay Switchboard, Friend West Midlands, and AIDSline West Midlands. In its

<sup>139</sup> *Birmingham Evening Mail*, 20 November 1984.

<sup>140</sup> J. Weeks, *Coming Out*, p.245.

<sup>141</sup> *Voice* magazine, Issue 26, January 1985.

<sup>142</sup> Report of the Director of Environmental Services and the Medical Officer for Environmental Health to BCC Environmental Health Committee, 6 February 1987, BCA, Box Ref., Personnel Committee 1967-87.

first few weeks the telephone service received, on average, one hundred and fifty enquiries per day, which gives an indication of the level of confusion surrounding the disease.<sup>143</sup> In January, twenty-three million pamphlets were delivered to every household in the UK. Two months later the Secretary of State, Norman Fowler, announced that the next stage of the campaign would target specifically homosexuals and drug addicts.<sup>144</sup>

Small has argued that the Thatcherite response to AIDS had all the characteristics of a moral panic. He noted that the social policy responses were more in accord with models of crime and disorder than with illness and treatment and designed to isolate and contain, rather than treat the disease. At the heart of the government's AIDS policy was a 'determining construct of dangerousness'.<sup>145</sup> Gay people were constantly depicted as dangerous 'others', representing a 'deviant' group outside of 'normal' (heterosexual) society. He suggested that: 'Homophobia was manifest in the original construction, by the media and by the government, of AIDS as essentially a problem for the gay community...the predominant construct was of gay problem/gays as a problem.'<sup>146</sup> The result of which was 'witch hunting and soapbox moralising'.<sup>147</sup> In some notable instances this 'soap box moralising' turned into very public outbursts of homophobia.

### **The Wombourne Twelve**

In December 1986, the Conservative leader of South Staffordshire Council, Cllr. William Brownhill, called for 90 per cent of lesbians and gay men to be sent to the gas chamber or shot to halt the spread of AIDS in the UK. The outburst came after members of the council's Health Committee were shown a government film about AIDS prevention. Cllr. Brownhill reportedly said afterwards:

I should shoot them all...Those bunch of queers that legalise filth in homosexuality have a lot to answer for and I hope they are proud of what they have done. The film said how to try to avoid AIDS but did not specifically say stop being queer. It is disgusting and diabolical. As a cure I would put 90 percent of queers in the ruddy gas chamber. Are we going to keep letting these queers trade their filth up and down the country...?<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> N. Small, 'AIDS and social policy', p.25.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., p.14.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., p.12.

<sup>147</sup> R. McKie, cited in N. Small, 'AIDS and social policy', p.12.

<sup>148</sup> From *Wolverhampton Express and Star*, 17 December 1986.

Surprisingly the leader of the council's Labour group, Cllr. Jack Greenway, publicly supported what had been said.<sup>149</sup> The National and Local Government Officers Association (NALGO) expressed a deep concern over people in responsible positions whipping up 'anti-homosexual hysteria' and demanded a meeting with both men,<sup>150</sup> while the secretary of the Campaign for Homosexual Equality (CHE), Jim Edgell, remarked that 'this kind of comment just defies analysis. It is a common misconception that homosexuals invented AIDS.'<sup>151</sup>

On 21 December, several members of the National Lesbian and Gay Youth Movement demonstrated outside Cllr. Brownhill's home near Wolverhampton. Although predominantly peaceful the protest resulted in twelve arrests. The Wombourne Twelve (as they became known) were charged with abusive and threatening behaviour, while one lesbian, who had in fact herself been assaulted, was charged with assaulting two police officers.<sup>152</sup> The group were remanded in custody for seven days while the police confirmed their identities. As a result all twelve spent Christmas behind bars. It was widely felt that the police had held them in custody over Christmas 'to teach them a lesson'.<sup>153</sup>

Several members of the group spoke at a meeting in Birmingham ahead of their scheduled court appearance in February. A young gay man named Des vocalised the anger felt by many gay people in the region: 'You can't just let people get away with those kind of statements. Our very existence is under threat! The panic around AIDS has created a climate where gays and lesbians face nothing short of a lynch mob. We've got to do something or we'll be back in Nazi Germany.'<sup>154</sup> A female member called Jasper added: 'As lesbians, we went on the protest because we are victims by association. At the moment, lesbians are very unlikely to get AIDS, but the attacks upon us have increased all the same. I've been beaten up three times in the past few months. Both lesbians and gays are becoming the scapegoats of society. We have to fight alongside our gay brothers to resist this attack.'<sup>155</sup>

A demonstration was organised for the day of the hearing. On 23 February over three hundred lesbians and gay men assembled outside Wombourne Magistrates Court in a show of solidarity with the group.<sup>156</sup> Demonstrators came from all over the UK with contingents from Nottingham and London joining representatives from Birmingham, Coventry, Leicester and

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<sup>149</sup> *Wolverhampton Express and Star*, 17 December 1986

<sup>150</sup> *In the Pink*, Issue 3, January 1987, GBR project archive.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>152</sup> *In the Pink*, Issue 3, January 1987, GBR project archive.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.* Wombourne police had a reputation as being backward. The previous year they had brought a man to trial in Wolverhampton who was HIV positive wearing space suits for protection.

<sup>154</sup> *In the Pink*, Issue 4, February 1987, GBR project archive.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>156</sup> *In the Pink*, Issue 5, March 1987, GBR project archive.

Wolverhampton. All charges were subsequently dropped and the planned demonstration outside the Court turned into a 'victory march' through the streets of Wombourne.<sup>157</sup> Some of the group successfully sued Staffordshire police and received compensation for wrongful arrest and false imprisonment. Cllr. Brownhill never received any disciplinary action over his comments.

Amidst of all the hysteria linking homosexuality to AIDS the UK gay community mobilised at an unprecedented level. In the late 1980s various local and national HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention initiatives and numerous AIDS counselling and support groups sprang up in most of the major cities in the UK. In Birmingham, in addition to the Lesbian and Gay Switchboard, Friend West Midlands and AIDSline West Midlands, Act-Up (1987), Body Positive (1987), Gay Men's Health Group (1987) and Birmingham Outreach Safer Sex Squad or BOSS (1987) were all founded. Act-Up and Body Positive were support and consciousness raising groups whilst Gay Men's Health Group and BOSS promoted safer sex practices and a greater awareness of sexual health issues amongst the city's gay community.

The effects of AIDS transformed the UK gay community in the 1980s and signalled an end to the seemingly limitless hedonism of the 1970s. Faced with the very real possibility of their own death or of losing loved ones as a consequence of the highly sexualised gay lifestyle, gay men looked inwards and to each other for sources of strength and support. Graham Allen recalls how AIDS affected him and his friends at the time:

The AIDS thing changed everything for people who lived through it, looking after friends who were dying, as that's what it meant then, if you got AIDS you were going to die. I had two close friends who were a couple...They became ill and Gerrard died although Geoff stayed well enough until the drugs came out. Gerrard was in a hospice up the road in Selly Park, we looked after him in his last weeks on a rota, we would go and be there so someone was always with him.<sup>158</sup>

Gay men (and lesbians) volunteered in their thousands to join HIV/AIDS groups after witnessing first hand the effects of the disease on their partners, friends, or friends of friends. Community responses to AIDS focused on developing support networks and community ties. Where the government response was one of isolation and stigmatisation, the response of the gay community was one of inclusion and compassion. Within these community groups gay people found the support and friendship needed to fight AIDS and bring about dramatic

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<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> Graham Allen, interviewed 2007 for GBR project.

changes within the gay community itself, pioneering new sex education techniques. The bonds that united the gay community in the face of AIDS would be tested and ultimately galvanised by the introduction of Section 28 in 1988.

## Section 28

28. Prohibition on promoting homosexuality by teaching or by publishing material.

(1) A local authority shall not –

- (a) intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality;
- (b) promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship.

(2) Nothing in subsection (1) above shall be taken to prohibit the doing of anything for the purpose of treating or preventing the spread of disease.

(3) In any proceedings in connection with the application of this section a court shall draw such inferences as to the intention of the local authority as may reasonably be drawn from the evidence before it.<sup>159</sup>

Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988 was enacted on 24 May. Lord Halsbury had proposed a similar piece of legislation prohibiting local authorities from providing ‘financial or other assistance to any person for the purpose of publishing or promoting homosexuality’ in 1986 in response to the publication of a number of sex education books featuring ‘positive images’ of lesbians and gay men.<sup>160</sup> The most famous of which were *Jenny Lives with Eric and Martin* and *Young, Gay and Proud*. A number of radical Labour controlled councils had introduced these books into their school’s sex education curricula and during the May 1986 local election the leader of Haringey Council was attacked for supporting ‘modest proposals’ for the promotion of positive images of lesbians and gay men in local schools.<sup>161</sup> This resulted in a number of protests from parent groups in Haringey that transformed the local conflict into a national issue. However, the legislation was overshadowed by the 1987 general election and the bill had not progressed beyond the Commons.

