

Oral History Interview with Chris Thomas

Interviewer: Bruce Carter

Date of interview: 3 January 2007

Location of interview: Darlington

Reason for interview: Early social groups

Restrictions: None



Log	Summary	Key words
04:40	Gives name, age, place of birth. From age 12 schooled at St Andrews Cathedral School	St Andrews Cathedral School;
05:50	Travelled to school by ferry – S.S. <i>South Steyne</i> – “it was good...a good beat; we used to go down and get off in the old smoking compartment” Was having sex from second form high school with crew on the ferry, and also businessmen and American servicemen on R&R “they were suckers for anything in a grey suit and a straw boater..”	SS South Steyne; American Servicemen; Rest and Recreation;
07:30	At age 14 (1963) met Neil, a classmate “who was very gay..” Neil was doing shows at Les Girls after-hours, unpaid; introduced Chris to the ‘scene’ – “we were both terribly underage”	Neil; Les Girls;
08:06	Describes bar at Chevron Hotel, Macleay Street, Kings Cross, known as the ‘Snakepit’ – “chock-a-block with men...sailors from Garden Island, lots of queens...a blokey poofter pub”	Chevron Hotel; Macleay Street; Kings Cross; Garden Island;
09:20	Describes Rex Hotel, Macleay Street, Kings Cross “the suit brigade was in there...”	Rex Hotel; Macleay Street; Kings Cross;
09:48	House parties on Saturday nights – would buy “anything that was cheap” – Brandovino, a bottle of Moselle, to drink “because we were at school..a group of six of us; guys that went to Manly Boys High, Balgowlah Boys High”. They would take the 730pm ferry from Manly and go to the Cross together	Brandovino; Moselle; Manly Boys High; Balgowlah Boys High; Manly; Kings Cross
10:25	Was ‘out’ to all of this group; would do beats together as well as bars and the house parties	
11:14	Started work for insurance company in 1966	
11:40	Describes Sydney as “very hypocritical” place in 1966 – “a lot of people doing things that were against the law”	
12:25	Describes “the married men doing the beats; there wasn’t a public toilet that wasn’t a beat”. Did beats on northern beaches – Collaroy Surf Club, Narrabeen, Dee Why car park, Balgowlah, the Corso at Manly, North Steyne, South Steyne, and Fairy Bower.	Collaroy Surf Club; Narrabeen; Dee Why Car Park; Balgowlah; the Corso; Manly; North Steyne; South Steyne; Fairy Bower;
13:40	Remembers Fairy Bower as “a big nude men’s get-off place”, that was popular only day times due to its location on cliffs.	Fairy Bower;
14:10	Describes other beats on north side, including Deep Creek set in bushland on Wakehurst Parkway. Recalls man being murdered at Deep Creek.	Deep Creek; Wakehurst Parkway;

14:50	Left home in 1974 – moved to Chippendale. Friend in Roo Bike Club owned the house, and asked him to house-sit. Eventually bought the house.	Chippendale; Roo Bike Club;
15:40	Roo Bike Club (RBC) formed in April 1972. RBC was an off-shoot of the South Pacific Motor Club (SPMC). Thinks there existed “an older group and a younger group” in the SPMC, and “the older group stayed with the SPMC, the younger, more out there guys that were riding bikes all the time started up the Roo Bike Club”	Roo Bike Club; South Pacific Motor Club;
16:40	RBC members would drink at the Barrel Inn, Challis Avenue, Kings Cross.	Barrel Inn; Challis Avenue; Kings Cross;
16:45	Barrell Inn, being a restaurant, was open until midnight, unlike other bars such as the Rex and Chevron which closed at 10pm.	Barrel Inn; Rex; Chevron;
17:20	Describes Barrell Inn “a small restaurant jam-packed with people”; Spanish style décor, white washed walls, heavy wood furniture.	Barrel Inn;
18:15	Barrell Inn attracted “men, masculine, leather..” Opened in 1971 by Ronny Watkins and another man called Bill (cannot recall Bill’s surname), who later went on to open the Laird Hotel in Melbourne.	Ronny Watkins; Bill; Laird Hotel;
18:50	Ronny wanted to cater to a ‘masculine, leather’ type crowd. SPMC also drank at Barrell Inn occasionally. Became the Roo’s “get to know you” bar.	South Pacific Motor Club; Barrel Inn; Roo Bike Club;
20:10	RBC also had clubrooms in Sussex Street, Sydney; “big flight of stairs, it’s where the fly-over is now..”	Sussex Street;
20:40	Clubrooms open on Friday and Saturday nights, Tuesday nights RBC members met at Barrell Inn.	Barrel Inn; Roo Bike Club;
21:00	Mentions several members of RBC who worked in the airline industry and had been to Chicago, San Francisco etc and seen bars there aimed at a ‘masculine, leather’ crowd; wanted to see something similar here.	Roo Bike Club; Chicago; San Francisco;
21:55	Says it wasn’t difficult to buy leather gear in Sydney in the 1970s.	Leather;
22:28	First visit to US in 1976 “wasn’t that expensive, like \$770 return, we went in groups”. Went with members of not only RBC but other motor clubs from Brisbane, Melbourne and Adelaide. Names various gay motor clubs in Australia.	Roo Bike Club;
23:50	“..we all had runs” out into the bush on long weekends – each club had a long weekend event each year.	
24:40	Cannot recall specific circumstances why RBC was started (broke away from SPMC). Joined RBC six months after the group forming. Thinks it may have been that all RBC members actively rode motorbikes, and not all SPMC members did.	Roo Bike Club; South Pacific Motor Club;
25:15	Owning a motorbike was a condition of membership of the RBC, unlike the SPMC.	Roo Bike Club; South Pacific Motor Club;

