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The evolution of the gay male public sphere in England and Wales 1967-c.1983

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The Evolution of the Gay Male Public Sphere in England and Wales, 1967- c.1983

By

Charles Smith

**Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the
award of Doctor of Philosophy of Loughborough University**

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Abstract

The Evolution of the Gay Male Public Sphere in England and Wales 1967-c.1983

This thesis is a reassessment of gay male politics in England and Wales during the period between the decriminalisation of homosexual acts in private in 1967 and the HIV epidemic of the early 1980s. It looks beyond the activities of the revolutionary Gay Liberation Front and its offshoots which have dominated previous accounts. Instead it considers a broader range of social and political organisations which developed for gay men in the seventies: including reformist NGOS such as the Campaign for Homosexual Equality, the gay club scene, and publications such as *Gay News*. Through a detailed consideration of these less formally radical enterprises it argues that the seventies saw the creation of a broadly Habermasian 'public sphere' of gay male life. The gay male public sphere was a set of social spaces, political campaigns, and communications media which were explicitly aligned to a gay male identity and had no direct precedent in previous queer public cultures. However, this was not precisely analogous to gay men 'Coming Out' as the GLF understood the term. Participation in the gay male public did not necessarily involve openly declaring your sexuality to all possible audiences. It was also not necessarily a radical challenge to the state and existing society and, this thesis argues, gay male politics in the seventies was characterised as much by people who wanted to work within existing systems as it was by those who wanted to overturn them. This thesis also considers the limits that were placed on the gay male public sphere, through an account of the operation of the Sexual Offences Act and Mary Whitehouse's prosecution of *Gay News* for blasphemous Libel. As such it is a contribution to debates about the nature and extent of Britain's postwar 'Permissive Society.'

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The line of thinking that produced this thesis began when I was just short of twenty years old, with a tutorial essay titled 'How Permissive was the Permissive Society?' As I write these acknowledgements I am around a month past thirty and struck by the people I have had the luck to know in that tumultuous decade and the impossibility of doing justice to them all in the few words which follow.

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Abbreviations

The Albany Trust (AT)
Campaign for Homosexual Equality (CHE)
Coleherne Road Residents' Association (CRRA)
Coleherne Patrons' Committee (CPC)
Cultuur en Ontspanningscentrum (COC).
Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP)
Gay Liberation Front (GLF)
Gay News (GN)
Gay and Lesbian Advocates and Defenders (GLAD)
Gay London Police Monitoring Group (GALOP)
Hall Carpenter Archives (HCA)
Homosexual Law Reform Society (HLRS)
International Committee for Sexual Equality (ICSE)
Lesbian and Gay Newsmedia Archive (LAGNA)
London Lesbian and Gay Switchboard (LGS)
Minorities Research Group (MRG)
Northern Irish Gay Rights Association (NIGRA)
North Western Homosexual Law Reform Committee (NWHLRC)
Obscene Publications Act (OPA)
Paedophile Information Exchange (PIE)
Sexual Offences Act (SOA)
The National Archives (TNA)

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Introduction

The historiography of gay male life in the seventies is surprisingly sparse. A series of popular history books which touched on the period appeared in the 1990s, and over the last twenty five years an incredible amount of individual stories have been collected and published through oral and community history work.¹ However, the most comprehensive and developed academic account remains the first: the final chapters of Jeffrey Weeks' 1977 work *Coming Out*.² The vast majority of subsequent scholarship has agreed with the basic chronology proposed by Weeks. These narratives emphasise two main points: the limited impact of the 1967 Sexual Offences Act (SOA) and the transformational influence of the Gay Liberation Front (GLF). Weeks and his successors have portrayed the GLF as playing an almost determining role in the creation of a gay identity and community, and credited much of the recent political and social gay rights gains to their legacy.³ In particular they have focused on gay men 'coming out' of the closet, aggressively challenging their marginalisation in society by moving in to the public realm as an act of revolutionary

¹ See for example A. Jivani, *It's Not Unusual: A History of Lesbian and Gay Britain* (London, 1997); C. Spencer, *Homosexuality: a history* (London, 1995); H. David, *On Queer Street: a social history of British homosexuality, 1895-1995* (London, 1997). For oral and community history, see Hall Carpenter Archives Gay Men's Oral History Group, *Walking after Midnight: Gay Men's Life Stories* (London, 1989); J. Weeks and K. Porter (eds), *Between the Acts: lives of homosexual men, 1885-1967* (rev. edn) (London, 1998); L. Power, *No Bath but Plenty of Bubbles: an oral history of the gay liberation* (London, 1995); B. Cant and S. Hemmings (eds), *Radical Records: Thirty Years of Lesbian and Gay History* (London, 1988); C. Summerskill, *Gateway to Heaven: Fifty Years of Gay and Lesbian Oral History* (London, 2013); National Gay and Lesbian Survey, *Proust, Cole Porter, Michelangelo, Marc Almond and Me: writings by gay men on their lives and lifestyles from the archives of the National Lesbian and Gay Survey* (London, 1993); M. Riley (ed), *Nowt so Queer: Tales from LGBT Lancashire* (Preston and South Ribble, 2008); Out in the City, *Tales from Out in the City: An anthology of memories* (Manchester, 2009); T. Walton (ed) *Out of the Shadows: a history of the pioneering London gay groups and organisations* (London, 2010).

² J. Weeks, *Coming Out: Homosexual Politics in Britain from the Nineteenth Century to the Present* (rev. edn) (London, 1990).

³ L. Robinson, *Gay Men and the Left: How the Personal Got Political* (Manchester, 2007) and M. Cook, 'From Gay Reform to Gaydar, 1967-2006' in *idem* (ed), *A Gay History of Britain: love and sex between men since the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 2007), pp.179-213.

political will. This thesis challenges the existing historiography by looking at a broader range of gay organisations and argues that the history of gay male politics has to concentrate as much on the reformist as the revolutionary, and on entrepreneurs as well as protestors.

This introduction is divided into four sections. The first provides a detailed reading of *Coming Out* and argues that it has to be interpreted as a product of the 1970s as well as a history of it. It then identifies four main gaps in the historiography that have been left by its concentration upon the most radical political groups. The second section argues that by addressing these gaps we are able to identify the emergence of broadly Habermasian gay male 'public sphere' in the 1970s. The third section discusses how the public sphere which emerged in the late twentieth century differs from the public sexual cultures identified in earlier periods by the new British Queer History. In the final section I discuss the parameters of the work, define its chronological and geographical extent, set out the sources I have used and summarise the chapters which follow.

Reassessing *Coming Out*

The first edition of *Coming Out* was published in 1977, just three years after the end of the GLF, and it is rooted in the politics of that era. As well as being a crucial foundational work of the history of sexuality, it is an argument against reformist politics. *Coming Out* is a history of 'reform groupings' of homosexuals from the late nineteenth century to the 1970s. It is not, however, an uncritical celebration of such groups, who Weeks saw as operating from a flawed, 'essentialist' understanding of homosexuality. They felt there was a natural, transhistorical figure called 'the homosexual' and therefore that hostility towards

homosexuality could be seen as 'arbitrary figment of men's unreason'⁴. This meant that reformers tried to argue for change within existing social structures, rather than take the revolutionary action which Weeks felt was needed. The men who agitated for the implementation of the Wolfenden Report and the law they eventually secured, were an example of this flawed approach.

According to *Coming Out* the campaign for law reform was cautious and uninspiring. Weeks characterised Wolfenden's recommendations 'as limited and conservative', and claimed that the committee was not concerned with the rights of homosexuals. Instead they wanted to preserve public decency by abolishing offences which were 'difficult to discover and troublesome... to prosecute'⁵. He called the Homosexual Law Reform Society (HLRS), which lobbied for Wolfenden to be implemented, 'perhaps overly cautious' and afraid to challenge public opinion. The Sexual Offences Act itself was 'hardly a trumpet call to freedom'⁶ and left a long list of inequalities in law. It had been passed not through the efforts of homosexual men themselves but by well-meaning liberals. After reform, Weeks notes, the number of prosecutions for homosexual offences actually went up. The social landscape post-decriminalisation was similarly uninspiring, some gay magazines were established but they focused on a limited young, metropolitan male demographic and had little to say to

⁴ Weeks, *Coming Out* (rev. edn), p.7. This reflected the strong 'social constructionist' stance Weeks has taken throughout his career. Most commonly associated with the work of Michel Foucault, social constructionism rejects the 'repressive hypothesis' - the assumption that there is an innate, liberated form of sexuality that can be unleashed through the removal of 'Victorian' restrictions. Instead the figure of the 'modern homosexual' is said to have emerged through discourses of medical and legal experts in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. (M. Foucault translated by R. Hurley, *The History of Sexuality*, Vol.1 (London 1979). For more on the interminable debates between social constructionists and essentialist in the seventies, please see J. Weeks, 'Queer(y)ing the Modern Homosexual', *Journal of British Studies*, Vol.51, No. 3 (2012), pp. 523-39. For a general collection of writing on both sides see E. Stein (ed), *Forms of Desire: Sexual Orientation and the Social Construction Controversy* (New York and London, 1992). For further key examples in the British case see K. Plummer (ed), *The Making of the Modern Homosexual* (London, 1981), and R. Norton, *The Myth of the Modern Homosexual: Queer History and the Myth of Search for Cultural Unity* (London, 1997).

⁵ Weeks, *Coming Out* (Rev. edn), p.166.

⁶ Ibid., p.176.

anyone else. A few new fashionable gay discos had emerged in London but men could not dance at them. Political activity was limited to the 'modest proposals' of the North Western Homosexual Law Reform Committee (NWLHRC) to set up a series of non-profit making social clubs, which were condemned by the parliamentary sponsors of the 1967 Act.⁷

According to Weeks the 1970s saw 'the turning point in the evolution of homosexual consciousness' of which the Gay Liberation Front was 'the most typical and dynamic representative'⁸. Weeks showed how the GLF challenged the ideology behind all previous homosexual law reform efforts. It rejected liberal appeals for 'tolerance' which by definition placed gay people in a subordinate position to the people in power. 'The existing organizations in asking (some said begging) the oppressor for acceptance, were revealing their own self oppression.'⁹ The GLF also condemned the existing 'gay scene' of cottages, clubs and pubs as a ghetto and an exploitative substitute for a real gay community. Instead of meeting in secret or respectfully lobbying for reform the GLF declared that gay people should 'Come Out', a process, which involved 'declaring, even asserting, your sexual identity to all comers'¹⁰. Furthermore the GLF did not see the issue of homosexual rights in isolation from other political issues. To them homosexual oppression was an aspect of two larger political problems, sexism and capitalism. Specifically, gay people were oppressed because by challenging existing gender roles they destabilised the very basis of capitalist society, the nuclear family.

⁷ Ibid., p.182.

⁸ Ibid., p.185.

⁹ Ibid., p.190.

¹⁰ Ibid., p.162.

In a period of intense activity between 1970 and 1972 the GLF held the first gay rights protests in the UK. The protests were directed against the police, evangelical Christians, the Heath Government, and the management of gay pubs. It also ran dances, debated issues, held consciousness raising meetings, and conducted lifestyle experiments in communes. Yet this was only a very brief period of activity, by 1972 GLF had started to split as the women left the organisation and the men divided between the 'radical feminist' and 'activist' camps.¹¹ By 1973 the movement had split into subgroups and there was no one organisation you could call the GLF. Weeks explained how such a small and short-lived organisation could have had such an impact thus:

On at least three levels its impact was deep: on the individual, on the gay community and in political debate. For many individuals it provided the possibility for at least partial individual liberation. They asserted their homosexuality, got rid of personal hang-ups caused by social pressures, developed new relationships and new life patterns ... For the gay community it had an immensely stimulating effect in ways that are still being realised. GLF did not cause the changes, but it suggested that they might be possible. Finally the GLF helped make homosexuality a political issue in the broadest sense.¹²

To Weeks, GLF was significant not because of its *direct* influence, but because it changed gay people's outlook. In 1977 this was an important distinction to make because the gay scene was developing in a very different way than this GLF activist had envisaged.

Summing up the period between 1973 and 1976 in a chapter doubtfully titled *A Gay Community?*, Weeks revealed his ambiguous feelings about recent developments. He noted the increase in the membership of the reformist Campaign for Homosexual (CHE), which had evolved out of the NWHLRC. But he attributed this to the stimulus provided by the GLF, and was critical of CHE's concentration on law reform and obsession with its own structure.

¹¹ Ibid., pp.200-04.

¹² Ibid., p.206.

Similarly he observed that there was now an 'expanded, more lavish subculture' but there were 'still few traces of a genuine community where lesbians and gay men could meet each other without stereotyping, competitiveness, sexism or age discrimination'¹³. The gay community had absorbed some of the energy of the GLF, but unlike the GLF they were aiming to be accommodated by existing society.

The most frequently read edition of *Coming Out* is the revised 1990 version, which obscures the fact that the book's historical narrative is a product of the mid-seventies. When producing the new edition Weeks left most of the book unchanged, but inserted a new final chapter (on gay politics in the eighties) in the place of the original finale 'Old Ways New Departures', which had set out his views on the future of gay politics in 1977. According to Weeks, by 1977 the revolutionary potential of the GLF had dissipated, with gay people starting to seek an acceptance within society rather than trying to change it completely. In his words, '[t]he oppositional force of gay liberation lost its power as it became clear that its minimal demands – for limited openness, better social facilities and small changes in the legal situation – if not already universally conceded were now historically possible.' Weeks felt such a moderate political programme was making the same mistakes as previous reform movements. Instead he argued that gay activists should work with the revolutionary left, as 'properly fulfilled lives will only be possible in a new type of society based on socialist principles.'¹⁴ Genuine progress for gay people had not been possible without a revolutionary movement, and further progress would not be possible until another one emerged.

¹³ Ibid., pp.207-30.

¹⁴ Ibid., pp.231-38.

Later generations of scholars have tended to mirror Weeks' account. Lucy Robinson's work on gay politics has focused on bringing together left history and gay history, arguing that considering connections between the two bring 'social and the political change in postwar Britain into clearer focus'¹⁵. Consequently her book *Gay Men and the Left* pivots its account around the GLF, and discusses reformist organisations such as CHE solely in terms of their reaction to gay liberation. Similarly, Matt Cook opens his account on events after law reform in *A Gay History of Britain* with a description of a GLF protest and says the chapter is about '[t]his assertive gay pride and the reservations many others had about it'. Cook then downplays law reform and attributes the growth of gay clubs, and newspapers to the impetus given by gay liberation.¹⁶ Because it concentrates on parliamentary politics Stephen Jeffrey Poulter's *Peers, Queers and Commons* spends more time on reformism than most other books, but it still follows Weeks in emphasising the central importance of the GLF.¹⁷

More general academic and popular histories have reproduced this account. For instance Adam Lent has used the GLF as a key case study in his work on Social Movements, in which he denies that the SOA had any impact and says that CHE only 'came of age' in 1975, nearly a decade into its existence, when it absorbed former GLF activists.¹⁸ In his account of the 1970s *When the Lights Went Out*, journalist Andy Beckett devotes most of his section on gay politics to the GLF. He describes other important developments, most notably the establishment of the gay commercial scene but attributes their growth to the influence of

¹⁵ L. Robinson, *Gay Men and the Left*, p.1.

¹⁶ M. Cook, 'From Gay Reform to Gaydar, 1967-2006', pp.179-213.

¹⁷ S. Jeffrey-Poulter, *Peers, Queers, and Commons: The Struggle for Gay Law Reform from 1950 to the Present* (London, 1991).

¹⁸ A. Lent, *British Social Movements Since 1945: sex, colour, peace and power* (Basingstoke 2001)

radical politics: 'The GLF helped establish in modern Britain for the first time a visible, unapologetic and rapidly expanding gay subculture'¹⁹.

I do not question Weeks' account of the London GLF itself, but histories which focus solely on that movement fail to address four key issues. Firstly, they reproduce the GLF's contempt for law reform and underestimate the impact of decriminalisation. The Sexual Offences Act was a limited reform which left many inequalities in law, and the parliamentarians who passed it certainly did not anticipate the emergence of a vast public homosexual community. But the existing historiography has done little to explain the apparent contradiction between parliament's intention and the eventual outcome. Decriminalisation has been judged mostly through studies of how it was secured, rather than the effects of the legal regime it put into place.

Secondly, few historians have written about reformist political groups on their own terms. CHE for instance is constantly in the GLF's shadow, despite the fact that it was in the years before 1970 when CHE acquired some of its most distinctive characteristics. There is also little work on the gay press, or on the gay commercial scene. Consequently the rhetoric of gay liberation has not been placed in the context of the other varied, competing political voices for gay men in the era. The political stances of gay reformists and entrepreneurs have been interpreted solely in terms of the GLF's impact. But less conventionally radical political actors were not passive recipients of the GLF's ideas, and the influence was not only one way.

Thirdly, work on the GLF almost always refers to the London group. The historiography of gay life after 1967 has almost entirely ignored the rest of the country, where things were

¹⁹ A. Beckett, *When the Lights Went Out: Britain in the Seventies* (London, 2009), pp. 209-20

strikingly different. In the capital the GLF was in part a reaction to an already existing 'gay' scene, in other places the first time anyone would have heard that word was when *Gay News* arrived several years later. In provincial towns it was often the local CHE group who first established that gay men could meet openly, not the GLF. The lives of gay men outside of London changed rapidly in the seventies, but the process change was not necessarily the same as in the capital.

Finally, the pace of reform since the mid-1990s has contradicted Gay Liberation's assumption that coming out was automatically a challenge to the prevailing economic and social order. Instead near legal equality was achieved by a Labour Party who had come to venerate the market, and then progressed further in the form of gay marriage by a notably right wing Conservative led government.²⁰ The pace of liberal reform has led Weeks to reconsider many aspects of his original thesis. When he published the second edition of *Coming Out* he had become more respectful of the political campaigns which preceded Gay Liberation, because 'a proper historical perspective has shown the courage needed to make any sort of stand at a time when male homosexuality was totally illegal.'²¹ By 2007 he had made a complete conversion to liberal reform and argued in his book *The World We Have Won* that the postwar era had seen a real, although incomplete, sexual revolution which 'has transformed the possibility of living our sexual diversity and creating intimate lives.'²² This had been done within a liberal political framework rather than requiring the revolution that Weeks, like most members of the GLF, had felt was necessary in the seventies.

²⁰ On New Labour's gay rights reforms see S. Brooke, *Sexual Politics: Sexuality, Family Planning, and the British Left from the 1880s to the Present Day* (Oxford, 2011), pp.255-68. On the Conservatives see M. McManus, *Tory Pride and Prejudice: The Conservative Party and Homosexual Law Reform* (London, 2011).

²¹ Weeks, *Coming Out* [Rev. Ed], xiii.

²² J. Weeks, *The World We Have Won: the remaking of erotic and intimate life* (London, 2007), pp.1-15.

However this theoretical recognition of liberal politics has not changed the comparative importance he gives to individual historical events. In *The World We Have Won* he still lists Gay (along with Women's) Liberation as the characteristic development of the 1970s.²³ Elsewhere he has talked of two sequential moments in political progress: 'the moment of transgression' ('a challenge to the traditional or received order of sexual life') and 'the moment of citizenship' (in which there is a movement towards inclusion and the claiming of rights).²⁴ In the case of gay politics the actions of the GLF are clearly a moment of transgression and the political achievements since are the moment of citizenship. But such a schematic chronological model does not take into account the diversity of gay political voices in the seventies. Gay Liberation profoundly influenced and altered demands for gay rights, but it did not create them. Claims to citizenship did not follow more transgressive action; they coexisted with each other. Therefore a history of gay politics has to concentrate as much on the reformist as the revolutionary, and take in entrepreneurs as well as protestors.

The Gay Male Public Sphere

In this thesis I have responded to all four gaps in the historiography identified above. Firstly, I have looked beyond the statutes and headline statistics to show how homosexual acts and gay organisations were policed in the 1970s. This has revealed how decriminalisation, far from being irrelevant, created the preconditions necessary for gay men to be able to publicly organise together and allowed them to claim a new but unequal form of citizenship which fundamentally changed their interactions with the state.

²³ J. Weeks, *The World We Have Won*, p.3.

²⁴ J. Weeks, *Making Sexual History* (Cambridge, 2000), pp.189-92.

Secondly I have researched the political and social activity of groups which were less radical than the GLF, or might even be considered non-political. In many areas through engaging with local government, media, and civil society, reformist groups like CHE helped to establish gay men's right to meet and organise publicly. They were also ideologically influential; as Stephen Brooke has observed, the detail of New Labour's equality policies was drawn from the work of CHE, not the GLF.²⁵ The idea of and case for homosexual equality, a concept written into CHE's name a year before the foundation of the GLF, was as influential as the millenarian ideas of Gay Liberation, if not more so. As well as considering traditionally activist groups, the thesis looks at the political stances of gay businessmen.²⁶ Paul Deslandes has written about the cultural politics of 1970s gay pornography, detailing how publishing explicit gay sexual content was defended as a political act which asserted the legitimacy of gay male sexuality.²⁷ Similarly, the entrepreneurs behind the growing and increasingly open gay club and pub scene framed their enterprises in terms of the rights and needs of gay men as consumers. This consumerist rhetoric not only adapted some of the ideas put forward by campaigning groups, but also challenged activists' fundamental assumptions about the needs and desires of gay men. The diversity of these organisations shows that the politics of gay male life in the seventies cannot be understood solely in terms of the ideas of one movement. Instead it has to be understood as series of debates between people with highly divergent political ideologies. However all of these organisations, whether counter-cultural, socialist, consumerist, liberal or even conservative fundamentally agreed that gay men had a right to live openly in society.

²⁵ S. Brooke, *Sexual Politics*, p.253. However, Brooke's discussions of seventies gay politics follow Robinson's and concentrate on the GLF.

²⁶ S. Brooke, *Sexual Politics*, p.253.

²⁷ P. Deslandes, 'The Cultural Politics of Gay Pornography in 1970s Britain', in B. Lewis (ed.), *British Queer History* (Manchester, 2013), pp.267-96.

In response to the third point I have considered experience beyond London. Recent years have seen a deluge of community history work.²⁸ Most significantly Robert Howes has published an important case study looking at gay voluntary groups in Bristol and Bath since 1967 which explores how gay people became a recognised part of the civil society of those cities. In it Howes emphasises the importance of the social aspects of these groups' work, and argues that they not only gave gay men new, more accessible places to meet but had important political effects. In particular, Howes identifies how these groups helped 'to situate the needs and wishes of LGBT people on the same level as those of mainstream society' by meeting in spaces used by members of mainstream society.²⁹ I am very much in sympathy with Howes' emphasis on less radical politics and on the quotidian work of building community building.³⁰ While emphasising the importance of local political action in several instances, this thesis nonetheless has a national focus, allowing it to consider developments like the creation of the gay press which were not necessarily bound to particular towns and cities. Because of this I am more circumspect about accepting the fairly conventional chronology that Howes proposes: 'a period of growth and enthusiasm in the early 1970s, followed by a period of decline in the mid seventies and limited development in the 1980s.'³¹ This is no doubt accurate for the various voluntary groups of Bristol and Bath, but thinking more broadly it elides important issues and events. It ignores both the forms of public gay male life which emerged before the advent of the GLF and significant late

²⁸ See fn 1 above.

²⁹ R. Howes, *Gay West: Civil Society, Community and LGBT History in Bristol and Bath 1970 to 2010* (Bristol, 2011), p.13.

³⁰ For my early work on this issue, please see <http://historyspot.org.uk/podcasts/voluntary-action-history/gay-ngos-and-formation-gay-community-england-1967-1985>: accessed 28/03/14.

³¹ Howes, *Gay West*, p.186.

seventies developments such as radical changes in the gay club scene or the outburst of activism around Mary Whitehouse's prosecution of *Gay News* for blasphemy in 1976.

I have therefore looked beyond London not through conducting more local studies, but by explaining the development of national networks of communication, the gay press in particular. The development of these networks was a unique and important innovation of the seventies, which established a national gay culture. Through publications such as *Gay News*, readers in Southampton or Huddersfield could for the first time play an active part in the same debates as men in Earls Court or Soho. The experience of gay men varied by place, but, unlike in previous eras it would be difficult to argue that it was defined or determined by it. And even within local areas the establishment of new forms of communication meant that queer cultures, based on friendship networks and homosocial environments such as private members' clubs or the workplace, were replaced by a gay culture organised around a sense of common identity.

All these three developments established something which can be described as a broadly Habermasian public sphere. With the removal of prohibitions on sex between adult men in private, gay men obtained a limited form of citizenship which made it possible to form the organisations, communications networks and social spaces. This allowed gay men to come together as a public for the first time. Debate between gay men, as gay men, was possible to an unprecedented extent. Instead of various queer practices and ideologies existing within discrete social groups, discussions ensued about the nature of the 'gay community' and the 'gay lifestyle'. Division and tension was a feature of such conversations, but they were nonetheless premised on the theoretical possibility of unity. And through this shared (if often unharmonious) culture, gay men were able to debate their needs and establish

political programmes. This gay male public sphere was therefore able to engage and challenge the policies of the state and the rest of civil society. As the era went on, parts of the state came to recognise gay men as a legitimate constituency, to listen to them and to discuss their demands, although in this period it rarely conceded them.

This development helps to explain the final gap in the historiography: the success of gay reformism. The gay male public sphere performed a social and political function which had a far more profound and long lasting effect than Weeks felt was possible when surveying the gay scene of 1977. The gay community's demands for 'limited openness' and 'better social facilities' in the mid seventies turned out to be the basis for a longer lasting political change. Although individual organisations came and went, by the early 1980s the gay male public sphere as a whole had achieved a resilience which would allow it to survive the more hostile environment of the Thatcher years. Authors such as Adam Lent have attempted to portray the protests around Section 28 as a sudden revival of a militancy which had lain dormant since the GLF. Yet they were organised using activist networks and publications which had existed and evolved continuously in the decade and a half in between.³² Similarly, gay men were only able to become part of what Virginia Berridge called the policy community surrounding HIV because of a previous decade of work organising to represent their case to the government.³³ The gay male public sphere had established a social space which allowed gay men to openly meet, talk and engage with the state in an unprecedented way, which made the political victories of the past twenty years possible.

³² A. Lent, 'The Transformation of Gay and Lesbian Politics in Britain', *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* Vol.5 Issue.1 (2003), pp.24-39.

³³ V. Berridge and P. Strong, 'Aids in the UK: Contemporary History and Study of Policy', *Twentieth Century British History* Vol.2 No.2 (1991), pp.150-74.

Identifying the establishment of this public sphere as a fundamental change in gay men's citizenship should not be taken to mean that the seventies should be uncritically celebrated as a time of unbroken social progress. This would not only be historically inaccurate but insulting to the men who were arrested, 'queer bashed', lost their jobs, or thrown out of their homes for being gay during the era. The development of the gay male public sphere was always contested, moral right campaigners like Mary Whitehouse attempted to shut down gay organisations, protestors and the patrons of gay pubs were harassed by the police, and men were sacked by employers for campaigning for gay rights. But one of the reasons we know about these events is that gay men recorded and publicly opposed them. The final chapter of this thesis considers Whitehouse's successful 1977 prosecution of *Gay News* for blasphemy and considers the moral right's invective against gay men more generally. However, although *Gay News* was found guilty of blasphemy and subjected to a large fine, it survived because gay groups from across the political spectrum collaborated with commercial venues to raise money for its defence and protested against the verdict. One of the key reasons the gay male public developed was because gay men wanted shelter from and a way to oppose the discrimination and hostility that was so rife in straight society.

What follows is a thematic account of the development of the gay male public sphere between 1967 and 1983. It is made up of five separate but intensely interconnected chapters, three of which look at the key institutions of this gay male public sphere (political campaigns, gay periodicals, and pubs and nightclubs.) A further two chapters consider the extent of and limits placed on this gay male public by the criminal law, and the moral right political groups respectively. These parallel accounts emphasise the diversity of opinion and personal experiences among gay men and therefore avoid falling into a conventional linear

chronology: in which gay men were discreet in the late sixties, protested in the early seventies, and went out dancing at the end of the decade. Instead they show how the gay movement, press and scene developed in parallel and were fundamentally influenced by each other. Together the emergence of these institutions can be seen as constituting a gay male public sphere, through which gay men were able to organise, discuss their interests and agitate for further political change.

Why Talk about a Public Sphere? Responding to the new British Queer History

The gay male public sphere is not a phrase that gay men themselves used when talking about the organisations which this thesis describes. The mass of individual political campaigns was often collectively referred to as the 'gay movement', and the varied set of gay commercial venues was described as 'the gay scene.' Sometimes the terms 'gay world' and 'gay community' would be used to encapsulate the full range of places and media where gay men met and talked. I have chosen to use the term 'public sphere' rather than any of these contemporary collective terms in part because the word public is particularly salient to the politics of homosexuality in the twentieth century. The division between public and private sexual acts was crucial to the politics of law reform, and the idea of gay people coming out was central to Gay Liberation. The concept also makes it possible to react to some of the insights of what Chris Waters has called 'the new British Queer History', which has emphasised the vibrancy of queer cultures before decriminalisation and questioned a 'Whiggish' account of pre-war oppression followed by postwar liberalisation culminating in 'the Permissive Society' of the 1960s.³⁴ Historians such as Matt Houlbrook

³⁴ C. Waters, 'Distance and Desire in the New British Queer History', *GLQ: A journal of gay and lesbian studies* Vol.14 no.1 (2008), p.141.

and Helen Smith have shown how same sex desire, far from being kept entirely closeted before the 1960s, was recognised and acted out in public spaces.³⁵ Therefore the story of gay men in the postwar era cannot be characterised as a linear journey from the closet to the mainstream. So instead this work uses ideas inspired by the debates around Habermas' concept to draw out the complexities of what being 'out' or in 'public' meant in the 1970s.

The development of gay publics has been noted by other scholars. Kenneth Plummer included Habermas' concept as one of the four parts of his model of 'intimate citizenship.' He argued that the modern era had seen the creation of new subjects of and forums for the debate and discussion of sexuality, as well as a new language of gay rights. He describes these as *Gay and Lesbian Public Spheres* which 'may be seen as (a) developing their own visible and positive cultures, which (b) leak into the wider public spheres and cultures, whilst also (c) providing alternative, subaltern cultures.'³⁶ But Plummer's work was primarily concerned with analysing debates on sexual issues at the turn of the twenty-first century, and he proposes no historical model for how and why these public spheres appeared other than that they have happened 'especially since the rallying cry of Stonewall'³⁷. As importantly, writing before the upsurge in the new queer history, he makes no assessment of how these public spheres were distinct from previous public gay cultures. The attitude of

³⁵ M. Houlbrook, *Queer London: perils and pleasures in the sexual metropolis, 1918-1957* (Chicago, 2005) and H. Smith, *A Study of Working-Class Men who Desired Other Men in the North of England, c.1895-1957* (Unpublished PhD, University of Sheffield, 2013). For further examples of the New British Queer History, see H.G. Cocks, *Nameless Offences: homosexual desire in the 19th century* [rev. edn](London, 2010); M. Cook, *London and the Culture of Homosexuality, 1885-1914* (Cambridge, 2003); S. Brady, *Masculinity and Male Homosexuality in Britain, 1861-1913* (Basingstoke, 2005); M. Kaplan, *Sodom on the Thames: Sex, Love and Scandal and Wilde Times* (Ithaca, NY and London, 2012).

³⁶ K. Plummer, 'The Square of Intimate Citizenship', *Citizenship Studies* Vol. 5 No. 6 (2001), p.245

³⁷ Ibid., p.245.

the state is also absent from his account and Plummer suggests no reason how or why the state chose to either resist or support such developments.

The work that has been done to bring gay history and the idea of the public sphere together has mostly talked not of the formation of a gay public, but of the transgression of gay voices and representations into an overarching (straight) public sphere.³⁸ However Martin Meeker, working on America, has identified the formation of 'communication networks' as a key change in postwar LGBT history. In his view, someone experiencing same sex desire has to become aware by some means that other people feel the same and that this has some form of social meaning, 'that it has a name'. Changing networks of communication, the ways in which LGBT people find both knowledge and other LGBT people, have the effect of forming an identity.³⁹ According to Meeker one of the most important activities of 1950s Homophile movement was to create larger and stronger communication networks between gay people. Accordingly the period from the 1950s to the 1970s was one in which these networks went from being 'hidden, coded, unstable and small scale' to being 'public, candid, stable and large-scale'.⁴⁰

Meeker prefers the term 'communication networks' to 'public sphere' because the latter is a 'predictive model'.⁴¹ Here he raises a legitimate issue. It is not the purpose of this thesis to discuss some trans-historical model of a public sphere. Habermas himself warned against such a project and said that the bourgeois public sphere cannot be 'transferred,

³⁸ D. Rizzo, 'Public Spheres and Gay Politics since the Second World War', in Robert Aldrich (ed.), *Gay Life and Culture: A World History* (London, 2006), pp.197-221.

³⁹ M. Meeker, *Contacts Desired: gay and lesbian communications and community, 1940s-1970s* (Chicago, 2005), pp.1-15.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p.9.

⁴¹ Ibid., p.15.

idealtypically generalized, to any number of historical situations that represent formally similar constellations'⁴². Yet historians of many different eras have found Habermas' ideas useful while questioning nearly every actual detail of his chronology. For instance, early modernists have argued that the public sphere in fact emerged before Habermas' chosen period.⁴³ The public sphere is invoked in this work not to test or refine Habermas' model, but as a heuristic device to illuminate the changes in gay male politics after 1967. To adapt the words of Steve Pincus and Peter Lake, '[w]hat follows.... is best seen as some variations on and applications of some basic themes and categories from Habermas, rather than a rigid application of his scheme [to the topic in hand]'⁴⁴.

Habermas' concept highlights some important elements of gay politics in the UK which Meeker's does not. Firstly it emphasises citizenship and the relationship of individuals to the state. The bourgeois public sphere was both a network of communication and a social body, which aimed to influence the government as well as discussing ideas. Habermas described it as being 'made up of private people gathered together as a public and articulating the needs of society with the state.' Specifically they aimed to alter policy on the 'basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange'.⁴⁵ In doing so they created the idea of public opinion to which the state and parliament had to answer. Similarly, the work of gay

⁴² Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, xvii.

⁴³ P. Lake and S. Pincus (eds), *The Politics of the Public Sphere in Early Modern England* (Manchester, 2007). For further examples of empirical historical work which has deployed Habermas' concept, see T. Crook and G. O'Hara (eds), *Statistics and the Public Sphere: Numbers and the People in Modern Britain* (Abingdon, 2011); K. Brückweh, *The Voice of the Citizen Consumer: A History of Market Research, Consumer Movements and the Political Public Sphere* (Oxford, 2011); J. Melton, *The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe* (Cambridge, 2001), p.4; Helen See, 'Guardians of the Public Sphere? Political Scandal and the Press, 1979–97' *Twentieth-century British History* Vol. 24, No.1 (2013), pp.110-27.