In the new parliamentary session, Conservative MP David Wilshire reintroduced a version of Lord Halsbury’s bill, with several notable additions, as an amendment to the Local

<sup>159</sup> Source: Office of Public Sector Information.

<sup>160</sup> A.M. Smith, *New Right Discourse on Race and Sexuality: Britain, 1968-1990* (London, 1994), p.187.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

Government Bill 1988. The bill was championed in the Commons by Birmingham MP Dame Jill Knight, then also Chairman of the Child and Family Protection Group. She claims:

I was contacted by parents who strongly objected to their children at school being encouraged into homosexuality and being taught that a normal family with mummy and daddy was outdated. To add insult to their injury, they were infuriated that it was their money, paid over as council tax, which was being used for this. This all happened after pressure from the Gay Liberation Front. At that time I took the trouble to refer to their manifesto, which clearly stated: ‘We fight for something more than reform. We must aim for the abolition of the family’.<sup>162</sup>

Section 28 therefore represented a deliberate attempt to promote the ‘true’ function of the family – to bring up children – and to make unlawful any activity that threatened to undermine this role. However, Smith has suggested that 1980s discourses on homosexuality were so thoroughly intertwined with discourses on AIDS that the appearance of the AIDS epidemic in Britain and the introduction of Section 28 must be seen as two sides of the same coin, not isolated phenomena.<sup>163</sup> Knight is reported to have stated, when promoting the clause in the Commons, that ‘some of which is being taught to children in our schools would undoubtedly lead to the spread of AIDS.’<sup>164</sup>

Together with the AIDS epidemic, Section 28 unified the gay community in Britain in a way that no previous single issue had been able. It has been compared to the Stonewall riots that brought together the gay community in America in 1969.<sup>165</sup> However, the legislation is actually more comparable to the Briggs Initiative that had proposed the removal of all openly gay teachers from Californian state schools in 1978. Critics of the clause particularly objected to the use of the term ‘pretended family relationship’, which implied that the homosexual lifestyle was inherently inferior to that of the heterosexual couple and was an unsuitable environment in which to raise children. The clause also prohibited local authorities from providing financial or other assistance to any group or organisation for the purpose of publishing or ‘promoting’ homosexuality. There was a very real fear at the time that ‘in one year’s time, there could be no gay pubs, no gay clubs and no gay press left in this country.’<sup>166</sup> For many lesbians and gay men Section 28 represented a fundamental challenge to their very existence that had to be fought.

<sup>162</sup> Lords Hansard, Column 1102, 6 December 1999 (191206-10). <<http://www.parliament.the-stationery-office.co.uk/pa/ld199900/ldhansrd/vo991206/text/91206-10.htm>>

<sup>163</sup> A.M. Smith, *New Right Discourse on Race and Sexuality*, p.196/7.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

<sup>165</sup> *Gay Times*, Issue 353, February 2008.

<sup>166</sup> Eric Presland, quoted in *Gay Times*, Issue 353, February 2008.

A national 'Stop the Clause' campaign was set up in late 1987 by the Organisation for Lesbian and Gay Action (OLGA) and a number of rallies organised to take place in London and Manchester while the clause was being debated in the Commons. The first demonstration was held in London on 9 January and was attended by twelve thousand people from all over the country.<sup>167</sup> The demonstration resulted in thirty-two arrests.<sup>168</sup> On 20 February twenty thousand protesters attended a rally in Manchester<sup>169</sup> and in April an estimated fifty thousand people marched again through London to protest against the clause.<sup>170</sup> The rallies were the largest gay rights demonstrations to take place outside of the U.S. Representatives from the West Midlands were present at each rally. The Manchester demonstration was attended by two coach loads of protestors from Coventry, two from Wolverhampton, four from Stoke and five from Birmingham.<sup>171</sup> Manchester City Council stood by Manchester's gay community in its fight against Section 28. It had provided office space for the 'Stop the Clause' group during the campaign and had supported the organisation of the February rally.<sup>172</sup>

In comparison, Birmingham City Council offered no such support to Birmingham's gay community. Despite the lack of council support, on 13 February 1988 Birmingham Stop the Clause group organised a small demonstration in the city centre. Although nowhere near the scale of the Manchester or London protests it was significant nonetheless as it was the first public demonstration by any lesbian and gay group in the city in many years. One hundred protesters leafleted shoppers and collected signatures for a petition protesting Clause 28. Organiser Steve Bedser told the local press: 'We are expecting supporters from all over the region and will be canvassing shoppers to try and explain the repressive nature of Clause 28.'<sup>173</sup> The rally concluded with a ceremonial burning of replica books by homosexual authors such as Wilde, Lawrence and Forster outside the city library to symbolise the 'effects of censorship'.<sup>174</sup> Three days later a public meeting was held at Birmingham's Josiah Mason Hall.<sup>175</sup> Six hundred people heard speakers from the National Union of Students, the Birmingham Rep theatre, Birmingham NALGO Lesbian and Gay Working Party and the Northwest Campaign for Lesbian and Gay Equality outline the potentially disastrous effects the clause would have upon the gay community if it was successful. One of those present was gay

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<sup>167</sup> *The Sunday Times*, 10 January 1988.

<sup>168</sup> Jim Edgell reported that at least two men had been arrested for kissing in public while others had been detained for possessing offensive weapons – the wooden poles carrying protest banners. From *The Sunday Times*, 10 January 1988.

<sup>169</sup> *The Sunday Times*, 21 February 1988.

<sup>170</sup> *The Observer*, 1 May 1988.

<sup>171</sup> *In the Pink*, Vol. 2, No. 4, March 1988, GBR project archive.

<sup>172</sup> A. Jones, *Lesbians in the Shadows*, p.24.

<sup>173</sup> *Birmingham Evening Mail*, 13 February 1988.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>175</sup> *In the Pink*, Vol. 2, No. 4, March 1988, GBR archive.

rights campaigner and political activist Peter Tatchell, who condemned Clause 28 as a 'bigots charter'.<sup>176</sup>

That same month *Birmingham Evening Mail* reported that one hundred 'noisy, but peaceful gays' had picketed Dame Knight's Edgbaston constituency office as she attended meetings there.<sup>177</sup> The picketing of Dame Knight's Edgbaston office appears to have been a regular occurrence whenever she was in residence: 'I remember being in a large group of about 50 picketing Dame Jill Knight's office in Five Ways in 1987-88, and opposite her office a group of workers put pages of *The Sun* in the windows. She told the paper that her constituents were terrified of coming to see her because she was barricaded in the building by these militant homosexuals – how right she was.'<sup>178</sup> Dame Knight herself alleged one occasion when 'opponents of Section 28 attacked me outside my constituency office and tried to turn my car over with me inside it. I was [only] saved by the swift arrival of several police cars with sirens blaring.'<sup>179</sup>

Despite these protests and amid widespread criticism Section 28 passed into British law in May 1988. In light of this, Birmingham Stop the Clause reconstituted itself as Birmingham Lesbian and Gay Rights Group. However, just one year later social commentators were noting a number of positive political effects upon the gay community. Section 28 politicised the gay community, influencing many previously apathetic lesbians and gay men to become activists. It inspired a number of high profile public figures to 'come out' in support of the 'Stop the Clause' campaign. It also strengthened the relationship between the lesbian and gay communities, uniting them in a common cause. Where the AIDS crisis had been a predominantly gay male issue, Section 28 threatened all gay people, irrespective of their gender. Section 28 also significantly increased support for the gay community among non-gay people, especially those in the arts. Most importantly, however, it ushered in a new era of gay activism in the 1990s. A national gay rights campaign was to be spearheaded by the political lobbying group Stonewall, founded in 1988 with the express intention of facilitating the repeal of Section 28. In Birmingham, the gay community would unite again in 1991 under the banner of the Coalition for Lesbian and Gay Rights (West Midlands) to campaign against the proposed introduction of Clause 25 of the Criminal Justice Bill 1990-1 and Paragraph 16 of the guidelines of the Children's Act 1989.

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<sup>176</sup> Ibid.

<sup>177</sup> *Birmingham Evening Mail*, 27 February 1988.

<sup>178</sup> Lyn David Thomas, interviewed 2007 for GBR project.

