

Pride History Group Oral History Interview with Bill (Francis Edward) Thornycroft

Interviewer: John Witte

Date of interview: 3 October 2013

Location of interview: Broxholm Road, West Norwood UK

Reason for interview: Australians in London in 1970s

Restrictions: None



Time	Summary	Key words
0030	Name, date and place of birth.	Worthing;
0050	Family background. Mother a socialist. Boyhood in Worthing and the Downs and living with school chum's family. Father was an engineer at Ricardo's Engineering.	Socialist; Worthing; South Downs;
0205	Schooling. Primary and Secondary school. The school was evacuated. He went to Petersfield School.	Worthing County High School for Boys; "Stayput Campaign";
0420	Impact of depression. Family not affected. Mother pointed out quarter mile long queues at the Labour Exchange. His sister joined Communist Party in 1935 and other siblings did as well. Spanish refugee children. Sister designed posters for "Aid for Spain.	Labour Party; Communist Party;
0620	After school in 1943, he went to college in London. Life in London during the blackouts and blitz. Aged 16 he joined the Home Guard and became a despatch rider. Volunteered for anti-aircraft guns in London. Function of anti-aircraft gunners.	Blitz; Flying Bombs; Home Guard;
1000	Unconscious knowledge he was homosexual. Conversation with his mother about getting married.	
1200	Sex with men. Masturbation with men one picked up in the black out.	
1310	South London gay scene in the 1950s. Worked for Collet's Bookshops, selling Communist magazines. In Edinburgh stayed overnight with a woman and he shared the bed with her son who was an out gay man, who introduced Bill to the London gay scene.	Collet's Bookshops;
1420	Through the gay scene, he met Fred his first long term partner. Description of Fred's social circle and weekly party at Harry's flat. Drag acts at the Dorset Arms;	Dorset Arms;
1545	After the 1967 Act, a commercial scene emerged. Prior to that the scene was secretive.	Sexual Offences Act 1967;
1620	About ten went to the house parties, including a woman who was the centre of it. Played music and danced. At a party in 1956 he met Fred and they became partners for 9 years. They owned a shop together for nine years and after selling the shop, he moved back with his mother.	Judy Garland;
1840	He later met Dennis and they were lovers for many years until he died.	
1900	Joined the Communist Party in 1943.	
1940	Attitudes to homosexuality in the Communist Party in the 1960s. London and Hampstead were more liberal.	Hampstead Communist Party;
2050	Issues raised by the Communist Party. Women's issues were raised later. Opposing the Korean War. Every year there were huge anti-nuclear marches from Aldermaston.	Korean War; Aldermaston;
2135	Invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. An exodus from the Party. His friend Margery Mason joined as others left.	Margery Mason;
2400	Gay Liberation Front. Bill got involved when South London Gay Liberation started. He saw the front page in the Streatham and Crystal Palace Advertiser (?) reporting that Gay Liberation had taken over the local library. He went to the second meeting, after hesitating. Leigh Hughes came out and dragged him in.	Gay Liberation Front; Streatham and Crystal Palace Advertiser; Leigh Hughes;
2545	Description of the meeting. It was non-hierarchical but they developed a structure to stop bullies taking over. There were "awareness groups" where people would hold	awareness groups;

	hands and talk about their lives.	
2815	They wanted to come out. They started with parades. Police response at Croydon parade.	Brixton; Croydon; Streatham;
2915	An idea to squat a building. The more conservative members left. They squatted 78 Railton Road, Brixton. Jamie Hall had squatted 79. Mícheál squatted St George's Hall. And the squatting grew around the Gay Centre attracting people from around the world. Those who left had moral objections to squatting.	78 Railton Road; Jamie Hall;
3050	The area had been earmarked for slum clearance. The older white residents were moved out and it had been derelict for some time.	Slum Clearance;
3100	"The straight leader of the squatters had the keys for what became the Gay Centre and handed it over to us". The squatter movement was big at the time.	South London Gay Community Centre; Squatter Movement;
3150	They opened up and someone lived above in the flat. When it opened, the local community were invited. The gay squatters were in drag.	
3340	The centre had a phone service – a forerunner of Gay Switchboard. Icebreakers was run from the Centre for a time. Callers were invited to come to the Centre and there were tea parties on Sunday afternoons in people's houses.	Gay Switchboard; Icebreakers;
3550	Friendships with other gay squats – eg Fleet Road in Hampstead. East London had a community centre briefly.	Fleet Road, Hampstead; East London Gay Community Centre;
3730	Squatting just grew without a conscious sense of creating a gay squatting movement. "It was a catalyst."	
3800	The Community Centre closed after a couple of years. The hard-core politicians were away on holiday. Four or five (the Nerds) – anarchists - who styled themselves as the working-class vs "the college boys", took over the Centre and messed it up. They didn't pay the bills so the phone and electricity were cut off.	South London Gay Community Centre;
4010	Bill mentions and earlier stunt by the Council to evict them to make it look like they were hard on squatters.	Lambeth Council;
4200	The other houses that were squatted continued and the enclave taking in Railton and Mayall Roads continues. They have created a communal garden. Jonathan looks after the whole garden.	Railton Road; Mayall Road;
4330	AIDS. Jamie Hall was ill and staying at Broxholm Road. AIDS was then called HTVL3. Jamie was the first he knew who died. The last day with Jamie. In the squats, Alistair, Gary (de Vere), Colm (Clifford) and Michael O'Dwyer.	AIDS; HTVL3; Gary de Vere; Colm Clifford; Michael O'Dwyer;
4915	Memories of Gary de Vere. A forceful man, maybe opinionated. He was an antiquarian bookseller dealing in 19 th century books to former British colonies.	Gary de Vere;
5100	Peter Vetter came at the end of the gay centre. Paul Coyle came later. Jeff Saynor there earlier.	Peter Vetter; Paul Coyle; Jeff Saynor;