⁴⁴ Lake and Pincus, *The Politics of the Public Sphere*, p.3

⁴⁵ Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, p.27.

NGOs and newspapers created the very concept of 'the gay community' whose demands could be heard.

This distinguished the new gay politics from the queer politics of the past. Houlbrook has argued that we should not see the case for homosexual law reform as having emerged from nowhere in the 1950s, but rather as a product of the 'queer cultural politics' of the inter war years. Instead he highlights how queer men made a range of political interventions 'in the courts, medical journals and the respectable press'.⁴⁶ Furthermore, he has emphasised the importance of queer men's own actions in securing law reform. He identifies the Wolfenden report as a 'point of fissure' when elite queer men created an image of a 'respectable homosexual', and rejected the more disorderly and public aspects of queer lives. In Houlbrook's words the respectable homosexual 'came out so they could retreat'.⁴⁷ In particular he discusses the importance of Patrick Trevor-Roper, Carl Winter and Peter Wildeblood's testimony to the Wolfenden Committee for translating this exclusionary respectable image in to law.

Yet these witnesses did not form part of a homosexual public in the Habermasian sense. They were individuals who were able to give testimony because they had social contacts with a member of the committee. Evidence sent in by other homosexual men was rejected as the products of 'exhibitionists'.⁴⁸ The idea of a homosexual community demanding political change threatened to derail reform. When the HLRS sent leaflets to MPs in 1958, opponents of the reform objected to being contacted by what they saw as a lobby of

⁴⁶ M. Houlbrook, 'Daring to speak whose name? Queer Cultural Politics, 1920-67', in M. Collins (ed), *The Permissive Society and its Enemies*, p.43.

⁴⁷ Houlbrook, *Queer London*, pp.241-263; Houlbrook, 'Daring to speak whose name?', pp.41-61.

⁴⁸ Higgins, *Heterosexual Dictatorship*, p.39.

perverts and the supporters of reform advised the society to avoid directly contacting parliamentarians again.⁴⁹ By contrast after 1967 groups like the GLF and CHE could claim to represent gay men. They did not have to lobby informally through personal networks or in a coded way through professional legal and medical discourses. After reform, surprisingly rapidly, gay men's voices became part of debate and were recognised by the state, civil society and the mainstream press, even if their demands were often rejected.

The gay male public sphere was also a novel development because of the sheer number of gay men that were involved. The political agency and organisation of queer men may not be exclusive to life after 1967, but the post decriminalisation era was the first time this activity made a leap from including, at most, dozens of men at any one time and in any one campaign, to containing, at least, thousands of people. And in terms of socio-political history, *size matters*. Not because the significance of political movements can be measured by a simple head count, but because the issues of communication and infrastructure are fundamentally different between small scale and large-scale groups. Mass politics requires some form of organisation, whether that is a constitution which has been pored over with a painstaking concern for selecting the right electoral system or a simple room booking at the LSE for just after tea on a Wednesday. It cannot be restricted to the ad hoc decisions of friendship networks in private homes. And, most importantly, it has to be in some way *public*. Gossip is not enough to let people know it is happening; leaflets have to be handed out, posters put up, newsletters published and distributed and so on. Whilst it is important to avoid narratives which strip all political agency from queer people of the past, a mass, public gay politics is a modern invention, something which formed in the years after 1967.

⁴⁹ Weeks, *Coming Out* (Rev Edn), p.169.

The concept of the public sphere also allows us to highlight the distinctions between the gay male world of the 1970s and the public queer cultures which Helen Smith and Matt Houlbrook have identified in the inter-war period. Helen Smith has shown how, during the first half of the twentieth century, sex between men was common place in the working-class culture in the North of England. Smith's work has overturned the assumption that these communities were intolerant of homosexual behaviour, and that acceptance could only be gained by moving to the capital. Instead she has shown how sex between men was accepted in a homosocial culture focused primarily on the workplace.⁵⁰ Matt Houlbrook has written about the vibrant urban queer culture that existed in London between the end of the First World War and the publication of the Wolfenden Report. He refutes the idea that 'homosexuals' were hidden and separate from the rest of society. Instead he describes how queer men utilised a variety of public spaces to meet, from public toilets, to cafes and bars, and even, on the occasion of the Chelsea Arts Ball, the Royal Albert Hall. This queer male culture was 'never a distinct subculture somehow removed from the city, but an integral part of modern metropolitan life.'⁵¹

Although queer life before decriminalisation was not restricted to 'the closet' but acted out in public spaces, gay organisations of the 1970s were public in a very different sense of the word. For instance, to what extent can gay pubs and clubs be considered public? In one sense this is an obvious question: going to the pub and club is called going *out* and involves leaving the privacy of home behind to meet other people. However Habermas used the example of the pub to show how the word public can have differing meanings. The public

⁵⁰ H. Smith, *A study of Working-Class Men Who Desired Other Men in the North of England, c.1895-1957* (Unpublished PhD, University of Sheffield, 2013).

⁵¹ Houlbrook, *Queer London*, pp.241-63; *idem*, 'Daring to speak whose name? Queer Cultural Politics, 1920-67', in M. Collins (ed.), *The Permissive Society and its Enemies*, pp.41-61.

house in his view was clearly a space accessible to almost all (at least all those adults who could afford it), but was also fundamentally private enterprise, owned by companies and run for their benefit. Conversely a public building is in theory run for and owned by the country in general, but physical access is often restricted to an extremely small group of people.⁵² Similarly Michael Warner asks rhetorically whether ‘the people who show up in the gay bars and clubs’ make up a public.⁵³ They clearly could do, but the conversations which happen in a gay bar do not necessarily have the characteristics which Warner sees as defining public speech, that is an indefinite and impersonal address to an audience of strangers. Meeting and talking in a public space is not the same thing as being part of ‘a public.’

This nuance becomes important when considering the evolution of the gay scene in the 1970s. Matt Houlbrook has revealed that there was an extensive network of queer commercial venues in inter-war London, and that to say queer men were unable to meet together openly before gay liberation is incorrect.⁵⁴ Therefore we cannot simply say that the new range of gay clubs and pubs which emerged after 1967 represent the gay scene coming out in to the public without defining what we mean by ‘public’. In the interwar period there had been many widely accessible leisure venues where queer men gathered and socialised, but they were not openly advertised as ‘gay’. In the seventies the managers and owners of gay pubs and clubs could not only recognise that they served gay men but overtly seek their custom through advertisement and listings in the gay press. This new scene was ‘public’ not just because it was outside the private home but because it involved recognising gay men as

⁵² Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, pp.1-2.

⁵³ M. Warner, ‘Public and Counterpublics’, *Public Culture*, Vol.14 No.1 (2002), p.59.

⁵⁴ Houlbrook, *Queer London*, pp.68-92.

a market, and therefore became part of wider discussions about gay identity. These distinctions allow us to highlight what was historically unique about the new public gay culture of the seventies and to think about its implications, without assuming queer people were completely invisible in previous eras.

Further distinctions can be drawn out by considering Warner's discussion of 'queer counterpublics'. To him counterpublics are, like all publics, defined by the fact that they address their speech to strangers (something which distinguishes a public from 'the notion of a bounded community or group'). But the speech 'also addresses those strangers as being not just anybody. Addressees are socially marked by their participation in this kind of discourse.'⁵⁵ A queer or gay public is therefore entirely distinct from the cultures which the new queer historians have identified. Studies like *Queer London* have emphasised that attending queer social spaces and participating in queer acts did not necessarily mark men as socially other.⁵⁶ But, according to Warner, '[c]ounterpublics of sexuality or gender ... are scenes of association and identity that transform the private lives they mediate.' A man reading *Gay News*, going to a gay club, or attending a CHE meeting was affirming a distinct social identity. But Warner also reminds us that not all of the actions of a counterpublic face outwards. In a queer or gay counter public 'no one is in the closet: the presumptive

⁵⁵ M. Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, p.86. The term counterpublic was coined by critics of Habermas who thought that his model of the bourgeois public sphere erased the multiplicity of political voices which existed in the eighteenth century, and in particular ignored women's experiences (for example, N. Fraser, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy', in C.J. Calhoun (ed), *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, MA, 1992), pp.109-42). Warner has defended Habermas from this accusation by highlighting how *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* stressed the existence of many different types of public discourse, and recognised that the idea of their being one unified public opinion was always a fiction. Warner however sees counterpublics as being distinct from publics, because counterpublics are in part defined by their 'tension with a larger public.' (M. Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York, 2005), pp.55-58). Warner's discussion of counterpublics has been useful for defining the role and impact of the gay male public sphere, but I have opted not use the term further. This is because it stresses an oppositional relationship with the wider public which, while appropriate for some gay political voices in this era, obscures those who sought integration into the mainstream political process.

⁵⁶ Houlbrook, *Queer London*, pp.167-94.

heterosexuality that constitutes the closet for individuals in ordinary speech is suspended.⁵⁷

Gay clubs, magazines, even gay political campaigns, did not focus solely on challenging or negotiating with the mainstream, but provided an environment in which gay men could talk as gay men, debate issues and seek sexual or romantic partners.

Going out dancing at a gay club, reading a gay magazine, or attending a gay political meeting made men part of a gay public, but did not necessarily imply that they had come out to the whole of society. Gay Liberation activists who valorised coming out as an all-encompassing process had difficulty reconciling themselves with this element of new public sphere. They had attributed the guilt and shame which they felt had characterised the old 'ghetto' gay pubs to these venues' closeted nature. The management of such venues refused to recognise they made money out of homosexuals and all their activity was based around keeping a plausible deniability. As the seventies went on, an increasing number of venues openly aimed to serve gay men as a market. Going to a club, however, does not necessarily involve informing anyone else that you are there, and the freedom on the dance floor did not necessarily extend to openness at work the next day. This new form of public leisure was fully compatible with discretion in professional or family life. Gay activists had to find ways to come to terms with developments which had dramatically expanded the social opportunities available to gay men, including themselves, but stopped well short of the more revolutionary change they desired to see.

Talking of a gay male public sphere also means that this thesis avoids seeing commercial and reformist organisations solely through the lens of Gay Liberation ideology and considers them as influential political forces in their own right. Many in the GLF condemned their

⁵⁷ M. Warner, *Publics and Counter Publics*, p.86.

fellow participants in the gay male public sphere as seeking assimilation and being too conciliatory to straight society. However, claiming citizenship and the right to recognition by the state was its own distinct form of radicalism at a time when homosexual acts had only recently been decriminalised, before which gay men not been allowed to play any kind of overt part in the political process. In recent years there has been much exciting international work which analyses other visions of gay politics on their own terms. In particular scholars have studied the homophile movements of 1950s and 1960s and challenged the conventional accounts of these organisations, which portrayed them as closeted, cautious and above all ineffectual. Meeker for instance has emphasised how radical the Mattachine Society was in the context of 1950s America. Showing how, behind a mask of respectability made necessary by the law, the Society sought to fight for equal rights for gay men and as such 'was daring, aggressive, and successful.'⁵⁸ Julian Jackson has reassessed the French group 'Arcadie', challenging teleological assumptions which judge it solely in the context of gay liberation, and refuting 'the idea that one kind of homosexual politics is quintessentially "conservative" and another quintessentially "radical"'.⁵⁹

However, the British case was different, as Jackson himself acknowledged when comparing the two. The UK did have a moderate, respectable campaign for the rights of homosexual men in the 1950s, the HLRS, but it is difficult to characterise it as an example of homosexuals self-organising. The HLRS presented itself as a coalition of straight liberals and the appointment of a homosexual man, Antony Grey, as secretary in 1962 was only permitted after much debate between the trustees. Although Grey and the HLRS were in

⁵⁸ M. Meeker, 'Behind the Mask of Respectability: Reconsidering the Mattachine Society and Male Homophile Practice, 1950s and 1960s', *Journal of the History of Sexuality* Vol.10 No.1 (2001), pp.78-116.

⁵⁹ J. Jackson, *Living in Arcadia: Homosexuality, Politics, and Morality in France from the Liberation to AIDS* (Chicago, 2009), p.58.

informal contact with homophile groups in other countries, they refused to affiliate to the International Committee for Sexual Equality (ICSE) precisely because they did not want to be seen as an organisation of homosexuals.⁶⁰ The first stirrings of a British homophile movement had to wait until 1964 with the emergence of the lesbian Minorities Research Group (MRG) and accompanying paper *Arena Three*, whose development has been charted by Alison Oram and Rebecca Jennings.⁶¹ Similarly, North Western Homosexual Law Reform Committee (NWLHRC) was founded in 1964, and became CHE in 1969. As Jackson points out, this meant that CHE, unlike its French equivalent, was 'the product of the same cultural moment as the GLF and able to absorb some of the same influences.'⁶² In the UK, unlike much of Western Europe and the USA, the ideology and infrastructure of gay reformism developed at the same time as the Gay Liberation Movement. The gay male public sphere of the 1970s was characterised by debate *and* collaboration between these different political traditions.

The gay male public sphere was both distinct from the queer sexual cultures which preceded it and not precisely analogous to the Gay Liberation ideology of *Coming Out*. Queer sites and discourses which had been found hitherto either through homosocial networks, pure accident, or knowledge of signs and signals were replaced after 1967 by arenas of debate and social spaces which existed openly and exclusively for gay men. The existence of this public sphere meant that homosexual men were able to become

⁶⁰ On the HLRS see in particular D. Minto, 'Mr Grey goes to Washington: the homophile internationalism of Britain's Homosexual Law Reform Society', in Lewis (ed.) *British Queer History*, pp.219-43.

⁶¹ R. Jennings, *Tomboys and Bachelor Girls: a lesbian history of post-war Britain 1945-71* (Manchester, 2007) pp.134-72; A. Oram, 'Little by Little: *Arena 3* and Lesbian Politics in the 1960s', in M. Collins (ed.), *The Permissive Society and its Enemies: Sixties British Culture* (London, 2007), p.62-79.

⁶² J. Jackson 'Homosexuality, Permissiveness and Morality in France and Britain, 1954-1982', in M. Collins *The Permissive Society and its Enemies*, p.96.

participants in, rather than the subjects, of public debate. There were, however, many contexts in which a gay man could be 'out': to friends and lovers at a gay club or meeting, in the pages of *Gay News*, to family, at work, or to the media. None of these necessarily had to include each other. However, the cumulative effect of gay men meeting and talking through these new institutions was to create and then strengthen the idea of a gay male public.

Parameters, Definitions and Sources

i) Terminology

At most points in this thesis I have used the term 'gay' rather than 'queer'. In recent years historians of same-sex desire have almost universally preferred to use the latter term, but it is a problematic term for post-decriminalisation history.⁶³ In the seventies queer was often used as a vicious insult and it is still viewed with disgust by many of the men the work discusses. Even today queer dominates discussions within the academy, but as Paul Baker notes it 'has not been reclaimed by the majority of gay people.'⁶⁴ So, the work below uses the definition of a gay man proposed by Baker: 'a male adult who openly self-identifies sexually and romantically, mainly or exclusively with other males.'⁶⁵ This is a definition which relies on the existence of a gay public sphere. To become 'gay' there must be some medium or environment within where a man can openly identify himself as such.

⁶³ For more discussion of the use of the word queer in the academy see B. Lewis 'Introduction: British Queer History' in Lewis (ed.) *British Queer History*, pp.1-16.

⁶⁴ P. Baker, *Public Discourses of Gay Men* (London, 2005), p.21.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p.22. Baker also rejects 'homosexual' as a medicalised term. Because of these connotations I have *mostly* avoided it, however, I do use it some cases where men and organisations openly identified themselves with the word (i.e. the Campaign for Homosexual Equality) and in some discussions of the law. In conceptual terms I have treated it as interchangeable with 'gay'.

This thesis is about the politics of a modern sexual identity, and is therefore distinct from the new queer history which had argued that it is inappropriate to apply these current categories to the earlier past. Laura Doan has drawn a distinction between what she calls ‘ancestral genealogy’ of early gay and lesbian historians such as Weeks and the ‘queer genealogy’ of later scholars. The former looks back to the past to write the history of the homosexual subject.⁶⁶ The later seeks to disrupt this search for similarity ‘through illustrating the “limited use” of categories of identity “that have often been taken for granted since the 1970s.”’⁶⁷ The work of Houlbrook and Smith in particular has shown how, only a few decades before decriminalisation, working-class men ‘could participate in homosexual or intimate same-sex relationships while seeing themselves as – and being seen by others – as “normal.”’⁶⁸ Both Smith and Houlbrook agree that from the 1950s onwards, in part because of the debate around Wolfenden, men who had sex with men increasingly came to identify themselves, and be identified by others, as ‘homosexual.’⁶⁹

Although such queer practices were far less prevalent in the 1970s than they had been in the interwar era, they had not disappeared entirely. Men could still desire other men, and have sex and relationships with them, without adopting a gay male identity or becoming part of the gay male public. Versions of many of the figures used by Houlbrook and likeminded scholars to disrupt the straight/gay binary still existed in the 1970s, including the married cottager and the ostensibly ‘straight’ rent boy. When it is necessary to discuss these

⁶⁶ L. Doan, *Disturbing Practices: History, Sexuality and Women’s Experience of Modern War* (Chicago, 2013), p.14.

⁶⁷ *Ibid* p.16. Doan here is quoting Matt Houlbrook.

⁶⁸ Houlbrook, *Queer London*, p.270.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, p.241-63 ; Smith, *A Study of Working-Class Men Who Desired Other Men*, p.240

characters alongside gay men, mostly when looking at the law, I use John Howard's definition of queer as a term encompassing all acts of homosexual between men.⁷⁰

ii) Gay Men and Women

This thesis is also about gay men rather than gay women. Most scholars have felt it necessary to consider the experiences of gay men and women separately. Emily Hamer, for instance, argues that to bind the two histories together would ignore the singularity of the lesbian experience. Gay men, she argues, have always still had access to masculine privilege and therefore a greater and earlier opportunity to form their own public identities.⁷¹ Lucy Jennings questions the idea that lesbian lives were not conducted in public, but also highlights the importance of gender in determining the different ways that queer men and lesbian women were able to experience and navigate space.⁷² It would however be incorrect to say that there was no lesbian public in the 1970s. Gay women met together, discussed issues, and represented their case to external audiences throughout the era, whether through Britain's first homophile organisation the Minorities Research Group, the pages of *Sappho* or meeting at the Gateways club. However, all these environments were deliberately separate from gay male social and political spaces. For instance the MRG was created after its founders approached Antony Grey at the Albany Trust, but banned men from attending any of its meetings.⁷³

⁷⁰ J. Howard, *Men Like That: a Southern Queer History* (Chicago, 1999), p.xviii.

⁷¹ E. Hamer, *Britannia's Glory: a History of Twentieth-Century Lesbians* (London, 1996), p.6

⁷² R. Jennings, *Tomboys and Bachelor Girls: a lesbian history of post-war Britain 1945-71* (Manchester, 2007), pp.1-7.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, pp.135-37.

Most of the institutions that I discuss were dominated by men. In some cases this was obvious and accepted, for instance gay male porn magazines contained very little that was of interest to Lesbian women. In others it was overwhelming but contested, gay pubs and clubs usually served a majority male clientele but were criticised by activists when they tried to bar women from entering. Gay women were theoretically welcome, even encouraged, to join CHE and to read *Gay News* but they never made up more than 10% of their members or readers. Many women, such as Alison Hennegan, the literary Editor of *Gay News*, were prominent and influential members of the organisations discussed in this thesis; however, many others reported that they found these institutions hostile and unwelcoming. The attempts in the early 1980s to increase the visibility of women in the pages of *Gay News*, explored in chapter three, illustrate the difficulty these organisations had in bringing the varied interests of gay men and women together. Men and women's experiences of these new public gay organisations were different and therefore need to be considered separately.

Additionally, although they overlap, the chronology of the lesbian public sphere is distinct from the chronology of the gay male public sphere. For instance, Georgina Turner has described how lesbian publishing made a move from producing 'alternative' magazines like *Sappho* that challenged existing media models in the seventies to 'professional and commercial' publications such as *Diva* in the nineties.⁷⁴ By contrast commercial magazines were the first periodicals to appear for gay men, and coexisted with more 'underground' publications rather than replaced them. Most importantly the two groups' relationship with the criminal law was fundamentally different. In the early eighties activists exposed the

⁷⁴ G. Turner, 'Catching the Wave: Britain's lesbian publishing goes commercial', *Journalism Studies* Vol.10 No.6 (2009), pp.769-88.

ways lesbians were frequently harassed by the police, but sex between women had never been a crime and discussion of law reform had never dominated the politics of lesbian women in the way it had the politics of homosexual men.

iii) Geographical extent

The law is also the reason why this thesis concentrates solely on the gay male public sphere in England and Wales, and not the other countries of the United Kingdom. Sex between men remained illegal in Scotland until 1980 and in Northern Ireland until 1982, and this fact was a decisive influence on the gay politics of both countries. Organisations such as the Scottish Minority group (SMG) and the Northern Ireland Gay Rights Association (NIGRA) were focused on extending the Sexual Offences Act to their respective countries.⁷⁵

By concentrating solely on England and Wales I am also not participating in one of the key recent trends in queer history, and especially in the history of less radical political movements, the transnational turn. Authors such as David Churchill and Leila Rupp have produced work which looks at the communications between the homophile groups of various countries in the fifties and sixties through both press networks and organisations such as the International Committee for Sexual Equality.⁷⁶ Transnationalism is as an approach which, in the words of David Minto, 'signal[s] a transgression of national integrity through, for example, hybrid identities or deterritorialised networks.' It is therefore a term

⁷⁵ On Scotland, see R. Davison and G. Davis, "'A Field for Private Members': The Wolfenden Committee and Scottish Homosexual Law Reform, 1950-67', *Twentieth-century British History*, Vol. 15, No.2 (2004), pp.174-201; R. Davison, "'The Sexual State': Sexuality and Scottish Governance, 1950-1980', *Journal of the History of Sexuality* Vol.13 No.4 (2004), pp.500-21.

⁷⁶ L. Rupp, 'The Persistence of Transnational Organizing: The Case of the Homophile Movement', *The American Historical Review* Vol.116 No.4 (2011), pp.1014-39; D. Churchill, 'Transnationalism and the Homophile Political Culture in the Postwar Decades', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* Vol.15 No.1 (2009), pp.31-36.

which is distinct from international which 'tends to reify nations ... even as it denotes interaction between them'⁷⁷.

Transnational scholarship is exciting and reveals important things about how identity formation and sexual politics extended across borders. But in the case of 1970s England and Wales it does not make sense to abandon the nation as a frame of reference because gay men at the time did not do so themselves. It is important to be aware of the international context when considering the development of the gay male public sphere as gay men made frequent comparisons with other countries, most notably the United States. But the key word is *comparison*, for discussions of foreign gay institutions focused as much on their difference to those at home as their similarity. So, as Chapter Four will highlight, although the development of the London gay club scene was profoundly influenced by gay men's experiences (whether actual or mediated) of clubs in New York and San Francisco, this influence was often expressed in the form of envy and national embarrassment. The perceived luxury of the US scene was understood in terms of stereotypes of American's lack of inhibition, whereas the comparative paucity of facilities available in London was lamented in terms of English restraint. It was an international comparison, denoting an interaction between two distinct cultures.

iv) Sources

As Meeker has suggested in the American case, the seventies marked a move from informal, coded networks of communication to ones which were large scale and explicit.⁷⁸ It is therefore unnecessary for historians of gay life in the seventies to seek, as the historians on

⁷⁷ D. Minto, *Mr Grey goes to Washington*, p.240 fn.

⁷⁸ Meeker, *Contacts Desired*.

earlier eras do, to uncover queer lives by reading legal documents and press coverage 'against the grain'⁷⁹. Gay men were able to speak for themselves in this era and left ample documentary evidence behind. But these printed sources are not just a way to access the changing nature of gay politics in the seventies, their existence *is* the crucial change in gay politics. The gay male public sphere was at its heart a change in the way gay men were able to communicate with both each other and the outside world. Gay newspapers, club flyers, campaigning pamphlets, guidebooks and submissions to government committees are not just ways to discover the details of the gay male public sphere. They are a constitutive part of the phenomena I am describing.

This thesis is therefore based on the mostly printed sources produced by the gay male public sphere itself, many of which are held in the Hall Carpenter Archive at the London School of Economics. The Hall Carpenter Archives are themselves a product of the gay male public sphere. They originated in a Gay Archives and Monitoring Project service set up by the CHE in 1980 to collect evidence of discrimination and police arrests. Since then the Hall Carpenter Archives have acquired the papers from a range of gay organisations, both those like CHE who assiduously kept and organised their own files and, through the material donated by individual activists, those like the GLF who had no central organising body.⁸⁰ The archive also has a large collection of gay periodicals, from activist newsletters to explicit pornography. Taken together these collections cover the full breadth of gay political voices

⁷⁹ S. Robertson, 'What's Law Got to Do with It? Legal Records and Sexual Histories', *Journal of the History of Sexuality* Vol.14 No.1/2 (2005), pp.161-85.

⁸⁰ On the history of the Hall Carpenter Archive see Sue Donnelly, 'Coming Out in the Archives: the Hall-Carpenter Archives at the London School of Economics', *History Workshop Journal*, Vol.66 no. 1 (2008), pp. 180-84.

in the seventies, from the Conservative Campaign for Homosexual Equality to the Gay Marxist group.

This breadth is important. Although each chapter concentrates on a select few individual organisations I have attempted to read and make use of material from as many different organisations and viewpoints as possible. For instance, chapter three concentrates mostly on *Gay News* as the largest-selling newspaper for gay people in the period. But its editorial mission and identity as a newspaper are carefully compared with those of rival gay sex magazines. Placing specific examples in a wider context– in this case, *Gay News* in the context of the gay press as a whole – has allowed me to draw more general conclusions about the changing nature of gay politics, rather than argue for the prominence of specific institutions.

However this thesis is not only concerned with the public pronouncements of gay men, but also with the creation of the infrastructure which made such pronouncements possible.

Much of this can be considered through the gay press and the publications of gay organisations themselves, which frequently featured discussions of such issues. In other cases they can be revealed from the minutes, personal correspondence and accounts that make up a large part of the Hall Carpenter collections. However it has been necessary to look outside the archive and to use the accounts and reflections of participants as contained in either published autobiographies or oral histories. This material adds two crucial perspectives to the work. Firstly it is a way of uncovering the more quotidian issues of production, funding and distribution which had a significant influence on the development of the gay male public sphere. My analysis of *Gay News* in particular has been expanded by having interviewed several key members of staff who offered explanations of editorial and

business decisions which could not have been found in the paper itself. Secondly it has allowed me to consider how gay men interacted with the gay male public sphere. For instance my analysis of the impact of the production of guides to gay venues was profoundly influenced by hearing gay men discuss gay pubs and clubs in the interviews contained in the Tony Deane collection in the National Sound Archive.

My own oral history interviews were originally supposed to play a much larger role in this project. I had planned particularly to use them to record the growth of the club scene, which I did not think would have left the same wealth of archival material as gay political organisations or journals. After formal training at the Institute for Historical Research I conducted ten interviews over 2011 and 2012, far fewer than planned, eight of which are used in this thesis.⁸¹ It soon became clear that it would not be the best methodology for considering the gay club scene. This was because the gay men it was easiest to locate and who were most inclined to talk to me were generally those who had been in some way politically active (who, as chapter four will show are not entirely representative of gay clubbers). An advert placed on a website for older gay men only garnered four responses and two eventual interviews with non-activists in the ten months it was online. Meeting the men I did interview was both enjoyable and enlightening, and their memories and insights are frequently referenced in the chapters that follow. However it soon became clear that unless the project was to become solely based around oral history it was unlikely that conducting more interviews would greatly extend the range of experiences I could consider, so I decided to prioritise making use of other material.

⁸¹ Two of the men interviewed wished for me not to include the material after seeing the transcripts.

To understand the gay male public sphere it is also sometimes necessary to look beyond those sources produced by gay men themselves. Accordingly, I have made extensive use of the Lesbian and Gay Newsmedia Archive (LAGNA) at the Bishopsgate Institute in London. Originally part of the Hall Carpenter Archives, LAGNA is an extensive collection of news cuttings from the national, local and trade press, collected in the seventies and eighties through a subscription to a professional cutting service. I have used these sources in two ways. One is as another way of accessing the public statements of gay men, who frequently spoke for themselves in mainstream press.⁸² The other was for the collection's original purpose, to monitor the activity of the police and the courts.

Other archival collections have been useful for considering the interactions the gay male public sphere had both with the state and with opposing political forces. I have also explored the actions and the attitudes of the state through its own archives and publications, making use of Parliamentary Papers, Hansard, and the files of both the Home Office and Director of Public Prosecutions. Mary Whitehouse's actions in opposing the gay male public sphere have been considered both through her public pronouncements in the press and the archives of the National Viewers and Listeners Association at Essex University.

v) Time Period

This work considers a 'long seventies' of gay male history, which starts in 1967 with the passage of the Sexual Offences Act and ends in the spring of 1983 with, among other things, the election of the second Thatcher Government.⁸³ It starts in 1967 because, as argued

⁸² The issue of how then mainstream media portrayed gay men more generally is outside the scope of the thesis. See D. Smith, *Sex, Lies and Politics: Politicians in the Press* (Eastbourne, 2012).

⁸³ Throughout this thesis I use '1970s' to denote the whole period from 1967 to 1983. When I need to be more specific about what part of the era I am discussing (if of course precise dates are not suitable), I talk about the

above, decriminalisation marked the slow start of a radical change in the political organisation of gay men. However it is important to remember that all the institutions described had some form of precursor. The informal lobbying of the Wolfenden committee predates the formation of public gay rights campaigning organisations, and queer men read homoerotic physique magazines and gathered in commercial leisure spaces before the advent of the gay press or club scene. The following chapters pay close attention to these antecedents but argue that none of them amounted to the creation of a gay public. By identifying 1967 as the key turning point I am not denying the profound importance of the Gay Liberation Front, which first met in the LSE in September 1970. Their influence was clear, important and widespread, as the dramatic increase in the use of the word 'gay' indicates. However the new gay male public sphere was characterised as much by the liberal reformism and entrepreneurialism which started to emerge in the late sixties as it was by the millenarian rhetoric of the GLF.

Compared to the decades either side, the seventies is an understudied period of contemporary history. Academic historians have generally agreed that 1960s Britain saw a profound change in sexual attitudes and behaviour. Arthur Marwick has argued that the sixties saw a general rise in 'permissiveness', 'that is to say, a general sexual liberation, entailing striking changes in public and private morals and ... a new frankness, openness, and indeed honesty in personal relations and modes of expression.'⁸⁴ Marcus Collins has stated that although permissiveness had clear antecedents, especially among intellectuals, the 1960s saw the removal of the 'institutional roadblocks' of censorship, church teaching

late sixties, early seventies, etc. Luckily there are practically no developments in gay politics which can sensibly be said to have *solely* spanned the exact period between 1 January 1970 and 31 December 1979.

⁸⁴ A. Marwick, *The Sixties: Cultural Revolution in Britain, France, Italy and the United States* (Oxford, 1998), p.18.

and government policies which represented 'a triumph for liberal progressivism' and allowed a true 'permissive society' to emerge.⁸⁵ Historians of demography and contraception such as Kate Fisher, Simon Szreter and Hera Cook have preferred the term 'sexual revolution' but have agreed that the 1960s saw a profound change in heterosexual sexual practices.⁸⁶

However it is hard to consider the majority of the sixties as a particularly 'permissive' decade for gay or queer men. Until 1967 they were still criminals and so unable to take full part in the new frank discussions of sexuality and were excluded from many of 'permissiveness' most high profile manifestations. For instance, gay men had no equivalent of what Collins has called 'the new pornography' and instead had to rely on the pre-permissive pornography of alibis contained in physique magazines.⁸⁷ Gay artists, both popular and highbrow, were unable to openly declare their sexual identity.⁸⁸ And although, as Lucy Robinson has argued, the ideas of London's counterculture would eventually be a

⁸⁵ M. Collins, 'Introduction: the Permissive Society and its Enemies', in *ibid*, *The Permissive Society and Its Enemies*, pp.5-11. For more on permissiveness see T. Newburn, *Permission and Regulation: Law and Morals in Post-War Britain* (London, 1992); P. Thompson 'Labour's "Gannex conscience"? politics and popular attitudes in the "permissive society"', in R. Coopey, S. Fielding and N. Tiratsoo (eds), *The Wilson governments, 1964-1970* (London, 1993), pp.136-37; T. Fisher, 'Permissiveness and the Politics of Morality', *Contemporary Record* no.7 (1993), pp.149-64; J. Green, *All Dressed Up: The sixties and the counterculture* [rev. edn] (London, 1999); J. Hampshire and J. Lewis, "'The Ravages of Permissiveness': Sex Education and the Permissive Society', *Twentieth-century British History*, Vol.15, no.3 (2004), pp.290-312.

⁸⁶ H. Cook, *The Long Sexual Revolution: English women, sex, and contraception, 1800-1975* (Oxford, 2004); K. Fisher and S. Szreter, *Sex before the Sexual Revolution: Intimate life in England 1918-1963* (Cambridge, 2010).

⁸⁷ On the heterosexual new pornography see M. Collins, 'The Pornography of Permissiveness: Men's Sexuality and Women's Emancipation in mid-twentieth century Britain', *History Workshop Journal* no. 47 (1999), pp.99-117. On physique magazines see Deslandes, 'The Cultural Politics of Gay Pornography in 1970s Britain', pp.267-68.

⁸⁸ For a discussion of queer representations in sixties popular culture see P. Smith (ed.), *The Queer Sixties* (London and New York, 1999).

huge influence on the Gay Liberation movement in the seventies, at its late sixties peak this counterculture was mostly silent on the topic of homosexuality.⁸⁹

Homosexual law reform itself remains an iconic example of permissiveness, a literal removal of 'the hindrances of external law' from 'the pursuit of pleasure' which Collins, following IT editor Tony McGrath, takes to be characteristic of the permissive society.⁹⁰ However the majority of the scholarship on either the Sexual Offences Act or the Wolfenden report has sought to question their 'permissive' or 'liberal' character. Frank Mort has argued that the new law 'sanctioned a discreet, responsible and heavily privatized version of homosexual selfhood, at the expense of all those individuals who did not conform to this ideal type, either in their personal lives or in their political and cultural demands.'⁹¹ Similarly, Matt Houlbrook has emphasised that the law was designed as much to define, restrict and control the homosexual subject as it was to liberate him.⁹² Both Mort and Houlbrook characterise their work as acting against a liberal or 'whiggish' historical consensus, although, as indicated above, the majority of academic work has emphasised the limited nature of law reform.⁹³

For gay men therefore it makes sense to talk of permissiveness not in the sixties but in the seventies. In recent years Paul Addison, Weeks and Collins have all considered what Collins

⁸⁹ Robinson, *Gay Men and the Left*, p.59.