<sup>179</sup> Lords Hansard, Column 1102, 6 December 1999 (191206-10). <<http://www.parliament.the-stationery-office.co.uk/ld199900/ldhansrd/vo991206/text/91206-10.htm>>



## Conclusion

The impact of HIV/AIDS on the gay community was two fold, not only did they experience the physical and emotional effects of the disease, they also had to endure the moral panic whipped up by the media whereby gay people were represented as a dangerous 'other' and a significant threat to 'normal' straight society. Homosexuality embodied a challenge to the primacy of the nuclear family, the building block of western capitalist societies. Smith has demonstrated that the discourse on homosexuality in the 1980s was inseparable from that of AIDS and it was in this context that Section 28 was introduced. Section 28 was based upon the mistaken belief in the proselytising nature of homosexuality. It represented the most significant backlash against the gay community since homosexual acts were legalised in 1967. However, rather than silencing the UK gay community, Section 28 had the exact opposite effect. Together with the AIDS epidemic, it mobilised the gay community, uniting both lesbians and gay men against a common cause and stimulated a period of intense political activity during which the gay community acquired a truly united voice. The anti-Section 28 marches in London and Manchester were the largest lesbian and gay rallies ever seen outside the US and drew protestors from all over the country. To paraphrase Weeks, it is a nice historical irony that Section 28 ended up galvanising the gay community and strengthening the very public identities that it was designed to delimit.<sup>180</sup> On a local level Section 28 helped solidify the ties of community in myriad regional gay communities which were developing all over the UK in cities such as Birmingham.

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<sup>180</sup> J. Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society*, p.304.

## Chapter Five: Birmingham Gay Pride

*Welcome to Birmingham Pride. It's a long overdue statement, but one that will prove worth waiting for. Pride is a unique celebration. It's a party, it's a piss up, it's a laugh, but it's a great deal more than that. It's also a statement, a reminder that life is diverse, colourful, unpredictable and to be celebrated. – Introduction to Birmingham Gay Pride Magazine, 1997.*

### Introduction

Birmingham has a long history of Gay Pride celebrations within the city. However, Birmingham's gay community were relatively slow to organise the city's first official Gay Pride Festival (1997) compared with other UK cities of similar size such as London (1970), Manchester (1990) and Brighton (1992). This chapter will trace the development of Gay Pride in Birmingham, from the GLF led Gay Pride Weekends of the early 1970s through to the city's first official Gay Pride Festival in the late 1990s. It will explore in detail the organisation of this first official Gay Pride Festival in a bid to establish why the event occurred when it did and what the festival meant for the city's gay community. This chapter will also examine the ghettoization of the gay scene in Birmingham during the early 1990s as well as the move towards the development of a gay 'village' around the Hurst Street area towards the end of the decade. Finally it will explore the issue of the increasing commercialisation of Gay Pride in the UK and the claim that many Gay Pride events have lost their original political spirit in favour of celebration. This chapter draws heavily on the personal memories collected by the Gay Birmingham Remembered (GBR) project. Due to the inherent problems associated with oral testimonies and memoirs the factual accuracy of some of the statements made within this chapter are open to debate. This said, every effort has been made to cross reference dates and opinions stated within the memories with primary and secondary literature, where available, before presenting them here as fact. During the course of this investigation it was necessary to follow up one particularly useful set of memories (Inge Thornton) with an interview of my own. For accuracy, this interview was taped and a transcript included in this thesis (Appendix 1).

### Early Gay Pride demonstrations

In the early 1970s, several decades before Birmingham held its first official Gay Pride Festival (1997), the city played host to a small number of Gay Pride Weekends organised by Birmingham GLF. These followed the success of the UK's first Gay Pride Week organised by

London GLF in late June/early July 1972. London Gay Pride Week consisted of a week of action during which GLF members took to the streets of the Capital to declare and celebrate their (homo) sexuality. London was for the first time quite literally coming ‘Out of the Closets and into the Streets!’ The climax of the week’s events was the ‘Carnival Parade’ on 1 July, during which over one thousand lesbians and gay men marched through central London from Trafalgar Square to Hyde Park in the first ever Gay Pride rally to take place outside the U.S.

Birmingham Gay Pride Weekend followed just one week later. It was one of the first events to be organised by Birmingham GLF. The weekend was apparently ‘hastily arranged and not very well conceived’ but a variety of activities were organised, including a number of GLF dances and two well attended Gay Days.<sup>181</sup> On Saturday 8 July a group of twenty GLF members gathered near the Bull Ring shopping centre in Birmingham city centre to distribute oranges, balloons and gay leaflets among shoppers. ‘Almost spontaneously we decided to march up New Street (a prospect that most of us regarded with some trepidation) which we did with determination and pride as well as the heady excitement of doing the thing itself.’ As the group marched they sang GLF slogans such as “What is gay? Gay is proud!”. The impromptu parade culminated in a small-scale rally on the steps of the Town Hall.<sup>182</sup> The following day the group met in Cannon Hill Park to distribute the remaining leaflets and oranges in a rather more informal and friendly manner. Gay Days were after all intended to be enjoyable social events, but at the same time they delivered a serious message: ‘to show straight people that gays are not confined to cottages and certain bars but that we actually exist not only as nice ‘respectable’ people, but as people wanting to choose their own lifestyle, and demanding the right to do so.’<sup>183</sup>

Although it is not clear how many more Gay Pride Weekends were actually held in the city, it is probable that Birmingham GLF staged a further two or three events before the group went in to decline around the middle of the decade. Later parades travelled down New Street and along High Street to Birmingham Peace Centre, out of which the group were based until its closure c.1975/6. These were small, unofficial marches and were not police chaperoned like London’s Carnival Parade. Nick Stanley recalls: ‘we took banners and marched down New Street, about 30 of us behind a GLF banner all shouting GLF mantras like “Glad to be gay”.’ He doesn’t remember experiencing any hostile reaction from bystanders during these early Gay Pride Parades: ‘I think they were just bemused.’<sup>184</sup> The reaction of bystanders is worth

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<sup>181</sup> Birmingham GLF Newsletter, undated but likely July 1972, BCA, LBF 22.55.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid.

<sup>184</sup> Nick Stanley, interviewed 2007 for GBR project.

noting. It is unsurprising that the most common reaction here was that of ‘bemusement’ as it was likely the first time many of them had seen an ‘out’ homosexual, let alone a group of lesbians and gay men parading down New Street carrying banners and singing at the top of their voice. ‘Our aim was to announce ourselves and let Birmingham know gay people were here: ‘Here we are and here we’ll stay’.’<sup>185</sup>

However, bemusement was not the universal experience, inevitably there were occasionally negative reactions from certain individuals and groups opposed to Gay Liberation. Interestingly Birmingham GLF members appear by and large to have only experienced homophobic abuse while protesting against other issues, not during their own events! As part of the Broad Left movement Birmingham GLF regularly attended demonstrations against fascists (at anti-National Front marches), sexists (at the University Carnival Queen and Grapple-And-Strip events), anti-abortionists, racists and evangelists among others.<sup>186</sup> Graham Allen recalls how during one demonstration he was carrying a banner that said ‘Gay People Support Troops Out of Ireland’ when ‘an Irish lady in the crowd attacked me with her umbrella, while I was walking down New Street, shouting that I was an abomination and was going to do to Hell! Fortunately for me, my gay brothers and sisters present, about fifteen, all pointed to her and shouted very loudly “EVIL, EVIL!” and she ran off!’<sup>187</sup> The reaction of the Irish lady can likely be explained by her Catholic upbringing. However there was and still is a substantial Irish Catholic presence in Birmingham, concentrated in and around the Digbeth area of the city.

### **Five Days of Fun**

‘Five Days of Fun’ (or ‘Gay Brum’ as it was originally known) was an annual five-day gay festival that took place in Birmingham between 1983-1996. It was organised by Brian Wigley, then entertainment manager of the Nightingale Club, and the festivals are widely considered to be the precursors to the city’s official Gay Pride Festivals. The festival was organised so that the gay bars and pubs would host a variety of activities during the day while the main evening events were shared between the newly revamped Grosvenor House Hotel and the Nightingale Club. The highlight of the weekend was an *It’s a Knockout* competition held in the grounds of the Grosvenor and featuring teams made up of staff from the Nightingale Club, the Jester, and the Grosvenor.<sup>188</sup> Although the event was primarily an

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<sup>185</sup> Ibid.

<sup>186</sup> *Gladrag*, January 1976, BCA, LBF 22.85.

<sup>187</sup> Graham Allen, interviewed 2007 for GBR project.

<sup>188</sup> *Gay Midlander*, September 1983, GBR project archive. The *It’s a Knockout* competition between the staff of the Nightingale Club and the Grosvenor had been an annual favourite at the Grosvenor

opportunity for the city's gay bars and clubs to make money it also represented an important step towards the development of a gay community in Birmingham, in that it was the first time that the rival bars and clubs set aside their respective differences in order to organise a large-scale gay event in the city. This initial collaboration over 'Five Days of Fun' laid the foundations for mutual cooperation between Birmingham's gay venues which would prove invaluable during the organisation of the city's first Gay Pride Festival.