25:23	Describes weekly activities of RBC. Sussex Street clubrooms closed in 1974, and club moved to premises “a garage in the back lane behind the Beauchamp” Hotel, Darlinghurst. Only stayed about a year at this location, then “just met at the Barrell, usually Friday, Saturday night”	Roo Bike Club; Sussex Street; Beauchamp Hotel; Darlinghurst; Barrel Inn;
26:40	Tuesday nights were meeting nights, Friday and Saturday nights were for socialising. Club was formally structured with a president, vice-president, secretary, corresponding secretary and run captain.	
26:50	Describes role of corresponding secretary – keeping touch with clubs nationally and overseas, producing newsletter <i>Roo News</i> .	Roo News;
27:58	Club hosted many overseas visitors “they all wanted to root with an Aussie” – Americans, Germans, Dutch, English, Mexican, Argentines.	
28:25	Describes dominant gay scene in Sydney at time RBC formed as based around bars and “a few steamy-type places” (steam baths), “but we were too busy being social”.	Roo Bike Club;
28:52	Believes RBC members saw themselves as different from many in the bars – “we didn’t drink as much...we also didn’t wear..well, it was the start of ‘you can be gay without being a drag queen, where you could just be a man, and love yourself if you happened to like guys”	Roo Bike Club;
29:30	Says gay bike clubs were known to straight bike clubs and that “there was never a problem”; only problems came from police “who thought we were an outlaw bike club”	Bike Clubs;
29:45	Describes typical dress of Club members in 1970s – “it was the ‘70s, ‘clone-world’ ”	Clone;
30:05	Believes other gay men not involved in bike/leather scene “were terrified” – assuming that leather men must be “all S and M”	S & M; Leather;
30:59	Lots of men from the bush moving to Sydney and discovering gay scene.	
31:32	Late 70s many bars opening, by 1980s commercial bar scene “in full swing”	Commercial bar scene;
31:48	Illegality of sex between men. Gay activists agitating for law reform.	Gay movement;
32:17	Cannot recall any antipathy from gay movement activists towards clone/leather/bike club guys.	
34:00	Stesses that RBC members wore leather “for safety” on bikes, not for “any sexual connotations”, although that did come later; “some people wore it for safety, some for fetish”.	Roo Bike Club;
35:28	December 1975 clubrooms behind Beauchamp Hotel in Darlinghurst closed. Last function at the clubrooms raised funds for Cyclone Tracey relief fund “we auctioned off	Beauchamp Hotel; Darlinghurst; Johnny

	a guy named Johnny Cupit with a paper bag over his head..about a week after Tracey”	Cupit; Cyclone Tracey;
38:10	Membership dues would be paid yearly. Club was always solvent – “we had pretty cluey people when it came to money” in the Club.	
38:50	Membership in early years was small - “about 10 people”	
39:01L	Later on ‘associate memberships’ were started. Constitution was changed, ‘associate members’ were those without bikes. Membership at its peak reached “about 40” people. ‘Associate members’ did not hold voting rights. Cannot recall when associate membership was introduced. Many ‘associate members’ were full members of gay bike clubs interstate.	
40:10	“there was always a core of about 20 full members in the Club up until its demise in ‘88”	
40:25	Describes club runs – “we’d go bush” - first RBC run was to Bungle Park beside Nepean River in November 1973 “probably about 40 of us..we took a piano..one of the guys could play piano..away we went..” <i>Note: see 45:35</i>	Bungle Park; Nepean River;
42:20	People would swim, “pair off”, although most men in RBC were in relationships.	Roo Bike Club;
43:00	Club associated with members of the Denim Guy Club. Second run RBC involved in was up to Scone with the Denim Guy Club in 1973. Thinks about 12 people went.	Denim Guy Club; Roo Bike Club;
43:50	Denim Guy Club was for men into leather and ‘country and western’ type gear, started by a man called Kevin Holmes – “they were sort of ‘bushies”	Denim Guy Club; Kevin Holmes;
44:19	RBC runs most Saturday or Sunday’s – RBC would join up with SPMC members. No animosity with SPMC, although “we’d have our jibes..SPMC got to be called SPAM – Singer-powered motor club- they were very good at making costumes”.	Roo Bike Club; SPMC; SPAM;
45:35	Piano on second run to Bungle Park, in 1974, not first <i>Note: see 40:25</i>	Bungle Park;
45:55	Recalls “lots of food” on runs.	
46:50	RBC runs to Hill End started in 1978. Became known as Hill End runs, but not actually to Hill End – “beside Turong River, past Bathurst”.	Roo Bike Club; Hill End; Turong River; Bathurst;
47:40	Describes RBC insignia. Cannot recall who designed it.	Roo Bike Club;
48: 45	Members wore a blue denim overlay with RBC patch on front and back.	Roo Bike Club;
49:27	Runs became larger. Hill End started with about 40 people, grew to over 120 in 1980s.	Hill End;