⁹⁰ Collins, 'Introduction: The Permissive Society and Its Enemies', p.2.

⁹¹ F. Mort, *Capital Affairs: London and the Making of the Permissive Society* (New Haven, 2010).

⁹² Houlbrook, *Queer London*, pp.241-63. See also C. Waters, 'Disorders of the mind, disorders of the body social: Peter Wildeblood and the making of the modern homosexual', in B. Conekin, F. Mort and C. Waters (eds), *Moments of Modernity: reconstructing Britain, 1945-1964* (London, 1999), pp.134-51.

⁹³ Historians are not the only scholars to have questioned the permissiveness of Wolfenden and the SOA. There is an extensive literature in law, sociology and cultural studies. See for example L. Moran, *The homosexual(ity) of law* (London, 1996); S. Hall 'Reformism and the Legislation of Consent', in National Deviancy Conference (ed.), *Permission and Control* (London, 1979), pp.1-43; K. Gleeson, *Consenting Adults in Private: In search of the Sexual Subject*(Unpublished PhD, University of New South Wales, 2005); Hornsey, R, *The Spiv and The Architect: unruly life in postwar London* (Minneapolis, 2010).

calls the 'evolution and diffusion' of permissiveness from the seventies onwards.⁹⁴ Addison has argued that permissiveness in the 1960s was a primarily elite phenomenon and that the 1970s were the time when 'widespread shifts in popular attitudes and behaviour marked the transition from permissive minority to permissive society'⁹⁵. The establishment of the gay male public sphere can be seen as an example of this transition. As the Seventies went on the social spaces available to gay men got larger, their media proliferated, and their political voices both got louder and more likely to be recognised. However, this generally progressive trend should not be used to characterise permissiveness as a linear and uncomplicated move towards greater freedom. As chapter one explains, the Sexual Offences Act left gay men in an unclear legal position. Homosexual acts in private had been decriminalised but the extent to which gay men were allowed to meet or talk in public had not been definitively settled. Some arms of the state sought to keep gay men restricted entirely to the private sphere; others supported their moves towards a more public existence. Outside of the state campaigners like Mary Whitehouse and the popular press continued to fight to restrict and shame gay men. Permissiveness for gay men was therefore not a process of either emancipation or revolution, but one of negotiation. Gay organisations had to work to establish their legitimacy and to claim the right to be recognised within the liberal state. At some points they did this by making confrontational demands, at others by acquiescence and self-censorship.

This thesis identifies the gay long seventies as ending, approximately, in 1983, but argues that the gay male public remained long past this date. 1983 is a turning point for several

⁹⁴ M. Collins, 'Sucking in the Seventies? The Rolling Stones and the aftermath of the permissive society', *Popular Music* Vol.7 No.1 (2012), p.7; P. Addison, *No Turning Back: The Peaceful Revolutions of Postwar Britain* (Oxford, 2010); Weeks, *The World We Have Won*.

⁹⁵ Addison, *No Turning Back*, p.341.

reasons. Firstly in spring that year *Gay News* went bankrupt and ceased publishing. With the division of CHE into separate social and political organisations in 1981, this left Lesbian and Gay Switchboard as the only national gay organisation of the early seventies still standing. Secondly this was the year Virginia Berridge has identified as a turning point in public awareness of the HIV epidemic. In April BBC2 aired the *Horizon* documentary *The Killer in the Village* which led to widespread discussion of the illness in the press. By the end of the year gay groups were meeting with the Chief Medical Officer about how best to deal with the emergency.⁹⁶ This both changed gay organisations' immediate priorities and was part of a process of gay rights moving to the centre of mainstream political debate. Thirdly, it coincided with the election of the second Thatcher government and increasing attention being paid to anti-discrimination programmes being run by Labour-run local councils. From this point on gay politics started to become an explicit point of disagreement between the two main political parties for the first time. In 1988 the Thatcher government would make the first legislative attempt to limit the gay male public sphere by passing of Section 28 of the 1988 Local Government Act which banned local authorities from 'promoting homosexuality.'⁹⁷

However, as said above, by the eighties the gay male public sphere was resilient enough to weather and resist these attacks. Lawrence Black, Hugh Pemberton and Pat Thane have argued for the necessity of studying the seventies separately from the decades which surround it, saying in particular that 'Thatcherite economics left a lasting legacy in a way

⁹⁶ V. Berridge and P. Strong, 'Aids in the UK: Contemporary History and Study of Policy', *Twentieth Century British History* Vol.2 No.2 (1991), pp.150-74.

⁹⁷ On Section 28, see A. Smith, *New Right Discourse on Race and Sexuality: Britain 1968-1990* (Cambridge, 1990); M. Durham, *Sex and Politics: the family and morality in the Thatcher years* (Basingstoke, 1991); D. Cooper, *Sexing the City: Lesbian and Gay Politics Within the Activist State* (London, 1994); D. Rayside, *On the Fringe: gays & lesbian in politics* (New York, 1998), pp.19-45.

which a desire to reinstate “Victorian values” did not. Thus the 1970s were not just a bridging point but simultaneously the sequel to the 1960s and the prequel to neo-liberalism, and the decade is thus distinctive and worthy of study.⁹⁸ It could be said that one reason the socially conservative parts of the Thatcher government failed so utterly to reverse permissiveness in the case of the gay male public sphere was that they incorrectly thought it had been unleashed by Labour in the sixties, rather than built by gay men in the seventies.

vi) Chapter Outline

Chapter one adds to the voluminous literature on decriminalisation by concentrating not on the reasons for and philosophy behind the passage of the Sexual Offences Act, but on how it was implemented. The question it examines is this: how we can reconcile the emergence of a new and often strident public gay culture with a law considered by most scholars to have been designed to prevent that very thing from happening? The first section highlights that, although the rhetoric behind both Wolfenden and the SOA insisted on homosexual men being hidden from public society, the law itself was restricted to regulating acts of physical sex between men. Attempts to make the law more wide-ranging, to ban gay pubs and ‘promoting homosexual acts’, were explicitly rejected by parliament during its passage. The second section of this chapter uses a mixture of criminal statistics, newspaper articles and material gathered by gay activists to chart how homosexual acts were policed after decriminalisation. The third section charts how the emerging institutions of the gay male public sphere were regulated using an eclectic mass of both statute and common law, none of which had been designed specifically with homosexual men in mind. The final section

⁹⁸ L. Black, H. Pemberton and P. Thane (eds), *Reassessing Seventies Britain* (Manchester, 2013), p.258.

looks at the debates between gay activists, both revolutionary and reformist, about the still illegal activities of cottaging and cruising.

The three middle chapters consider in turn the three central institutions which made up the gay male public sphere: political organisations, the press, and 'the scene', i.e. pubs and clubs. These chapters cannot hope to be entirely comprehensive histories of these institutions and there are notable exclusions in each. For instance, Chapter two on gay political groups concentrates entirely on independent gay groups, rather than those which sat within other organisations like political parties, unions or churches. Chapter three limits itself to periodical publications, rather than other print communications such as the emerging gay book press or even academic studies. And Chapter four looks at gay pubs and clubs, whilst not commenting on other sites of gay commercial sociability such as saunas, restaurants and boarding houses. But they do not cover randomly selected case studies; instead they take the 'core sample' approach espoused by political historians such as Lawrence Black and look at examples which are 'the sites and the hosts of bigger debates.'⁹⁹

Chapter two reconsiders gay political groups, concentrating not on the radical politics of the GLF but on the more reformist Campaign for Homosexual Equality. Historians like Jeffrey Weeks and Lucy Robinson have typically been dismissive of CHE, portraying it as politically cautious, ineffective and obsessed with its own structure. This chapter draws on insights of recent work on the importance of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) in Postwar Britain, to challenge this assessment. It shows how CHE created an unprecedented non-commercial social network for homosexuals through its collection of local groups. In its campaigning work CHE shared many of the initial goals of the Gay Liberation movement but

⁹⁹ L. Black, *Redefining British Politics: Culture, Consumerism and Participation, 1954-70* (Basingstoke, 2010), p.2.

rejected its revolutionary ideology. The Campaign's search for a reformist political message involved engaging with the lives that homosexuals were actually living, recognising the problems that they faced, and negotiating the tensions that existed between them. In particular, discussion of what 'homosexual equality' actually meant was embedded in the name of the organisation. This makes CHE vital for understanding the formation of gay rights and gay communities in the 1970s.

Chapter three charts the evolution of the gay press and concentrates especially on the self-proclaimed 'world's largest circulation newspaper for homosexuals', *Gay News*.¹⁰⁰ It shows how such publications revolutionised the way gay men communicated with each other, creating spaces where people from different geographical, cultural and ideological milieus could connect and talk with each other. It also demonstrates how the pages of these periodicals became the subject, as well as the site, of discussions about gay politics and identity. Stances on what should appear in publications for gay men, about what exactly was a 'gay' news story, reflected broader debates on gay men's place in society. For instance, discussions about sexually explicit material led to discussions about the role of overt sexuality in gay men's public life. And, crucially, the attempt to turn *Gay News* into a publication which appealed equally to gay women and men reflected wider discussions of gender and the difficulty of achieving political or social unity between the two groups.

Chapter four looks at gay pubs and clubs. It uses gay guides to show how the creation of the gay male public sphere fundamentally altered the nature of queer commercial venues. Because the location and purpose of such venues could now be described, they evolved

¹⁰⁰ The boast was frequently made from *Gay News*' cover see for example *Gay News* 89, 28 February – 10 March 1976, p.1

from being spaces in which queer men informally gathered into enterprises which openly tried to appeal to a gay male market. It then uses Ron Peck's 1978 film *Nighthawks* to explore the tensions between gay activism and gay sociability, between 'Coming Out and Going Out'. Peck was an activist filmmaker and a member of the Gay Left Collective, but *Nighthawks* concentrates on the seemingly apolitical world of gay pub and club. As such the film can be used to show the difficulty some activists had in reconciling themselves with a gay commercial scene which greatly expanded the social and sexual opportunities available to gay men but was also avowedly capitalist and subcultural. Finally the chapter considers the foundation of large scale 'Ultra Discos' such as *Bang* and *Heaven* in the later 1970s. It shows how the entrepreneurs who founded these clubs framed their endeavours in a political ideology which highlighted gay men's rights as consumers, an ideology which had some striking similarities with the rhetoric of gay liberation.

In Chapter five the focus of the thesis changes slightly. It explores the opposition to the emergence of the gay male public sphere in general and Mary Whitehouse's prosecution of *Gay News* for blasphemous libel in 1977 in particular. The case was both the most high-profile attack on the gay male public sphere in the seventies, and caused the largest and loudest political mobilisation of gay people between the fall of the GLF and Section 28. Gay groups from across the political spectrum, the gay commercial scene and the rest of the gay press rallied to *Gay News'* aid, because they saw Whitehouse's actions as a clear attack on their right to organise publicly. However, the political ferment around the prosecution was short lived, and unlike in similar cases in America did not lead to gay rights becoming a mainstream political issue. This was because both Whitehouse and *Gay News'* straight

liberal supporters had a different view of what the trial was about and were concerned issues such as free speech in general and secularism rather than gay rights.

There then follows a conclusion which summarises the preceding chapters, briefly looks forward to the 1980s, and suggests how the concept of public spheres could be useful for the broader study of the 'permissive society.'

Chapter 1: 'New Law but no new deal?' Gay Men and Permissive law reform

The 1957 Wolfenden Report and the 1967 Sexual Offences Act (SOA) occupy a totemic place in the historiography of postwar Britain and debates about the development of the permissive society. Stephen Brooke states that 'the decriminalisation of homosexuality became shorthand for the ... relaxation of public and private mores in the 1960s'¹⁰¹. Matt Houlbrook declares that the 'Sexual Offences Act has a near iconic status as an agent of progressive social change'¹⁰². Kate Gleeson identifies Wolfenden as central to 'stories of progress and linear distance *away* from oppression, toward more freedom and less involvement of the state in matters of so-called individual choice or morality'¹⁰³. Yet, as Gleeson's qualifying adjective indicates, the report and act are most frequently used in accounts of permissiveness in order to critique the concept. They contrast their revisionist interpretation with a popular 'mythology' (which, like most myths, has no clearly identifiable authors),¹⁰⁴ and reject seeing the Sexual Offences Act as an unambiguous moment of emancipation from on high, in order to highlight a more complicated reality.

There are three ways in which the 'liberal' interpretation of mid-century homosexual law reform is typically debunked. Firstly, the ideology behind the reform is critiqued by questioning the motives of the Wolfenden Committee and Parliament. Secondly, emphasis

¹⁰¹ Brooke, *Sexual Politics*, p.146.

¹⁰² Houlbrook, *Queer London*, p.242.

¹⁰³ K. Gleeson, *Consenting Adults in Private: In search of the Sexual Subject*(Unpublished PHD, University of New South Wales, 2005), p.56.

¹⁰⁴ Jeffrey Weeks is held up by Gleeson as the key proponent of the myths of the permissive society, twenty years after he wrote of 'The "Myth" of Permissiveness' (Jeffrey Weeks, *Sexuality and Its Discontents* (London, 1985), pp.17-21). Houlbrook also takes on Weeks and paints Patrick Higgins as a Whig, despite *Heterosexual Dictatorship's* clear condemnation of the philosophy of the reformers. (Higgins, *Heterosexual Dictatorship*). In the end obituaries for Roy Jenkins are the only accounts which Houlbrook can find advocating the most simplistic liberal arguments. Houlbrook, *Queer London*, pp.241-42.

is placed on the many discriminatory laws which remained after the passage of the Sexual Offences Act.¹⁰⁵ Thirdly, the fact that the number of men arrested for gross indecency increased in the years immediately following 1967 is presented as proof that the reform cannot be seen as an uncomplicatedly liberalising measure.¹⁰⁶

The first of these arguments is the most well developed in the historiography, with writers such as Gleeson and Houlbrook portraying reform as an attempt to create an entirely private and de-eroticised homosexual citizen, who was granted limited freedoms on the condition that his homosexuality did not intrude into public view. According to Houlbrook, 'Just in case the respectable homosexual did not willingly assume the responsibilities of citizenship by remaining discreet and invisible, the law would police him into confinement.'¹⁰⁷ Similarly Gleeson argues that reform was designed to bring about 'docility – silence and obedience, not the militant homosexual identity of the 1970s and after.'¹⁰⁸

Yet docility did not follow reform. On the contrary, the years after decriminalisation were marked by the foundation of public political campaigns and voluntary services for gay men, the creation of a diverse gay press and the emergence of a range of openly gay pubs and clubs. Gleeson and Houlbrook acknowledge these developments but do not attempt to explain them, since they fall outside the timeframe of their studies. Authors such as Lucy Robinson and Jeffrey Weeks, who do consider events after 1967, downplay the effects of

¹⁰⁵ Robinson, *Gay men and the Left*, p.40.

¹⁰⁶ Higgins *Heterosexual Dictatorship*, pp.144-46, Houlbrook, *Queer London*, p.263; Newburn, *Permission and Control*, p.62.

¹⁰⁷ M. Houlbrook, *Queer London*, p.263.

¹⁰⁸ K. Gleeson, 'Discipline, Punishment and the homosexual in law', *Liverpool Law Review* vol. 28 (2007), pp.327-47.

law reform, instead emphasising the impact of the actions of the revolutionary Gay Liberation Front (GLF) in changing gay people's lives.¹⁰⁹

The extent and nature of the Sexual Offences Act's 'permissiveness' has been assessed through a debate about the reasons for its passage rather than an analysis of its results. This gives us a limited understanding of the interactions between gay men and the law in the late twentieth century. If, as Julia Laite has argued, the story of the criminalisation of female sex work 'must not end with explaining why certain laws get passed', then neither can the story of the decriminalisation of homosexual acts.¹¹⁰ Houlbrook has emphasised the localised nature of the policing of queer sex acts in pre-decriminalisation London, and has shown that the increase in prosecutions for gross indecency in the 1950s should not be attributed to a centrally directed 'witch hunt' but the operational decisions of a few individual police divisions.¹¹¹ Policing in the decriminalised era remained as localised and inconsistent and therefore cannot be assessed by looking at just the statute book and the prescriptions of the Home Office.

This chapter addresses four gaps in our understanding of the impact of decriminalisation: Firstly how can the emergence of new and stridently public form of gay life be reconciled with a regulatory regime which was allegedly designed to prevent that very thing from happening? Secondly, beyond headline statistics, how did the law operate after 1967, how were gay men policed in the 'permissive society'? Finally how did new public forms of gay life relate to older, still legally prohibited queer cultures of public sex? The first section

¹⁰⁹ Weeks, *Coming Out*, p.176; Robinson, *Gay Men and the Left*, p.36-41.

¹¹⁰ J. Laite, *Common Prostitutes and Ordinary Citizens: Commercial Sex in London, 1885-1960* (Basingstoke, 2011), p.15.

¹¹¹ Houlbrook, *Queer London*, pp.31-36.

undertakes a limited re-reading of the Wolfenden Report and the parliamentary debate around the Sexual Offences Act. It demonstrates that although the rhetoric surrounding homosexual law reform emphasised restricting homosexuality entirely to the private sphere, the law itself only placed restrictions on homosexual acts. The second uses a combination of press coverage, official statistics, and the archives of both the Home Office and the gay movement to demonstrate how the Sexual Offences Act was enforced after it was passed. The third uses the same sources to explore the precarious legal position of the new institutions of the public sphere: gay political groups, gay magazines, and gay clubs. It shows how these institutions were regulated by an inconsistently enforced set of common law provisions and statutes which made no explicit comment on homosexuality. The decriminalisation of homosexual acts in private meant that some arms of the state acknowledged and worked with the state, whilst others felt that the limited nature of the 1967 reforms meant that such organisations were still against public policy. The final section then considers the political debates in the gay movement and the gay press about the still definitively illegal practice of cottaging. It shows that many gay activists emphasised their legitimacy by marginalising other forms of queer life in a similar way to the covert homosexual reformers of the 1950s.

The Silences of Law Reform

Previous readings of the Wolfenden Report and Sexual Offences Act have concentrated on the limits of their liberalism and their attempts to restrict homosexuality to the private sphere. This chapter accepts much of that critique but argues that in order to understand fully the system of regulation which was put in place by the 1967 law it is necessary to draw a firmer distinction between those activities which reformers condemned or condoned

explicitly, and those which they remained silent about. When the Sexual Offences Act was written into the law this distinction established a difference between what was unambiguously still illegal, and what issues remained to be decided by the police, the courts and wider society.

The committee's terms of reference relating to homosexuality were to consider 'The law and practice relating to homosexual offences and the treatment of persons convicted of such offences by the court.'¹¹² Whilst the committee would talk about wider issues, they could only propose changes to the criminal law around specific sexual offences involving physical acts between men: primarily buggery, gross indecency and assault.¹¹³ The report was keen to make a distinction between homosexual offences and homosexuality, which was a 'state or condition, and as such does not or, and cannot, come within the purview of the criminal law.'¹¹⁴ Orientation and by implication identity was not the law's business.

The crimes of soliciting, procuring and importuning were concerned with how men met each other for sex, and so could have led to a wider discussion about the ways that homosexual men socialised with each other. However each offence was interpreted in a deliberately limited way. Wolfenden defined 'importuning' primarily as making sexual contacts with men in London's public toilets and 'procuring' as meaning prostitution.¹¹⁵ Both Houlbrook and

¹¹² Cmnd. 247 *Report of the Committee on Homosexual Offences and Prostitution* (Wolfenden Committee report) (London: HMSO, 1957), p.7.

¹¹³ The report set out a complete list of homosexual offences: buggery, attempted buggery, indecent assault on a male, acts of gross indecency between males, procuring acts of indecency between males, attempting to procure an act of gross indecency between males, assault with attempt to commit buggery, persistent soliciting and importuning of males for an immoral purpose and offences against local bye-laws. The majority of these involved physical acts of genital sexual contact between men. Homosexual Buggery was defined specifically as 'Sexual intercourse per anum between two men.' Gross Indecency was defined in practice as 'mutual masturbation, intercrural contact or oral genital contact 'with or without emission.' *Ibid*, pp.29-30.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid*, p.11.

¹¹⁵ The report drew a specific parallel to the offence of 'living off immoral earnings.' *Ibid*, p.42.

Patrick Higgins have highlighted one of the fundamental contradictions of Wolfenden: it proposed that homosexual acts should not be illegal in private but made no allowances for how men were supposed to find their partners in the first place.¹¹⁶ The report was not just contradictory on this point but explicitly silent. It condemned prostitution and public sex as outraging public decency but made no reference to pubs and clubs despite taking extensive evidence from the police on the issue.¹¹⁷ The other institutions of the gay male public sphere existed only in the most nascent forms, so there are no references in any of the accounts of the committee to voluntary services or gay publications and therefore the committee made no ruling on whether they should be legal.

The committee eventually recommended that sex between men should be legal in private, which could be taken to imply that homosexual men meeting publicly should remain illegal. But there was no definition of what 'in private' meant in the report; the committee felt that the courts would be able to decide on the issue as they did for heterosexual acts.¹¹⁸ As Frank Mort has said, the Wolfenden Committee was primarily concerned with regulating the street life of London's West End, with the issues of public sex (cottaging) and male prostitution (rent) and it therefore proposed no regulatory framework for other public forms of gay life.¹¹⁹

Even before the proposals had reached the statute book members of the Judiciary had observed this gap in Wolfenden's proposed reforms. In the 1962 House of Lords judgement on the case of *Shaw v. DPP*, Viscount Simmonds famously defended the existence of the

¹¹⁶ Higgins, *Heterosexual Dictatorship*, p.93, Houlbrook, *Queer London*, pp.259-60.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid*, pp.76-80.

¹¹⁸ *Report of the Committee on Homosexual Offences and Prostitution*, p.25.

¹¹⁹ Frank Mort, *Capital Affairs*, p.142.

common law offence of 'conspiracy to corrupt the public morals' with the following hypothetical case:

Let it be supposed that at some future, perhaps, early, date homosexual practices between adult consenting males are no longer a crime. Would it not be an offence if even without obscenity, such practices were publicly advocated and encouraged by pamphlet and advertisement? Or must we wait until Parliament finds time to deal with such conduct? ¹²⁰

Simmonds' statement was frequently quoted in the parliamentary debates around the Sexual Offences Act. In a similar way to Houlbrook's account of Wolfenden, Stephen Jeffrey Poulter's account of this debate emphasises the lengths to which parliamentarians went to avoid being seen to either approve homosexuality or accept that homosexuals should have any role in public life. As an example he quotes Norman St John-Stevás:

If the Bill passed, homosexuality would remain unlawful, although not criminal. The Bill would create no recognised status of homosexuality. It would remain contrary to public policy. ¹²¹

Whilst this was a fair reflection of the general tone of the debate, a deeper reading reveals that parliament was confused about the practical implications of the reforms. Opponents of the bill in the House of Lords held up the prospect of homosexual men associating together and *proselytising* as the principle reason not to pass the reform. Lord Goddard condemned the measure as likely to lead to the creation of "buggers' clubs" or associations or coteries of people who are given to this particular vice. ¹²² Goddard and fellow opponent of the bill Viscount Dilhorne wanted to prevent the proliferation of venues for group sex between men. In order to do so they sought to tighten the definition of public sexual acts to include any time when more than two men were present, a clause which made it into the final

¹²⁰ Shaw v. DPP, [1961] 2 All ER 446.

¹²¹ Norman St John-Stevás quoted in Poulter, *Peers, Queers and Commons*, p.82.

¹²² *HL Deb 24 May 1965 vol 266, 665.*

legislation. Yet it is important to emphasise that both the text of the law and the actual content of the debate did not indicate parliament intended to make homosexual men associating together publicly, short of group sex, illegal. Talking to Dilhorne and Goddard's amendments Lord Boothby and Baroness Gaitskell brought up both the possible existence of homosexual pubs and clubs in this country and their actual existence in Holland, a clear reference to the Dutch homophile organisation Cultuur en Ontspanningscentrum (COC).

Lord Boothby set out a clear taxonomy:

I think there is an enormous difference to be drawn between what are called "clubs" where homosexuals meet to establish contact, and sexual activities on the part of more than two or three people ... I am not in the least against the kind of pubs or clubs which exist in this country and undoubtedly in Holland, as the noble Baroness has said, where people of homosexual tendencies meet for the purpose of making acquaintance with each other.¹²³

Viscount Dilhorne's response was that '[c]ases of homosexuals merely gathering together would never have been before the criminal courts in the cases to which Lord Goddard referred. There must have been homosexual activities as well.'¹²⁴ So even one of the most vigorous opponents of decriminalisation was willing to accept that gay pubs and clubs should not necessarily be illegal.

In the Commons, opponents of the bill cast their net far wider. Whilst moving an amendment to ban 'activities tending to promote acts of homosexuality,' Conservative MP Cyril Osborne declared that 'if a club incidentally or partially operates so as to bring homos together and encourage this degrading and demoralising activity, I say that it should be punished.'¹²⁵ This was not however the view of Home Office Minister Dick Taverne, who felt

¹²³ *HL Deb 21 June 1965 vol 267, 372.*

¹²⁴ *HL Deb 21 June 1965 vol 267, 373.*

¹²⁵ *HC Deb 23 June 1967 vol 748, 2151.*

that the clause was so wide as to 'cover any activity which might bring homosexuals together', including running homosexual pubs or counselling organisations, and opposed the clause for that reason.¹²⁶ Leo Abse, who sponsored the bill in the Commons, claimed the proposed clause was unnecessary because the judgement in the Shaw case made publishing lists of homosexuals illegal already (although Simmonds had in fact only referred to the possibility of the Judiciary taken such action).¹²⁷

Conservative MP for the Isle of Thanet W Rees Davies criticised the bill for defining public acts purely in terms of physical space, and argued that its provisions failed to protect society from moral harm. 'I should not wish to stop people doing outrageous acts of immorality of the normal kind in private,' he argued, before adding that 'we should safeguard the public entirely by not permitting any form of intrusion into public society.'¹²⁸

But both Osborne's and Davies' attempts to amend the bill failed and the act passed with no such clarifying clauses. Although the previous historiography is correct in saying that reformers did not anticipate the emergence of an increasingly public gay identity, the Sexual Offences Act contained no measures which were specifically designed to prevent that from happening. Two years after reform CHE proposal's to set up a chain of non-commercial 'Esquire Clubs' were strongly opposed by the Act's two sponsors, Abse and Lord Arran. Authors such as Kate Gleeson and Jeffrey Weeks have cited this reaction to emphasise the limited nature of the reform.¹²⁹ But the law Arran and Abse had helped to pass did not make

¹²⁶ *HC Deb 23 June 1967 vol 748*, 2127.

¹²⁷ *HC Deb 23 June 1967 vol 748*, 2143.

¹²⁸ *HC Deb 03 July 1967 vol 749*, 1442.

¹²⁹ K. Gleeson, 'Freudian Slips and Coteries of Vice: The Sexual Offences Act of 1967', *Parliamentary History* Vol. 27 No.3 (2008), p.409; Weeks, *Coming Out*, p.182.

such enterprises illegal, and attempts to do so had been explicitly rejected during its passage.

The Operation of the Act

The Sexual Offences Act removed no crimes from the statute book. Homosexual acts continued to be prosecuted under the offences consolidated in the 1956 Sexual Offences Act. Such offences were decriminalised only if they were conducted between consenting adults (over 21) in private ('public' being defined as including, but not limited to, any act in a public toilet or involving more than two people). The maximum penalties were increased for many of those acts which remained illegal, leading some scholars to view the Sexual Offences Act as an example of the 'double taxonomy' of permissiveness, whereby some conduct was made legal only by increasing other forms of regulation.¹³⁰ For buggery and gross indecency the law introduced a formal distinction in sentencing between consensual and non-consensual acts and between offences with adults and offences with minors, reserving life imprisonment for acts with boys under 16 or without consent.¹³¹ However this disaggregation occurred during sentencing and so the official statistics do not indicate whether the men still being convicted for homosexual offences had fallen foul of the law by virtue of the age of their partner, a lack of consent, or by being in public – and how public was being defined was even harder to ascertain.¹³²

¹³⁰ S. Hall, 'Reformism and the Legislation of Consent', in National Deviancy Conference (ed.), *Permission and Control* (London, 1979), p.14.

¹³¹ For a working guide to the law including sentencing see *Rook and Ward on Sexual Offences* (London, 1990), pp.107-45.

¹³² Indeed during the passage of the SOA itself MPs had remarked that they could not assess what the impact of the new law would have because there was no reliable estimate of the number of men the reforms would apply to. A. Holden, *Letting the wolf through the door: public morality, politics and 'permissive' reform under the Wilson government, 1964-70* (unpublished PhD, University of London 2000), p.88.

Historians have frequently quoted then seemingly counterintuitive fact that after the passage of the Sexual Offences Act the number men convicted of gross indecency actually went up.¹³³ The most frequent source of this information is from the work of Roy Walmsley and Karen White who published a comprehensive study of the operation of the law in 1978 in order to provide evidence for the Criminal Law Revision Committee's review of sexual offences. Walmsley and White used police returns to assess all sexual offences known to the police in 1973, and found that cases of gross indecency known to the police had doubled, prosecutions had tripled and convictions had quadrupled since the passage of the 1967 act. Yet their work provides a much more detailed picture of operation of the law than this cherry-picked statistic suggests.¹³⁴

First they broke down the offences of Buggery and Gross Indecency by the age of the partner/victim:

Table 1.1: Ages of Partners/Victims – Convicted of Homosexual Buggery (1973)								
	21 or over	18-20	16-17	14-15	12-13	10-11	Under 10	Total
All	17	12	23	39	36	37	23	187
Consensual	17	8	22					
Non-consensual	0	4	1					

¹³³ See, among many other examples: Higgins, *Heterosexual Dictatorship*, p.146; M. Porter, 'Gender, Identity and Sexual Orientation' in P. Thane (eds.), *Unequal Britain: Equalities in Britain since 1945* (London, 2010), p.140; B. Harrison, *Seeking a Role: The United Kingdom 1951-1970* (Oxford, 2009), p.510; Houlbrook, *Queer London*, p.263.

¹³⁴ R. Walmsley and K. White, *Sexual Offences, Consent and Sentencing*, (London, 1979).

Table 1.2: Ages of Partners/Victims – Convicted of Gross Indecency (1973)¹³⁵

21 and Over	18-20	16-17	14-15	Non consensual/under 14	Age not known	Total
1442	62	37	27	47	12	1,627

So in the case of buggery 140 out of 187 (74.8%) offences were either with boys under 16 or non-consensual, and only 17 out of 187 (9%) were with consenting males over 21. In the case of gross indecency 1442 out of 1,627 (88.6%) were consenting acts with males over 21, and only 74 either with a partner who was non-consenting or under 16 (4.5%). So, although there was no universal pattern, after 1967 the charges used against men began to polarise. Buggery was a charge most frequently used for non-consensual or inter-generational sex, whereas gross indecency was a crime committed mostly by consenting adults in public.

The police and the courts most frequently defined ‘public’ as relating to the physical location where the sexual act took place, and rarely resorted to the clauses in the SOA which legislated against group sex. Walmsley observed that gross indecency arrests mainly happened in public toilets, and other sources agreed. The cases which were covered in newspapers or used as examples in gay campaigning materials nearly always involved (alleged) cottaging or cruising in outside spaces, with the exception of some arrests made during police raids on gay commercial venues. Walmsley also noted that although the pattern of the law being used against sex in public spaces was consistent across the country, the actual number of prosecutions varied greatly from place to place. So according to

¹³⁵ Data in this format was derived from Cmnd. 8216, *Report on the Age of Consent in Relation to Sexual Offences* (London: HMSO, 1981), pp.32-33.

Walmsley the increase in offences could be attributed to sporadically increased rates of police activity in selected (but, frustratingly for the historian, unnamed) areas.¹³⁶

Walmsley proposed three possible explanations for the rise. Firstly, that there had been an actual increase in homosexual activity since 1967, which would have explained the increase in offences known to the police but not the increase in the prosecution rate. Secondly, that the attitude of the public had changed and there was an increase in complaints over the activity, an idea which was hard to reconcile with the uneven increase in arrests in different areas of the country. Finally he suggested, and endorsed, the idea that the Sexual Offences Act itself could be to blame. After years of debate the reform of the law had clarified that sex in public toilets was still illegal and, furthermore, had made it easier to prosecute men for the crime by making the offence triable summarily at a magistrate's court, rather than requiring a jury trial.¹³⁷

Walmsley and White's work suggests that the majority of prosecutions for homosexual acts after 1967 were the result of proactive decisions by individual local police forces to observe specific public spaces, and that the increased conviction rate was secured by summary trial. The report did not consider the other major offence used to prosecute homosexual behaviour in the period: the crime of 'persistently soliciting or importuning in a public place for an immoral purpose'. In practice this law offence solely applied to the attempts of men to pick up other men for sex, as the judgement 1966 case of *Crook v. Edmonson* had established that the offence did not apply to men approaching women for sex.¹³⁸ The

¹³⁶ For press coverage see below; R. Walmsley, 'Indecency between Males and the Sexual Offences Act, 1967', *Criminal Law Review*, July 1978, pp. 400-7.

¹³⁷ *Ibid*, pp. 400-7.

¹³⁸ *Crook v Edmondson* ([1966] 2 QB 81).

vagueness of the term 'persistently soliciting' led gay campaigners to describe the offence as the gay 'SUS law', because it allowed the police to harass gay men on the flimsiest of pretexts.¹³⁹ Soliciting and gross indecency were the offences most often used to prosecute acts between consenting adults in the era, and soliciting, like gross indecency, was mainly tried summarily.¹⁴⁰

Although Walmsley and White's conclusions were tentative, there is much evidence to support them from official records, coverage of policing in both the gay and local press and the observations of the gay movement. The police were not disinterestedly and systemically enforcing the laws on the statute book but making specific decisions over where and when to go after homosexual behaviour. Discretion over how police time was to be used, which crimes to prioritise, and the prosecution practice in all cases that did not require approval from the Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP) lay in the hands of individual police forces and ultimately their Chief Constable.¹⁴¹ Men committing homosexual acts were not caught during routine patrols or enquiries but as a result of observations targeted on specific locations selected by the individual police forces. The police admitted, and sometimes even actively publicised, these operations. In articles covering individual prosecutions, which appeared frequently in both *Gay News* and local newspapers, police officers were often quoted saying they had been conducting plain clothes observation and covert surveillance

¹³⁹ Gay London Police Monitoring Group (GALOP), 2nd *Annual Report* June 1985, p.2.

¹⁴⁰ Rook and Ward, *Sexual Offences*, pp.135-38.