As the name suggests 'Five Days of Fun' was a celebration, an opportunity for lesbians and gay men from Birmingham to come together for a weekend of fun, meet new people and form new friendship groups. It had no political aspirations. In fact its organisers avoided making a political statement of any kind. This is indicative of Birmingham's gay business people who had always been reluctant to associate themselves with the radical politics of the gay liberation movement for fear that this might jeopardise their hard won position within 'straight society'. 'Five Day's of Fun' was no different. All the events were held out of sight and behind closed doors. This is in stark comparison of the GLF 'Gay Days' of the mid 1970s that sought to reclaim 'gay space' by taking gay love directly into public locations. It suggests a closeted gay scene in Birmingham in the 1980s and demonstrates a lack of political will among many of the city's gay business people. Even when the *It's a Knockout* competition was transferred to the car park behind Partners bar following the closure of the Grosvenor in 1986 the games were kept by and large out of sight of 'straight society.'

### **A Gay Village**

By the 1990s Birmingham's (male) gay scene had become firmly established in and around the Hurst Street area. To supplement the well-established bars at the top of Hurst Street (that is The Jester, Partners bar and the Nightingale Club), a number of new venues opened in the largely derelict area towards the lower end of Hurst Street, providing greater choice and variety for Birmingham's lesbian and gay population. The Fountain Inn opened on the corner of Wrentham Street and Kent Street, just off Hurst Street, in July 1991 and The Village Inn opened on Hurst Street around the same time. The Nightingale Club moved for the third and final time to its current Kent Street premises in February 1994 and Bass Breweries opened the American themed Route 66 nightclub and bar on the corner of Hurst Street and Kent Street later that year.<sup>189</sup>

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since the mid-1970s. It was expanded in 1983 to include a team from the Jester and this provided the nucleus for *Gay Brum* '83.

<sup>189</sup> Birmingham's gay scene at this time was still predominantly male orientated. Most of the venues were almost exclusively male with many (including the Nightingale Club) actively discriminated against women requiring a male member to sign them in. As such many lesbians tended to avoid the

The concentration of gay venues in and around the Hurst Street area can be attributed to the ready availability of cheap property in this part of the city. At this time Hurst Street was a largely derelict warehouse district. The development of the city's Inner Ring Road in 1971 had isolated the area and allowed it to fall into disrepair. In 1980 Hurst Street was highlighted as an area of 'potential change' by Birmingham City Council (BCC) and West Midlands County Council (WMCC).<sup>190</sup> It was one of six inner city areas in urgent need of redevelopment and in the late 1980s much of the land to the east of Hurst Street was demolished as part of the Arcadian Centre development. It might also be explained by the presence of three of the city's oldest and most established gay venues at the top end of Hurst Street, which served as proof that gay businesses could be successful in this area. The concentration of gay venues around the Hurst Street area in the 1990s is often (wrongly) cited as evidence of the development of a gay 'village' in this location during this period. In reality this is simply evidence of a process of self-ghettoization that had been taking place in Birmingham since the early 1980s. During the 1980s and early 1990s Hurst Street was still very much a gay 'ghetto', home to a smattering of discrete gay bars and nightclubs that opened only under cover of darkness. During the day Hurst Street was often deserted. As late as the mid 1990s many patrons of the area's bars and nightclubs considered Hurst Street unsafe.<sup>191</sup>

However the late 1990s a new wave of gay businesses opened in the Hurst Street area that signalled the beginning of significant changes in the composition of Birmingham's gay 'ghetto'. This was also around this time that the local press first referred to this location as the city's 'unofficial 'gay village''.<sup>192</sup> In February 1997 Angels Café Bar opened on Hurst Street complete with revolutionary clear-glass frontages. They symbolised the growing sense of openness and assertiveness beginning to permeate the city's gay 'ghetto' by the late 1990s. In particular, gay men were no longer willing to hide away in basement bars or behind blacked-

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mainstream city centre bars, perhaps with the exception of the Jester, preferring instead to patronise a select number of gay friendly pubs in the outlying suburbs of Moseley, Kings Heath and Balsall Heath. The Old Moseley Arms (affectionately known as 'Old Mo') was the most well known of these and had been popular venue among many lesbians since the 1970s. Large numbers of lesbians regularly packed the small pool room to the rear of the pub. There were a select number of other venues available to women that included Sheila's Bar in the back of the Station pub in Kings Heath, which operated a women's only night from the late 1980s till the early 1990s and the Malt Shovel pub in Balsall Heath which became popular among lesbians around the same time Sheila's bar ended. There was only one actual women's bar in the city centre. That was The Fox on Lower Essex Street, which despite not officially becoming a lesbian bar until 1997 became extremely popular with women around the mid 1990s.

<sup>190</sup> W. Chan, 'Finding Chinatown: Ethnocentrism and Urban Planning', in D. Bell and M. Jayne (eds), *City of Quarters: Urban villages in the contemporary city* (London, 2004), p.178.

<sup>191</sup> Inge Thornton, interviewed 24 June 2009.

<sup>192</sup> *Birmingham Evening Mail*, 16 April 1997.

out windows. For the new generation of gay people Angels represented a long overdue change in the attitudes of providers of gay facilities in the city. 'It was amazing to be able to go somewhere that wasn't just a pub which opened in the evening and it was really nice to be able to sit in a gay space and have a cup of coffee at lunch time.'<sup>193</sup> For older generations of gay men, however, the changes occurring in the 'ghetto' were often rather more daunting. Mike recalls, at first it was 'a bit awkward going into a place where you could actually be seen having a drink. But those reservations soon disappeared... it really did signal the change in the confidence of the city's gay community. There was no doubt about that.'<sup>194</sup>

Also present among this new wave of gay businesses establishing themselves in the Hurst Street area in the late 1990s was the Birmingham branch of Clone Zone, Britain's leading gay retailer, which relocated from Bristol Road to the Arcadian Centre at the top of Hurst Street in March 1997. A gay hairdresser, Funky Crop Shop, opened above Clone Zone and Music Beat Records, a gay owned music store opened up next door.<sup>195</sup> Gareth, a spokesperson for Angels noted: 'there is a distinct move towards the development of a village-like atmosphere, similar to that of Manchester in the Hurst Street area.'<sup>196</sup>

There are some striking similarities between Birmingham's gay quarter and Manchester's Gay Village that are worth mentioning here. Both districts emerged in undeveloped, 'run down' and 'rough' city centre areas. Both are situated next to large Chinese communities with very visible ethnic identities and architecture. Both districts were predominantly leisure areas, with little or no resident population and both cities were home to a substantial lesbian and gay population. However, by the late 1990s, as Birmingham's gay 'ghetto' was only just 'coming out', Manchester already had a well-developed Gay Village. The opening of Manto bar (complete with revolutionary plate glass windows) on Canal Street in 1991 is popularly perceived to have initiated the development of Manchester's Gay Village.<sup>197</sup> With such clear similarities between the two cities and in the character and location of their gay districts, it begs the question as to why Manchester's Gay Village developed so far ahead of Birmingham's own gay quarter?

The answer perhaps lies in the attitude of their respective city councils. During the 1980s and 1990s Birmingham and Manchester, with similar histories as prominent industrial cities,

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<sup>193</sup> Ibid.

<sup>194</sup> Mike, interviewed 2007 for GBR project.

<sup>195</sup> Birmingham *Gay Pride* magazine, Issue 1, 1997, GBR project archive. In fact the number of gay business in the Hurst Street area had approached such a level such a level in the late 1990s as to raise concerns about over saturation of the market.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid.

<sup>197</sup> A. Jones, *Lesbians in the Shadows*, p.9.

underwent a process of redevelopment during which both cities were re-branded as a forward looking cosmopolitan urban centres. Manchester City Council actively encouraged the development of the city's Gay Village, adopting Canal Street as a symbol of Manchester's new cosmopolitan character. Marketing the city as a gay friendly destination attracted a substantial amount of gay investment while also promoting Manchester tourism, the Gay Village being central to both enterprises.<sup>198</sup> As Birmingham was already home to large immigrant population, BCC sought to promote Birmingham as a proud multicultural destination. Wun Chan has noted that in Birmingham local government response played upon the suggestion that around five thousand post-1984 Hong Kong immigrants would arrive in the region and would be a source of investment for the city's financial recovery.<sup>199</sup> For this reason BCC sponsored the development of Birmingham's Chinatown during the 1980s and 1990s as a tourist attraction and to provide a base for the city's anticipated Chinese community. The location of this Chinatown was to be at the top of Hurst Street, putting it in direct confrontation with the city's pre-existing gay community. BCC went to great lengths to promote its Chinatown venture and spent vast amounts on the development of the area at the top of Hurst Street. However, no money was made available for lesbian and gay community projects or for the redevelopment of the lower Hurst Street area.<sup>200</sup> The developments occurring of Birmingham's gay quarter towards the end of the 1990s were entirely due to the efforts of enterprising gay business owners.