50:20	Last run in late 1980s had about 140 people. Dot Dingle (David Wilkins) did entertainment.	David Wilkins;
50:35	Describes shows that started on runs in 1980s – “something to do on Saturday night”.	
51:10	Shows could be elaborate – “..foot lights, spot lights, scenery, a tent for costumes..we had a tv monitor in the dressing room showing what was happening on stage..”	
51:39	Club members drew on skills and contacts in various fields to make shows happen.	
51:50	Club members came from a broad cross section – “theatre, travel, businesses, government departments.. a really broad range of people – no unemployed..a very good mix that worked really well”	
52:30	Most active members of Club “got tired..the same people doing the same work time after time – that’s why clubs fold, there’s no fresh blood, and everybody wanted to enjoy themselves and not do the fucking work”	Roo Bike Club;
53:05	Believes decriminalisation in NSW of sex between men in 1984 changed the relevance of clubs such as RBC – “people didn’t need that closeness with other guys, you could do it independently” – didn’t need strength in numbers as a form of self protection.	Decriminalisation; Roo Bike Club;
53:57	Describes working at Newtown Hotel when the law changed in 1984, and noticing change in attitude of people “..there was a lot more independence, not the closeness between customers that there used to be..people didn’t have to seek companionship in a group” any longer.	Newtown Hotel;
55:20	Believes change in legality resulted in gay men becoming harsher in their relations with each other – “before it was legal, you could go to someone’s house party after the pub, nothing would get stolen”	
56:30	Believes today the attitude is more “gimme, gimme, gimme..a lot of the young gays feel it is their right to have everything handed to them on a platter”	
56:40	Impact of drugs on Sydney’s gay scene – “started with Americans in 60s” on rec. leave from duty in Vietnam.	Vietnam; Americans;
57:41	Believes drug use today on scene such as crystal-meth use makes people sociopathic – “you only think of yourself”	
59:35	Impact of AIDS – lost many close friends - another factor in demise of RBC.	AIDS; Roo Bike Club;
1:00:09	Last meeting of RBC was in October 1988 – Club run to property near Canberra/Bundanoon area.	Roo Bike Club; Canberra; Bundanoon;
1:01:04	Believes the “friendship, honesty, the trust” between Club members was the best	Roo Bike Club;

	aspect of being an RBC member.	
1:01:30	Silliest memory of RBC days was taking 14 men in full leather to his parents house at Morisett for afternoon tea. Mother put on “full afternoon tea”, father was out the front checking out all the bikes.	Morisett;
1:03:02	Though the Club monopolised a lot of his time he doesn’t regret this – “everybody that was a core member had a passion for the Club..”	Roo Bike Club;
1:04:31	Believes clubs offered friendship and acceptance.	
1:07:20	1981 – After Chris had been working at the Flinders Hotel for a while, Roo Club moved to Newtown Hotel on Tuesday nights	Flinders Hotel; Roo Bike Club; Newtown Hotel;
1:08:14	BREAK	
1:09:25	1977 – a lot of US guys visited after RBC members went to US in ‘76 – Club hired an East West Fokker Friendship for a mystery flight, flew “down to Nowra and back..a lot of fun” . Mystery flights were popular and RBC held several, sometimes using Rebel Air DC3.	Roo Bike Club; East West; Fokker Friendship plane; Rebel Air DC3;
1:12:42	Believes that one day people will return to the “camaraderie and silliness” that existed then.	
1:12:58	Describes ‘in-flight meal’ offered to punters on mystery flights “silly, silly things”	
1:13:58	Michael Glynn. David Beschi.	Michael Glynn; David Beschi;
1:14:27	Describes other Club events that were not runs with camp flavour – tour of men’s toilets at Sydney Opera House and Central Station – remembers one outing themed <i>Bad Taste Tourist</i> .	Sydney Opera House; Central Station; Bad Taste Tourist;
1:16:25	ENDS	