¹⁴¹ T. Brain, *A History of Policing in England and Wales From 1974: A Turbulent Journey* (Oxford, 2010), pp.5-6.

on a toilet or public park.¹⁴² In 1971, when Young Liberal Bernard Greaves challenged police tactics in Cambridge, a police officer declared that

I have made no secret of the fact that I have ordered additional attention to be paid regarding the complaints received about the habitual activity of homosexuals in and around public toilets...The current law makes it an offence to indulge in homosexual practices in public places or with persons under 21. While this is the law, the police in Cambridge will do their utmost to enforce it.¹⁴³

Gay campaigners condemned police enforcement as arbitrary, and argued that crackdowns were normally justified by saying that complaints were received yet trials rarely featured any actual member of the public willing to testify. This implied that at best the police, far from responding to a public outcry, were engaging in independent moral crusades, and at worse that they were fabricating evidence and prosecuting men based only on their word.¹⁴⁴ In their survey of newspaper coverage of cottaging offences Julian Meldrum and D.J. West found only one example of an identifiable offended member of the public – a man who had had a note passed to him under the divisions of a toilet cubicle.¹⁴⁵ The police, however, never claimed to be throwing themselves between homosexual predators and innocent straight men. Instead they attributed their decision to act to public complaints about that area becoming known for homosexual activity in general.

¹⁴² See for example: Lagna. Berkshire: 'Police hid above toilet cubicle', *Reading Evening Post*, 22/08/1978; Lagna. Wiltshire: 'City toilets unsavoury reputation', *Western Gazette*, 22/09/1978; Lagna. West Midlands: 'Police in big drive to stamp out vice in toilets', *Sandwell Evening Mail* 1/5/1981'; 'Police admit trapping', *Gay News* 89 (26 February- 10 March 1976), p.4; 'Blackpool organises special patrols', *Gay News* 140, 6-19 April 1978, p.7.

¹⁴³ HCA/CHE Cambridge/2/9: 'Cambridge warn: no let up in action against homosexuals', *Cambridge Evening News*, 12/10/1972 (Clipping).

¹⁴⁴ See for Instance HCA/CHE2/9/23: 'CHE Comments on the Triennial review report of the Police complaints board 1980'.

¹⁴⁵ D.J. West and J. Meldrum, 'Homosexual Offences as Reported by the press', *Medicine, Science and the Law* Vol.23 No.1(1983), p.1.

Some such complaints were anonymous and untraceable, as when police in Stockport justified 150 arrests over a year after receiving 'numerous' complaints about two lavatories.¹⁴⁶ Yet in other cases, community leaders and residents' associations were the source of the complaints. The presence of either cottaging or importuning was portrayed as disruptive to the local area and an affront to public decency. In 1980 the chair of Dudley Tenants and Ratepayers Association described a local toilet in Sedgley as 'just a filth meeting place ... Decent people won't use them.'¹⁴⁷ Sometimes local residents were merely complaining about the noise or inconvenience caused by large amounts of men travelling to the site.¹⁴⁸ But others claimed that areas were becoming off limits to ordinary members of the public who needed to be shielded from homosexual behaviour. Although it was rarely made clear whether residents had to witness actual homosexual acts, or just became uncomfortably aware of queer men's presence in the area. In 1977 the *Waltham Forest Guardian* declared that '[i]t is deplorable and makes a mockery of the word "convenience" when ordinary members of the public confess to avoiding the use of a necessary facility rather than risk being witness to behaviour they find offensive.'¹⁴⁹

The protection of the young was a frequently cited reason for intervention. A residents' campaign in Botley, Hampshire, opined that the notoriety of the village's public conveniences made parents reluctant to allow their children to go to the local recreation ground. Chief Inspector Reg Flint went further when declaring that in Luton '[l]ocal youngsters could be lured to the park, attracted by the easy money to be made from male

¹⁴⁶ See also Lagna. West Midlands: 'Importuning a disgrace says inspector', *Tipton Herald*, 17/10/1974.

¹⁴⁷ Lagna. West Midlands: 'Toilets "a risk to youngster"', *Wolverhampton Express and Star*, 11/11/1980.

¹⁴⁸ Lagna. London Cruising Grounds: 'Residents win bid to close public loo', *Hornsey Journal*, 10/02/1978.

¹⁴⁹ Lagna. London Cruising Grounds: 'End this shame now', *Waltham Forest Guardian and Independent*, 11/3/1977.

prostitution.¹⁵⁰ Despite the rhetoric, however, the protection of youth did not seem to be a particular priority of these operations. As the statistics above show only a distinct minority of arrests were for acts with partners under 21, and there was an incentive not to go after such cases as prosecution required the consent of the DPP.¹⁵¹

However community leaders did not necessarily wish to see police activity increase as a result of their complaints. An increase in arrests and accompanying press coverage could draw attention to homosexual activities in an area and damage its reputation. Responding to an increase in arrests in 1977 the *Stockport Express* stated that

The recent spate of offences is not only making it unsafe for any male to walk into public buildings without fear of suspicion, but is also dragging down the town's good name. Chief Superintendent Hartley admits there is a purge on following complaints from the public.¹⁵²

The *Express* went on to call for harsh judgements to deter such activity, but it is notable that locals generally called for the removal or alteration of sites of public sex rather than increased policing.¹⁵³

However, police forces in general seemed to prefer punishment to prevention when dealing with homosexual acts in public. During the passage of the 1967 Act the Home Secretary Roy Jenkins tried to alter the way homosexual acts were policed in London (the only jurisdiction where the Home Office had direct influence on operational decisions). In January 1967 he

¹⁵⁰ Lagna. Hampshire: 'Shutdown Campaign at Notorious Loo', *Southern Evening Echo*, 12/06/1981.

¹⁵¹ P. Crane, *Gays and the Law* (London, 1982), pp.62-68.

¹⁵² Quoted in 'Stockport: furore after police "cottage" action', *Gay News* 201, 16-29 October 1980, p.3.

¹⁵³ Altering public spaces so it was harder to have sex in them became a key principle in urban design. See for instance the clear lines of sight which characterised the redevelopment of Bloomsbury Square (just outside the Institute of Historical Research) in the early 2000s. J. Andersson, 'Heritage Discourse and the Desexualisation of Public Space: The "Historical Restorations" of Bloomsbury's Squares', *Antipode: a radical journal of geography* (2012) Vol.44 no.4, pp.1081-98.

met with the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, Sir Joseph Simpson, and argued that instead of using non-uniformed police to catch and punish cottagers the practice be discouraged through regular patrols by uniformed police. Plain clothes officers conducting such work were, in his view, 'exposed to great temptations' and might in very rare cases be 'behaving as agent provocateurs' [his emphasis]. The commissioner objected, and said that punitive arrests were the only option for controlling the problem:

If the frequenters of these lavatories realised, as they very soon would, that police supervision had been withdrawn, the problem would soon get out of control and there would be justified complaints from the public and by the local authorities. There would also be very undesirable press comment.¹⁵⁴

Although the Metropolitan Police pursued Jenkins' strategy for a time, it did not survive his removal from the Home Office in 1968.¹⁵⁵ Simpson's argument encapsulates the thinking behind policing in C Division, the area of London containing the famous cottages and clubs of the Piccadilly area, throughout the late 1960s and 1970s. A system was designed where a pair of police officers would be assigned for a set number of days (typically ten per two months) in order to visit 'known places of assignation'¹⁵⁶. Few officers felt that police actions could wipe out the practice entirely. Instead the strategy was couched in terms of controlling a chronic problem. They thought that without exemplary arrests the activity would increase and become more blatant, and this is what was alleged to have happened after the 1967 experiment. Although some officers talked of the risk to the young and of homosexuals' alleged propensity to convert people, the reasons for policing were most

¹⁵⁴ The National Archives (hereafter TNA) HO/291/1060: Male Importuning: Note of a Meeting on 12th January, 1967.

¹⁵⁵ TNA HO/291/1060: Commissioner of Metropolitan Police to Phillip Allen 04/08/1967; Commissioners of the Metropolitan Police to Graham-Harrison – 27/02/1968.

¹⁵⁶ TNA MEPO/2/11248: Commander 'A' Administration to Chief superintendent C division. 01/07/1968.

frequently couched in terms of protecting public order and preventing an increase in public complaints.¹⁵⁷

Although its international fame meant that Piccadilly was not entirely typical, this strategy is in keeping with the general pattern of policing under the Sexual Offences Act across England and Wales. Arrests were made as a result of proactive police action using plain clothes officers around chosen geographical areas, in response to real or anticipated complaints from the public. Policing under this statute remained primarily about the regulation of specific public spaces. Police forces approached this task with a deliberately punitive strategy, seeking arrests and prosecutions rather than more preventative action, and the tactics used to gain to convictions would become a *bête noire* of the gay movement.

Gay activists campaigned on the issue from the earliest days of the movement and it was a cause which cut across ideological lines. By 1971 both the reformist Campaign for Homosexual Equality and the revolutionary Gay Liberation Front were trying to gather more concrete evidence of police practices.¹⁵⁸ Despite the high number of arrests this proved difficult as the men concerned were hard to reach, they did not necessarily read any gay publications and were usually keen to avoid any further publicity.¹⁵⁹ However, throughout the seventies and eighties activists gradually accrued evidence about police methods and developed a case against them. Police were accused of 'entrapment' – a term which encompassed a variety of practices including police acting as *agents provocateurs*, conducting covert surveillance, and lying to the court. A Walsall solicitor who wrote to CHE described how he got a client acquitted by proving it was physically impossible for the police

¹⁵⁷ TNA MEPO/2/11248: Correspondence no. 47/66/295.

¹⁵⁸ CHE *Bulletin*, October 1971, p.4; HCA/GLF/3: 'The beginning of the end...?'.

¹⁵⁹ HCA/CHE 8/8 (1974 Conference Papers): *Report of the Legal Standing Committee*.

witnesses to have seen the alleged act from the place they said they were standing. His letter also described police using boy prostitutes as *agents provocateurs*, although this was a role more frequently played by the police officers themselves.¹⁶⁰ CHE's submission to the Royal Commission on Criminal Procedure described a police officer waiting for men outside public toilets, then, when said men joined them, moving another short distance away and waiting again. When the man finally made a sexual proposition he would be arrested.¹⁶¹ Even more proactively between 1983 and 1984 plain-clothed officers started waiting outside historic Earl's Court gay pub The Coleherne, asking men who were leaving the pub what kind of sex they enjoyed. After the customer had agreed to go home with the stranger they would be joined by a third man who would reveal himself to be a police officer and make an arrest.¹⁶²

Back at the police station, men arrested for homosexual offences were often intimidated into pleading guilty. The manuals of Gay and Lesbian Advocates and Defenders (GLAD) list the tactics commonly used by the police and arguments against them. Suspects were told that pleading guilty would mean that there would be no publicity, when in fact whether a local newspaper decided to cover any particular case was normally decided by the notability of the suspect or the sensationalism of the circumstances rather than the plea.¹⁶³ A suspect might also be led to believe that a co-defendant had already confessed and so the only option was a guilty plea. One man from Manchester was ostentatiously asked about his family and for the names and addresses of his employer, despite the fact that the police

¹⁶⁰ HCA/CHE/9/39: Police Entrapment.

¹⁶¹ HCA/CHE/14/3: Evidence to the Royal Commission on Criminal Procedure.

¹⁶² National Council for Civil Liberties Archives (Hull History Centre)- U DCL 656-15: *Gays and police in London* (draft), pp.55-56; GALOP, *1st Annual Report* April 1984, p.8-9.

¹⁶³ HCA/AT/14/9: 'GLAD Manual'.

were only obliged to report members of selected professions, and even then they were only supposed to do so after conviction.¹⁶⁴ A guilty plea meant that little attention was drawn to the nature of their evidence. When the Gay London Police Monitoring Group (GALOP) persuaded men to fight their cases, the accuracy of the police's testimony was questioned and the men concerned were often acquitted. For instance five out of the six men who pleaded not guilty in the Earl's Court cases were found innocent.¹⁶⁵

Police tactics caused the president and founder of CHE Alan Horsfall to declare that

Men are convicted of sexual 'offences' on the basis of completely uncorroborated evidence which would be considered by the courts as totally inadequate to establish guilt in the case, say, of theft. Indeed, guilt is established more often than not in the police stations rather than in the courts and by methods of interrogation which would be considered disgraceful even if practised on terrorists, let alone gays.¹⁶⁶

The evidence acquired by gay campaigners supports Walmsley and White's conjecture that the increase in the number of convictions for gross indecency can be attributed to the use of summary trials for the offence. The Wolfenden report had noted the practice of some police forces using local bye-laws to prosecute homosexual offences rather than the statute law, in order to avoid a jury trial.¹⁶⁷ This practice seems to have stopped by the 1970s, apart from a brief perceived increase in the use of public order charges noted by GLAD in 1980.¹⁶⁸ Instead the Sexual Offences Act allowed men to opt for a magistrate's trial for gross indecency, which the police encouraged them to do in the hope that it would be quicker and more discreet than a delayed jury trial.

¹⁶⁴ HCA/CHE/7/40: Anonymous note.

¹⁶⁵ GALOP, 2nd *Annual Report*, p.6.

¹⁶⁶ HCA/Palmer/7/1/17: A. Horsfall, 'Cottage Industry', *CHE80 Conference Gazette* [Sunday], p.2.

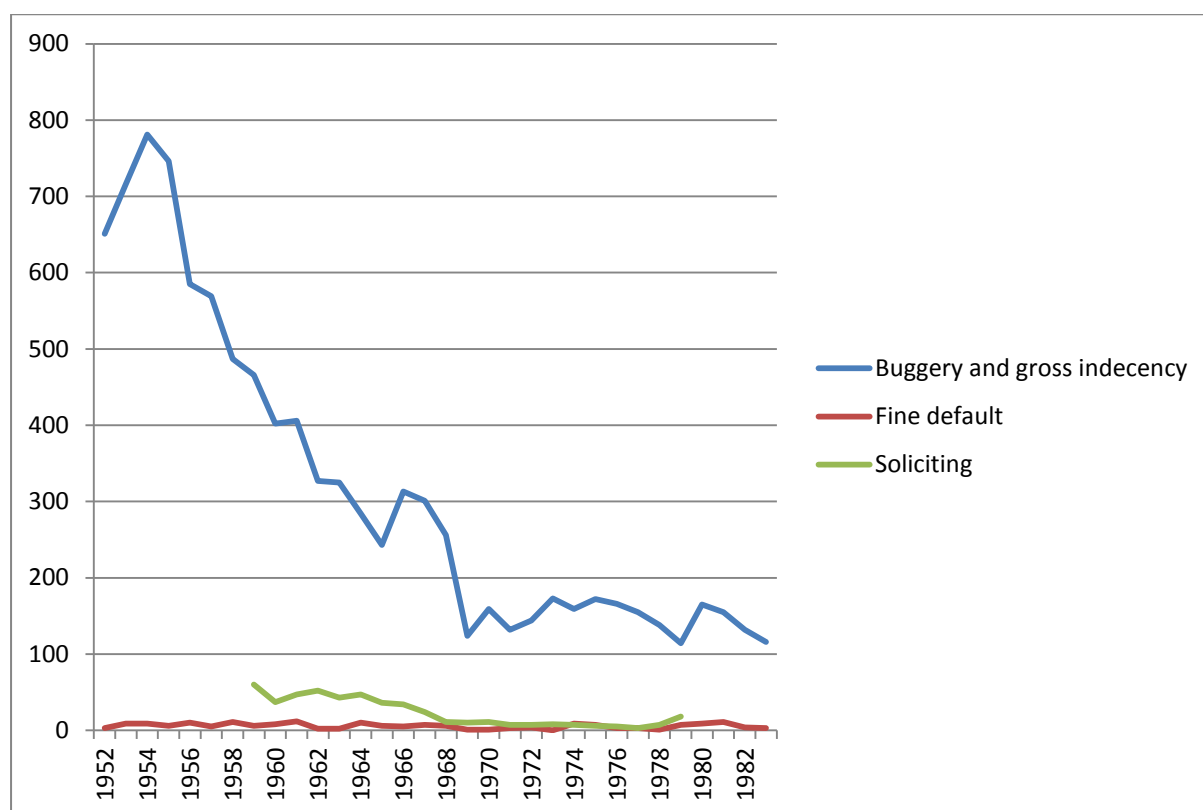
¹⁶⁷ *Report of the Committee on Homosexual Offences and Prostitution*, p.45. In the famous case of the conservative MP for Harrow Ian Harvey the charge he was actually fined for was breaking the park regulations. I. Harvey, *To Fall Like Lucifer* (London, 1971), p.109.

¹⁶⁸ 'Campaign challenges "Order" Law', *Gay News* 196, 24 July – 20 August 1980, p.4.

Opting for a trial at a magistrate's court also meant that the accused faced a far lower potential sentence than they would have been at the assizes/quarter sessions (and after 1973 crown courts). The maximum prison sentence a magistrate could hand down for any crime was six months, substantially below the two years for gross indecency set out in the statute, but more frequently the offence was punished with a fine. The total number of men being sent to prison for buggery and gross indecency (which included non-consensual offences) decreased drastically from the 1950s to the 1970s (a decline which started before 1967 so cannot be completely attributed to the act, see Figure 1). By 1979 the fact that a magistrate had threatened to start giving out prison sentences for importuning was deemed worthy of report in the gay press.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁹ 'Magistrate's jail threat', *Gay News* 178, 1-14 November 1979, p.9.

Figure 1 – Men imprisoned for Homosexual Offences in England and Wales 1952-1983



Source: Annual Returns of Prison statistics. In 1968 the classification changed from 'buggery, attempts etc 16-18' - 16-18 being the categories of offence, which includes Gross Indecency (18) – to 'buggery and Indecency between males.' Figures before 1959 include under 18s admitted to borstals.¹⁷⁰

This reduction in the number of men imprisoned for homosexual acts has been less frequently noted than the rise in the number of gross indecency convictions. Matt Houlbrook has argued against seeing a similar rise in the 1950s as proof of the state conducting a McCarthyite 'witch hunt' against homosexuals, and has shown how it can be attributed to the operational decisions of individual London police divisions. However, a similar top-line increase in the number convictions in the seventies has been used by

¹⁷⁰Table 4.1 in Cmd.8948, Report of the Commissioners of Prisons for the Year 1952 (London: HMSO, 1953) onwards.

Houlbrook, among others, to bolster their argument that the Sexual Offences Act was not the great liberal reform of popular repute. A detailed consideration of policing patterns shows that after decriminalisation the laws against gross indecency and importuning were frequently used against men who had consensual sex with other adult men in public spaces. However, this should not be understood as the implementation of the coherent policy of an overarching state bent on policing gay men 'into confinement'.¹⁷¹ Prosecutions were the result of the operational decisions of individual police forces, who proactively observed individual geographical areas. Furthermore when faced with abusive policing practices gay men did not move into private, they publicly criticised the police. Such campaigns were just one example of a new public sphere of gay life, a development that had not been anticipated by those behind the Sexual Offences Act.

The Legal Regulation of the Gay Male Public Sphere

The Sexual Offences Act therefore most clearly affected the regulation of physical sex acts in public space. Yet by decriminalising acts in private, it meant that organisations, publications and services created by and for gay men were no longer *de facto* groups of criminals. The legal status of these new institutions was never explicitly set out in statute and was instead decided using common and case law. This meant that their legal status was decided not by legislators but by prosecutors, judges and juries. This was a profoundly unstable system of regulation under which gay organisations could never be sure whether what they were doing would draw the attention of the law.

¹⁷¹ Houlbrook, *Queer London*, p.263

The offence of procuring, for instance, was a cause of frequent anxiety. The Sexual Offences Act specified that it was still a crime for a third party to procure a man to commit a homosexual act with another man, even if said act was now legal. Procuring was not defined in statute, so in theory this could cover any activity designed to bring gay men together – including running befriending services and social clubs. In 1968 Lord Arran backed this interpretation of the act, questioning CHE's plans to set up a chain of venues called Esquire Clubs and sarcastically suggesting that they should consult the Home Office.¹⁷² In fact they did, but neither the Home Office nor the local police forces was able to give a clear statement on the issue and the clubs were halted due to local public pressure rather than legal action.¹⁷³

The idea that procuring charges could be used to close down gay male enterprises was frequently discussed. For instance in 1981 Judge Leonard QC stated that

under my reading of the law as it presently stands the proprietor of a gay bar who openly advertises it as such or even who does nothing about homosexuals meeting there possibly for sexual purposes could be acting unlawfully.¹⁷⁴

However ACE Lynch, writing in the *Criminal Law Review*, argued that the case law on procuring indicated that just introducing gay men could not constitute an offence, which would instead require a proactive attempt to bring about a homosexual act.¹⁷⁵ The debate was theoretical because prosecutions for the offence were rare. Mary Whitehouse's famous

¹⁷² Lagna. Ed. Pubs and Clubs: 'The New Freedom', *Scottish Daily Mail*, 5/9/1968.

¹⁷³ HCA/Ephemera/95: NWHLRC Minutes 24/05/1968; HCA Grey Papers 1/15 (folder 2): Grey to Horsfall 04/1968.

¹⁷⁴ Quoted in P. Crane, *Gays and the Law*, p.31.

¹⁷⁵ A. Lynch, 'Counselling and Assisting Homosexuals', *Criminal Law Review*, October 1979, pp.630-44.

action against the play *Romans in Britain* was the only widely reported example which did not involve prostitution.¹⁷⁶

The offence of conspiracy to corrupt the public morals was another potential source of danger. Simmonds' statements in the Shaw case made it clear that some in the legal establishment would use the offence to emphasise the limits of reform. A test case on this issue emerged almost immediately when the Director of Public Prosecutions proceeded against the underground magazine *International Times* for its contact column 'males'. Voices within the office of the DPP saw the action as vital for emphasising that homosexual acts remained against public policy, stating that 'though not an offence if committed in private, buggery is still abominable as much now as in 1966'¹⁷⁷. At the trial the defendant's counsel argued that by legislating in 1967 parliament had settled the issue of whether homosexuality was against the public morals. However, in his summing up Judge Sutcliffe drew the jury's attention to 'how guarded was the approach of Parliament to this change in the law and the areas of the problems of homosexuality which were left untouched'¹⁷⁸. Sutcliffe stated that it was perfectly within the scope of the law for them to find that encouraging these now-legal acts corrupted the public morals, which the jury duly did. The eventual appeal led to the damning comment in the House of Lords that despite reform

¹⁷⁶ The Whitehouse action was halted before a jury could give a verdict see J. Sutherland, *Offensive Literature* (London, 1982), pp.180-90. Procuring offences are not routinely reported in the published Criminal Statistics. However a 1990 answer to a parliamentary question reveals that prosecutions never reached double figures throughout the entire of the 1980s, see *HC Deb 17 December 1990* vol 183 c2W.

¹⁷⁷ TNA DPP/2/4688: Note to DPP 02/08/1968.

¹⁷⁸ TNA DPP/2/4670: Short Transcript, p.24.

‘there is a material difference between merely exempting certain conduct from criminal penalties and making it lawful in the full sense.’¹⁷⁹

The judgement emphasised that although homosexual acts had been decriminalised this did not necessarily mean that they had ceased to be against public policy. This placed gay organisations in a legally tenuous position and left them fearful of persecution. The attitude of the police was generally hostile, leading CHE to declare in 1977 that they had ‘been left in no doubt that the police do view us as, in some way, quasi criminal’.¹⁸⁰ Sporadic harassment and intimidation of gay groups occurred. For example the first ever Gay Liberation Front disco was raided on the suspicion of drug use and Rotherham CHE observed police officers recording members’ license plates outside a group meeting, information which was used to identify people to question during a later investigation.¹⁸¹ The prosecution and subsequent conviction of members of the Paedophile Information Exchange (PIE) on conspiracy charges heightened anxiety throughout the gay world. PIE both advocated for rights for paedophiles and sought to bring paedophiles into contact with each other, though not explicitly to bring them into contact with children, which made them similar to the gay movement organisationally if not ideologically. Gay campaigners feared that if members of PIE were convicted this would open the floodgates to similar prosecutions, either originating from the police or from moral entrepreneurs such as Mary Whitehouse.¹⁸²

¹⁷⁹ *Kneller (Publishing, Printing and Promotions) Ltd and others v Director of Public Prosecutions* [1972] 2 All ER 898.

¹⁸⁰ HCA/CHE/14/3: Evidence to the Royal Commission on Criminal Procedure.

¹⁸¹ L. Power, *No Bath but Plenty of Bubbles*, p.47-48; HCA/CHE/9/45: ‘Discrimination and the Gay Minority’, p.5.

¹⁸² HCA/CHE/9/32: Briefing Paper on the PIE trial; HCA/GAA/2/4: ‘The Times they are a changing’, *GAA Bulletin*, no.19, pp.3-4. The fear that the conspiracy law could be sued against gay NGOs predated the PIE trial: see HCA/CHE/9/37: ‘Conspiracy charges and you: emergency information sheet to convenors’, 28/08/1975.

The Kneller judgement was used by the Charity Commissioners as a justification to refuse to register any gay-run organisation throughout the 1970s. In their view the legal status of homosexuality was such that only organisations which researched the condition or offered counselling to reverse it could be considered as having charitable objectives.¹⁸³ Yet this interpretation was not shared by many, including those who had helped to pass the act. Whilst opposing the use of conspiracy charges against gay magazines, David Steel stated that when parliament 'passed the Act we did so largely on the assumption that in future the homosexual minority in our midst should be free from oppression provided that they were obliged to observe the generally accepted standards of public decency.'¹⁸⁴ More significantly at the same time the Charity Commissioners and courts were insisting on the pseudo-criminal nature of homosexual conduct, the Home Office along with Islington Council were giving the first official public grant to gay organisation, London FRIEND. The grant, personally supported by Roy Jenkins on his return to the Home Office in 1974, gave public money to an organisation which helped gay women and men to meet.¹⁸⁵

For the gay press and commercial venues prosecution was not just a theoretical possibility but a regular feature of their existence. Gay publishers were vulnerable to a broad range of potential charges. The Obscene Publications Act (OPA) 1959 meant that publishers and shopkeepers faced fines, imprisonment and the seizure and destruction of material which a court decided would 'deprave and corrupt' any likely reader. Common law conspiracy charges could also be brought, conveniently avoiding the 'public good' defences in the OPA. If the material was distributed using the Royal Mail the charge of sending indecent items

¹⁸³ See extensive correspondence with the Charity commissioners in HCA/CHE/9/41.

¹⁸⁴ Lagna. Ba: 'Steel attacks Him Seizure', *Guardian* 27/8/1976.

¹⁸⁵ Walton (ed.), *Out of the Shadows*, pp.77-85.

through the post could be used, as it was in the case of early gay magazine *Spartacus*.¹⁸⁶ For the majority of the commercial gay publishing companies, raids on shops, offices, and printers were a regular occurrence. But the timing of, or justification for, police raids, could not be predicted. In his evidence to the Williams Committee the Director of Public Prosecutions admitted to the lack of a general agreement on what material was considered obscene under the OPA, pointing out there were even cases where different courts came to different verdicts regarding the same magazine within the same week.¹⁸⁷

Further uncertainty was caused by the nature of proceedings under section 3 of the OPA which meant that a large number of magazines could be seized for an indefinite amount of time pending a decision on forfeiture. Publishing companies were bankrupted by this process, unable to absorb the costs of the large amount of stock which was destroyed. In summer 1975 Incognito, the publishers of the magazines *Him Exclusive*, *Jeffrey* and *Playguy*, had over 22,000 magazines taken in a series of raids on their shop, followed by the seizure of the complete run of the September issue of *Him Exclusive* from their printers. The magazines remained in the hands of the DPP throughout 1975, and Incognito was not informed what material had led to the raid. The magistrates ordered all the stock to be destroyed in 1976 – highlighting articles written by a doctor on anal and oral sex, and the contact ads. Another raid followed in June 1976, and in August the company went bankrupt.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁶ P. Crane, *Gays and the Law*, pp.88.

¹⁸⁷ TNA HO/265/5: Ev 55. Memorandum of the Director of Public Prosecutions.

¹⁸⁸ Nicholas De Jongh, 'Magazine alleges discrimination', *Guardian* 21/08/1975, p.4; 'Conspiracy: Government inventing new laws – MP complains', *Gay News* 78, 11-24 September 1975, p.1; 'Yard Men seize HIM yet again', *Gay News* 99, 15-28 July 1976, p.3; 'Incognito owes £47,000', *Gay News* 101, 26 August - 8 September 1977, p.5; 'Stop press: Him Found Obscene. Court Case ends with destruction', *Him Exclusive* 14, p.17.

Whilst this brought about the end of one publishing company, everyone involved in Incognito continued to produce magazines for gay men. For many, police raids were an absorbable expense and 'a normal occurrence in the life of gay magazines'¹⁸⁹. Yet the unpredictability of the law led to calls from gay publishers for a more explicit code of practice to bring 'a greater degree of stability to this side of the trade'¹⁹⁰. Gay magazines emphasised their responsibility by signing up to system of self-regulation by the industry body known as the British Adult Publications Association. The Association invented a voluntary code of practice, drawn up and implemented by former liberal head of the BBFC John Trevelyan, and operated a system of pre-publication censorship – with some issues going on sale with the most explicit words blacked out.¹⁹¹ The early eighties saw a series of increasingly vicious obscenity raids in London, and the introduction of a licensing regime for sex shops. The police began to use Section 2 of the OPA, allowing for publishers to be fined and possibly imprisoned as well. Such raids destroyed one of the largest publishing companies, Street Level Ltd, merging it into Alex McKenna's *Zipper*. Fearing arrest and the potential destruction of sex shops as a retail venue, McKenna converted Street Level's flagship sex magazine *Him Monthly* into a more general gay lifestyle periodical. Aiming for distribution through mainstream outlets including WHSmith, the magazine ceased to include any full nudes and 'toned down the words, as we have it on good authority that the police are teaching trainees to read'¹⁹².

¹⁸⁹ A. McKenna, 'Sex Mags and the Law', *Him Monthly* 50, p.5.

¹⁹⁰ H0 265-66: A F Gloak [*Q International*] to Coleman British Adult Publications Board 22/11/1978.

¹⁹¹ A. Purnell, 'Publishers Page', *Him Monthly* 15, p.6; 'Cock and Balls', *Zipper* 9, p.5.

¹⁹² 'Him Opinion' *Him Monthly* 51, October 1982, p.7.

In contrast to gay NGOs and magazines, both of which emerged after 1967, the gay commercial scene had a long pre-existing history of legal regulation. The legal tools used to regulate such venues were not primarily sexual offences, but licensing regulations and, from 1937, the nineteenth-century charge of keeping a disorderly house.¹⁹³ As soon as the SOA was passed, club owners and managers sought to use the change of the law as a defence. Decriminalisation in their view meant that running a service for homosexuals could no longer be considered a crime in itself. In the case of one club in Paddington in 1969, Michael Sherrad QC declared:

One is faced with the position that Parliament had made legal relationships between consenting male adult of a kind that not very long ago were prohibited by the law and very often punishable by imprisonment ... It follows that one is bound to have set up against this background clubs catering for male homosexuals. And this is one. He is not ashamed that he is catering for a section of society with which he has a great deal of sympathy.¹⁹⁴

The defence also emphasised that the landlord had tried to control his customers' behaviour by displaying signs prohibiting men from kissing or wearing drag. After the Flamingo Club in Wolverhampton was raided in 1968, a defence witness declared that '[t]he club served a useful and desirable purpose for homosexuals' and denied the police's accusations that orgies occurred on the premises. The landlord in this case drew attention to the steps he had taken to prevent sexual activity on the premises, including the installation of better lighting.¹⁹⁵ In neither of these cases did the defence prevail and both landlords were fined. It was nonetheless significant that their convictions were secured on the basis of disorderly conduct of men on the premises, not the fact that the club catered for gay men.

¹⁹³ Houlbrook, *Queer London*, pp.75-80.

¹⁹⁴ Lagna. Ed. Gay Pubs: 'Dancing Men kissed at stud Club', *Paddington Mercury*, 14/7/1969.

¹⁹⁵ HCA Grey/ 1/20: 'Law Report'.

This remained the legal position throughout the seventies; no official moves were made to declare gay venues illegal but the police aggressively restricted activity considered disruptive. Earls Court, an area of London well known for its gay venues, attracted large amounts of both gay men and police activity in the evening. The large crowds which tended to gather outside The Coleherne pub were a particular cause of tension. The tactics used by the police to disperse the crowd were the subject of one of the first investigations undertaken by *Gay News*, which argued that they amounted to harassment.¹⁹⁶ But the area around The Coleherne remained subject to aggressive policing and the use of dogs one night in 1976 inflamed tensions so much that, in the words of one witness 'we nearly had our Stonewall moment.'¹⁹⁷ Venues were raided, in a series of actions clearly designed to intimidate both customers and proprietors. *Gay News* described how, during a 1978 raid on The Catacombs Coffee Bar,

Customers were stopped from leaving. They were made to form orderly queues to gave their names to police officers. They were asked for their addresses too, and some were asked other questions – how many drinks have you brought, how much did you pay to get in? A member of *GN's* staff was even asked how tall he was. After answering the questions, each person was given a white strip printed 'Metropolitan Police.'¹⁹⁸

This strip had to be handed to an officer on the door before that individual was allowed to leave the premises. Such raids led to the closure of both The Catacombs and nearby Gigolo, both of which were well known in the gay community for onsite sexual activity.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁶ 'Who was obstructing who? No Photographs-No Evidence', *Gay News* 5, p.5; 'Guess What', *Gay News* 10, p.5.

¹⁹⁷ Nick Billingham, Author Interview, 12/01/2012.

¹⁹⁸ 'Three men are charged after police raid London night spot', *Gay News* 139, 23 March 23 – 5 April 1978, p.3.

¹⁹⁹ NSA C547 (Tony Deane Interviews): F4279, F4265, F4269.

Other Gay venues were a recognised and tolerated part of the landscape of Earls Court,²⁰⁰ policed in an aggressive and hostile way but only when they engendered activities which police considered disruptive. In 1977 the noise caused by The Coleherne's patrons led the Coleherne Road Residents' Association (CRRRA) to petition local MP Nicholas Scott, emphasising that 'The activities we object to are hanging about on doorsteps and urinating in basements. The fact that the people who do it are homosexuals is neither here nor there.'²⁰¹ Continuing problems led the association to seek to block the renewal of the pub's license in 1978, something which was avoided by a four-way conversation between the police, the brewery, the CRRRA and a group of regulars who had formed the Coleherne Patrons Committee. At a meeting with the CPC a representative of the police had said 'he saw no reason why The Coleherne should not still be there in a hundred years' time as long as The Coleherne's patrons did nothing to abuse the situation.'²⁰² The CPC concentrated as much on cooperating with the police in curtailing the behaviour of other patrons as they did on monitoring and challenging police's actions. They distributed signs asking the customers to desist from urinating in the street and making excessive noise with their motorcycles. They asked international gay guides to remove references to nearby Wharfedale Street as a cruising ground, and requested increased police activity in the road in the early hours of the morning. This worked and an agreement between the CRRRA and the brewery on changes to the pub led to the objections to the license renewal being removed.²⁰³

²⁰⁰ Lagna, Greater London. Pubs and clubs: 'Gay with Frivolity: Michael Walker provides a guide to the homosexual side of the Royal borough', *Kensington Post*, 28/10/1977.