The establishment of a number of non-nightlife orientated gay owned businesses towards the end of the 1990s is certainly an indication of a real move towards the creation of a village-like atmosphere around Hurst Street. However the centralisation of gay businesses in one area alone does not necessarily constitute a gay 'village'. A gay 'village' should be the centre of the city's gay community and as such it requires close work and collaboration between representatives of the gay community, local gay businesses and the City Council. This kind of cooperation was seen for the first time in Birmingham during the organisation of the city's first official Gay Pride Festival in 1997.

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<sup>198</sup> J. Binnie and B. Skeggs, 'Cosmopolitan knowledge and the production and consumption of sexualised space: Manchester's Gay Village', in J. Binnie, J. Holloway, S. Millington and C. Young (eds), *Cosmopolitan Urbanism* (London, 2006).

<sup>199</sup> W. Chan, 'Finding Chinatown: Ethnocentrism and Urban Planning', p.182.

<sup>200</sup> At the time of writing the length of Hurst Street is due a major redevelopment by Birmingham City Council. This will be the first instance of the city Council allocating any public money for the development of the city's now well-established gay quarter.



## Birmingham Gay Pride Festival

Birmingham Gay Pride Festival marked a significant departure from the purely commercial ‘Five Days of Fun’ model. It was the brainchild of local nightclub owner and entrepreneur Bill Gavan: ‘I, like most other gay entrepreneurs,’ he recalls, ‘would shout and complain on a regular basis, that we had no rights and nothing, until my partner said one day ‘why don’t you do something about it, instead of complaining’ so I organised a small committee, the Triangle Committee, in [November] 1996, and had public meetings about having a Gay Pride.’<sup>201</sup> Gavan came from a business background and owned the popular Subway City nightclub in Hockley, but was also involved in various community initiatives within the city. From the outset it was intended that Birmingham’s Gay Pride Festival be a cooperative effort between the city’s gay commercial venues *and* representatives of local gay community organisations.

The initial public meeting was held in the White Swan pub in Hockley, at which Gavan was elected chair of the committee. The meeting was attended by a group of about thirty or forty lesbians and gay men, of varying backgrounds and degrees of involvement in the commercial gay scene. It seems that the prospect of organising a Gay Pride Festival in the city especially appealed to those marginalized by Birmingham’s mainstream gay scene. This is because Gay Pride still held the promise of a community focused event. It had not by this time become the purely commercial affair that it is today. This group included, among others, many lesbians. Inge Thornton recalls: ‘A group of women thought, ‘If it’s all blokes it’ll be rubbish’, so I went along, and they were electing people onto the first committee and the women decided we needed some women on and someone nominated me, there was a vote, it wasn’t split along men and women lines, and I ended up being voted on, though I hadn’t intended to!’<sup>202</sup> Thornton was one of just three women elected to the committee, but more than anyone their presence ensured that the festival retained a distinctive community element and prevented it becoming simply an extension of ‘Five Days of Fun’. Gavan recalls that, ‘[the committee]...couldn’t have pulled it off without the girls, the guys were easier because they were on the gay scene, they were getting the local businesses involved, but the lesbians – I called them the girls – they were bringing people in from the voluntary sector, and other members of the public, in other words they had more balls than me, to go out there and invite the general public.’<sup>203</sup>

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<sup>201</sup> Bill Gavan, interviewed 2007 for GBR project. The first Triangle Committee consisted of Bill Gavan (chair), Rory Murray (secretary), Julia Radcliffe (treasurer), Dave Babbington (admin), Polly Goodwin, Chris Higgins, Clare Jones, Nick O’Reilly, Donald Steel, Trevor Sword and Inge Thornton.

<sup>202</sup> Inge Thornton, interviewed 2007 for GBR project.

<sup>203</sup> Bill Gavan, interviewed 2007 for GBR project.

Thornton vividly remembers divisions quickly emerging between the different interest groups on the committee, who each had their own individual designs for the festival, and the particular struggle of women on the committee to ensure that a community focus remained at the heart of the celebrations:

It became very clear that there was a difference between what most of the men wanted and the women wanted, lots of community and family stuff, sitting down things, women's stalls etc. Something that didn't revolve around lots of loud music and getting pissed, and some of the men wanted that, and it was very hard to get a sense of community, to think about it. We brought a black bloke in from the Nightingale, Trevor Sword was speaking up for the disabled, people in wheelchairs etc and without us it would have been a three day piss up...<sup>204</sup>

It seems that the commercial business owners had very clear ideas as to how they wanted the festival to be organised and it was often difficult for the women to make themselves heard. Some of their ideas were evidently sidelined in favour of more commercial plans. 'Polly and I would think that certain decisions had been made...[and] sometimes think that we had put forward these ideas and they wouldn't always get followed through.'<sup>205</sup>

It was decided very early on that Birmingham Pride should be private funded and above all one hundred per cent self-supporting. Fundraising for the event took various different forms. In the months running up to the May Bank Holiday weekend the venues in and around the city's gay 'village' were a frenzy of fundraising activity. Activities ranged from Bingo at The Jester and a 'Cabaret Extravaganza' weekend hosted by Route 66 nightclub to a 'Star Trek' theme weekend at Partners Bar which raised upwards of £427 towards Pride.<sup>206</sup> Other events included 'Election Karaoke' and 'Eurovision Madness' evenings, again at Partners Bar, a 'Stars in Your Eyes' contest at the Pelican Bar and a 'Ball' hosted by Subway City nightclub featuring eight hours of happy house and techno and a £200 prize for the strangest dressed customer.<sup>207</sup> The relentless fundraising continued right up until the day of the event itself and raised an estimated £16,637, comprising just over half the total income from the weekend's celebrations. The Carlsberg Tetley group also sponsored the event, donating £3,000 towards the first six hundred official Birmingham Pride T-shirts. These were then sold for £9.99 each throughout the city's gay venues in the run up to the event and during the weekend itself and are estimated to have raised about £1,115. Individual donations also comprised an important

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<sup>204</sup> Inge Thornton, interviewed 2007 for GBR project.

<sup>205</sup> Inge Thornton, interviewed 24 June 2009.

<sup>206</sup> Birmingham Pride Update Newsletters, GBR project archive.

<sup>207</sup> *Midland Zone*, Issue 2, May 1997, GBR project archive.

component of the fundraising activity, with £420 being raised through standing orders and private donations, as well as £336.71 raised through collections in the run up to the event, and £1,389 being collected over the weekend.

Although Pride was financially self-supporting, both the size and nature of the event meant that it needed the go-ahead from both BCC and West Midlands Police. Gavan recalls that the City Council and West Midlands police were both very supportive from day one: '[I] went to the Chief Constable at the time and he said 'There's no problem with Pride so long as it's a celebration and procession, not a demonstration'. He gave me a small hand written note to take to the local police station, and the local desk sergeant at Digbeth said 'Over my dead body' – so I showed him the note, and that was basically the start of the Police Liaison situation.'<sup>208</sup> Several roads around Hurst Street had to be closed to make space for a street carnival and market, with upwards of forty stalls and live entertainment, which would be the centrepiece of the festival.<sup>209</sup>

BCC reportedly welcomed the Pride proposal with 'open arms', although this was almost certainly due to the fact that the event was one hundred per cent financially self-supporting and required no financial contribution from the council.<sup>210</sup> This response is typical of BCC whose policy towards lesbians and gays had for so long been virtually none existent, neither actively discriminatory nor particularly supportive. The then leader of the council, Cllr. Theresa Stewart, offered some words of support for the event: 'Birmingham is an international city whose citizens represent all races, cultures and communities. Events which actively encourage tolerance and mutual understanding should be supported whole heartedly. I hope your event proves successful.'<sup>211</sup>

The event itself took place over the May Bank Holiday weekend and attracted an estimated 15,000 visitors to the city from all over the country.<sup>212</sup> About twenty gay venues provided non-stop indoor entertainment during the three-day festival, many of them having being granted special extensions to their opening hours for the event. However the centrepiece of the festival was the Sunday street carnival, complete with fun fair, numerous live music stages (featuring performances by Sonia, Sinitta, cabaret star Margarita Pracatan and U.S gay comedian Scott Capurro), street performers (including Stonewall Aikido Club and Leicester

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<sup>208</sup> Bill Gavan, interviewed 2007 for GBR project.

<sup>209</sup> *Birmingham Evening Mail*, 16 April 1997.

<sup>210</sup> Bill Gavan, interviewed 2007 for GBR project.

<sup>211</sup> *Midland Zone*, Pride Special, June 1997, GBR project archive.

<sup>212</sup> See *Birmingham Evening Mail*, 27 May 1997, p.6, and *The Birmingham Post*, 26 May 1997.

based fire eating troupe Flaming Fairies), food vendors and a market consisting of upwards of forty commercial and community stalls.

