

Pride History Group Oral History Interview with Ian Townson

Interviewer: John Witte

Date: 4 October 2013

Location of interview: London

Reason for interview: PHG, Australians in London

Restrictions: None



Time	Summary	Keywords
00100	Born 10 Dec 1950, in Lancaster, England. Dad was a taxi driver; mother unpaid housewife, and did cleaning work and charity work.	
00200	Schooling: didn't enjoy it. Got very nasty bullying teachers in high school. At the Castle School became a prefect and Head Boy. Wrote for school magazine.	
00320	Dad: apolitical and a philanderer – left the family when Ian was about 10 years old. Mum was fiercely Scottish, of protestant background. She was conservative, royalist.	Family
00445	At school was very good at French. Did a few operettas/plays. Not interested in sport. Disqualified from sport for his poor eyesight. More interested in the arts.	School life
00600	Had no idea what to do when left school. Did some textile factory work, ended up as a shop steward. Organised strike action against Edward Heath's 1971 Industrial Relations Act. Worked for Merino Knitwear.	Early jobs
00720	Went back to school to do A Levels. Broke down because of sexuality. Saw a psychiatrist. Attempted suicide a couple of times – more a cry for help. Had aversion therapy – very crude – electric shock. Was trying anything to stop the feelings, the internalized fear he had. His mother was ok with him being gay.	Aversion therapy
00950	If he had had anyone around him saying 'gay is ok', it might've been very different for him. This was 1968. No-one to advise him. GP put him in touch with Ridgley (where had the aversion therapy). Managed to stop the therapy.	
01130	Got involved with community political (anarchist) groups; set up a free press. This helped. They rescued him – gave him respite from home and school life. Gave him breathing space.	
01220	The Farmers Arms in Lancaster was a place where all the alternatives met. Those who challenged the status quo. Early 1970s so a lot of gay liberation groups, anarchist groups, counter culture groups.	The Farmers Arm
01630	Lancaster Uni gay liberation group organized a bus to Bradford where DJ West, famous psychiatrist, was speaking about homosexuality at a conference. People from all over the country	Gay Liberation Psychiatrist DJ West Don Milligan

	went there to protest and take over the venue. Addressed by Don Milligan in drag.	
01815	This event/protest is where he met people from Brixton (who also came to Bradford to protest). People like Colm Clifford, Gary de Vere (Australian). And went down to London, Oct 1974, Brixton. Joined the Gay Community Centre Squat (5-6 months after they had established it in Railton Road). Ian stayed at 146 Mayall Road. Arrived just in time for 1974 General Election. South London Gay Liberation put up a candidate – Malcolm Greatbanks. As a process of coming out. Didn't expect to win a seat.	Brixton South London Gay Liberation Railton Road Mayall Road Malcolm Greatbanks 1974 General Election, UK
02030	Squatting explained. Esp in the Lambeth Council area. Many on Railton Road.	Squatting
02310	Gay liberation wanted their own space – claiming the right to exist – and coming out as a gay organization. It was a social centre and a counterpoint to the unfriendly, inhospitable commercial gay scene. Held weekly discos, dance classes, Spanish classes – a fully-fledged resource for gay people.	Gay Community Centre
02430	Weekly collective meeting to discuss campaigns, e.g. picketing local pubs where they were thrown out of, The George, The Prince Regent, The Windsor Castle. Got support from local counsellors – joined sit-ins at the pubs. Socialists in the Labor Party would join them. Picketed branches of WH Smiths for banning/not selling Gay News. The Gay Centre lasted from 1974 to 1976.	Localized campaigns The George The Prince Regent The Windsor Castle Sit-ins WH Smiths
02740	Once closed down, the focus shifted to all the squats. Organised social activities at Lambeth Town Hall. Gay Centre drew more people into the area to squat.	Lambeth Town Hall
02830	The prosecution of Gay News for blasphemous libel by Mary Whitehouse (right-wing, conservative) – lots of demonstrations. Had Mary Whitehouse, Anita Bryant and Adolf Hitler all on the same banner.	Mary Whitehouse
03015	Other gay squats; Fleet Rd, Hampstead Heath. Radnor Terrace, Women's Groups there. East London Gay Centre in Stepney. Bethnal Rouge – drag queens. Coleville Terrace – drag queens.	Gay squats
03240	Refused to pay rates for the Gay Centre (during Queens in Fur phase) – taken to Camberwell Magistrates Court. Lost and still had to pay.	
03500	Lots of Australians involved in the campaigns: Peter Vetter, Gary de Vere, Paul Coil, Kevin Taylor, Jeffrey Saynor, Terry Stewart. The Australians and Irish were most outspoken – had a bigger sense of injustice.	Gary de Vere, Paul Coil, Kevin Taylor, Jeffrey Saynor, Terry Stewart
03715	Gary de Vere's involvement in the movement.	