²⁰¹ Lagna. Greater London-Pubs and Clubs: 'MP backs campaign to quieten down the gays', *Chelsea Post*, 16/12/1977.

²⁰² HCA/Coleherne Patrons Committee: CPC meeting with CS Faulkner 06/10/1978.

²⁰³ HCA/Coleherne Patrons Committee: 'Open letter to all motorcyclists who use the Coleherne', 24/11/1978; Minutes 22/03/1979; Minutes 01/03/1979.

This process of compromise and self-regulation characterised the legal position of the institutions of the gay male public sphere. The Sexual Offences Act had failed to legislate against them so the state did not take concerted legal action to abolish them entirely. However, many in the police and the judiciary disapproved of gay men organising publicly, and sporadically used an eclectic group of ill-defined legal instruments against them. In order to guard against this gay magazines and clubs implemented systems of self regulation, to emphasise their restraint and legitimacy.

Public Sex and the New Gay Politics

The emergence and qualified toleration of a public sphere for gay life did not entirely replace cultures of public sex. The work of Matt Houlbrook has portrayed cottaging as central to both queer life before 1967, and the cultural politics of the Wolfenden Report. Houlbrook describes the cottage as the locus of queer sexual identity between 1918 and 1957, as the places where the 'homosexual self and community were stabilized and articulated'²⁰⁴. The homosexual or queer man was, therefore, defined by the sexual activity which occurred in the cottage, and by the strategies and knowledge he used to find such locations; however, outside the cottage these acts had divergent meanings for the men who undertook them and they implied no common identity. The covert lobbying around the Wolfenden report relied on respectable homosexual men distancing themselves from disreputable queer men who had sex in public places, emphasising that if granted limited freedom they would retreat entirely into the private home.²⁰⁵ However the new public

²⁰⁴ M. Houlbrook, 'For Whose Convenience? Gay Guides, Cognitive Maps and the Construction of Homosexual London: 1917–1967', in S. Gunn and R.J. Morris (eds.), *Identities in Space: Contested Terrains in the Western City since 1850* (London, 2001) pp.165-86.

²⁰⁵ Houlbrook, *Queer London*, pp.241-63.

sphere of gay life, whilst challenging the idea gay men should restrict their lives entirely to the private realm, had trouble reconciling itself to older cultures of public sex.

Cottaging was seen as a common activity among gay men after reform. Writing in *Spartacus* in 1971 Roger Baker condemned the activity but declared that 'the man who can say that he has never, at some time in his life, used a public lavatory for the purpose of making a sexual contact, must be a very rare one indeed.'²⁰⁶ It is of course impossible to specify any percentage of self identified gay men who sought sexual partners in public, and many would vehemently object to any attempt to say it was universal, but in general discussion it was assumed to be high. Cottaging was also most often discussed in 'essentialist' terms by both activists and the police, who assumed that all men who had sex with men could be described as homosexual, whether out or closeted. This made cottaging a problem for gay campaigners. It was viewed as a common gay male practice and the site of the most consistent state action against gay men, but was also something of which the public disapproved. So activists were caught between wanting to defend those arrested by authorities and at the same time distance themselves from the activity. This was not just a tactical problem; many gay activists had genuine ideological concerns about cottaging and cruising.

Some within Gay Liberation and its offshoots condemned cottaging simply because they saw it as sexual exploitation. In the words of GLF member Michael Mason, 'cottaging was objected to because objectification was a big sin'²⁰⁷. GLF portrayed cottaging as a result of gay male oppression, describing it the result of neuroses produced by the pressures of living

²⁰⁶ R. Baker, 'And Roses round the door', *Spartacus* 23, p.6.

²⁰⁷ Power, *No Bath but plenty of bubbles*, pp.110

in a heterosexual society. They believed that gay men's attempts to find sexual partners in both public toilets and the commercial scene were a stunted and unhappy articulation of their sexuality, seeking out casual and anonymous sex instead of the deeper connections which society would not let them form. Cottagers and bar cruisers were instructed: 'The meat-market smells!...Pull the flush in the cottage! Have a revolution in your life!'²⁰⁸ The Gay Left collective would later describe cottaging as an exploitative mixture of 'manly aggression' and the 'competitive nature of capitalism' producing a 'turnover of people as commodities, sexual objects to be discarded when used.'²⁰⁹

Cottaging was also a secretive activity, predicated on anonymity and at odds with Gay Liberation's philosophy of coming out. It was therefore a potential distraction from the development of political consciousness, giving gay men the opportunity to have sexual experiences without having to face up to their identity or join any kind of movement. Derek James wrote in *Gay News* that 'Cottages are easy venues for hypocrites to nip in and out of. Quick relief before returning to respectable lives, riddled with real or fictitious heterosexuality.'²¹⁰ James described the appeal of cottaging as resting in a compartmentalisation of sexuality, so no matter how much promiscuity it facilitated it was fundamentally the product of heterosexual oppression. The impersonal nature of cottaging meant that it made communication between those participating unlikely and therefore meant that the cottage was, unlike the political meeting, a place where gay men were unlikely to find out about liberationist ideas. As Eric Scott-Presland wrote in 1980, '[a]ny

²⁰⁸ 'Male Gay roles' in A. Walter (ed.), *Come Together: the Years of Gay Liberation* (London 1980), p.86.

²⁰⁹ 'Love, Sex and Maleness', *Gay Left* 4, p.5.

²¹⁰ D. James, 'Liberation Jottings', *Gay News* 77, 28 August – 11 September 1975, p.14.

revolution first of all needs a base; it depends on those boring perennials, communication and organisation. So how do you build that base from anonymous casual sex?’²¹¹

Presland was reviewing *Gents*, a revue put together by cabaret group the Brixton Faeries which proposed an alternative view of cottage. They portrayed it as an authentic, radical space, one not granted by heterosexuals but taken by gay men; a place of raw sexuality in contrast to the world outside, where all types of gay men (the radical liberationist, the married closet case, the prim reformist) met.²¹² Similarly the Gay Left collective declared that the cottage represented ‘the ineradicability of gay sexuality, a sexuality which our society either prefers to pretend doesn’t exist, or strives to channel into respectable avenues.’²¹³ Yet they regarded cottaging as an imperfect, un-liberated articulation of that sexuality. Although often a ‘first introduction to homosexual expression’, cottaging was deemed a service for married men and those unable to find partners through the commercial gay scene due to their age, lack of money or looks. The Gay Left Collective noted cottaging’s vital utility for many gay men, whilst being unwilling to endorse it.

Such unease also characterised the response of less formally radical groups. Although horrified by policing and sympathetic to the needs of lonely men, for reformist groups cottaging was a publicity disaster. It was also hard to reconcile the practice with their argument that gay men should have exactly the same rights as heterosexual as there was no officially accepted equivalent straight culture of anonymous public sex. For a few the response to this was obvious. In 1971 Executive Committee member Martin Stafford published a paper asking ‘Can CHE afford to be Morally Neutral?’ Stafford argued that

²¹¹ E. Presland, ‘Cottaging – Brixton Faeries Gents’, *Gay Noise* 9, December 4th 1980, p.9.

²¹² HCA/Townsend/24: ‘Gents’.

²¹³ ‘Within these Walls’, *Gay Left* 2, pp.3-4.

homosexuals should attempt to act in line with conventional moral standards, both because these standards were desirable in themselves and because if homosexuals were to gain acceptance they needed to be seen to agree with straight values. Cottaging, along with liberationist movements and the commercial scene, should in Stafford's view be condemned by CHE.²¹⁴ The theory was brought to CHE's National Council in 1972 and was met with a mixture of suspicion and confusion. Delegates were unsure how CHE was to enact such a policy and about implications of making such moral judgements. One said that the paper implied an implied 'an institutional morality reminiscent of Hitlerian Germany.'²¹⁵

This debate dogged CHE for the entirety of its existence. The national campaign refused to take any clear line either way on the ethics of cottaging itself and instead concentrated on condemning the police's tactics. Many of CHE's members condemned cottaging and were concerned about how it reflected on gay men in general. 'Much as though this may be considered good by those who do it, gays get the labels of dirty old men and sexual perverts. This in no way does our name or movement any good', wrote one member in response to a 1979 attempt to open a discussion on the topic.²¹⁶ Even those who saw no problem with the practice felt that arguing for 'a right to cottage' would alienate straight supporters and it was best to continue to pursue a strategy of condemning police activity.²¹⁷ Eventually the relevant committee came to the ambiguous position that 'CHE could neither

²¹⁴ M. Stafford 'Does Morality Matter?' *CHE Bulletin*, June 1971, p.3.

²¹⁵ HCA/CHE/3/1: National Council Minutes 03/06/1972

²¹⁶ HCA/CHE/7/40: Lamb to Sir [Palmer], 03/02/1979.

²¹⁷ HCA/CHE/7/40: Campbell to Palmer.

approve nor disapprove of cottaging, but that we had to accept it at [sic] a fact of gay life.²¹⁸

Instead, campaigners sought to condemn police tactics whilst not endorsing sex in public spaces. One line was to represent cottaging as a product of heterosexual oppression. In their 1969 article 'New Law but No New Deal', the former secretary of the Homosexual Law Reform Society, Antony Grey and criminologist D.J. West, argued that cottaging was a reaction to lack of opportunities homosexual men had to meet others. In large parts of the country cottages represented the only place where men could meet for sex and even those who lived in larger towns might feel reluctant to go to commercial venues because 'so open an avowal of his personality would court the notice of his relatives, employers or the authorities. Instead, he may resort to furtive calls at public conveniences in the hope of remaining anonymous'²¹⁹. Whilst calling for a change in the law Grey and West argued that what was really required was the recognition and acceptance of gay people as part of 'the total social fabric'²²⁰.

This stance made the continuation of cottaging the responsibility of society rather than individual gay men. But it also made the cottager a pathetic figure, driven by desperation to an abject space as the only way of gaining physical relief. A 1983 CHE leaflet claimed with a doubtful precision that 60% of cottagers had no other opportunities to meet gay men: 'Most are married and feel guilty about their sexual feelings. They go to "cottages" since there is nowhere else they can be certain to meet other gay men during the day and where they will

²¹⁸ HCA/CHE/7/40: Report of a meeting on Cottaging.

²¹⁹ HCA/Grey/1/20: 'New Law but no New Deal'.

²²⁰ Ibid.

not be recognised.’²²¹ In 1978 Jim Edgell, chair of CHE’s Tunbridge Wells branch, said that ‘habitual cottagers include a high proportion of the old, the unattractive, the self-oppressed, the married and the mixed up. For various reasons, these would not readily use other gay facilities and to be honest many of them would not score very often if they did.’²²² This challenged and defused the threat of the cottager. As one editorial for *Gay News* declared whilst excoriating police tactics,

Cottaging is indeed a ‘problem’ – for the many men, young and old, who have not yet come to terms with their homosexuality, it is often the only way to find sexual release. They are often horrified by what they do, and usually see it as an unhealthy obsession over which they have no control. Shame is built in ... they are brought, humiliated, through courts, their shame on public parade, punished by fine and admonition – and then face the social ostracism which follows publicity in local newspapers. No one had pity or understanding for ‘the perverts in the park’²²³.

An *Observer* piece by Des Wilson, republished in *Gay News*, drew the line even more explicitly, stating that ‘It is sad for the men concerned – sad that there is no better, more comfortable, more human way. But really that is all it is – sad for them; not harmful to us.’²²⁴

Activists also argued that cottaging was harmless because heterosexuals would be completely unaware of it if it were not for outside interference. Following on from the sociological work of Laud Humphries on ‘tearooms’ in the USA, campaigners emphasised that public sex involved a complex system signals which prevented those who were not interested from having any knowledge of what was happening. In 1980 the Labour

Campaign for Gay Rights declared that

²²¹ HCA/CHE/7/30: Cottaging and the Police; See also B. Kenyon, ‘Sex, Consequences and Disgrace’, *Gay News* 88, 12-25 February 1976, p.11.

²²² J. Edgell, ‘A Complex Problem’, *Gay News* 152, 5-18 October 1978, p.19.

²²³ ‘*Gay News* Comments’, *Gay News* 186, 6-19 March 1980, p.14.

²²⁴ D. Wilson, ‘A case of shame and sympathy’, *Gay News* 89 26 February – 10 March 1976, p.11.

It's an unjustifiable use of police time to employ police in this way since those who engage in such sexual activities are extremely discreet about them and in no way seek to involve or seduce anyone else into taking part. This is a 'victimless offence' since those participants are willing and consenting partners.²²⁵

In fact they argued it was only police activity itself which drew attention to the practice at all. Cottaging was portrayed as an activity which had no impact on heterosexual society – despite being in public it was an entirely private affair.

These arguments allowed activists both to claim that cottaging was no threat to straight society, and to distance themselves from the practice. The healthy open association of gay people was the exact opposite to the seedy, secretive practice of public sex. The solution to the problem was not therefore punitive police action but for gay people to be allowed to meet more publicly. In Cambridge this analysis led to a tentative compact with the police, whereby officers agreed not to charge first-time offenders and instead referred them to the local CHE group. In return Cambridge CHE was expected to persuade local gay men to stop cottaging.²²⁶ This was an impossible task for the group, who no more had a way to communicate with the majority of cottagers than the police, and the agreement ended soon after it began. Similar tactics were however tried by CHE groups across the country. Croydon CHE put up posters in local toilets saying 'HOMOSEXUAL? YOU RISK ARREST AND PROSECUTION IF YOU LOITER IN PUBLIC TOILETS OR USE THEM FOR SEXUAL PURPOSES.'²²⁷ One CHE member from Feltham volunteered to hand out cards in toilets extolling the virtues of meeting in public rather than in a cottage.²²⁸ Some in CHE wanted to make such

²²⁵ HCA/CHE2/9/32: Manchester Labour Campaign for Gay Rights Press Statement 24/11/1980.

²²⁶ 'The Cambridge Experiment', *Gay News* 96 3-16 June 1975 p.11.

²²⁷ HCA/CHE/7/40: *Checkpoint: Campaign for Homosexual Equality Croydon Group Monthly Newsletter*, January 1979, p.1.

²²⁸ 'And cottagers could help to swell the ranks of CHE', *Gay News* 158, 11-24 January 1979, p.7.

campaigns national policy, but this was rejected as it felt that being seen to work too closely with the police would damage the organisation in the gay community.²²⁹

Certainly many were vocally against the idea. Roger Baker mocked the concept as paternalistic and prudish, remarking that 'Victorian Missionaries would have been breathless with admiration'²³⁰. Radical newspaper *Gay Noise* took great exception to Bernard Greaves' later attempts to negotiate with the police in Leicester. Greaves' attempts to establish 'good relations between members of the gay community and the police' were portrayed as a fool's errand given the police's role as enforcers of discriminatory laws. To negotiate meant 'legitimacy to what they are doing, and involves an element of trust which is dangerous and foolish'. The only political tactic likely to be successful was 'to organise independently and publicly in total opposition to the actions of our oppressors'²³¹.

Importantly however *Gay Noise* did not object to the way Greaves' campaigns marginalised cottagers, but to his co-operation with a coercive arm of the state. Like Greaves they wanted gay people to organise and become a public part of society, which were aims that cottaging did nothing to further.

Across the political spectrum the gay movement stressed the public organisation of gay people: whether as revolutionary figures who challenged the whole nature of the state and society, or as respectable citizens to be recognized and accommodated by both. Reformist groups inverted the political tactics used by the covert homosexual campaigners described by Houlbrook – instead of arguing for respectability by promising to retreat they argued for respectability by promising to be open. Queer cultures of sex in public places were

²²⁹ HCA/CHE/7/40: Alan Horsfall to CHE Executive Committee 14/09/1978.

²³⁰ R. Baker, 'The Outlaw's Back', *Gay News* 173, 23 August - 5 September 1979, p.17.

²³¹ 'and On', *Gay Noise* 8 20, November 1980, p.9; Letters, *Gay Noise* 9, 1 January 1981, p.12.

marginalised by most in the gay movement, their secrecy and anonymity seen as fundamentally different from the new public political identity which the movement was trying to create. Practices such as cottaging were therefore portrayed as products of oppression and relics of the past. The cottager and the cruiser went from being urban figures conducting their sexuality in the most public way possible, to being represented as tragically forced into privacy, ironically having sex in public because they were trapped in the closet.

Conclusion

The impact of the Sexual Offences Acts hinges on the distinction between two meanings of the word *public*. 'Public' could refer to physical acts of sex in a public space, or the public recognition of someone's homosexuality and association of people together in spaces or through institutions explicitly catering to homosexual men. The general rhetoric of reform was hostile to both practices, but only the first was explicitly legislated against. After reform police action against men seeking sex in public spaces intensified, whereas the second form of public activity was placed in an ambiguous legal situation. Groups of homosexual men meeting and communicating were no longer de facto criminals, and the decriminalisation of private acts had made it clear that homosexual men had some legitimate place in society, but the extent of the legal limits on what they could do were unclear. For the gay campaigner, publisher or landlord, the permissive society was a perilous place, where legitimacy had not been explicitly granted but had to be claimed and protected against those in the state who wanted to restrict gay men to the private sphere. Gay campaigners, both reformist and liberationist, concentrated on the second definition of the word public, demanding the right to live lives openly and be recognised as a legitimate part of society.

However such movements found it hard to reconcile themselves with older queer cultures of public sex, despite this being the site of the most clearly and consistently coercive state action. The overt campaigners of the 1970s excluded other queer men in ways similar to the covert campaigners of the 1950s.

To understand permissive reform correctly it is necessary to separate it from its commonly assumed synonyms 'liberal' and 'progressive'. Permissive reform was a tactic born out of a lack of consensus, a way of dealing with the regulation of moral issues based on removing some criminal sanctions whilst not being willing to seem to endorse the activity in general. Permissive reform is therefore distinct from the gay rights reforms of the past twenty years. They involve a positive recognition of gay people's rights, compared with SOA's strategy of negative liberty and the removal of criminal sanctions. The passage of the 1967 Sexual Offences Act removed sanctions from a range of human behaviour, homosexual acts in private, but did not contain any measure which could be used to enforce any particular view of gay men's wider place in society. The permissive society should not be viewed as some hegemonic system or *zeitgeist*. It operated as a contingent, often contradictory set of actions by diverse group of state actors (including the police, courts, parliament, local councils, etc). Permissiveness was therefore a process of negotiation and, for gay men, an opportunity which was seized with unforeseen vigour.

Chapter Two: Gay NGOs and the Campaign for Homosexual Equality

The existing historiography of gay political groups in the 1970s has concentrated almost exclusively on the London-based Gay Liberation Front. Historians such as Lucy Robinson and Jeffrey Weeks have valorised the GLF as a paradigm-breaking political movement which challenged the caution and moderation which had characterised all previous homosexual politics groups and credit it with creating a new and strident political voice for gay people. At the same time the more reformist Campaign for Homosexual Equality has been dismissed because of its failure to become either an effective lobbying organisation or a mass movement, and has been analysed mostly in terms of what distinguished it from the GLF. For instance, both Lent and Robinson describe CHE as essentially timid, attributing the adoption of a more militant campaigning style after 1974 to the influence of the GLF and an influx of their activists.²³² Jeffrey Weeks also credits CHE's rapid membership growth in the early seventies to the stimulus of the GLF, but laments the organisation's inability to mobilise its large membership into activism.²³³ Similarly Julian Jackson criticises the campaign for its obsession with its own structures and regards it as unable to take advantage of the new militancy that the GLF had produced.²³⁴

The point of this chapter is not to either downplay the influence of the GLF or to argue that CHE was a particularly effective political organisation. Rather it seeks to analyse what CHE tells us about the nature of gay male politics in the 1970s, whatever its organisational problems and lack of legislative achievement. GLF was riven with splits, failed to persuade

²³² Lent, *British social movements since 1945*, p.91; Robinson, *Gay men and the left in post-war Britain*, p.123.

²³³ Weeks, *Coming Out*, pp.210-13.

²³⁴ Jackson, *Homosexuality, Permissiveness and Morality in France and Britain*, pp.89-96.

the majority of the gay scene to join in with its cause, and did not achieve the revolution it called for. Yet that movement has been rightly recognised as significant because of the radical sense of possibility that it created. Similarly CHE's significance lies not in its campaigning achievements (or lack of them) but in its actions in creating a social and political space for gay men. CHE formed groups across the country which allowed men to meet publicly, and sought to engage with the state and civil society as gay men for the first time. As such CHE can be considered as an example of the new gay male public sphere, and used to draw out some of its key features.

In recent years historians of non-parliamentary postwar politics have begun to study less radical groups in more detail. The work of Crowson, Hilton and McKay and Mouhot on Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) notes how the existing literature has tended to concentrate on New Social Movements and therefore privilege the least conciliatory and most protest-orientated organisations. They use the example of gay politics to show how accounts which concentrate on New Social Movements, 'are too reliant on downplaying the significance of the quiet, single-issue reformist groups, and they exaggerate the lasting impact of their more radical cousins'²³⁵. However to prove this point they make no reference to CHE and rely on a list of Gay liberation offshoots (two of which, *Gay News* and London Lesbian and Gay Switchboard, CHE also had a part in founding).²³⁶

Nevertheless this approach has also led to important work which considers how radical politics influenced allegedly more conventional pressure groups. Chris Moores has cautioned against seeing non-parliamentary politics in the sixties as being characterised

²³⁵ M. Hilton, J. McKay, N. Crowson and J. Mouhot, *The Politics of Experience: How NGOs Shaped Modern Britain* (Oxford, 2013), p.63.

²³⁶ *Ibid*, p.63.

solely by the rise of 'youth activism, subcultures and movements critiquing aspects of established society.' Instead he uses the example of the National Council for Civil Liberties to describe a breed of 'progressive professionals', who drew 'on the "old" and new, on the expert and on the do-it-yourself activist'²³⁷. In a similar vein Virginia Berridge and Alex Mold have illustrated how both anti-smoking campaign ASH and drug users group Release tactically drew from both new social movements *and* older voluntary traditions. ASH was a small centrally driven group which 'drew strength from an image, rather than a reality, of mass activism' and Release similarly adopted a radical image but at the same time adopted older voluntary sector traditions. Berridge and Mold conclude that any discussions of activism in the 1960s and 1970s 'needs to encompass the ways in which both old and new drew on each other.'²³⁸

CHE can be seen as a similar mixture of the old and the new. It evolved from the North Western Homosexual Law Reform Committee, which had been founded by Labour Councillor Alan Horsfall in order to campaign for the Sexual Offences Act. It's initial aims and activities were therefore analogous to the respectable lobbying of the Homosexual Law Reform Society. Unlike the HLRS, however, the committee were overtly identified as a group of homosexual men. Antony Grey, the secretary of the HLRS, described them as 'young men who were impatient with what they regarded as the pussyfooting of the HLRS.'²³⁹ So, from the very beginning CHE was at once an extremely conventional political organisation, a law reform committee set up to lobby in all the usual ways, and something more radical, one of

²³⁷ C. Moores 'The Progressive Professionals: The National Council for Civil Liberties and the Politics of Activism in the 1960s' *Twentieth Century British History* Vol.20 no.4 (2009), pp.538-50.

²³⁸ V. Berridge and A. Mold, 'Professionalization, new social movements and voluntary action in the 1960s and 1970s' in M.Hilton and J.Mckay (eds.), *Ages of Voluntarism: How we got to the big society?* (Oxford, 2011) pp.113-34.

²³⁹ A. Grey, *A Quest for Justice: Towards Homosexual Emancipation* (London, 1992), pp.136-37.

the first occasions when a group of homosexual men got together to publically call for change. Throughout its existence, CHE would similarly mix the older traditions of voluntary and community groups with the newer politics of sexual identity.

Much of CHE's most important work was done in its diffuse collection of local groups and other offshoots of the main organisation. Therefore what follows is not a standard administrative history of the organisation. Instead this chapter highlights how CHE helped to bring about three main changes to the social and political position of gay men. Firstly, it looks at the social groups which were the basis of the campaign's membership, and argues that they succeeded in creating an unprecedented network of spaces where gay men could meet publicly. Secondly, it shows at how the existence of CHE facilitated debate between gay men which allowed them to discuss influential political goals. Finally, it will look at how CHE's, often but not always unsuccessful, political campaigns helped to establish that gay men had a form of citizenship and could be recognised by the state.

'Make Friends Through CHE': Changing the nature of the gay social scene

By 1975 CHE was a mass membership organisation with over 5,000 members in 100 groups spread across the country.²⁴⁰ Although some engaged in local activism, CHE groups were predominantly social and the majority of their members avoided campaigning activity. As such the groups have received less historical attention than the more vocal and challenging actions of the GLF, or even national CHE itself. However they in fact were part of a profound change in gay male sociability and can be seen as part of an emerging gay male public sphere.

²⁴⁰ A. Clarke 'A.H.A.', *CHE Bulletin*, Vol.3 No.10, p.2.

Even as the Sexual Offences Act was still going through parliament, the NWHLRC were receiving many letters from socially isolated gay men.²⁴¹ After the reform the committee identified the social isolation of homosexuals as one of the most important problems that it could address. However, at this point it was not sure what they could actually do to improve the situation or, indeed, what the situation actually was. In October 1967 the committee advertised a provisional phone counselling service in the local Manchester press.²⁴² The line was so overwhelmed with callers that they had to cut down on advertising in order to cope. As Alan Horsfall said in 1977, 'It sounds a bit cynical now but we were really testing the amount of unhappiness and frustration there was.'²⁴³ NWHLRC were not alone in noticing how isolated many gay men were, either because they had no contact with other gay people whatsoever or because they were dissatisfied with the pubs and clubs of the commercial scene. One respondent to an Albany Trust survey in 1969 declared that 'there are no large towns nearby with homogroups or communities – so one feels completely isolated as well as being constantly watched and commented upon'²⁴⁴. Many respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the club and pub scene and 64% of the 2,000 men surveyed declared that what they wanted to see 'well run and socially acceptable meeting spaces'²⁴⁵.

The committee's first response was a proposal to establish a series of alternative social clubs for gay people. Accordingly in 1968 they set up Esquire Clubs as a separate limited company which would offer their members 'food, friendship, drink dancing and entertainment,

²⁴¹ 'Future Activities, *NWHLRC Bulletin*, May 1967, p.2.

²⁴² HCA/Ephemera/95:; NWHLRC minutes 06/10/1967.

²⁴³ Alan Horsfall interviewed in *Out*, no.5 (June/July 1977), p5; *NWHLRC Bulletin*, April 1968, p.1.; HCA/Ephemera/95: NWHLRC minutes 06/10/1967.

²⁴⁴ HCA/Albany Trust/13: Respondent 0085.

²⁴⁵ HCA/Albany Trust/10: Results of 1970 Social Needs survey..

cultural activities [and] discussion groups'²⁴⁶. This was an attempt to create a new public form of gay social life. As the previous chapter has noted the parliamentarians behind the Sexual Offences Act opposed the idea of clubs which were overtly run for homosexuals, but the concept behind Esquire Clubs also challenged the practices of the late sixties gay scene. The company started by working with existing venues, and in 1968 members of Esquire Clubs were given free access to The Rockingham and The Rouge clubs in Manchester. However, both clubs had previously maintained strict membership requirements and vetting processes in order to avoid the attentions of the police. Their managements found it difficult to adjust to admitting absolutely anyone with an Esquire membership card and both agreements collapsed.²⁴⁷ This underlines how novel the concept behind Esquire Clubs was. NWHLRC wanted to create social facilities which were accessible to all gay men, and extended beyond the covert and personal networks of the old gay scene. This was a newly public form of sociability.

Esquire never successfully opened its own clubs, but at the same time the NWHLRC (which became the Committee for Homosexual Equality 1969) was observing the beginnings of another kind of alternative social network. In a paper given to the Albany Trust in May 1968 Grey described a mounting demand for an organisation concerned with the social needs of homosexuals. He described attempts to form social groups in Wolverhampton, Nottingham, Coventry and London (particularly in Stepney). Some of these initiatives were homosexuals themselves and others were by church and social work organisations.²⁴⁸ Similarly the NWHLRC noted private meetings happening in a pub in Coventry (distinct from the group

²⁴⁶ HCA Ephemera/95: NWHLRC minutes 12/01/1968.

²⁴⁷ A. Horsfall 'Esquire Clubs' <http://www.gaymonitor.co.uk/esquire1.htm> accessed 29/04/2014.

²⁴⁸ HCA/Grey/1/15 (folder 2): 'Social organisations for homosexuals'.

Grey noted) and in a house in Nottingham (possibly the same).²⁴⁹ Groups started to form across the country some which wanted to affiliate to a national organisation, a development which took the original members of the NWHLCRC by surprise.²⁵⁰ By December 1969 existing groups were affiliating to the organisation and the committee were proactively working to encourage groups in other areas.²⁵¹ They did this by appointing a local convenor, who was then given the addresses of all CHE members in the local area.²⁵²

These groups created a new form of social structure for gay men. In the words of Executive Committee member Roger Baker, they aimed to provide 'a comfortable, relaxed climate in which people can meet and talk' in contrast to the perceived cattle markets of the established gay clubs.²⁵³ The mid-seventies recruitment leaflet 'What CHE can offer you?' described the groups as an opportunity to make new friends, either as an alternative or a safe introduction to the commercial scene.²⁵⁴ Groups organised a diverse range of social activities. The local leaflet *Is there Gay Life in Streatham?* listed parties, cinema and theatre trips, bowling, country walks, pub crawls and eating out, going on to say that 'in fact, we'll organise anything that anyone wants to do.'²⁵⁵

In contrast to the informal and covert networks of the old queer scene, CHE advertised its existence in mainstream publications. The case of Ian Randall, described in 1977 CHE Publication *OUT*, presents a perfect example of how the system was supposed to work.

²⁴⁹ HCA/Ephemera/95: NWHLCRC Minutes 24/05/1968.

²⁵⁰ Alan Horsfall interviewed in *Out*, no.5 (June/July 1977), p.5.

²⁵¹ *CHE Bulletin* December 1969, p.2,

²⁵² HCA/Ephemera/95: NWHLCRC Minutes 12/12/69; *CHE Bulletin*, March 1970, p.1,

²⁵³ R.Baker 'London CHE', *CHE Bulletin*, November 1970, p.1.

²⁵⁴ HCA/PALMER./4/1/13: 'What CHE Can offer you?'.

²⁵⁵ HCA/PALMER/4/1/13: 'Is there gay life in Streatham?'.

After a lonely and isolated adolescence, terrified of trying to go to a gay club alone, Randall responded to an advert for national CHE in *Time Out* at the age of 19. They assigned him to a local group and he attended a meeting at which Quentin Crisp spoke. 'It was the first time I had been in a room full of homosexuals and I felt marvellous,' he recalled: 'I was free and happy and gay in all meanings of the word.' Following a period of attending meetings in secret, he felt able to come out to his friends and family.²⁵⁶ After London Lesbian and Gay Switchboard (LLGS) was founded in 1974 they referred many of their callers to their local CHE group. As LLGS volunteer David Seligman said: 'Many such callers will have previously been completely isolated, and other than talking [sic.] to us on the telephone, their initial contact with a CHE group may be their first contact with other homosexuals.'²⁵⁷

However not everyone found the groups such an inclusive and liberating experience. Women in particular often reported feeling excluded and even resented at meetings.²⁵⁸ This is part of the reason why - despite CHE notionally catering for both gay women and men - the female section of the membership never climbed above about 10%.²⁵⁹ Others found some of the groups altogether too obsessed with being respectable or, as John Saxby put it, 'Middle Aged, Middle Class, Middle Brow and Middle Sexed.'²⁶⁰ Some other men did not see CHE as an alternative to the commercial scene, but as a convenient way to be introduced to

²⁵⁶ Saved: Ian Randall' *Out* 4, April/May 1977, p.3.

²⁵⁷ HCA/CHE2/10/3(1): Special Commission Evidence no.69..

²⁵⁸ "'Female Intruders" – Chris Gills account of joining a CHE group.' *Out* 3 February/March 1977, p.9.

²⁵⁹ P. Temperton 'Membership report', *CHE Bulletin*, January (Incorporating December) 1972, p.3; L. Stanley 'Women and Men in CHE', *CHE Bulletin*, March 1973, p.1.

²⁶⁰ 'Up the Metropolis – it's a long way to Piccadilly', *CHE Bulletin*, no.1, 1974, p.3.

it. For instance Paul O'Grady talks of his frustration in finding how Liverpool CHE was mostly made up of men who rarely went to the pubs and clubs.²⁶¹

As well as introducing individuals to other gay people for the first time, some CHE groups were responsible for creating a whole new gay scene in the places they were based. A 1973 leaflet by Gay Cambridge, a point of co-operation between the GLF and CHE, described the change which these organisations had brought about to the whole gay scene in the city. Previously, in their view, gay life in the university and town in general had been based on exclusive groups, centred round specific dons. By contrast 'the advent of Gay Cambridge means that there is an alternative, a group of men and women across a broad social and intellectual spectrum who do at least try to be friendly and welcoming.'²⁶² Similarly Terry Sanderson describes how in Sheffield before the establishment of the CHE group there was just one 'gay' venue, the upstairs room of The King William pub which could only be accessed by walking past crowds of jeering straight men. CHE started to organise a weekly disco in one of the rooms in City Hall. Sanderson claims:

The concept of a 'gay community' was born in Sheffield through those discos. Suddenly there was somewhere you could 'be' in peace, where plots could be hatched, messages got across and, best of all, where romance could be safely experienced.²⁶³

CHE transformed the social lives of many of its members and the scenes in many of the towns where it had groups. But such a social function had never been CHE's original purpose and there was a division between those who were involved in the national campaign and the members on the ground. Executive Committee member Nick Stanley resigned in 1971

²⁶¹ P. O'Grady, *At My Mother's Knee...and other Low Joints* (London, 2008), pp.375-83.

²⁶² HCA/GLF/10: 'Gay Lib leaflette'.