Everyone was flabbergasted that Birmingham had pulled it off. They thought that it was going to be an extension of 'Five Days of Fun' in Partners car park...It was a beautiful day; quite surreal really. All these gay people dressed up to the nines with balloons etc. There were community stalls and the commercial venues provided the beer and dance tents...What was so nice about it was being in Birmingham and holding hands and kissing on our own patch and it worked. This was about being out and out there, this wasn't London or Manchester.<sup>213</sup>

The street market featured of a good mixture of commercial stalls promoting Birmingham's growing number of gay businesses and venues and community stalls providing information about local lesbian and gay community groups and welfare organisations within the city. Among those groups represented at the carnival were: West Midlands Lesbian and Gay Switchboard, West Midlands Friend, Birmingham Lesbian and Gay Youth Group, LesBeWell, AB Plus and BOSS Project. A number of women and family orientated events were also held in The Fox including singing, story telling and comedy acts. Thornton recalls: 'They were [all] people we'd known from years of doing other things, people who used to be in Women in Theatre, local comedians who are still around today, very local sort of low key acts that we put on in The Fox and the place was packed, it was great!'<sup>214</sup> An estimated two hundred people in all volunteered to steward the event.<sup>215</sup> The event had a projected expenditure of £11,710 and in reality cost £18,924.86, however through donations, sponsorships and on the day collecting it made a total £30,018.94 (See Appendix 1). This left a substantial surplus, some of which went towards organising next years event, while the remainder was divided amongst a number deserving local gay community groups and charities.

As a collaborative effort between Birmingham's gay commercial businesses and the city's numerous gay community groups and organisations, Birmingham Gay Pride Festival marked a watershed in the development of Birmingham's gay community. The festival served as a showcase for the strength and power of the gay community that had emerged in Birmingham as a result of the challenges of the previous decade. From 1997 there was certainly no denying the presence of the gay community in Birmingham.

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<sup>213</sup> Trevor Sword, interviewed 2007 for GBR project.

<sup>214</sup> Inge Thornton, interviewed 24 June 2009.

<sup>215</sup> *Birmingham Evening Mail*, 10 May 1997.

### Commercialisation of Pride

However, visitors to Birmingham Pride today might notice a conspicuous absence in this description of the city's first Gay Pride Festival. That is, the absence of the Pride Parade, a central feature of today's festivities. The parade would not be a feature of Birmingham's Gay Pride celebrations until the year 2000. Thornton recalls some early discussions about the feasibility of a Pride Parade but suggests that a combination of health and safety concerns, coupled with opposition from within the committee itself ultimately resulted in the parade being dropped from the event. In fact, Thornton suggests that Birmingham's first Pride event was intentionally apolitical. It is evident that some members of the Triangle committee, principally those representing the city's gay commercial venues, intentionally limited the political impact of the event.<sup>216</sup> As a result, Thornton notes that any political statement that the event made was purely accidental, however she also recalls that 'just the fact that it happened accidentally made a political statement: that we wanted to have a weekend that was our weekend and that made us a visible part of Birmingham's culture.'<sup>217</sup>

The lack of a political stimulus in Birmingham's first Gay Pride Festival is symptomatic of a general depoliticisation of Gay Pride in Britain. The majority of UK Gay Pride events have now developed from political protests, the likes of which were seen in the 1970s and 1980s, into full-scale festival-style showcases for local gay communities. These are often more an opportunity for gay bars and businesses to make money than arenas of political activity. As such gay businesses have developed an ever-increasing influence over the organisation of these events. In many cases this influence has had a commercialising effect. As more and more people attend UK Gay Pride events, many gay activists have expressed a concern that the political significance of the events themselves is being compromised or devalued.

While few would deny that one of the key functions of any Gay Pride Festival is to raise money for and promote local gay businesses, especially the bars and nightclubs (some of which would now struggle to operate throughout the year without the substantial cash injection that comes from Gay Pride celebrations), Gay Pride is much more than a simple celebration. From its radical beginnings in the 1970s Gay Pride has carried at its core a powerful political message. It is both an individual and collective affirmation of ones (homo) sexuality as well as an expression of the strength of the gay community. Gay pride is all about flying the rainbow flag in the face of the dominant heterocentric culture and announcing, to borrow from a Queer Nation slogan, 'we're here, we're Queer and we're Proud!' The Pride

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<sup>216</sup> Inge Thornton, interview, 24 June 2009.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid.

Parade is now generally considered an essential feature of the Gay Pride Festival as it celebrates the importance of diversity. When this political message is removed from Gay Pride it loses one of its base meanings and becomes little more than yet another affirmation of the dominant capitalist code.

## **Conclusion**

Birmingham has a long and distinguished history of Gay Pride celebrations within the city. It can claim to be one of the first cities in the UK behind London to hold a Gay Pride Parade and had one of the most politically active GLF groups in the country. However following the demise of Birmingham GLF the city's lesbian and gay population appeared to retreat back into the closet in some respects. 'Five Days of Fun' is a perfect case in point. Although it is widely accepted to be the precursor to the city's official Gay Pride Festivals, its organisers, Birmingham's gay venue owners, purposefully avoided using the term 'Pride' to describe the event. In fact they avoided any association whatsoever with the politics of the Gay Liberation movement. The festival events were hidden away out of sight of 'straight' society, quite literally behind the closed doors of Birmingham's gay pubs and clubs. This does not denote a sense of pride about the proceedings. By 1997 however a new attitude was beginning to sweep through Birmingham's unofficial gay 'village'. A new concentration of gay bars and clubs had brought with it a growing confidence as well as a new air of openness, symbolised by the opening of Angels Café Bar in 1997 and there was evidence of the opening stages of a move towards a village-like atmosphere in and around the Hurst Street area. Birmingham Gay Pride Festival 1997 was simply the natural culmination of these changes. Although initially conceived as nothing more than a celebration of lesbian and gay life in Birmingham it had a profound effect on both the city's burgeoning gay community as well as the city itself. It is fair to say that it represented a 'coming out' process for Birmingham's gay community after which it emerged far more confident and assured of its place within the city.

## Chapter Six: Conclusion

By the time that male homosexual acts were decriminalised in England and Wales in 1967 Birmingham was already home to a discernable homosexual subculture, similar to those that might have existed in many large cities in the UK at this time. This legislation provided a springboard for the Gay Liberation movement in Britain. Gay Liberation encompassed a new gay consciousness and desire to overthrow the dominant oppressive system. Birmingham Gay Liberation Front (GLF) was one of the county's most active Gay Liberation Front groups, along with Nottingham and London. The group was active between 1972 and 1977 and participated in many political campaigns during this period, demonstrating on a variety of issues, not simply gay rights. Some of the most successful events organised by the group were the 'Gay Days' of the mid 1970s that sought to reclaim gay space within the city by taking gay activism into public places. Birmingham GLF also ran regular social events which provided an alternative to the gay commercial scene which expanded significantly following the introduction of the Sexual Offences Act 1967. The gay scene at this time was far more expensive than its straight counterpart and was viewed by many gay people as exploiting its customers. This desire for alternative social facilities for lesbians and gay men resulted in the foundation of Birmingham Gay Community Centre, Bordesley Street, in 1976. The first of its kind in the UK, Birmingham Gay Community Centre represented a significant stride towards the creation of a gay community in the city. The Centre provided a safe environment for lesbians and gay men to 'come out', meet other gay people, and build lasting relationships and friendship groups. It also provided a home to most (if not all) of the city's gay groups and organisations. The Centre was extremely popular until it was forced to close in 1979. When the Centre reopened in 1985 it never achieved the level of popularity it had experienced during the previous decade, largely due to problems with its location. By this time the gay commercial scene had taken over much of the social role that had been an integral part of the original Centre.

The Centre eventually closed in March 1987 following the withdrawal of a £23,500 rescue grant from the ill-fated West Midlands County Council by Birmingham City Council (BCC). The City Council has provided no funding for any lesbian or gay organisations in its entire history. This is in contrast to the Greater London Council and Manchester City Council who both allocated funding for similar gay centres in the 1980s. Throughout the decade, while Thatcherism was at its peak, the City Council was particularly reluctant to associate itself with gay rights issues. It appears that the controlling Labour group, fearful of being branded 'looney' and thereby losing its majority control of the council, adopted a distinctly conservative mentality during this period. An excellent example of BCC's conservatism is

seen in its adoption of an equal opportunities policy in 1987. Unsurprisingly the policy was predominantly geared towards the prevention of discrimination of ethnic minority communities. However, despite pressure to include provision for the protection of lesbians and gay men from discrimination on the grounds of their sexual orientation, the mention of gay people within the policy was limited a few uses of the term 'sexuality'. Moreover the council's Code of Practice contained no specific references to the prevention of discrimination of lesbians and gay men in the workplace. As such the impact of the policy, for gay people at least, was negligible.