	[Audio interview with Gary in the Hall Carpenter Archive.]	
03930	Very little communication between white and black folk in Brixton, except in 1981 during the riots when there were acts of solidarity. Heavy handed policing against black youth. Joined a picket outside Brixton Police Station when a young black man was beaten and killed. Only a few black out gay men in their circle.	
04340	Formal name was South London Gay Liberation Theatre Group, but soon morphed into Brixton Faeries. South London Gay Community Centre cast their net wider than just Brixton.	South London Gay Liberation Theatre Group
04445	How Brixton Faeries came about. A few people had theatre experience: Stephen Gee did drama at uni; Julian Howes was involved in other drama groups. Seen as another way of coming out. All fun. Agitprop. Performed one play in a local school playground at a festival, small theatres, Campaign for Sexual Equality conferences. Not well organized. Titles: Mr Punch's Nuclear Family (challenging patriarchal attitudes) Out of It – examining the relationship between Festival of Light, Fascism and The National Front. Gents – that celebrated Cottaging (Tea Room Trade in the US), Beats in Australia. Men having sex with each other in public toilets. Minehead Revisited or The Warts that Dared to Speak Their Name – about Jeremy Thorpe's affair with Norman Scott.	Brixton Faeries Plays Stephen Gee Julian Howes Agitprop Mr Punch's Nuclear Family Out of It Gents Minehead Revisited or The Warts that Dared to Speak Their Name Jeremy Thorpe Norman Scott
05730	Gay Sweatshop also did a lot. More professional, better organized. Did international tours. Propagandists.	Gay Sweatshop
05915	Bloodlips was radical drag at its most bonkers. Burlesque/Cabaret, splendid. Influenced by Hot Peaches.	Bloodlips
10000	The Oval House – a resource centre for disadvantaged youth, theatre, modern dance. Now just about theatre. Very localized.	The Oval House
10030	Union Place – did printing, outreach. Worked there.	Union Place
10315	Squatting: over 6-7 years, houses were squatted. People turned up at the Gay Centre and asked if anywhere to stay. 159 Railton Road was one of the main ones. Partly empty buildings, some still had people living there. 6 houses on Mayall Rd, and 6 on Railton Rd. Created communal gardens between the properties. Alastair Kerr – a custodian of the Gay Centre. Tony Smith – (Ian's partner) lived at 146 Mayall Rd. Edwin Henshaw was already there. Knew each other at Cambridge University.	The Squats Mayall Road Railton Road Alastair Kerr Tony Smith Edwin Henshaw Matthew Jones Jamie Hall, David Callow, David Simpson, Peter

	<p>Several were Irish (Michael O'Dwyer, Edwin Henshaw, Terry Stewart)</p> <p>Andreas from Cypress – organized dance classes, yoga – with Henry Pimm. They squatted 148 Mayall Rd.</p> <p>Matthew Jones (Australian) – did lighting for their shows.</p> <p>Jamie Hall, David Callow, David Simpson, Peter Vetter, Peter Cross all at 159 Railton Rd.</p> <p>Lots of traffic between the squats.</p>	Vetter, Peter Cross
11330	<p>1980s:</p> <p>1981 Brixton riots. Nobody local was surprised that they happened. Due to police harassment. Many buildings in Railton Rd were trashed. 2 pubs burned to the ground.</p> <p>Two of Ian's acquaintances were sent to prison for supplying petrol to the rioters (for petrol bombs).</p>	1981 Brixton Riots
11640	<p>A lot of looting happened. Public buildings were trashed not private dwellings. It was scary. Journalists were attacked as well. Had a street party the day after the riots ended. Got some hostile responses. Some black resistance.</p>	
12015	<p>HIV/AIDS: Started to hear about it as people died.</p> <p>Ian in Germany and Brighton and away from the epicentre.</p> <p>Many who were involved with Brixton Faeries died: Alastair, Gary, Colm, Michael O'Dwyer, Jim Ennis, David Callum.</p> <p>The threat seemed to come from the Americans (be wary of Americans; don't die of ignorance ads).</p> <p>Viewed as a death sentence. No drugs at the time. Very ignorant of how people were dying.</p> <p>Didn't subscribe to the abstinence theory.</p>	HIV/AIDS
12440	<p>Terrence Higgins Trust – education about HIV</p> <p>The gay press had a lot of information.</p>	
12750	<p>1984 still in Brighton, then moved to Clapham, so was out of the community by then.</p>	
12915	<p>Heritage of the squatting:</p> <p>All of the squats were preserved as a gay area. Became part of the Brixton Housing Cooperative – social housing.</p> <p>Each individual was able to design their own flat in the remodeling that happened. And everyone was moved back in again with the communal garden preserved. But it was more isolating as in individual flats. Some of the elan was lost.</p>	Squats Brixton Housing Cooperative
13325	<p>Still have a friendship network.</p>	