²⁶³ T. Sanderson 'Faltering Out of the Closet' in *Radical Records*, p.88.

because he felt that the organisation was becoming too social and therefore too conservative.²⁶⁴ When Alan Horsfall resigned as chair of the organisation in 1973, primarily for personal reasons, he expressed concern that the groups were becoming far too insular.²⁶⁵ It was often felt that national campaigners held the social side in contempt, and Executive Committee members had to explicitly state that they were not denying its importance while trying to encourage political action.²⁶⁶

After the politically charged Morecambe conference of 1974, Executive Committee member Peter Naughton sought to defend the social groups as potential incubators of political activism. He described the existing commercial scene as place where interactions were based on anonymity and where there was 'no real communication between the personalities, the real people.' By contrast people in CHE groups began 'to know other individuals not as nameless faces to go to bed with, but as real people with a definite place in their local community and in society'.²⁶⁷ Such groups created an environment where gay people could talk to each other, and therefore could according to Naughton, inspire gay people to further political action.

This vision of local groups' radical potential was not necessarily borne out by experience. There was a fear that people joined CHE, found their new social group and then saw no need for further action. In 1972 members of the Executive Committee explained the organisation's 50% membership renewal rate by saying that many people would have got all

²⁶⁴ HCA/CHE/2/1: Executive Committee agenda and minutes 15/05/1971.

²⁶⁵ HCA/CHE/2/2: Horsfall to committee July 1973.

²⁶⁶ T. Naylor "London CHE-Over-Social Sleeping bitch?", *Lunch* 18 March 1973, p.24; L. Stanley 'The Campaign in CHE' *CHE Bulletin* July 1972, p.1.; B.Greaves 'CHE and Political Action', *CHE Bulletin*, September 1972, p.1.

²⁶⁷ HCA/CHE2/10/3(1): 'CHE's structure, or what future for CHE?'

they wanted out of the organisation in the first year.²⁶⁸ Terry Sanderson in 1974 reported that he heard members claiming that there was no need for any activism since they experienced no prejudice whatsoever in their day to day lives – then when asked how many people knew they were gay saying: ‘just my boyfriend and the people in CHE’²⁶⁹.

But even ‘the people in CHE’ marked a significant change in gay men’s social circles. CHE was a new public form of sociability, available to people who were far away from the existing gay scene, unhappy with that environment, or just not aware of its existence. It was accessible not through knowledge of cultural codes, friendship networks or pure luck, but through advertisements in newspapers, cards left in libraries and referrals through help lines. If the majority of its members did not become full time activists, and so did not ‘come out’ in the way the GLF understood it, they were still aligning themselves to a public gay identity. CHE’s large membership may not have supplied the huge pool of activists that some had hoped, but the numbers involved helped to emphasise the organisation’s significance. Accordingly, when seeking to influence parliamentarians, CHE emphasised that it was ‘this country’s largest homophile organisation’²⁷⁰. Collectively their membership of the group acted to affirm the concept of there being a ‘gay community’ which would be crucial in the political discussions and campaigning activities discussed below.

Political Debates and Communication

The foundation of organisations like CHE also acted to facilitate debate and discussion between gay men as gay men for the first time. Its monthly bulletins, pamphlets, and, from

²⁶⁸ HCA CHE/2/1: Agenda and Notes -19/08/1972.

²⁶⁹ T. Sanderson, ‘But I can’t...coming out’ *CHE Bulletin* vol. 2 no.5 1974, p.6.

²⁷⁰ B. Sturges, *No Offence: The Case for Homosexual Equality at Law* (London, 1975), p.46.

1973, annual members' conferences became forums for discussion of policy and analysis of the gay world. Compared to the covert lobbying behind the Wolfenden report, where individual men became self appointed and unchallenged spokesmen for all homosexuals, this was an environment where collective goals could be presented and contested. The forums which CHE created allowed gay men to make public criticisms of the existing scene, facilitated debate and the exchange of ideas with other organisations, and established policy programmes which could be presented to the outside world.

Chapter One has already discussed how the emergence of the gay male public sphere facilitated debate around cottaging. The commercial scene was also the topic of similar conversations within CHE, although they had a very different outcome. As mentioned above CHE, like GLF, were initially critical of the existing clubs and pubs, which they condemned as sordid places which gay men only resorted to because of their oppression. The early leaflet *Introducing the Campaign for Homosexual Equality* stated that the bars had an 'exploitative and predatory atmosphere'²⁷¹. Writing in *Spartacus*, Executive Committee member Roger Baker complained that gay bars only really served as places for confident gay men to make sexual contacts. They did nothing to challenge the loneliness and isolation of the majority and perpetuated gay men's marginalisation into ghettos.²⁷² Many members of local groups agreed, and during a June 1973 discussion group on membership and recruitment, local delegates said that they 'were opposed to commercial clubs because they were cliquey and expensive'²⁷³.

²⁷¹ *NWHLRC Bulletin* April 1968, pp.1-2; HCA/CHE/13/9: 'Introducing the Campaign for Homosexual Equality'.

²⁷² R. Baker, 'CHE', *Spartacus* 19, p.35.

²⁷³ HCACHE/3/3: National Council Minutes 09/06/1973.

However other members were able to contest this commentary on the commercial scene and in doing so succeeded in moderating CHE's stance on the issue. Bristol CHE complained that the condemnation of the club scene in the main CHE leaflet was unnecessary and insulting to people who enjoyed attending them. The Executive Committee responded by agreeing to write a new leaflet, specially aimed for people on the commercial scene.²⁷⁴ When the leaflet was revised in 1973 the most explicitly critical remarks were removed, although it took pains to emphasise that clubs only played a limited social role for gay people.²⁷⁵ Similarly, Baker's views on the clubs became more moderate. In his 1973 conference paper 'Is there a Gay Lifestyle?' he pointed out that the gay commercial scene was in fact less financially exploitative than its straight equivalent. The only problem was that it had a monopoly on gay sociability, which campaigns like CHE were trying to break.²⁷⁶ In comparison with previous 'respectable' reform efforts CHE could not demonise other aspects of gay life without having to answer directly to people who disagreed.

CHE also entered into dialogue with other gay political groups, most notably the Gay Liberation Front. Robinson and Weeks mostly discuss GLF's influence on CHE in terms of it leading to more overt aggressive campaigning and a less formal style of politics, but the influence was also ideological. CHE was aware of the American GLF before the London GLF's first meeting in the LSE in September 1970, and was sympathetic to the idea of a militant gay campaigning group. In December 1969 they responded to an article on events in New York in *Peace News* by saying 'the emergence in this country ... of a movement fighting to establish and defend homosexual civil rights has already taken place,' and declared,

²⁷⁴ R. Baker, 'CHE and Publicity', *CHE Bulletin* August 1972, p.2.

²⁷⁵ HCA/CHE 2/1: Executive Committee Minutes 10/06/1973.

²⁷⁶ HCA/CHE/8/2: Is There a Gay Lifestyle?.

inaccurately as it turned out, that their new groups would be 'part vigilante, part crusading and part social'²⁷⁷. In late 1970 they noted that as a result of campaigning activity the US debate 'on the homosexual's situation and on his relationship with society has achieved a depth and urgency lacking in this country', and that '[a]n energetic promotion of their cause would benefit all homosexuals while even moderates need militants to make them appear more moderate.'²⁷⁸

CHE's response to the British arm of the GLF was less effusive, but it was not entirely hostile. It reacted differently to each of GLF's defining characteristics – its Marxist revolutionary analysis, aggressive campaigning strategy, and antipathy towards sexism and the institution of the nuclear family. The revolutionary rhetoric caused the most tension between the organisations. The *Bulletin's* first mention of London GLF informed CHE members that what GLF 'really want is a Marxist revolution'. In contrast they emphasised that CHE were a very different body 'whose supporters are of various shades of political opinion; we do not believe that prejudice against homosexuals has anything to do with the class struggle'²⁷⁹. In January 1971 John Elbert reported on the GLF's London meetings and said that despite GLF's 'neo-marxian rhetoric' CHE should work with them on areas of mutual interest.²⁸⁰ By May however he had abandoned all such hope of co-operation and was accusing the GLF of exploiting gay people's legitimate grievances in order to further their own 'anachronistic and anti-human policies'²⁸¹. Although the GLF and CHE did co-operate on many individual campaigns, the question of whether the gay movement should necessarily be aligned to the

²⁷⁷ 'Reply to Peace News', *CHE Bulletin*, December 1969, p.2.

²⁷⁸ 'The American Homophile Movement', *CHE Bulletin*, November 1970, pp.2-3.

²⁷⁹ 'Gay L'b in London', *CHE Bulletin*, December 1970, p.3.

²⁸⁰ J. Elbert 'Gay Liberation and Politics' *CHE Bulletin*, Jan/Feb 1971, pp.1-2.

²⁸¹ J. Elbert 'Letters', *CHE Bulletin* May 1971, p.2.

left remained a sticking point for even the most militant CHE activists. In 1973, CHE's first paid worker Paul Temperton declared that he wanted CHE to be like the American Gay Activist's Alliance – 'a militant and activist body without the revolutionary and Marxist overtones of the GLF'²⁸².

The GLF's stance that sexism and the nuclear family was the root of gay people's oppression was engaged with more positively. Early CHE material had been overwhelmingly conciliatory towards heterosexual society. The early leaflet *Homosexuals Today* emphasised that discrimination was the result of the ignorance rather than the malice of the general public and what was needed was education.²⁸³ Many in CHE were uneasy with GLF's broadsides against the existing social structure. When reviewing the GLF manifesto, Peter Norman declared that 'its antipathy towards the family seems to me border on the hysterical.'²⁸⁴ Others were more receptive to the GLF's ideas, although they were not sure whether CHE was an appropriate body to implement them. In *Is There a Gay Lifestyle?* Baker declared that 'I do, incidentally regard present society as one almighty fuck up and I do believe that the application of some of the basic principles of gay liberation to society as a whole would be beneficial,' but did not feel that CHE was in a position to change the entire nature of society.²⁸⁵ The conference commission which met to consider Baker's paper found many areas of agreement, but were unable to make any suggestion for action other than that local groups should discuss the paper.²⁸⁶ However GLF ideas in this area did succeed in changing CHE's stance on some issues. In 1973 the main leaflet was rewritten to include

²⁸² 'Paul Temperton – interview' *Lunch* 16, p.4.

²⁸³ HCA/CHE/13/9: 'Homosexuals Today'.

²⁸⁴ P. Norman 'GLF Manifesto Review', *CHE Bulletin*, February 1972, p.3.

²⁸⁵ HCA/CHE/8/2: 'Is There a Gay Lifestyle?'.

²⁸⁶ HCA/CHE/8/2: 'Is there a Gay Lifestyle?', 'Report of the Gay Lifestyle Commission'.

sexism as one of the roots of gay oppression. Whilst not advocating the destruction of the nuclear family, it argued that the imposition of rigid gender roles was part of the reason for heterosexual society's condemnation of gay men and women.²⁸⁷

The existence of CHE also allowed gay men to debate and agree on collective political goals, and to form their own political programmes rather than lobby for those established by others such as Wolfenden. CHE's signature campaign was for a comprehensive reform of the law regarding homosexual acts. Their initial proposed reform bill came out of the 1974 Malvern Conference, which Lent and Weeks have identified as the height of 'militant reformism' in CHE.²⁸⁸ However reform of the law had always been one of CHE's priorities, so when the issue came to be debated at the 1973 Morecambe conference the only point of controversy was on what method should be used to establish equality. Two approaches were proposed, the first was to treat the law on heterosexual acts as the starting point and make sure all regulations which applied to homosexual acts were equivalent. The second was to make homosexual equality part of a comprehensive change in the law of sexual offences, which would take in other issues such as prostitution. The initial working group on the issue preferred the first option even though they felt it might be possible to build a wider base of support if they looked at a wider range of issues.²⁸⁹ The full conference disagreed and voted for the preparation of a bill reforming all sexual offences legislation.²⁹⁰

CHE immediately set up a working party to draft a bill along the lines mandated by the conference. However, Ike Cowen, the group's convenor and CHE's legal advisor, disagreed

²⁸⁷ HCA/CHE/13/9: 'Introducing the Campaign for Homosexual Equality'.

²⁸⁸ Weeks, *Coming Out*, p.212 ; Lent, *British Social Movements*, p.91.

²⁸⁹ HCA/CHE/8/3: Law Reform Commission Report; HCA/CHE/8/4: Law Reform Report.

²⁹⁰ P. Temperton 'Law Reform Commission', *CHE Bulletin*, April/May 1973, p.7.

with the conference's decision and felt that trying to expand their law reform efforts to other sexual minorities would seriously damage the likelihood of the campaign achieving its aims. In his resignation letter from the working group he declared that anything other than a narrow equality bill would be 'a piece of propaganda for use in a bigger and more utopian battle.'²⁹¹ The working party continued without him but instead of a full draft bill produced a more generalised series of proposals based on the fundamental principle that 'any sexual activity genuinely entered into freely should be legally permitted except where there are clear reasons for not permitting it on other grounds.'²⁹² Accordingly their proposals involved the abolition of most restrictions on homosexual conduct, but they also had more radical implications. They proposed that there should be no separate category of sexual assault which could instead be prosecuted under the general assault law. Furthermore they noted that their approach had implications for the law on incest, prostitution and living off immoral earnings. However it was their policies on the age of consent which were most controversial. They argued that the absolute age should be lowered to 12 years old and that for children between 12 and 16 there should be presumption of lack of consent which a defendant would be allowed to rebut in court. This radical proposal was in fact the moderate view. The minority report argued that the age should be moved down to 12, and that there should be a possibility of proving consent below that age. The report said, 'however great our persecution, that of paedophiles is many, many times worse. Their feelings too, are natural, and they too are entitled to express them openly and without fear.'²⁹³

²⁹¹ HCA CHE 2/2: Cowen to Horsfall 07/08/1973.

²⁹² HCA/CHE/8/7: Report of the Law Reform Working Party.

²⁹³ HCA/CHE/8/7: Report of the Law Reform Working Party, Appendix A.

Unsurprisingly the working party's proposals caused controversy when they were put before the 1974 Morecambe conference. The Scottish Minorities Group, which hoped to work with CHE on an eventual campaign, dismissed them as too 'pie in the sky' and not a coherent programme for change. The SMG added that it had not yet developed a position on the law around incest, and very much hoped it would not have to do so. In the SMG's view gay organisations should support homosexual law reform and leave other issues up to individual members' consciences.²⁹⁴ The animosity such an approach was likely to provoke was further underlined by CHE Vice-President Michael De-La-Noy, who condemned the proposals in his speech opening the conference.²⁹⁵ Eventually the conference came to the conclusion that although removing all anomalies from sexual law would be generally beneficial to gay people, 'the impetus for change cannot come solely or principally from a gay organisation.'²⁹⁶ The delegates accordingly mandated CHE to prepare a draft bill which would remove the inequalities in the law in a more piecemeal fashion. These legislative proposals became the basis for CHE's efforts in law reform for the rest of the decade and in 1975 a booklet explaining the change was sent out to all MPs.²⁹⁷

Tortuous though this process was, such an open form of political debate was unprecedented in homosexual politics. Homosexual men had previously established political programmes hidden in professional discourses like medicine or the law, or through elite networks and secret societies such as George Ives' Order of Chaeronea.²⁹⁸ Although such campaigns were not successful during the seventies, they were the product of an open debate between gay

²⁹⁴ HCA/CHE/8/6: Comments by SMG.

²⁹⁵ 'Michael De-La Noy Dismissed', *Guardian*, 28/05/1974, p.5.

²⁹⁶ HCA CHE 8/9: *Report of the Law Reform Commission*.

²⁹⁷ B. Sturgess, *No Offence*.

²⁹⁸ For more on the Order of Chaeronea see M. Cook, *London and the culture of Homosexuality*, pp.33-39.

men which would not have been possible before 1967. The discussions around the club scene, gay liberation ideology and law reform are all examples of CHE acting as part of gay male public sphere in which individuals came together to agree on collective goals.

Political Action and Gay Men's Citizenship

CHE achieved no major changes to legislation in the era being discussed, and in general its campaigning activities have been characterised as sporadic and ineffective. Law reform was their most high profile and consistent campaign, but after Roy Jenkins passed the whole issue of sexual offences legislation over to the Criminal Law Review Commission in 1975 further progress on the issue became unlikely until the committee had reported.²⁹⁹

Other campaigns stalled due to the membership's lack of engagement. Many people in local groups seemed unconcerned with either campaigning or national organisation as a whole. The turnout for the elections to the Executive Committee was usually below 20 per cent.³⁰⁰

National Council meetings, which were supposed to be the local groups' forum for influencing the central organisation, were only attended by representatives of 30-40 per cent of groups.³⁰¹ CHE publications were frequently full of calls for more member involvement, some of which their authors felt impelled to begin with defences of the very existence of National CHE.³⁰² Furthermore CHE only ever had at most three members of paid staff, and usually only had one, and so the majority of work was done by volunteers.

This meant that any campaign or policy proposed by council, Executive Committee or

²⁹⁹ 'Law Reform: The Way Forward', *CHE Bulletin*, April 1975, p.3-5.

³⁰⁰ B. Kenyon, 'Why National CHE?', *CHE Bulletin*, February 1975, p.3; For instance Executive Member Martin Stafford was elected on only 95 first choice votes 'J Martin Stafford Explains', *Gay News*, 13, p.3.

³⁰¹ Local Groups, CHE Annual Report 1977, p.3.

³⁰² B. Kenyon, 'Why National CHE?', p.3.

conference, had to then be picked up by a small pool of activists working on their own initiative. It was not always possible to find activists willing to campaign on the policies determined by the conference, or certain that anyone would even recall what the membership had actually decided. The CHE publication *Broadsheet* noted how 'conference fever results in the proliferation of resolutions which die the death'³⁰³.

The dispersed nature of the organisation, with only a small office staff in Manchester and groups and activists spread across the country, also made concerted campaigns difficult to organise. The assessment of the 1973 education campaign highlighted that the monthly meeting schedule of many groups made it difficult for them to act quickly. The report also noted that CHE did not have the resources to create high quality campaigning materials which local campaigners could use.³⁰⁴ This led some to the conclusion that local groups were not a suitable basis for political campaigns, and to the formation of an Activists Alliance as an alternative forum for such work.³⁰⁵ This was not a success and co-ordinating national campaigns remained a problem. As Jim Edgell noted in 1978, the first part of any CHE campaign was spent calling for people to be involved and when people were found it was unlikely that they would be in the most convenient place. So campaigning on education eventually became led by the Tyneside group, which Edgell considered to be too far away from London to lead a genuinely national effort.³⁰⁶

CHE also struggled with the sheer breadth of possible activity encapsulated in its expansive title. As well as focusing on law reform, CHE ran long-term campaigns on discrimination in

³⁰³ 'Flagging Resolutions', *CHE Broadsheet* May 1978, p.4.

³⁰⁴ HCA /HE/8/6: Report of the Education Campaign.

³⁰⁵ HCA/CHE/8/7: CHE Structure.

³⁰⁶ J. Edgell 'Bridging the Gap', *OUT* 4, April/March 1977, pp.10-11.

employment, police harassment and the Trade Union movement but found it hard to keep up momentum. As the 1981 Annual Report said: 'because we are everywhere, we encounter discrimination everywhere and are disadvantaged on a myriad of fronts, each one of which would be a campaign in itself.'³⁰⁷ By the late 70s CHE found itself cut out of many important areas by more boutique organisations. For instance in 1977 it abandoned attempts at working with the Churches to the Gay Christian Movement and handed over work with the elderly to their own offshoot, the August Trust.³⁰⁸

But CHE's political impact should not be dismissed because of its lack of direct campaigning successes, any more than the GLF's should. As a reformist organisation openly made up of gay people, they were at the forefront of a fundamental change in the relationship between gay men and the state. From the earliest days of organisation they sought to participate in the political process. In 1971 Executive Committee member Michael Steed arranged a fringe event at the national Liberal Party Assembly, the first meeting on gay rights at any political party conference.³⁰⁹ During the meeting Bernard Greaves spoke about his campaigns against the police in Cambridge and drew attention to similar operations happening in Scarborough where the conference was being held.³¹⁰ Through such actions gay men were not only openly participating in politics but attempting to hold the state to account for its policies.

Throughout its existence CHE sought to engage with the government and civil society and therefore to affirm gay people's rights as citizens. Furthermore, parts of the state often

³⁰⁷ HCA/CHE/1/1: CHE Annual Report 1981, p.1.

³⁰⁸ HCA/CHE/1/1: CHE Annual Report 1977, p.2.

³⁰⁹ HCA CHE 2/1: Executive Committee Minutes 14/08/1971.

³¹⁰ Bernard Greaves, Author Interview, 26/01/2012.

recognised their right to do so. In 1972 CHE officially submitted evidence to the House of Lords select committee on sexual discrimination.³¹¹ In 1974, as mentioned in the previous Chapter, CHE offshoot FRIEND received a joint grant from the Home Office and Islington Borough Council.³¹² In 1977 Peter Mitchell of Westminster CHE stood as a 'Pro Homosexual Civil Rights' candidate in a bye-election for the City of Westminster. He received 439 votes and, more significantly, secured CHE a series of sympathetic meetings with the election's winner Peter Brooke.³¹³ The first Early Day Motion advocating Gay rights was tabled in parliament in 1978, as a result of Wolverhampton CHE's inclusion in the local Remembrance Day ceremonies.³¹⁴ These actions involved a tentative, yet unprecedented recognition of the right of gay people's political demands to be heard – and a new, if limited role in the political sphere and official debate. In 1977 CHE was invited to meet with Home Office ministers on forthcoming legislation. As its official bulletin noted, 'CHE is now obviously one of the several hundred pressure groups to which the government feels obliged to listen, even if it disregards [what it hears].'³¹⁵

Such official recognition, while limited, indicates how governmental attitudes had evolved since the Wolfenden committee, which had explicitly rejected evidence sent in by gay men as irrelevant and the product of 'exhibitionists'.³¹⁶ The conclusions of that committee, and the legislation which followed can, however, be seen as the beginning of the process.

Matthew Waites has written about how the report for the first time granted a form of,

³¹¹ HCA/CHE 2/1: Executive Committee Minutes 17/06/1972.

³¹² See Chapter One.

³¹³ Nick Billingham, Author Interview, 12/01/2012.

³¹⁴ HCA/CHE/1/1: *CHE Annual Report* 1979, p.7.

³¹⁵ N. Hart 'Give us the Tools', *Out*, Issue 4, April/May 1977, p.11.

³¹⁶ P. Higgins, *Heterosexual Dictatorship*, p.39.

highly unequal, citizenship to gay men – by acknowledging their limited right to privacy.³¹⁷

Through organisations like CHE, gay men started to use this citizenship to act and engage with the state and civil society explicitly as gay people.

Official recognition by the state also helped in interactions with other, more hostile organisations. Befriending organisation FRIEND, an offshoot of CHE, found this during its attempts to secure advertising space in the national press. In 1977 the *Sunday Times* initially refused to accept advertising from FRIEND until they supplied evidence of the Home Office grant. After evidence of such official approval was received, FRIEND was allowed to feature in the paper's pages.³¹⁸

CHE groups also sought to be part of the political process on a local level, where they had more campaigning successes. For instance, the Sheffield group persuaded their local authority to give a gay couple a joint tenancy on a home and their local education authority to agree not to discriminate against gay teachers. Rotherham CHE conducted a long-term and eventually successful campaign to be allowed to use local council facilities as well as calling for a copy of *Gay News* to be available in the local library.³¹⁹

Getting the local library to stock *Gay News* was a common campaigning goal for CHE groups. Making the newspaper available in a council run facility not only increased the visibility of gay people, but underlined that they were legitimate members of the local community. During their campaign on the issue, Wandsworth and Richmond CHE emphasised the

³¹⁷ M. Waites, *The Age of Consent: young people, sexuality, and citizenship* (Basingstoke, 2005), pp.111-13.

³¹⁸ HCA/Friend/3/1: Mercer to Jeffrey 28/04/1977; Jeffrey to Mercer 03/05/1977.

³¹⁹ 'Gay teachers and Tenants Welcome!', *CHE Bulletin* December 1975, p.1; 'Gay Teachers will not be dismissed', *Gay News* 84, 4-12 December 1975, p.5; T. Sanderson 'Faltering from the Closet', pp.89-90; HCA CHE 9/160: *Rotherham Campaign for Homosexual Equality Newsletter*, May 1979.

council's obligations under the Libraries and Museums Act, which stated that councils had to provide a service for all sections of the community. They declared that Richmond's gay population numbered an estimated 25,000, who were paying taxes for a service which had unilaterally decided to ignore them. They implored the local gay community to write to the borough librarian and to 'tell him that you expect your library to cater for gay people on equal terms with others, and that... 'Gay News' should be stocked.'³²⁰ Such campaigns asserted gay men's status as citizens, who could expect the rights and services given in law to any other part of the community.

In 1978 the national organisation acknowledged the importance of this type of action by encouraging local groups to adopt the 'rolling programme'. This was a list of potential campaigning activities which groups could undertake, many of which boiled down to getting CHE recognised by official bodies such as the Local Council for Voluntary Services or the local social workers.³²¹ For the first time there was an official public face for gay people in local communities although not one which was necessarily representative or, for that matter, heeded. As the majority report of the 1980 CHE special commission said:

Some of the most effective work can be carried out at a local level: joining area voluntary social councils, approaching local councils, local political parties, the Samaritans, Women's Institutes, Housewives' Guilds, religious organisations, being listed in local citizens guides and public relations publications, making representation to educational institutions, etc. Only by making people come face to face with gay people will we change attitudes.³²²

Like the formation of the local groups themselves this amounted a very different form of coming out than that envisaged by the GLF. Instead of attacking and demanding the

³²⁰ HCA/Ephemera/1233(8): You pays YOUR money... and you takes their choice!

³²¹ HCA/CHE/1/1: *CHE Annual Report 1979*, p.5.

³²² HCA/GCO/4/2: Majority Report of the Special Commission.

overthrow of the state and society, CHE sought to establish a public presence within society's existing structures. CHE wanted gay people to be a recognised group within their communities and to be part of the political process. Although its campaigns were uncoordinated and often stalled, they worked to establish that gay men had a form of citizenship.

Conclusion

In 1980 falling memberships and allegations of malpractice in the 1979 Executive Committee elections led CHE to fundamentally reconsider its structure. It was finally conceded that the majority of the members of local groups were unlikely to become campaigners and a decision was made to split the organisation in two. Activists would remain within the Campaign for Homosexual Equality whereas social groups would become Gay Community Organisations. The main aim of the GCOs was to be to establish a series of gay centres in their local community.³²³ This turned out to be far too ambitious a task for the GCOS and no such centres were founded. However the project underlines how even as it ceased to be a mass members' organisation CHE was concerned with giving the gay community a physical public presence.

CHE's ideology and demands were less radical than those of the GLF but their existence was still a part of a fundamental change in the social lives and political status of gay men.

Through its network of social groups CHE worked to establish a series of openly advertised spaces where gay men could meet, as an alternative to the coded networks of the old queer scene. Although the majority of the members of such groups did not engage in campaigning

³²³HCA/GCO/4/12: Minority Report of the Special Commission to York National Conference, August 1980.

activity by joining CHE they were still aligning themselves to a new publicly recognised identity. CHE was also a forum for discussion, in which collective goals could be established. Instead of isolated pockets of organisation, debate raged over what gay social and political organisations should do. Finally CHE was an organisation which could have an open and explicit engagement with local and central government, and the wider voluntary sector. Like GLF's strident protest CHE's willingness to work with official bodies established gay men were not only to be seen as a social problem to be expurgated or hidden by reactionaries or passively helped by liberals, but as an active force, a part of the civil society of Britain. This can be viewed as claiming a newfound citizenship, albeit one which was contested and highly unequal.

Chapter Three: 'But you can't share in something you don't know about' - *Gay News* and the evolution of the Gay Press

Periodicals which were openly aimed at a gay male audience did not emerge until after 1967. This is not, however, to say that the production of magazines for queer consumers was an entirely new idea. In 1954 John S Barrington had published *Male Model Monthly* to celebrate the 'world's finest male physiques, photographed by the world's finest artists'³²⁴. An example of what Marcus Collins has called 'the pornography of alibis', *Male Model Monthly* hid its queer appeal under rhetoric of artistic, rather than erotic, appreciation.³²⁵ Similarly, Justin Bengry has shown that from the mid-fifties onwards cinema magazine *Films and Filming* successfully courted a queer audience by featuring erotically charged adverts, discussing films with homosexual content and printing columns of coded contact ads. While magazines such as *Films and Filming* were, as Bengry suggests, 'a key feature of the sexual development of many queer men', they did not amount to a gay male public sphere as they relied on '[q]ueer codes and innuendo [which] were subtle enough to be overlooked or misread by mainstream readers'³²⁶. As one of its editors described, *Films and Filming* was a magazine that men could read on the tube or in the office 'without fear of anyone suspecting they were gay'³²⁷. In the years before decriminalisation such publications had to avoid both identifying *themselves* as gay to the censors and identifying their readers as gay men to their family, friends or colleagues.

³²⁴ J.S. Barrington quoted in Deslandes, *The Cultural Politics of Gay Pornography in 1970s Britain*, p.266.

³²⁵ Collins, *Modern Love*, pp.135-39.

³²⁶ J. Bengry, 'Films and Filming: the Making of a Queer Marketplace in Pre-Decriminalisation Britain', in Lewis (ed), *British Queer History*, pp.244-66.

³²⁷ Ibid. p.290.

The periodicals which emerged immediately after decriminalisation were different because they explicitly recognised their market. Publications like *Spartacus*, *Gay News* and *Zipper* could not be perused on the tube or in the office without identifying the reader as gay. As such, those who read them were affirming a gay identity (if only to themselves) and by producing them their publishers were taking a stance that gay men were a legitimate audience who had the right to communicate with each other. In the immediate aftermath of decriminalisation this was an overtly political act, and from the earliest days of the gay press these magazines made political demands. In December 1969, a year before the GLF arrived in England, *Spartacus* declared that 'we believe in Homosexual Equality, we are gay and not afraid to admit it, and with your help ... we will battle onwards towards a society that accepts us as equals.'³²⁸ The phrase 'with your help' is instructive, as this was not just an individual demand but an assertion of the needs of a wider gay public made up of the magazine's readers. Similarly Paul Deslandes' work on gay pornography in the 1970s has shown that the publication of such material, particularly in the context of frequent police prosecutions, 'signalled a new kind of political boldness' which made 'a positive assertion of gay male sexuality'³²⁹.

These qualities were inherent in all publications for gay men. However, this chapter concentrates on just one of them: the self-proclaimed 'world's largest circulation newspaper for homosexuals', *Gay News*. This is in part because far more people read *Gay News* than other publications (20,000 copies were sold per issue by the end of the seventies which were read by over 50,000 people) and it lasted a uniquely long time (nearly 11 years from 1972 to 1983). It is also a publication which clearly illustrates the distinction between the

³²⁸ 'Christmas Letter', *Spartacus* 7, p.3.

³²⁹ Deslandes, *The Cultural Politics of Gay Pornography in 1970s Britain*, p.290.

emergence of the gay male public sphere and the GLF's ideology of coming out. *Gay News* originated within the GLF, but it was a project that many members would quickly disavow as a perversion of the movement's ideology. By the time of the paper's collapse *Gay News* could be called 'Britain's most public gay institution', but it was public in a sense which was distinct from the GLF's revolutionary rhetoric.³³⁰

The first section of this chapter describes how, rather than embracing the style and genres of alternative media, *Gay News* aimed to mimic the form of the mainstream press. It supplied a notionally independent source of news and a forum for discussion between different gay people, produced in a 'professional' style and distributed through mainstream outlets. The section will discuss how this was a development which fundamentally changed the way gay people communicated with each other and made new types of political activity possible. However *Gay News* embraced an ideology that was distinct from that of the GLF. Instead of agitating for revolution, *Gay News* sought to assert gay people's rights by producing a publication which was the precise equivalent to those which existed for straight people. As such it was a demonstration of how the gay male public sphere was established as much by groups which tried to work within the structures of society as those who tried to overturn them.

The second section considers *Gay News* in the context of other gay magazines. It shows how the pages of *Gay News* created as well as reported discussions about gay identity and politics. In particular it describes how *Gay News* struggled to live up to its ideals of being a forum which allowed discussion between all gay people. The paper came in for criticism for

³³⁰ 'Gay News Job Shock', *Capital Gay*, 08/10/1982, p.1.

its lack of sexually explicit material, its attitude to gay commercialism and the gay movement, and the amount of space it gave to lesbian contributors.

‘Just like any other Newspaper’: *Gay News*, Newspaper Form and Identity Politics

Georgina Turner’s work on lesbian publishing in the UK has proposed a narrative according to which alternative media (as defined by media theorist Chris Atton) in the 1960s and 70s, including *Sappho* and *Gay News*, developed into a professionalised model culminating in the publication of *Diva* in the 1990s.³³¹ Publications for gay men do not fit into this narrative, both because commercial magazines for gay men existed from the late 1960s onwards and because *Gay News* cannot be seen as an ‘alternative media’ production by Atton’s definition. Atton proposes six rules for alternative media:

1. Content (politically radical, socially/culturally radical); news values
2. Form – graphics, visual language; varieties of presentation and binding; aesthetics
3. Reprographic innovations/adaptions – use of mimeographs, IBM typesetting, offset litho, photocopiers
4. ‘Distributive use’ (Atton, 1999b) – alternative sites for distribution, clandestine/invisible distribution networks, anti-copyright
5. Transformed social relations, roles and responsibilities – reader-writers, collective organization, de-professionalization of e.g. journalism, printing, publishing.
6. Transformed communication processes – horizontal linkages, networks.³³²

³³¹ Turner, *Catching the Wave*, pp.769-88.

³³² Chris Atton, *Alternative Media* (London, 2001), pp.27-29.

Gay News contravened most of these rules, often deliberately. On point 1 *Gay News* prided itself on publishing gay voices from across the political spectrum, both formally radical and entirely conservative. It also went out of its way to feature the types of content that could be found in straight newspapers, such as a regular cookery column. The paper did take advantage of the new printing techniques used by the underground press, but, especially after its earliest issues, deliberately echoed the visual presentation of mainstream newspapers (points 2 and 3). It was initially sold by street sellers and in gay pubs, but it fought to be distributed through the most mainstream institutions possible such as WHSmith, public libraries and the Royal Mail (point 4). Although the paper was founded by a collective, the majority of whom had no experience of professional media production, the paper celebrated the fact that they could publish respected mainstream literary writers (Point 5). And, far from rejecting hierarchal structures, from quite early on in its life *Gay News* had an editor (who was eventually the sole significant shareholder), Denis Lemon, who was so much the imitation media baron that Drag activist Bette Bourne labelled him 'Lord Lemoncliffe.'³³³

This is not just a theoretical point. The people behind *Gay News* defined themselves partly in opposition to publications which matched Atton's model. GLF magazine *Come Together* was produced by a rolling media workshop and did not put individual writers' full names on articles. All of its content had to be approved by the movement at large: a policy which got David Seligman and Martin Corbett, members of the original *Gay News* collective, into trouble when they produced an edition on their own in early 1972.³³⁴ Tellingly, Andrew Lumsden, the man who came up with the original idea for *Gay News*, was involved in nearly

³³³ NSA c456 (Hall Carpenter Collection): 126/01-03.