The 1980s had a dramatic effect on the development of Birmingham's gay community. The dual challenges presented by the arrival of AIDS and the introduction of Section 28 galvanised the UK gay community and mobilised them into collective acts of resistance and political activism. The first cases of AIDS were reported in Birmingham in November 1984 and the city's first HIV/AIDS support group, AIDS Concern Midlands, was established several months later. In the absence of a coherent AIDS policy from Thatcher's Conservative Government during the early stages of the epidemic what there was of a gay community at the time was forced by necessity to provide much of the initial response to the spread of the disease itself. From the mid 1980s onwards a whole host of HIV/AIDS prevention and AIDS counselling groups were set up in all major cities across the UK, Birmingham included. The development of these community groups is one of the most important legacies of AIDS. The introduction of Section 28 in 1988 dealt a further blow to the gay community in the UK. Section 28 was specifically designed to limit gay politics by prohibiting the 'promotion' of homosexuality by local authorities. On the surface it appeared to challenge the very existence of the UK gay community. Such was the perceived threat posed by Section 28 that the gay community 'came out' and turned out in previously never before seen numbers to protest against the clause. The strength of the gay community was revealed during huge rallies in Manchester and London, which at their height were attended by over fifty thousand demonstrators. Smaller scenes of political activity were seen in many cities throughout the UK. Although the demonstrations failed to prevent the enactment of Section 28, the collective acts of resistance served to further cement the ties of community that had been established during the initial community responses to the AIDS epidemic. The effect of this was to usher in a new era of gay activism in the 1990s.

In 1997 Birmingham's emergent gay community organised the city's first official Gay Pride Festival. The festival came about amid radical changes in Birmingham's gay social scene. In the late 1990s the city's gay quarter was undergoing a dramatic transformation along the lines experienced in London and Manchester several years earlier. There was a new sense of



openness developing in and around the Hurst Street area and an unwillingness to hide away behind blacked out windows or in basement bars any longer. This changing attitude was symbolised by the opening of Angels Café Bar in 1997, complete with clear glass frontages, which signalled the beginning of the transformation of the area. In light of this transformation of the gay social scene, it is significant that the Gay Pride Festival was the brainchild of local gay nightclub owner Bill Gavan. The Gay Pride Festival differed from previous Gay Pride celebrations held in the city in that it was a collaborative effort between local gay business owners and Birmingham's various gay community groups. The festival showcased a mix of commercial interests and community groups, providing a variety of alternative social opportunities for gay people in Birmingham and the West Midlands. In this sense the Gay Pride Festival marked the moment when Birmingham's gay community can be said to have 'come out' of its metaphorical closet. After 1997 Birmingham's gay community firmly established itself as a visible, vocal and ultimately valuable element of the city's social landscape and cultural identity.

The constraints of this study have meant that it has been impossible to investigate every aspect of the development of the city's gay community in as much detail as one would have perhaps liked. One of the main challenges during the writing of this study has been to resist the urge to develop almost every paragraph into a chapter in its own right. Much work remains to be done on the great many lesbian and gay community groups operating in the city throughout this period. In particular the effects of HIV/AIDS organisations on the development of a gay community in the city would be an interesting departure point for any further research into what is sadly still a vastly under researched field.

## Appendix 1 - Transcript of Interview with Inge Thornton

**Inge Thornton, born 1961**

Interview conducted 24<sup>th</sup> June 2009

Questions:

**1. Tell me about your memories and impressions of the Birmingham gay scene in the '90s...**

“In the early 90s the women were still definitely drinking in...if there was a scene as such...the women I mixed with weren't going into town, they were still drinking in bars in Balsall Heath, Kings Heath, that sort of area. There was a bar on Tuesday night at the back of the Station pub in Kings Heath called Sheila's bar, and lots of women used to drink...by the 90s we were drinking in the Malt Shovel pub on Brighton Road in Balsall Heath. We sort of took over the pool room in the back, and that was still going on in 1992.”

“There were various attempts to find other pubs for lesbians to drink in because the fox didn't exist then, but none of them really got off the ground. And then...I can't quite remember when the fox became a lesbian bar, I remember being taken there by somebody, possibly in 1992 when it wasn't quite a lesbian bar, it was this really run down, back street, local bar but there were a few women had started to drink there. There was also bar in the Holloway Head, which I never went to, and I think that was also on a Tuesday night. Then the fox took off as a lesbian venue...somewhere between 1993 and...certainly by 1996/7 it was a lesbian bar.”

“I remember going to the occasional disco which was men and women, which was unusual, in Peacocks, which was a room in the Imperial Hotel opposite the Trocadero. There was of course the Nightingale and Subway City and women used to go there occasionally but they were all very male dominated and the sort of women that I mixed with, and still do to some extent, weren't really clubbing type women so we were happier having a bar where we could play pool and chat to people rather than going into town to big glossy sorts of venues. There were women's discos in the Matador in the 80s and 90s...that was the only occasion that we ventured into town, although it wasn't really part of the 'gay scene'.”

**2. Would you say then that there weren't many clubs and bars in the centre of town during the early 1990s around where the gay 'village', as it exists now, would emerge later in the decade?**

“Absolutely. There was the Gale, which was moving around at that stage. I remember it being on Thorpe Street. I can't remember when Subway City opened but I remember it being amazing that there were two nightclubs that you could go to. The only pub for men that I knew of when I first came out was the Jester. I did get taken to the Trocadero once by my very first girlfriend in 1983 but I couldn't see any other gay people in there, so whether it was still functioning as a gay bar I don't know. The only bar that was run as a gay bar was the Jester.”

“I remember Angels opening...it was great to have that sort of bar that had open windows which wasn't down some stairs to a cellar.”

“One thing that always amuses me is that the gay quarter is next to the Chinese quarter, as it is in Manchester and I always find that funny. It must have been because of cheap property.”

**2a. So would it be fair perhaps to describe that area as a gay 'ghetto' rather than a gay 'village' in the early 90s?**

“I’m not sure that I would describe it as a ‘village’ now if I’m honest. It definitely had more of a ghetto feel. Certainly in the 90s still you would feel sometimes a bit hesitant about walking down Hurst Street openly, holding someone’s hand, or even just being there because I think that the rest of Birmingham wasn’t comfortable with this ‘gay ghetto’ then, and I’m not sure it is entirely comfortable now.”

**2b. You say that you wouldn’t describe the Birmingham scene now as a ‘village’. What then do you consider to be the key features of a gay ‘village’, and how is the Birmingham gay scene deficient?**

“I suppose mainly because it is very bar based. I remember when Angels first opened, and Angels was completely different then than it is now, it was open all day and used to serve coffee and it was amazing to be able to go somewhere that wasn’t just a pub which opened in the evening and it was really nice to be able to sit in a gay space and have a cup of coffee at lunch time. Birmingham hasn’t got a bookshop or a café or a community centre even. It just has the bars.”

“It’s all very nightlife focused which is why I don’t think it’s a village. If you go in there during the day it’s dead. It only comes alive at night. Whereas I’m sure around Canal Street in Manchester...because they have the big centre beyond Canal Street, I think it’s the Lesbian and Gay Foundation, which has rooms for hire and it does a lot of community work, you know, and groups can use its room space. Birmingham doesn’t have that.”

**3. Angels Café Bar opened just before Pride ‘97 with its glass frontage, can you explain the significance of a new open style gay bar such as this opening in Birmingham?**

“I do think that it signified some shift of people becoming slightly less afraid to be more open about their lifestyle and their sexuality, which was happening around the early to mid 90s. If you look at the Nightingale now with all the banners outside and big posters proclaiming who’s there and the huge flags out side, and how it used to be when it was on Thorpe Street with tiny little signs and you didn’t really know where it was, someone had to tell you.”

**4. So tell me how you got involved with the first Pride Committee?**

“There was a meeting that was held in the White Sawn somewhere in Hockley and I think at the time it was one of those pubs that people had taken over in an attempt to get another women’s bar. Which is odd because the fox must have been open by then. It was, I think, run by a couple of lesbians...they didn’t run it as a gay bar but I think they sort of thought they would try using one of the rooms as a sort of gay venue. I can’t remember how I found out about the meeting, it was probably someone down the fox mentioned it and there was a bit of a movement to try and get lots of women to try and go along to the meeting. We were really worried that if it were just a bunch of blokes then it would just be a piss up.”

**4a. Why didn’t you trust the men to plan the Pride Festival on their own?**

“Because I didn’t know them at that time. Up until that time the two scenes, certainly in the world that I mixed anyway, were completely separate. For many years I didn’t know any gay men, which is shameful but we just didn’t mix in the same circles. It’s strange because when you look at people’s memories in the 60s they did! Somehow in the 80s/90s, certainly for me, they didn’t mix, I’m sure other people did but we didn’t. I suppose because I came from a feminist background where we wanted women only spaces we just mixed with other women. So that may have accounted for some of the distrust and I accept now that it was a completely fallacious distrust and I’m quite ashamed of myself, but that was the feeling on that night that we ought to get some women along to the meeting because if the men took it over it would

just be a drag show with lots of drinking which wasn't what we would have been interested in."