³³⁴ Power, *No Bath but Plenty of Bubbles*, pp.251-53.

all Gay Liberation Front groups except the media workshop, because he felt that as a journalist on *The Times* his professional training made it inappropriate for him to participate.³³⁵

Come Together was also mostly based around the London GLF and by 1971 it was becoming clear that a new medium was needed to communicate with the rest of the country. As a result of the first general meeting of gay groups outside of London, the June 1971 'think-in' held in Leeds, it was decided to produce the publication *Broadsheet*. Effectively a directory of groups around the country, *Broadsheet* aimed 'to coordinate ideas and information and to stimulate activity' among gay groups.³³⁶ Its typewritten pages recorded the names and addresses of every gay group known to Leeds GLF, and, in a few cases, a short description which detailed their recent activities.³³⁷ As such it was an unprecedented information resource, the first attempt to record the extent of gay political activity across the country. But if it succeeded in its mission it was through people using the contacts, rather than through encouraging any kind of national debate.

At the same time *Broadsheet* was being produced, Andrew Lumsden developed another perspective on the problems encountered by gay people in communicating with each other. In late 1970 he had tried to get his own paper *The Times* to publish an article on the GLF, but had been turned down by the editor. Moving on to the popular press, Lumsden pitched the idea to the editor of the *Daily Mirror*, a personal friend of his, who rejected it as being a 'London story' unsuitable for the national press. Lumsden rejected this premise:

³³⁵ Andrew Lumsden, Author interview, 21/06/2011.

³³⁶ HCA/GLF/11: *Gay Flashes* 2, p.4.

³³⁷ HCA/GLF/11: *Broadsheet* nos. 5-27, March 1972-December 1974.

Well I knew better, I knew it wasn't just a London phenomena [sic] because of course people were pouring in from everywhere, from Ulster to Paris to see what this was, what was going on in London, you know. But he was a friend and it was his newspaper, he edited it, so I wasn't going to quarrel with him, but that made me think that the only way to get any information out was to do it ourselves.³³⁸

'Doing it ourselves' had been a core principle of the GLF for months, but Lumsden was proposing a new, distinct strategy. The vision was not for a propaganda sheet or a directory but a *newspaper*. Unlike the alternative media of the GLF it was to be paid for 'so people took it seriously and made demands on it', done to high, by implication professional, standard and, crucially to be impartial between gay political groups. These would be *Gay News*' organising principles throughout the seventies: a newspaper created by and for gay people, reporting on both the activities of gay people and the outside world.³³⁹

By the time the paper was launched in 1972, Lumsden was not involved. Unable to leave his job at *The Times*, he did not work on the published paper until 1981. But a collective formed to realise his vision. When the paper was proposed at a GLF meeting some activists argued that a newspaper open to all views would be by definition 'too liberal, evasive and unpolitical'. The collective responded that producing a newspaper for gay people was in itself a politically significant action. Partly this was because they wanted the paper to be a uniquely visible gay production, but also because they saw the idea of producing a news source for gay people was intrinsically radical.³⁴⁰ As the first editorial said,

News is not only the bad things that can happen to us all, but knowing about what others are doing, sharing and achieving. Information is knowing where and when this is going on, so that if you have a mind to you could share in it. Why shouldn't gay

³³⁸ Andrew Lumsden, Author interview, 21/06/2011.

³³⁹ Andrew Lumsden, Author interview, 21/06/2011; Andrew Lumsden in J. Green, *Days in the Life: Voices from the English Underground* [rev. edn] (London, 1998), pp.300-301.

³⁴⁰ 'Gay News', *Come Together*, Issue 12, 1972, p.9.

people know what each other are doing in whatever place it is, wherever you happen to live? But you can't share in something you don't know about.³⁴¹

On one level this was an attempt to break down the loneliness of the individually isolated gay person. On another it set out a totally new vision of how gay people should relate to each other. *Gay News* argued that gay people were disconnected from each other, and that the locations they were able to meet (i.e. the cottage or the commercial scene) were there purely for sex, reducing people to mere 'bedfodder'. In issue 5 they declared that 'We don't like that attitude very much. It's so much nicer going to bed with people you like, people you know, people you care about.'³⁴² What *Gay News* was trying to do was create a shared experience and meaning of gay life which was not just based around physical space or sexual opportunity. This could be seen as similar to the practice of the consciousness raising sections of the GLF, but crucially *Gay News* argued that this understanding did not have to be based on one correct political ideology.

Gay News claimed to be 'partisan for but not between gay people' and was deliberately not aligned to any particular political group. The original collective brought GLF activists like Michael Mason and Denis Lemon together with members of the CHE executive such as Glenys Parry and Roger Baker. However, its first issue was published in spring 1972, the high point of the *internecine* struggles which led to the decline of the London GLF. A core number in the team – such as Lemon, Martin Corbett and David Seligman – were drawn from the GLF Office Collective, a group which was associated with the 'activist' tendency in GLF.³⁴³

Unsurprisingly the paper was far from neutral in this controversy and frequently condemned

³⁴¹ 'Editorial', *Gay News* 1, p.2. Neither the early issues of *Gay News* nor the majority of gay sex mags throughout the seventies had cover dates, presumably because of the unreliability of their production schedules.

³⁴² 'Editorial', *Gay News* 5, p.2.

³⁴³ Power, *No Bath but Plenty of Bubbles*, p.250-60

the opposing 'rad-femmes'. However *Gay News*' main criticism of the other group was that they were overly factional. Lemon criticised the rad-femmes because they were 'extremists' who intimidated and censored others while failing to communicate to the majority of gay people. Doug Pollard went further, and portrayed them as dangerous ideologues, incapable of tolerating anyone else's views. 'A Stalin is no less a Stalin because he looks like a moustachioed Mae West. A fuehrer is still a fuehrer in a frock.'³⁴⁴ By contrast *Gay News* prided itself on printing a diverse range of views and providing a medium within which gay organisations could be criticised by gay people themselves.³⁴⁵

Gay News stressed the need for both pluralism and populism within the gay world. In 1973 they lamented the tendency for gay groups to splinter into 'ego tripping factions' and compared them uncharitably with the American movement, which had in their view done far more to work with the majority of gays on the commercial scene.³⁴⁶ David Seligman said gay politics was 'too full of men with university backgrounds preaching revolutionary theory at great length' whilst the loneliness and isolation of gay people went unchallenged.³⁴⁷ Later the paper carried opinion articles such as *The Right not to be Left* by Ted Nicholas, which argued that left-wing gay activists could be as intolerant to fellow gays as Mary Whitehouse.³⁴⁸ *Gay News* condemned those who either tried to insist that any gay person's political view should not be heard, or who failed to try to appeal to the widest possible gay audience.

³⁴⁴ D. Pollard, 'An Open Letter to the Rad. Femmes', *Gay News* 2, p.8; D. Lemon, 'Spare Rib attacked or when the Communicating Stopped', *Gay News* 2, p.7.

³⁴⁵ 'Your Paper and Gay Lib', *Gay News* 12, p.7.

³⁴⁶ 'The Splintering Gay Movement: "Ego tripping by chauvinistic factions"', *Gay News* 29, 9-29 August 1973, p.3.

³⁴⁷ D. Seligman, 'Standing in the Shadows', *Gay News* 15, p.7.

³⁴⁸ T. Nicholas, 'The right not to be left', *Gay News* 129, 20 October - 2 November 1977, pp.17-18.

Gay News' political philosophy was, hence, a specifically gay liberal radicalism. As a 1976 editorial argued,

Whether Gay Liberation is or is not a by-product of revolution does not affect the essential Millsian nature of the claim that homosexual men and women as individuals should be awarded the same right to love one another in their own way. What gay socialist can assert that gay liberation is an inevitable consequence of a socialist society? Or that the good of the state *means* the individual well being of members of a minority? ³⁴⁹

The editorial accepted that radical change was needed in order to achieve gay equality, but that activism should not be chained to any one ideology other than gay equality itself.

Liberal reformists and socialist revolutionaries needed to communicate with each other, and, although it did not say this explicitly, *Gay News* was the place to do it. For *Gay News* to take the form of a notionally independent newspaper, rather than a samizdat manifesto or a newsheet serving one political grouping, was to adopt the stance that all forms of gay association were legitimate and all viewpoints deserved to be heard.

But *Gay News* was not just a sphere of public debate. It was also a regular source of news about the activities of gay people throughout the country. *Gay News* had a greater ability to gather news about gay people than any publication before it, and was unsurpassed by any contemporary one. The administrative structure and reputation needed to do this was acquired gradually during the paper's early years. By its own admission the first edition could more accurately have been called *Gay Views*. One main story for instance was about the formation of the National Federation of Homophile Organisations, something which had actually happened eight months earlier. The temporary employment of Australian Tim Skinner, the first professional journalist to work full time on the paper, considerably

³⁴⁹ 'Gay News Comments', *Gay News* 118, 5-18 May 1977, p.10.

improved their procedures.³⁵⁰ However *Gay News* never had the resources or staff to research stories from scratch. Even at its peak the paper only had three full-time reporting staff (a news editor and two staff reporters) to produce around ten tabloid pages of news content per fortnight. All three of the staff members were based in London, with no regional correspondents. So, although they did some investigative reporting, the majority of stories had to be brought to their attention by someone else.

Those stories came from a variety of sources. The paper subscribed to a cuttings service which monitored the local, national and trade press for any mention of homosexuality; gay groups sent in their newsletters; businesses and campaigns sent out press releases, and readers would phone up with tips. As Lumsden would say in 2011,

People rang us, like any newspaper office people rang. By [the early eighties] there was quite a lot of written material which would come in the post because the paper had been around for eight years and people knew to get in touch, and so the phone rang a lot and people said 'guess what's going on in Loughborough' you know. 'You'll never believe it but the police have just done a raid, on two different pubs, and they're charging people with this that and the next' and so we'd zoom off to see about it. So, a lot of tip off. Just like any newspaper, in no way different.³⁵¹

In particular the public activity of gay NGOs and campaigners supplied stories. This was both because *Gay News* was able to report on gay organisations themselves, and also because gay NGOs' work revealed the views of the state and other organisations. Local gay groups formed a useful national network. As News Editor Michael Mason recalls, 'we might see a

³⁵⁰ M. Mason, 'All Our Yesterdays', *Gay News* 50, 4-17 July 1974, p.11.

³⁵¹ Andrew Lumsden, Author interview, 21/06/2011. The example is almost certainly a reference to my institutional affiliation, as far as myself and my notes recall *Gay News* never reported on a police raid in Loughborough.

clipping from Exeter let's say, and we would contact the Exeter CHE group for help....they could put us on to people we couldn't otherwise find.'³⁵²

In a randomly selected issue (number 161, cover dates February 22nd to March 7th 1979) twelve of the thirty one individual news stories were direct reports of the activities of NGOs, ranging from the high politics of the campaign for law reform in Northern Ireland, through the planning of that year's Gay Pride, to a cheeky publicity stunt by Tyneside CHE, which had thrown a party for Prince Andrew's birthday.³⁵³ A further six stories were reports of outside organisations' views on gay issues, which on closer inspection turned out to have come to light because of campaigning activity. For instance, comments made by a senior probation officer in trade magazine *Social Work Today* were covered because they came up in a meeting held by a branch of the discussion society *Intergroup*.³⁵⁴ This brings the total number of NGO-sourced stories to seventeen, just over half. A further six stories covered legal issues, both crimes against gay people and the policing of gay people. The cover story was one of these, a tragic story of the murder of a gay man. This story gained further currency because the victim was Peter Wells, a member of Croydon CHE who was taking the case of his imprisonment for having sex with men under 21 to the European Court of Human Rights.³⁵⁵ Four stories covered the arts and entertainment, including a new drama being made about the Vassal case.³⁵⁶ Three more covered events on the club scene, including a

³⁵² Michael Mason, Author Interview, 16/12/2011.

³⁵³ 'Govt. Running out of time', *Gay News* 161, 22 February-7 March 1979, p.2; 'Wanted: 1,000 Beds', in *ibid.*, p.3; 'CHE throws party for Prince Andrew', in *ibid.*, p.5.

³⁵⁴ 'Gay Colleagues are the real problem', in *ibid.*, p.6.

³⁵⁵ 'CHE Man dies in shotgun killing', in *ibid.*, pp.1-2.

³⁵⁶ 'Gay Spy to be BBC Adviser', in *ibid.*, p.7.

Village People competition at the Newcastle Casablanca club.³⁵⁷ Finally one international story informed readers of the first gay Italian 'MP'.³⁵⁸

Politically *Gay News* achieved what Broadsheet had attempted to do, making activists aware of what was happening throughout the country. But as well as recording this political activity it made important new endeavours possible. As Peter Scott-Presland said when recalling setting up helpline service for Oxford in 1972,

I mean we were the first switchboard in this country. And don't forget that this is after a very very few issues of *Gay News*. So, I mean you must be aware of how the advent *Gay News* like transformed the way people communicated with each other. But before that you had no way of knowing who was doing what except by word of mouth, or if something occasionally made it in to the National Papers. So for example FRIEND would have been going by then, but I had no idea that FRIEND [CHE's counselling arm] existed.³⁵⁹

By 1979 there was a National Association of Gay Switchboards (NAGS), sharing information and setting standards across the country, and they used the pages of *Gay News* to debate and criticise the practices of services like Merseyside FRIEND.³⁶⁰ Gay NGOs and voluntary organisations had gone from evolving in parallel to being aware and able to influence each other.

The existence of *Gay News* allowed gay groups to talk to an audience of gay men outside of their local areas and beyond their personal networks. It meant that groups could gain access to a wider gay public, making gay people who would never otherwise have met aware of shared interests and enabling collaboration on a scale that was previously impossible. So as

³⁵⁷ 'Newcastle', in *ibid.*, p.8.

³⁵⁸ 'Gay MP sworn in', in *ibid.*, p.2.

³⁵⁹ Peter Scott-Presland, Author Interview, 02/06/2011.

³⁶⁰ 'Gay News Comments', *Gay News* 179, 15-28 November 1979, p.12; 'Switchboard row – Nags answers back', *Gay News* 180, 29 November - 12 December, p.12.

Bob Cant and Nigel Young observed, most early gay workers organisations found their initial members through coverage in *Gay News* rather than Trade Union magazines. There were men dispersed throughout the Trade Union movement, but the union presses had refused to give publicity to a gay group. *Gay News* allowed gay trade unionists to find each other, and therefore played an important role in allowing gay men to organise and demand that the union movement took their views more seriously.³⁶¹ The paper also supplied gay groups with a regular and stable communications medium, which made the day-to-day business of political organisation substantially easier. Socialist journal *Gay Left* had to direct readers to *Gay News* to find out the dates and location of its conferences, which could not be announced in time to fit in with their own quarterly production schedule.³⁶²

Even when geographical distance was not an issue, *Gay News* revolutionised how gay men talked to each other. The Coleherne Patrons Committee, mentioned in Chapter One, knew precisely where to find men who were interested in the same aims as they were: hundreds of them were in or around the pub every night of the week. But when they were deciding how to reach as many of them as possible, an article in *Gay News* was as appealing a proposition as more immediate communication methods such as a notice board or the installation of a tannoy system.³⁶³ Appearing in the paper helped the CPC find new members and get their message out, but it also provided a medium where their actions could be discussed and criticised. Columnist Robin Houston called attempts to the protect The Coleherne ‘one of the most misguided and wasteful gay rights campaigns ever waged’ and

³⁶¹ Cant and Young noted that there were flaws in this strategy, people reading *Gay News* already likely to have some kind of consciousness about their gayness already. B. Cant and N. Young, ‘Gay Workers Movement’, *Gay Left* 2, p.19.

³⁶² ‘Notices’, *Gay Left* 4, p.7.

³⁶³ HCA/The Coleherne Patrons Committee: Minutes, 15/03/1979.

said that gay men should not try to defend the 'grubby cruising' that the pub brought to the nearby streets.³⁶⁴ The article provoked a flurry of debate. The following issue activist Stephen Gee wrote in to say that Houston's dismissal of The Coleherne customers' case as being rooted merely in a 'fears of loneliness' or 'frustrated obsessions' was 'like saying the poor rebel merely because they're hungry!'³⁶⁵ The CPC stated in the next issue that, although they had some sympathy with residents' complaints about noise, this did not justify the *agent provocateur* tactics used by the police in nearby streets.³⁶⁶ Before *Gay News* both respectable homosexual campaigners and Gay Liberation activists had launched broadsides against the commercial scene but this had been through their own newsletters and networks. The existence of *Gay News* brought them into contact with each other *and* the patrons of gay pubs, enabling an extended public conversation on the issues. *Gay News* had become, in Literary Editor Alison Hennegan's words, 'the debating chamber of the gay movement'³⁶⁷.

The paper plugged its readers into a wider gay world, making them aware of problems and activity they would never have otherwise considered. In 1974 a reader wrote to explain how *Gay News* had completely changed his views on the situation of gay people. He had previously written in to say how lucky gay people were, but now realised 'how very wrong I was. Having been a regular subscriber to your newspaper (and still am), I'd just like to say how disgusted and appalled I am at some of the incidents reported in *GN*.'³⁶⁸ An even more

³⁶⁴ 'Robin Houston', *Gay News* 152, 5-18 October 1978, p.21.

³⁶⁵ 'Late Night Line-Up', *Gay News* 153, 19 October - 1 November 1978, p.12.

³⁶⁶ 'Late Night Line-Up', *Gay News* 154, 2-15 November 1978, p.12.

³⁶⁷ Author Interview, Michael Mason, 16/12/2011; for more on the gay activists' criticisms of the gay scene see Chapter Four.

³⁶⁸ D. White, 'A lot to fight for', *Gay News* 44, 11-24 April 1974, p.2.

vivid example of *Gay News* extending someone's horizons is the case of John Alcock.

Previously a volunteer for the HLRS, he had in the late Sixties been so close to the heart of homosexual politics that he was with Antony Grey in parliament the night the Sexual Offence Act was passed. He was, however, completely unaware of the tumult of the early seventies, and only found out about the activities of the Gay Liberation Front retrospectively after having seen someone reading a copy of *Gay News* in the park.³⁶⁹

From the start the people behind *Gay News* had placed great importance on distributing the paper both widely and in the most prominent of mainstream venues. They did this for two reasons: firstly, it enabled them to reach the largest possible audience of gay people and, secondly, the appearance of a gay newspaper among mainstream publications emphasised that gay people had a legitimate place in society. In the early days the paper was distributed by means of what an editorial described as 'us, you and prayer book'³⁷⁰. Subscribers received copies through the mail and members of the editorial collective sold copies in the street, and in London's gay pubs and clubs. The only shops that sold the paper were either radical bookstores or sex shops. The collective was keen to break out of these limited networks and to make sure that the paper appeared in mainstream newsagents. They implored readers to approach their local shops to stock the paper, saying it was vital for *Gay News* to 'come out' and take its rightful place among the rest of the press.³⁷¹ The ambition was for the paper to be available along all other newspapers, as openly and legitimately as the products of Fleet Street. By the end of their first year the paper was professionally

³⁶⁹ NSA C456 (Hall Carpenter Collection): 003/01-02.

³⁷⁰ 'Info', *Gay News* 2, p.2.

³⁷¹ 'Editorial', *Gay News* 8, p.2.

distributed by Moores Harness and issued readers with forms to give to their local newsagents to encourage them to stock copies.³⁷²

However a distribution deal with WHSmiths was the prize *Gay News* most sought, both because they controlled over half of the UK's wholesale newspaper market and because a place on the high street chain's shelves would be a sure sign of the paper's legitimacy. In the early days there was no question of it happening. Smiths demanded sales figures of 10,000 before it would even consider distributing a publication and *Gay News* recognised that they had not yet reached that figure.³⁷³ By 1976, when *Gay News* was over the required amount, a similar limited distribution deal was agreed for 23 selected stores. This pilot scheme was, however, abandoned in early 1977 when Christian groups drew WHSmith's attention to the paper's coverage of the Paedophile Information Exchange.³⁷⁴

The chain refused to distribute the paper for another four years until 1981 when newly appointed Business Manager Robert Palmer began successful negotiations for another limited distribution deal. Palmer's tactics in these discussions were instructive. Instead of mounting a vigorous defence of *Gay News*' coverage of PIE on its own terms, he decided to make a comparison to the straight press. He asked Julian Meldrum of the Gay Monitoring and Archive Project to collate examples of coverage of paedophilia from broadsheet newspapers in order 'to prove to them that other newspapers they stock have discussed paedophilia as much as we have'³⁷⁵. *Gay News* used its self-identity as a newspaper akin to

³⁷² 'Reminders and jottings,' *Gay News* 24, p.8; 'Give it to your newsagent', *Gay News* 24, p.13.

³⁷³ TNA BS2/352: 'Gay News submission to the Royal Commission on the Press'.

³⁷⁴ TNA BS2/352: 'Gay News submission to the Royal Commission on the Press'; HCA/Ephemera/1222: Field to Scrivener 7/02/1978; LAGNA Ec. *Gay News*: 'WHSmith to put ban on *Gay News*,' *The Guardian*, 1/2/1978.

³⁷⁵ HCA/Ephemera/416: Palmer to Meldrum, 25/06/1981.

The Guardian, *Telegraph* and *Times* to argue for its – and by extension, for all gay people's – right to appear openly.

Adopting the practices and professional identities of the mainstream press also meant that journalists found *Gay News* far easier to approach than many other gay organisations and could use them as a source of views and information. As news editor Michael Mason said,

The mainstream press regarded *Gay News* as a resource when they were writing stories about the new gay liberation movement. We were a newspaper, and they understood what a newspaper was so to begin with *Gay News* was about the only gay institution that the press had regular contact with. We were journalists who could be phoned up and we would know the inside stuff that they had no way of getting in touch with. What were they supposed to do, go to a gay club? And be molested?!³⁷⁶

So, for instance, in 1982 when one of the Queen's bodyguards was revealed to be gay, the paper co-operated with *The Sun* by supplying back issues to its journalists. The eventual outcome of this co-operation was however unfortunate. *The Sun* took a story from *Gay News* about another bodyguard who had resigned because he was in a relationship with a man, but, unlike *Gay News*, printed his name. Andrew Lumsden, who had by then returned to the paper as editor, justified their cooperation by saying that they were 'pleased when the populars print anything genuinely informative about gays. When *The Sun* does it, millions of parents may take a look and learn to behave better to children who come out.'³⁷⁷

By the late seventies, *Gay News* had achieved the aims originally envisaged by Lumsden. It was significant because of its very existence and its identification with the form of a mainstream newspaper. The only media convention it sought to break was that the one that said homosexuals were to be talked about in terms of pity or scandal. In doing so, it

³⁷⁶ Michael Mason, Author interview, 16/12/2011.

³⁷⁷ HCA/Lumsden/12: Lumsden to Henry, 12/08/1982.

promoted a form of liberalism, being an open forum for gay people of all political positions unlike previous activist newsletters which had been produced by political organisations. *Gay News* altered the way gay men communicated each other, helping discussion to expand beyond individual locations and specific political groups. Because *Gay News* identified itself as a newspaper its staff argued that gay rights should be granted parity with those straight people enjoyed. Gay people should be allowed to publish their own newspapers just as straight people could, its newspapers should be allowed to feature articles on equivalent topics, and they should be sold in the same shops. However, despite the rhetoric, this liberal political stance was not a neutral one. The production of the paper meant that *Gay News* was the subject of, as well as the medium for, interrelated debates on sexuality, gender and commercialism: the subjects of the next section.

‘Putting the sex back into homosexual?’ Gender, sex and commercialism

Gay News was not the only gay periodical to launch in 1972, a year which saw a spate of new gay publications including *Jeffrey*, *Quorum* and *Follow-Up*. *Jeffrey* was particularly significant as the first publication of Incognito Press, whose founders Alan Purnell and Alex McKenna would go on to produce a range of increasingly explicit gay sex magazines throughout the seventies. These magazines celebrated the fact that they featured explicit sexual content (both written and visual), were for gay men (not gay women), and were proudly commercial entities.³⁷⁸ All three of these stances distinguished them from *Gay News* and expressed a distinct view of what bound gay men together. The conflict between

³⁷⁸ For more on these magazines and the work of Alan Purnell in particular see. Deslandes, *The Cultural Politics of Gay Pornography*, pp.267-96.

these opposing views raged in the pages of the publications concerned and the tensions they exposed would be an important factor in *Gay News*' eventual demise in 1983.

Gay News' attitude to explicit sexual content was in part determined by its desire to work within the law, a strategy which both assured the survival of the paper and asserted the legitimacy of producing a newspaper for gay people. In its early days, *Gay News* seemed to challenge the legal system. They published gay contact adverts in their first issue, published the very week that the House of Lords had upheld *IT*'s conviction for doing the same.³⁷⁹ In reality they were working very hard to discourage prosecution, banning ads from men under 21 and any references to controversial sexual practices such as sadism and masochism. Readers complained about these restrictions as censorship, leading the paper to insist that this was a purely practical decision, not one designed to police and marginalise any part of the gay community.³⁸⁰ In general the paper walked the legal line carefully and successfully. There was only one, ultimately unsuccessful prosecution for obscenity, when copies of *Gay News* were seized by police in a raid on a newsagent in Bath as part of a much larger haul including straight porn and copies of the *Times Literary Supplement*.³⁸¹ The most significant challenge came not from the state, but from Mary Whitehouse (as discussed in Chapter Five).

This caution, however, contributed to one of the main criticisms levelled at *Gay News*, its lack of explicit sexual material. The visual and written content the paper was, for some, surprisingly chaste. In 1977, Nick Scott, advertising manager explained by this by saying that

³⁷⁹ Editorial, *Gay News* 14, p.2.

³⁸⁰ 'Here we are again', *Gay News* 12, p.6; R. Bonham, 'Second thoughts', *Gay News* 14, p.2.

³⁸¹ M. Mason, 'All Our Yesterdays', *Gay News* 50, 4-17 July 1974, p.11; Lagna. EC. *Gay News*: 'TLS was seized by police in Sex Magazines raid', *The Times*, 18/04/1974.

‘[f]ull page naked men are out. Think of what would have happened in the court case!’³⁸²

However it was not only legal concerns which made nudity unlikely to appear. *Gay News* was after all a *newspaper* not a magazine, and in theory it was supposed to appeal equally to gay men and gay women. The editorial team had also inherited a suspicion of commercial pornography from the GLF, arguing that ‘many publishers in this area who seem to have a vested interest in maintaining a continuing atmosphere of furtiveness and fear which forces gays to remain in the closet, with the result there remains a seller’s market with the customer prepared to accept second best.’³⁸³

However the paper’s feature articles also rarely touched on sex. The topic of ‘sexuality’ filled just one half column of the 20-page index of the first 160 issues, and those that were published bordered on the evasive.³⁸⁴ A Roger Baker article entitled ‘Gay Sex Left out in the Cold’ pottered around the subject of how gay men had no source of information about the practicalities of sex other than pornography and personal experience, but did nothing to create a practical alternative. Another article by Baker noted the appearance of ‘fist-fucking’ in (illegally) imported US porn, analysing it in terms of its danger and cultural meanings.³⁸⁵ Magazines like *Zipper* and *Him* were more explicit, if not necessarily more permissive. *Zipper* responded to the fist-fucking trend by condemning the practice in far blunter terms than Baker but also gave readers instructions on the best way to do it safely.³⁸⁶ Such graphic information about gay sex was one of the key selling points of these magazines and a

³⁸² ‘What about the workers?’, *Gay News* 125, 11 August – 7 September 1977, p.14.

³⁸³ A. Hennegan, ‘Read All about it’, *Gay News* 141, 20 April - 3 May 1978, p.16.

³⁸⁴ HCA/Palmer/7/1/17: *Gay News* Index.

³⁸⁵ R. Baker, ‘Gay Sex: Left Out in the Cold’, *Gay News* 69, 24 April - 7 May 1975, pp.9-10; R. Baker, ‘FF=Fun and Frolics, Fantastic Fusions or Fast Fatality’, *Gay News* 59, 21 November - 4 December 1974, p.10.

³⁸⁶ P. Lane, ‘Zipparound: Fist Fucking Fellow’, *Zipper* 4, p.29.

practical response to the paucity of sexual knowledge described by Baker. In his column in *Gay News*, Barrie Kenyon argued that the sexually explicit problem pages were the main appeal of the 'glossy magazines'. However he thought that the gay movement should concentrate as much on increasing consciousness as practical sexual knowledge. 'Many sex problems, I venture to suggest, originate in guilt and self-oppression. Unsatisfactory sex may result from an inner and hidden feeling that intimate acts are shameful.'³⁸⁷

Unlike the gay sex magazines, which targeted gay men with particular sexual predilections, *Gay News* aimed to facilitate conversations between a far broader gay community. This had important implications for the allowed content, as Andrew Lumsden explained to potential advertisers:

It may be easiest to think of us as a 'family newspaper' in a special sense. Our features and news sections deal with every aspect of the gay 'family': the elderly and the young, the lesbian and the gay male, the cosmopolitan and the rural, the monogamous and the promiscuous, the come-out and the coming out (and the closeted), the highly educated and the under educated, the fit and the disabled. Advertisements that seek to appeal to particular markets should not become offensive to other readers.³⁸⁸

Adrian Bingham has written about how the twentieth century popular press walked a careful line between including sexual content which improved sales and including material that was so explicit as to alienate readers or put off advertisers. They did this by presenting themselves as 'Family Newspapers' which retailed 'morally respectable material suitable for consumption by readers of both sexes and all ages'³⁸⁹. *Gay News* took a similar stance but for slightly different reasons. Although it may have been prudent legally, the family

³⁸⁷ B. Kenyon, 'Much better than a sleeping pill', *Gay News* 95, 20 May -2 June 1976, p.12.

³⁸⁸ HCA/Lumsden/6: Draft Letters to advertisers.

³⁸⁹ A. Bingham, *Family Newspapers: Sex, Private Life & The Popular Press* (Oxford, 2009), p.11.

newspaper label was not a commercial necessity but a political position. The pages of *Gay News* were supposed to be suitable for all genders and (gay) proclivities.

One of the key aims of the *Gay News* project was to build up a form of identity and set of connections between gay people that was not just based on sexual contact. A comic article by Alison Hennegan in our sample issue is a good illustration. 'Gays are sick: an unflinching look at gay illnesses' satirised the idea that hepatitis was a gay disease by offering a series of fictional maladies suffered by gay people. These included such political illnesses as 'badge wearer's stoop', where overloading of the lapels caused a curvature of the spine, and club-based injuries such as 'Listener's Crick', which was acquired by leaning forward to listen to people at clubs. Only one was sexual, 'Lockjaw' caused by oral sex, a practice conveniently common to both lesbians and gay men, but even that could be also acquired by gritting of the teeth whilst listening to ignorant heterosexuals. The article rejected an attitude which defined gay life solely around sexual act, in this case a sexual disease, and broadened it to include all the other ways gay people interacted and came together.³⁹⁰

The paper's features articles therefore covered a vast range of subjects not directly related to either gay sex or gay politics. When asked in 2011 whether *Gay News* had any concerns regarding the obscenity laws, Michael Mason responded:

No, because we weren't obscene. We were a newspaper and arts magazine, our features articles were about cultural matters, the arts, literature, history, conditions in foreign climes. No we weren't, we didn't have any anxiety on that score at all.³⁹¹

As Mason says, whilst ignoring sex, a large number of the pages of *Gay News* were given over to literature and the arts. Reviews featured from the beginning. The seemingly random

³⁹⁰ A. Hennegan, 'Gays are sick: an unflinching look at gay health', *Gay News* 161, 22 February - 7 March 1979, pp.18-19.

³⁹¹ Michael Mason, Author interview, 16/12/2011.

selection was criticised by some readers who asked what the works reviewed had to do with being gay. *Gay News*' response was that as gay people they were not interested only in specifically gay things.³⁹² The policy continued and by 1976 the book pages were large enough to employ Peter Burton as literary editor. These pages proudly featured writers from the literary establishment, from both academia and the broadsheet press, whose presence the paper celebrated as a mark of their respectability.³⁹³ Some people, even on the staff, felt this was elitist but Burton's replacement as literary editor Alison Hennegan argued that it was a radical move. Firstly, it provided a space where literary writers could write as gay men or lesbians and would not be forced to hide their identity for their assumed heterosexual audience. Secondly, far from being exclusive, 'intellectual' books were forms of gay culture which gay people in the provinces could experience, through mail order or their libraries, which was far more accessible than the 'low brow' clubs of London.³⁹⁴

Courting the literary establishment drew flak from the more explicit sex magazines, which contrasted *Gay News*'s literary affectations with their own overt sexual content. *Man to Man* magazine declared that 'If you want entertainment news we suggest you buy *Time Out* or *TV Times*, they do it better than we could and we plan to stick to what we're good at ... that's good clean healthy sex.'³⁹⁵ Alan Purnell wrote in *Him* that 'When the Sunday papers overflow with good, guilt-free gay porn, then I'll consider that the need for *HIM* in its current form has ended, and I'll start looking for other voids to fill'³⁹⁶. He made it clear what

³⁹² 'Editorial', *Gay News* 6, p.2.

³⁹³ P. Burton, *Parallel Lives* (London, 1985), pp.112-15.

³⁹⁴ Hanscombe and Lumsden, *Title Fight*, pp.89-95.

³⁹⁵ *Man to Man*, Issue 2, p.42.

³⁹⁶ A. Purnell, 'Publisher's Page', *Him International* 7, p.14.

he thought bound gay men together: 'It's sex dears. So let's stick to what interests *all* of us!' Others outside of gay publishing agreed with him. Tom Robinson, despite later using *Gay News* as a totem in his song *Glad To Be Gay*, pointed out that discussion of sexuality was a glaring absence in the gay movement. 'C.H.E., G.L.F., and *Gay News* are not directly concerned with the specifics of having sex, but with helping establish a sense of community and awareness among homosexuals,' he wrote. Robinson went on to say that many found the de-sexed and chaste nature of these organisations to be oppressive, whereas *HIM* was 'at least cheerfully frank and straightforward'³⁹⁷.