"There was a little group of women sitting in one corner, probably about ten of us, and then there were probably about thirty or forty blokes...And we were sort of going 'someone's got to put their name forward, we've got to get more women on the committee', and I said, 'oh go on then', not for one minute thinking that I would get elected, and I did!"

**5. You've said that being on the committee wasn't the most positive experience for you and you've described 'infighting' that occurred within the committee. Can you discuss this in a bit more detail?**

Inge recalls how the election of Bill Gavan as chair of the committee was not as 'clear cut' a decision at the time as it might now seem. "On the night, I do remember, he wasn't the clear...I was surprised that he got elected chair because I didn't think that he was the clear runner to take it. Although I didn't know enough about the bar politics of Birmingham, I mean I sort of knew who he was vaguely and I didn't realise how much clout he had in Birmingham and just how much work he'd put in already. The other bloke who I thought might get the chair was a bloke called Nick who had a Union background and was much better at conducting meetings and presenting arguments. So maybe that's why I thought he might get the vote, because his way of presenting himself at the meeting appealed more to me and that's perhaps why I was surprised that Bill got elected. It wasn't clear cut by any means."

"I think infighting, I think I might not use that word now, I think that's possibly too strong a word. I think actually what we managed to pull off was amazing, with such a disparate group of people. As I say there was me and Polly Goodwin who had very much sort of women's community [interests], and Polly had a young son then... he'd have been six or seven. There had been events run by women in Balsall Heath area which had sort of a literary focus, I mean we'd had a few writers along who'd read out bits from their books, or music, I don't mean showy bands just a couple of women who'd play their guitar and sang, very low key and run on a shoe string because we had no money, but they were great events and had a great sense of community feeling. We were used to coming at things from that sort of angle and Polly was very interested in the family angle as she had this young son and she wanted Pride to be about a representation of all sorts, of gay families, and that it should be an place that you felt safe to bring your kids along to."

"Trevor really opened my eyes because I hadn't really thought in great detail at this point was about how non inclusive the gay scene in general was in terms of disability access...To hear his descriptions of how hard it was for him to get into the bars just horrified me really. So he was obviously fighting for the 'whatever we do we must make it so that people in wheelchairs must be placed at the front of the stage so that they can see what is going on and that they won't get trampled on by people walking up and down the streets'. There was a bloke called Rory Murray who worked for BOSS so he had quite a good health focus on things and wanted included things about...because obviously it wasn't that long after the whole AIDS/HIV crisis really, I mean it was still very much in peoples mind, and he wanted very much a health focus in there as well, and he'd done much more on the community side of things than most people had. And then there was Bill, bless him, who came from a you know, 'lets just have huge events which are sort of louder, more out, brasher sort of thing', he knew from experience from running Subway City that people did want to get to nightclubs and have loud music or whatever."

"What surprised me most of all was that Polly and I would think that certain decisions had been made and certain discussions had been had and then they'd sort of seem to...I mean we weren't very good at keeping minutes of the meetings, as in a proper regulated record of what

had gone on at the meetings, so we would sometimes think that we had put forward these ideas and they wouldn't always get followed through. I do think a lot of it was that we just weren't keeping proper minutes of the meetings so sometimes some of our lengthy ideas, because they weren't doing the big brash stuff, maybe didn't quite make it back onto the agenda."

**6. What do you consider to have been the main successes of Pride '97?**

"It was a great feeling actually, it did work well...we did have some women focused events in the fox, and they were people we'd known from years of doing other things, people who used to be in women in theatre, local comedians who are still around today, very local sort of low key acts that we put on in the fox and the place was packed, it was great. There was definitely a real buzz about the streets. The stalls were a good mix of community stalls and people selling things...It was good to have that cross pollination between the community side and the commercial side."

**7. What kind of political statement do you think it made?**

"Any political statement that it made was accidental, because I think all political focus was lost in the first one, but just the fact that it happened accidentally made a political statement: that we wanted to have a weekend that was our weekend and that made us a visible part of Birmingham's culture."

**7a. Was it ever overtly political?**

"No. I would have loved it to have been political, but no, certainly not the first one."

**8. Was this why there was initially no parade to accompany Pride? Was this a conscious decision?**

"I remember meeting about trying to get a parade and I can't actually remember what stopped it. Whether it might have been health and safety concerns or whether some people on the committee didn't want a parade and just wanted it to be focused in the gay village. I think both of those were factors actually. There were definitely some of us who wanted a parade..."

"It was a combination of health and safety worries but also some of the people on the committee didn't want it to happen and for it to be very focused within the gay village."

**8a. Can you remember who those people were that were against the parade?**

"It would have been more of the commercial people who wanted something focused around the gay village. But also to be fair we were struggling to organise what we organised and it would have been a big commitment to try and get those roads closed."

**9. Do you think Pride '97 successfully catered for interests of Birmingham's gay community as a whole?**

"No I don't think it did and no I don't think Pride still does. Apart from the events that happened in the fox I don't think there was enough for women, there could have been more, and there certainly was not enough for African Caribbean or Asian people. There was Black representation on the committee at all, although a bloke called Upton Cloo[?], who used to work for the Nightingale at that time, did get involved in later stages. He was African Caribbean, but there was no focus on any culturally diverse events whatsoever. Without the input from Trevor there would probably have been no thought about access for people in wheelchairs or catering for people with any other disabilities. It was very mainstream focused

and did what it did well enough but it could have been so much better and should have been so much better.”

“I still think that generally out on the scene it’s still predominately able bodied and very white, you know, I don’t think that Birmingham is very good at diversity of any sort really.”

**9a. Why do you think it had such a mainstream focus?**

“I think shortage of time was one factor. I have to say it was getting desperately rushed towards the end just to get anything on the programme that people would want to see. I think lack of experience, you know, that was the beginnings of Birmingham trying to put on something very big and none of us had that kind of experience, and it showed. I mean it was a very small group of people, there was only about twelve of us. So lack of experience was a big factor.”

**10. Did you continue to help with successive Prides?**

“No. A, it was really hard work, and B, I found the meetings quite stressful because of the differences between the community side of things and the commercial side of things, I mean the meetings didn’t dissolve into arguments but it was hard work trying to get your point of view across. And I did feel that some of the ideas that we were trying to contribute did get quietly buried and that the whole thing did become much more commercial than I’d imagined it would be. It was incredibly hard work, you know I’d done a year and that was enough. I was just rather disillusioned with it. I think I went to the second Pride, although I certainly wasn’t involved, but then I stopped going to Pride at all.”

**11. What was your overall impression of Pride 97?**

“I think that it was as good an event as it could have been given the circumstances and it did mark some sort of change in Birmingham’s view of its self as a gay city, or a city that could cater for its gay population.”

**12. Do you think then that Pride 97 represented some sort of watershed for the gay community in Birmingham?**

“It must have been some sort of watershed because we never used to have a Pride and now we have one. Even the City Council vaguely remembers that it’s Pride at the end of May now, which we certainly didn’t imagine could happen in 1997.”

## Appendix 2 - Abolition of West Midlands County Council - Grants to Voluntary Organisations (April 1986)

### Social Services

	£	£
Afro-Caribbean Resource Centre	28,704	
Birmingham Citizens Advice Bureau	110,304	
Birmingham Rape Crisis Centre	12,517	
Birmingham Settlement - Money Advice Centre	36,400	
Community Energy Resource Centre	30,321	
Norton Hall Women and Children's Centre	35,868	
Sikh Youth Service	8,390	
St. Basil's Centre Court Workers	10,000	
Victim Support Scheme E3	1,248	
S.E.N.S.E (National Blind Deaf and Rubella Association)	<u>69,943</u>	343,695

### Leisure Services

Banner Theatre - various projects	20,000	
Birmingham Railway Museum	31,000	
Bread and Circuses Theatre	5,200	
Wheels project	<u>100,000</u>	156,400

### Economic Development

Birmingham Co-Operative Development Agency	36,997	
Birmingham Trades Council Sparkhill Workshop	33,280	
Birmingham Trades Union Resource Centre	89,500	
Engineering Industrial Training Board	148,720	
Greenspring YTS	11,440	
Handprint	24,747	
Midland Vietnamese Community Association	11,247	
Workers Educational Association - Retirement	1,575	
Workers Educational Association - Second Chance	<u>3,278</u>	360,784

### Finance and Management

Saltley Action Law Centre	<u>20,000</u>	20,000
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### General Purposes

Midland Pensioners Convention	<u>3,150</u>	3,150
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TOTAL £ 884,029

The balance of grants in excess of £556,000 will be met in full from the Finance and Management Committee budget for grants to organisations previously supported by the County Council.

Source: Report of the City Treasurer to BCC Finance and Management Committee, 21 April 1986, BCA, Box Ref., Finance and Management Committee 1985-6.





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