Lumsden's letter to advertisers and the early controversies over contact ads demonstrated that *Gay News* also had to decide where to draw the line regarding advertisements. In 1981, in the wake of the use of conspiracy charges against the Paedophile Information Exchange, the paper had taken further legal advice on contact ads from the barrister Geoffrey Robertson. He recommended that they emulate the practice of *The Times*, on the assumption that any jury would find it a suitable benchmark of respectability. At the same time the much more risqué practices of *Zipper* and *Him Monthly* were a positive boon, providing the perfect contrast for any halo polishing that might be needed. On a specific point, he advised *Gay News* to remove references to masturbation from an advert for a device known as a Jakpak.³⁹⁸ The device was advertised fully in *Him Monthly*, which condemned *Gay News*' failure to publish the uncensored ad. Accusing *Gay News* of abandoning its radicalism and origins as an underground newspaper, the magazine declared that '[t]imes have obviously changed more than I had realised for *Gay News* (*Our Gay News*)

³⁹⁷ 'Liberating Him', *CHE Bulletin*, November 1976, p.4. That Robinson decided to ignore *HIM* and its pinups in the lyrics to *Glad to Gay*, stating that 'There's no nudes in *Gay News/our one magazine*' [my emphasis] shows how he was aware that it was much easier to defend gay literary criticism than overt porn.

³⁹⁸ HCA/Ephemera/643: Meeting report.

to consider itself a Family Newspaper. I think that the term Family Newspaper is consistent with sloppy, inaccurate, mindless and riddled with double standards' [their emphasis]. They mocked Lumsden for his acquiescence to the law, calling *Gay News* 'his new baby (over 21 of course)' and accusing them of forgetting who made the paper possible – the advertisers and commercial scene.³⁹⁹

HIM was correct to say that the commercial scene's advertising was crucial to *Gay News*' continued existence. In its early days the paper had been mostly funded through subscriptions and frequent appeals to readers for donations to solve various cash flow problems.⁴⁰⁰ As the paper went on advertising expanded and the paper included display ads for an astonishing range of gay books, films, other magazines (including *HIM* and *Zipper*), clothes retailers, travel firms, dating agencies and, significantly, gay clubs, pubs and restaurants. By 1982 53% of the paper's income came from advertising, either display or classified, and 8% from the mail order books company.⁴⁰¹ Of this advertising, the vast majority was for businesses run specifically for gay men, which made the paper reliant both on the political scene for news and the commercial scene for its finance – a position which would prove tactically awkward.

In keeping with their desire to be just like any other newspaper, some on the *Gay News* team wanted to expand their advertising base beyond gay businesses. 'I remember right from the start that Denis Lemon's ambition was to carry an advertisement for an electric kettle. That was the totemic ad that he wanted,' Michael Mason recalled in 2011 before adding that 'getting Russell Hobbes or Swan to advertise in a gay paper in those days was

³⁹⁹ 'A Family Newspaper', *Him Monthly* 55, p.11.

⁴⁰⁰ 'Editorial', *Gay News* 14, p.2; 'Please and Thanks', *Gay News* 15, p.1.

⁴⁰¹ Hanscombe and Lumsden, *Title Fight*, pp.42-43.

largely academic.⁴⁰² In 1981 the paper made a push to appeal to advertisers beyond the gay scene. Newly appointed business manager Robert Palmer used the readers of *Gay News* to undertake a survey of gay consumption, which quantified readers' spending habits and compared them to the national average. A media pack was then sent out to potential advertisers called '*Gay News, you can't afford to ignore us*,' which emphasised that gay men spent more on toiletries, holidays, fashion and technology than the UK average male.⁴⁰³ Coinciding with Richard Branson's purchase of Heaven (see chapter four), the survey succeeded in generating a small flurry of publicity, with articles appearing in *The Sunday Times*, *Time Out*, *The Economist* and *Marketing Week*.⁴⁰⁴ All discussed gay men's spending power, noting the potentially lucrative nature of an emerging pink economy. Writing in *The Economist* Brenda Maddox identified gay men as 'the prototypes of the new householder that is emerging: unmarried, childless, concerned with career and self-enhancement – the swinging single.'⁴⁰⁵ However advertisers were less responsive than journalists, and the manufacturers of kitchen appliances failed to flock to the pages of *Gay News*. As Robert Palmer admitted in 2011, 'it was a bit premature, we did get a certain amount of response but not quite the response that would have been got now.'⁴⁰⁶

Throughout its existence *Gay News* therefore remained reliant on the predominantly gay male commercial scene for its revenue, something which drew criticism from gay activists in general and lesbian women in particular. Many ex-GLF members condemned *Gay News* for

⁴⁰² Michael Mason, Author interview, 16/12/2011.

⁴⁰³ The fact that *Gay News*' readership was skewed towards London would have had a distorting effect on these figures. HCA/Ephemera/262: '*Gay News, you can't afford to ignore us*'.

⁴⁰⁴ HCA/Ephemera/263: 'The Gay Market... You can't afford to ignore us'.

⁴⁰⁵ HCA/Ephemera/263: B. Maddox, 'The Swinging Single', *The Economist*, 23/01/1982.

⁴⁰⁶ Robert Palmer, Author Interview, 20/07/2011.

its acquiescence to the market. In 2005 Stuart Feather told Andy Beckett that 'I was against *Gay News* the whole idea of it,' adding that 'we knew capitalism had the ability to absorb its dissidents.'⁴⁰⁷ This was a long-standing critique. In her 1974 pamphlet *Gay Liberation, Reformism and Revolution*, Martine O'Leary accused Lemon of being entirely in it for the money and *Gay News* of acting as a block to the gay cause. One reason for this was its willingness to advertise products which she saw as being part of the sexually unliberated commercial scene. 'Despite its platitudinous discussions of sexual liberation, it sees no reason *not* to run a full page ad for magazine called *Trade* - a more classic example of sexual exploitation it is hard to imagine.'⁴⁰⁸ She also criticised *Gay News* for being 'exclusively male-orientated except for the occasional token article from the occasional token sister.'⁴⁰⁹

Gay News never achieved gender parity. Although there were prominent women on its staff throughout its existence, they always remained a minority and only 6% of the readership was female. In terms of content the paper struggled to live up to its ideals of appealing equally to both genders. Some were put off by the overt gay male sexuality which dominated the advertising, despite Lumsden's attempts at censorship. One reader was particularly offended by a glossy full-colour insert advertising men's underwear. This was the final straw of a long building resentment. 'In eight years or so of reading *GN* I've grown deft in the art of not seeing most of the advertisements: but a glossy colour pull-out was too much for my early morning stamina,' she said, before adding the ad was a 'very blatant smack in the face to lesbian (far less feminist) sensibility.'⁴¹⁰ In addition the majority of the

⁴⁰⁷ Beckett, *When the Lights Went Out*, p.220.

⁴⁰⁸ HCA/CHE/11/18: Martine O'Leary, 'Gay Liberation: Reformism and Revolution'.

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid.

⁴¹⁰ M. Cameron, 'Letters', *Gay News* 237, 1-14 April 1982, p.16.

paper's news coverage related to gay men, something which the women on the staff ascribed to the way the paper had adopted the same news values as the mainstream press. *Gay News'* coverage was 'event and time-tied', and this tended to privilege the more public activities of gay men.⁴¹¹ Lesbians also had little interest in some of the political controversies reported by *Gay News*, and in the coverage of the gay scene. After a run of articles on cottaging and policing, one woman wrote in to declare that the subject was 'one big yawn' and that calls for less aggressive policing were irrelevant because gay men 'get their kicks' from stigma.⁴¹² R. Hillbert declared that a lesbian-friendly version of the paper would feature '[l]ess macho leather and bad news from Paedophiliaville'⁴¹³.

In 1982 the paper made an attempt to make women's voices more prominent in the paper by creating a dedicated page called 'The Visible Lesbian.' The page was informed by the ideology of the women's liberation movement. The women producing it therefore eschewed the hierarchy that characterised the rest of the paper and refused to venerate expertise. Consequently there was no one editor and the concept of the collective returned to *Gay News*.⁴¹⁴ The first edition of the page declared that the subsequent issues would not be filled by the collective but by 'you – the women readers of *GN*' and that the staff were 'just acting as caretakers for the space.'⁴¹⁵ The page's main article was an explicitly personal account of a trip to see the sexually explicit gay male film *Taxi Zum Klo*. Visually the page looked entirely different from the rest of the paper, less like a mainstream newspaper and more like a page taken from one of the slightly more polished editions of *Come Together*.

⁴¹¹ G. Hanscombe and A. Lumsden, *Title fight: the battle for Gay News* (London, 1983), p.108.

⁴¹² R. Hambrook, 'One Big Yawn', *Gay News* 191, 15-18 May 1980, p.18.

⁴¹³ R. Hillbert, 'In My Opinion: Taking Our Proper Place', *Gay News* 227, 28 October -11 November 1981, p.20.

⁴¹⁴ Hanscombe and Lumsden, *Title Fight*, pp.105-22.

⁴¹⁵ 'The Visible Lesbian', *Gay News* 235, 4-17 February 1982, p.7.

The pages garnered many letters of complaint from male readers, who seemed to associate the appearance of a single page as the start of a full scale lesbian takeover of 'their' paper.

Andrew Lumsden unsympathetically summarised the men's complaints:

They expect to get a buzz from the paper, a rush of gay maleness and this process is as badly disrupted by lesbian comments, pages, news, articles, as if *Playboy*-style photos of women appeared at intervals through *HIM* and *Zipper*.⁴¹⁶

Nevertheless the pages stayed and continued to be produced in the same non-hierarchical fashion until the paper's demise in 1983.

The Visible Lesbian's collectivism contrasted with the business dealings affecting the rest of the paper in 1982, when Robert Palmer bought Gay News Ltd from Denis Lemon. The change of ownership would have been a surprise to many in the gay community, who still thought it was a collective.⁴¹⁷ The paper had been a limited company from the beginning in order to ensure regular accounting and make it less likely to crash and burn like so many other gay enterprises. The first two years were characterised by perpetual financial crises until solicitor Richard Creed offered enough money to make the enterprise stable, at the price of him receiving 49% of the company. Creed's initial investment, a necessary action to make the paper stable, had fundamentally changed the nature of the organisation. As collective member Michael Mason said, 'Overnight, without any of us noticing *Gay News* had become a business owned not, as before, by its workers but by two men.'⁴¹⁸ In 1979

⁴¹⁶ A. Lumsden, 'Oddities and Soddities', *Gay News* 239, 29 April - 12 May 1982, p.19.

⁴¹⁷ See for instance E. Presland, 'Striking Attitudes', *Gay News* 239, 29 April - 12 May 1982, p.18.

⁴¹⁸ 'The Acne Years', *Gay News* 242, 10-23 June 1982, pp.7-8.

Lemon bought out Creed and became majority shareholder following a controversy over money taken out of the mail order books fund.⁴¹⁹

Now one man was in charge, as both its editor and 98% owner. By 1981 Lemon's domination of the paper was causing disquiet among the people who worked there, due to a management style which some characterised as dictatorial. Others complained about the surprisingly lavish lifestyle the paper appeared to be affording him, including membership of the Reform Club.⁴²⁰ The majority of the staff was therefore elated when Lemon agreed to sell his shares entirely to Palmer. However the details of the deal would lead to *Gay News'* eventual closure. The money used to buy Lemon out was a loan secured against Gay News Ltd itself. Lemon was owed payments totalling £70,000 over the next two years which were to be taken out of the paper's profits.⁴²¹ These sums were based on projections of future income and circulation which proved to be widely optimistic.

By 1982 *Gay News* was facing competition from a wider range of gay publications than the sex mags of the late seventies. 1981 had seen the first issue of *Capital Gay*, produced by ex-*Gay News* journalists Michael Mason and Graeme McKerrow. A London-based freesheet, *Capital Gay* relied on advertising and was distributed through gay bars and clubs. It was meant to be a lighter read than *Gay News*, something which could be digested on a night out. As Mason put it, 'we wanted to be *The Mirror* to their *Guardian*.'⁴²² Although they had very different business models, in terms of news coverage this was the first time *Gay News* had faced a regular competitor. Another challenge came from *Direction One*, a self-declared

⁴¹⁹ Hanscombe and Lumsden, *Title Fight*, pp.33-43; HCA/Ephemera/272: Fisher to Lumsden.

⁴²⁰ Hanscombe and Lumsden, *Title Fight*, pp.27-35.

⁴²¹ Robert Palmer, Author Interview, 20/07/2011.

⁴²² Michael Mason, Author Interview, 16/12/2011.

‘upmarket’ monthly magazine for both gay men and lesbians, launched by the women behind *Gayway* dating agency. *Direction One* embraced commercialism far more wholeheartedly than *Gay News* ever had. The editor declared that ‘political stuff is old fashioned; we want to take a more positive approach. Gays smoke and drink like everyone else, probably more, and we want advertisers to use the magazine to reach them.’⁴²³ Its contributors rejected the idea that all gay people were left-wing radicals and expressed admiration for Thatcher, the Liberal Party, and the newly formed SDP.⁴²⁴ This was an unambiguous celebration of the market, compared with *Gay News*’ more Faustian arrangement, and Andrew Lumsden joked that the publication’s launch event was ‘the party to end Gay Liberation’.⁴²⁵ *Direction One* failed after three issues, despite securing distribution from WHSmith, but it indicated that the idea of a widely distributed gay magazine was not as radical as it once was.

However, the crucial rival was a new version of an old competitor. Alex McKenna’s new bowdlerised *Him* (see chapter one) may not have featured the same explicit photographs of earlier versions of the magazine but it maintained the stance that *Gay News* was a fusty moralistic publication. Specifically, McKenna responded to the small increase and greater prominence of the coverage of gay women’s issues by asserting that the paper was now in the hands of a cadre of lesbians. This gendered critique was not entirely new. In 1981 *Him Monthly* had portrayed *Gay News*’ opposition to Heaven’s all-male door policy as a sign of its acquiescence to ‘women’s groups’. It criticised *Gay News* for seeking to prevent Heaven from being ‘a hard and raunchy place – a place for males to have a good time with other

⁴²³ Lagna. Ec. Gay Press: ‘Gay Go for Consumerism’, *The Sunday Telegraph*, 15/11/1981.

⁴²⁴ Ibid.

⁴²⁵ HCA/Ephemera/330: Lumsden to Parry, 15/12/81.

males'.⁴²⁶ The new *Him* continued to associate the presence of women with political didacticism and an opposition to male pleasure, calling the paper 'dreary, lacking direction and full of lesbians'.⁴²⁷ By 1982, McKenna was aggressively pursuing *Gay News*' market share. He reduced the price of advertising in *Him* and published a range of articles which maliciously portrayed *Gay News* as creatively moribund and failing commercially.⁴²⁸

A temporary fall in advertising revenue and the financial burden of meeting the payments due to Denis Lemon meant that by early 1983 *Gay News* was close to bankruptcy. In January, Lemon returned to the staff, in a move which caused readers to protest outside the papers' offices.⁴²⁹ Although Lemon was technically a member of the team again he was incredibly critical of the paper. In the run-up to his initial departure from *Gay News* he had become increasingly contemptuous of the people in the 'gay movement' and had told his reporters that *Gay News* should not be thought of 'radical' or 'alternative', but should simply be seen as 'a "newspaper", short and simple'.⁴³⁰ Now he came to echo McKenna's sentiments that the paper was elitist and out of touch with the contemporary gay male lifestyle. In an internal memo entitled 'Into the Eighties' (which since the decade was by now three years old was a criticism in itself), Lemon argued that the paper had become stagnant and inward-looking and that its focus on politics and 'intellectual' topics failed to address the changing gay lifestyle of the 1980s. 'What reason does any person who inhabits the commercial scene have for reading *Gay News*?' he asked rhetorically, before adding that

⁴²⁶ Editorial response to J. Croxley, 'Him Forum: Putting the Sex back into Homosexual', *Him Monthly* 29, p.5.

⁴²⁷ 'Gay News Trouble', *Him Monthly* 53, p.9.

⁴²⁸ HCA/Lumsden/4: 'Extract from Him'.

⁴²⁹ 'Gay News latest – Lemon squeezed out – owners to play... Musical Shares', *Capital Gay* 81, 18/01/1983, p.1.

⁴³⁰ Hanscombe and Lumsden, *Title Fight*, p.33.

‘the young and the scene are every bit as important, as much a part of gay life, as is the lecturer in semantics, the lesbian feminist, or the Marxist art historian.’⁴³¹

It soon became clear that *Gay News* was incapable of making the sort of profits required to pay the remaining money owed to Lemon, and in response Palmer agreed to allow the staff to make a bid to buy the paper. A proposal was put together involving a mixture of the staff’s own money, donations from gay political organisations, and an application for a grant from the Greater London Council’s Enterprise Board (GLEB). The plan collapsed on April 12th when the GLEB refused to make the grant, citing their doubts that the paper could achieve profits suggested in the bid. On April 15th Robert Palmer announced that *Gay News* was ceasing publication and the company went into liquidation. Both McKenna and the staff attempted to buy the title at the subsequent auction of assets arranged by the liquidators, but businessman Nigel Ostrer outbid them.⁴³² Ostrer’s *New Gay News* appeared in late 1983 in a new glossy format, produced by a completely different staff. *New Gay News* survived only a few months and the *Gay News* brand was then bought by McKenna and integrated into *HIM*.

In the meantime, McKenna had produced his own short-lived replacement for *Gay News*, a fortnightly news magazine called *Gay Reporter* edited by Denis Lemon and Peter Burton. In the editorial of the first issue, Lemon declared that the paper was ‘a new concept that looks forward to the future rather than harking back to the 60s.’ *Gay Reporter* was to contain ‘NOT preaching, no political bias and no condescending attitudes’ but would instead take

⁴³¹ Hanscombe and Lumsden, *Title Fight*, pp.239-40.

⁴³² Hanscombe and Lumsden, *Title Fight*, pp.221-63.

‘an approach that considers lifestyles and a wide range of points of view’⁴³³. Lemon still believed that gay publications should provide a forum for the free exchange of opinions, but had come to disavow the gay movement. Instead he felt a gay publication had to embrace and celebrate the commercial scene. Burton and Lemon declared that gay publishing ‘must be fully aware of the commercial aspects of life as well as concentrating on the serious issues’ and stated that ‘[a]s gay men, we aren’t ashamed of living lively and active lives in the Britain of the 80s – and we don’t see why you should be!’⁴³⁴ But this populism was in fact an abandonment of *Gay News*’ (often unrealised) aim to be an open forum for the entire gay community. *Gay Reporter*, which was integrated fully into *HIM* after a few issues, sought to appeal to a more limited metropolitan and male demographic.

It would be a mistake to insist that *Gay News*’ decline was an inevitable result of the changing nature of the gay male public sphere. The financial deal between Lemon and Palmer were an important factor, and it is possible that with better financial planning the paper could have survived into the eighties. If it had survived, however, it would have faced an increasingly competitive environment, as other publications articulated different visions of what bound gay men together (and whether they had anything in common with lesbian women). However no publication which emerged afterwards would operate in the precarious but productive space between the commercial scene and the gay political movement once occupied by *Gay News*.

⁴³³ ‘Welcome to Your New Fortnightly’, *Gay Reporter* 1, 2-15 June 1983, p.1.

⁴³⁴ Ibid.

Conclusion

After *Gay News* collapsed, readers wrote to the office decrying the loss of the publication. One correspondent from Plymouth described the paper as 'my only link with the gay community' and stated that 'to someone like me – quite isolated for various reasons – *GN* was lifeline, a point of sanity'. Another went further, portraying *Gay News* as a form of identity and alternative to politics: 'I never was a member of CHE or anything like that. Nothing Political! I am member of *Gay News*.'⁴³⁵ Such testimony illustrates how the publication of a newspaper which overtly catered to gay men acted to make them feel part of a collective experience which could be described as 'a gay community.' *Gay News* was produced in order to create a forum through which all gay people could communicate, regardless of physical location, precise sexual interests, political ideology or gender. It was radical not because of any formal revolutionary content or because it broke down any media conventions, but because of its very existence and its identification with the form of a mainstream newspaper. Through the production of the paper itself and attempts to make it widely available in the most mainstream outlets possible, *Gay News* was a project which asserted the right of gay people to communicate with each other in the same way heterosexuals did and to do so openly. As such it was crucial part of the new gay male public sphere. It was a forum which aimed to be both accessible to all, without the knowledge of codes and signals required to locate the queer content in magazines such as *Films and Filming*, and which had a public representative function to the outside world. It made its readers both aware an active part of a broader gay world, and enabled new cultural and political enterprises.

⁴³⁵ HCA/Ephemera/461: 'A sub-normality nurse who is slowly going off his rocker in Plymouth to *Gay News*' and 'Adrian from Acrington to *Gay News*', 28/04/1983.

Gay News was not however the only vision of gay publishing in the seventies and its attempts to equally represent all parts of the gay community were fraught and ultimately unsuccessful. The paper's attempts to find common ground between gay people other than sexual opportunities led some to criticise it for stripping overt sexuality from gay men's lives. Its reliance on both the gay movement and the gay commercial market caused tension between those who thought commercialism exploitative and those who felt that the gay movement was against the pleasure gay men found through consumption. Finally *Gay News*' long-held, but only sporadically implemented, conviction that it should serve gay men and lesbians equally was contested by more commercial publishers who saw their interests as distinct. Although these debates demonstrate the difficulties that *Gay News* had in implementing its vision, they also show how publishing periodicals for gay men in this era was an inherently politicised act, and that they could become the subjects of as well as the medium for debates about gay male identity.

Chapter Four: Coming Out and Going Out? The Commercial Scene.

Of the three institutions of the gay male public sphere discussed in this thesis, commercial gay venues do most to disrupt traditional narratives of gay men 'Coming Out.'⁴³⁶ The manner in which gay pubs and clubs became larger and more overtly identified as gay throughout the seventies is an often noted but rarely analysed development, often seen merely as an aftermath to the paradigm-changing political uprising that was the Gay Liberation Front.⁴³⁷ However the proliferation of gay pubs and clubs does not sit well with the ideology of the GLF, or with histories which focus on it, for two key reasons. Firstly they were by definition commercial spaces, which operated within capitalism rather than aiming to overturn it. Like all businesses they existed primarily to make money and could therefore be accused of exploiting rather than liberating gay men. Secondly, the increasingly public nature of gay venues did not necessarily mean that attendees were 'coming out' in the way gay activists understood the term. Going out to a gay bar or club in the evening did not have to involve a full public declaration of a customer's homosexuality, it could be as ephemeral and discreet an experience as visiting a cottage.

Both these factors initially led gay activists, including non-GLF reformists, to criticise gay venues as a ghetto and to demand alternatives. However, throughout the seventies

⁴³⁶ This chapter almost exclusively discusses pubs and clubs (a word which has various meanings), as they made up the vast majority of gay commercial venues; however, it should be noted that other commercial leisure spaces catered to gay men in this era, including restaurants, health clubs and hotels.

⁴³⁷ Jeffrey Weeks' *Coming Out* noted the expansion and the increasingly open nature of gay scene, but, writing in 1977, places this in an account which concentrates on the failure of gay community to realise the potential of GLF. Weeks, *Coming Out*, p.221-22. Matt Cook also mentions the expansion of pubs and clubs in his chapter on gay life after 1967, portraying them as 'part of the new visibility of gay life'. M. Cook, *A Gay History Of Britain*, p.189.

commercial leisure venues were the sites where the largest number of gay men could be found in one place. Going to a pub or club was one of the most common collective gay male experiences in this era, far outstripping involvement in political groups. This made the gay commercial scene a vital concern for gay activists, who of course also went to such venues themselves. Conversely, 'gay' pubs and clubs described themselves using the terminology popularised by the GLF and used networks founded by activists, most notably *Gay News* and Gay Switchboards, to reach a gay audience. As the historian of American disco Alice Echols has said, 'while the relationship between "going out and coming out" (and between consumer capitalism and gay liberation) was deep and reciprocal, it was not untroubled.'⁴³⁸

Another complicating factor is that gay commercial venues had a much richer prehistory than either gay campaigns or the gay press. Matt Houlbrook has demonstrated that interwar London had an extensive network of queer commercial venues. However, this network was unstable and could not be explicitly mapped. A venue became a regular meeting place for queer men through the decisions of individual friendships and word of mouth. As Houlbrook says, 'ad hoc sociability coexisted with an extensive network of known queer meeting places. A venue's reputation depended upon accumulated individual movements, as men socialised with friends, who in turn took their friends.'⁴³⁹ With the exception of the private members' clubs which emerged in London's postwar West End, most of these venues were not exclusively queer and were not run by queer men – indeed often their owners and managers had no idea of the reputation that the venue had acquired. Before decriminalisation there was a queer scene which existed in public social

⁴³⁸ A. Echols, *Hot Stuff: disco and the remaking of American culture* (New York, 2010), p.41.

⁴³⁹ M. Houlbrook, *Queer London*, p.69.

spaces, but worked to avoid publicity. When considering the transformation the gay scene underwent in the seventies it is important to consider these distinctions.

The historian of the post-law reform club scene faces the opposite methodological challenge of that encountered by authors writing on the era before 1967. Instead of having to trawl archives for the scant documentary evidence of queer venues' existence, we have to find a way to select and organise an explosion of discussion on the subject. There is a mass of stories of individuals attending gay venues found in biographies, contemporary interviews, the gay and national press, and oral and community histories.⁴⁴⁰ They are used extensively in this chapter to illuminate the way people interacted with the gay scene. But they are not the fundamental subject – which is the way in which ad hoc commercial sociability became a public act. This chapter's aim is reflected in Peter Ghosh's description of Ross McKibbin's work, which sought to consider 'just how far the "social" world extended, and what were the boundaries between the realms of society and politics'⁴⁴¹. The chapter therefore considers three ways in which the gay commercial scene was made public, and uses them to explore three intersections between gay sociability and gay politics.

Section one looks at the development of guides to gay venues from decriminalisation to the mid-seventies. These guides not only make it possible to sketch a chronology of how the gay scene expanded changed over the period, but also to consider how the process of describing venues as gay changed them. Mapping the geographical location of gay venues made them more accessible to those men outside existing queer networks. It also brought

⁴⁴⁰ Much of this chapter's approach (although as it turns out few of the actual sources quoted) is indebted to the curatorial work done at the blog *History is Made at Night*, <http://history-is-made-at-night.blogspot.co.uk/> - accessed 20/01/2014.

⁴⁴¹ P. Ghosh, 'The Guv'nor: the Place of Ross McKibbin in the writing of British history', in ed. William Whyte et al., *Classes, Cultures and Politics: Essays on British History for Ross McKibbin* (Oxford, 2011), p.20.

gay venues into the wider gay male public sphere. Venues went from being places gay men happened to attend to being publicly identified as gay pubs and clubs, making them a place where gay male identity was formed and contested.

Section two looks at Paul Hallam's and Ron Peck's 1978 film *Nighthawks*. Set on the gay scene, the film represents the experience of a London school teacher, cycling between his evenings at a series of gay clubs and his days in the school. The movie was filmed inside several prominent gay venues and the majority of its performers are gay men from the scene itself. However, its principal value is not as a documentary source, but as an artefact which emerged from the intersection between the gay political and commercial scene.

Made by gay activists it attempts to portray the 'average' experience of a gay man – the world not of the demo, committee or commune, but of the bar and dance floor. As such the story of *Nighthawks*' production, the film itself, and the reaction to its release, can be used to explore the tensions between political activism and commercial sociability.

The final section shifts focus to the owners of commercial venues and how they represented their enterprises, focusing on the development of 'Ultradiscos'. The entrepreneurs who established nights such as *Bang* and venues such as *Heaven*, large-scale dance clubs consciously based on the American scene, framed their actions in a political ideology which highlighted gay men's rights as consumers. As well as describing the emergence of these venues, the section will explore this ideology and compare it with Gay Liberation's critiques of the facilities available to gay men. It demonstrates that they were intensely interrelated, and that, although gay activists came to radically different conclusions than gay entrepreneurs, they shared a sense of dissatisfaction with the existing gay scene.

Gay Guides and the emergence of the 'Gay Scene'

Although there are some records of samizdat lists of clubs being distributed between homosexual men in the early 60s, the production of published guides had to wait until after decriminalisation and the establishment of the gay press.⁴⁴² Before law reform publishing the precise location of a gay pub or club could have drawn the police's attention to the venue. After 1967 it was possible to list the names and addresses of gay pubs and clubs, an innovation which not only made them easier to find but brought them into the wider gay male public sphere.

The New London Spy, 'a guide to the city's pleasures' published in 1966, is a good example of the tactics needed to describe the gay scene in London on the cusp of law reform. The guide left the reader in no doubt that there were a large number of venues around, but also that they were spread across the city rather than being restricted to any one space:

The queer pubs of London are spread over a wide area, from the dockside pubs in the East End to the tourist pubs in the West End; from the smart pubs of Chelsea and Belgravia to the bed-sitter areas of Earls Court and Fulham.⁴⁴³

These broad geographic areas highlight an important characteristic of the gay scene throughout the seventies. Although some neighbourhoods were generally known as 'gay' (Earls Court and Soho remain prominent throughout the era) this should not be confused with the emergence of 'Gay Villages' such as the Castro in San Francisco or Canal Street in 1980s Manchester.⁴⁴⁴ The gay venues where men met in the seventies were not huddled

⁴⁴² For instance according to Emmanuel Cooper the guestbook at the Arts and Battledress Club also acted as a proto gay guide, listing other gay venues. Summerskill, *Gateway to Heaven*, p.74.

⁴⁴³ H. Davies (ed.), *The New London Spy* (London, 1966), p.223.

⁴⁴⁴ The appearance of clusters of gay pubs in these areas can, however, be identified as a precursor to the developments of these villages, see A. Collins, 'Sexual Dissidence, Enterprise and Assimilation: Bedfellows in Urban Regeneration', in A. Collins (ed.), *Cities of Pleasure: Sex and the Urban Socialscape* (Abingdon, 2006),

together in discrete spaces, but mixed among the rest of the city. Gay guides would become particularly important in helping men to find the needles in this haystack. The *New London Spy* however was unable to be specific, and only identified the general areas where a gay pub might be found. By contrast the chapter which followed on lesbian London only described one venue where queer women met, but because of the law was able to name it and identify its location: the Gateways on the Kings Road.⁴⁴⁵

From the earliest days of the gay press it was clear that there was a demand for explicit guides to the gay scene. In issue two of *TIMM* a reader suggested 'that it might be possible to produce a special Readers' Guide to Great Britain in which useful addresses such as hotels, boarding houses, clubs, etc., might be listed.'⁴⁴⁶ The magazine later asked readers to send in information about UK venues so that a register could be produced, but the magazine folded before the project got off the ground.⁴⁴⁷ Demands from readers aside, it was clear to the early gay magazines' editorial teams that pubs and clubs were a potentially lucrative source of advertising. *Jeremy* tried to get gay venues to advertise in the magazine; only one venue did, the Masquerade, but *Jeremy* became a forum for description and discussion of the London gay scene. As its final editor Peter Burton said, '[t]hough Club advertising in these publications was thin on the ground editorial comment wasn't'⁴⁴⁸.

pp.159-73. On Manchester in particular see S. Whittle, 'Consuming differences: the collaboration of the gay body with the cultural state', in S. Whittle (ed.), *The Margins of the City: gay men's urban lives* (Aldershot, 1994), pp.27-41.

⁴⁴⁵ *The New London Spy*, pp.231-38. For More on the Gateways see J. Gardiner, *From the Closet to the Screen* (London, 2003), and R. Jennings 'The Gateways club and the emergence of a post-Second World War lesbian subculture', *Social History*, Vol.31, No.2 (2006), pp.206-25.

⁴⁴⁶ 'GW', 'Letters to Editor', *TIMM* 2, p.49.

⁴⁴⁷ 'Club Register', *TIMM* 13, p.23.

⁴⁴⁸ P. Burton, *Parallel Lives*, p.49.

The first issue of *Jeremy* featured the first explicitly titled gay guide published in Britain: one and half pages naming just over a dozen venues in the two foci of gay London, Earls Court and the West End. It was written in a humorous style, in which the author summed up the pubs in terms of what he saw as their clientele's defining characteristics other than homosexuality. The guide highlighted divisions of age (the Coalville Arms in Chelsea is described as 'on the whole middle ages with a spattering of youth'), class (The Boltons in Earls Court is '[b]asic – and let's face it – rather common'), fashion (visitors to the Peg O'Waissal in Belgravia should 'try not to wear the same clothes you wore the previous night') and profession (the Salisbury in St Martin's Lane has a 'profusion of mirrors and rather jaded theatrical types').⁴⁴⁹

The guide also identified a series of 'clubs', which should not be confused with clubs in the modern sense of the word (licensed late night venues for dancing to, usually recorded, music). Some of these were the private members' clubs, such as The Rockingham and The A and B, which had first sprung up in the 1940s.⁴⁵⁰ Brian Wilkinson describes a trip to the Rockingham in the very early seventies:

the club that I was first introduced to what was called the Rockingham Club which was in Archer Street, it was a membership club, you had to be proposed/voted and whatever it was very suit and ties sort of thing, or blazers, very smart casual sort of thing ... there was a Juke box in it but no dancing, people just sort of chattered.⁴⁵¹

This exclusive, deliberately respectable air had originally been insurance against the attention of the police but it continued after 1967. Despite the change in the law not all welcomed publicity, for instance the management of The Rehearsal wrote to *Jeremy* to

⁴⁴⁹ 'Gay Guide', *Jeremy* 1, pp.36-37

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁵¹ Author Interview, Brian Wilkinson, 30/08/2012.

emphasise their strict membership arrangements and discourage strangers from visiting.⁴⁵²

Many of these clubs persisted throughout the seventies, and grew much more relaxed with being publicly defined as gay. But they came to be seen as increasingly anachronistic, a perception which some turned to their advantage. A mid-seventies circular distributed to CHE members by The Festival promised a quiet relaxing atmosphere and then listed the clubs' virtues in terms of how it remained unaffected by recent trends: 'No Drag Show, No Jukebox, No dancing.'⁴⁵³

The future could be glimpsed at the other, newer clubs which *Jeremy* listed: coffee bars such as Earls Courts' The Catacombs and a few other licensed venues such as Yours or Mine on Kensington High Street.⁴⁵⁴ Although many required membership it was not usually necessary to be proposed by an existing member. Whilst more open than the old school private members' clubs they still operated in an atmosphere of restriction, albeit one determined as much by the laws regulating alcohol as those around homosexuality. Serving only coffee allowed many of them to stay open late into the night; without alcohol dancers could achieve intoxication through alternative means such as the 'all sorts of soft sweet things' which *Jeremy* assured readers were available at *La Deuce* in Soho.⁴⁵⁵ Others were technically supper clubs and had to insist that all customers had 'a meal' on entry, as Brian Wilkinson recalls of Yours or Mine: 'they had a few cardboard plates at the back with a bit a sweaty ham on or a lettuce leaf...they get it out...show it to you, 'yes I've eaten.'⁴⁵⁶

⁴⁵² 'Members only', *Jeremy* Vol.1 no.9, p.45.

⁴⁵³ HCA Ephemera/168: 'Festival Club'.

⁴⁵⁴ 'Gay Guide', *Jeremy* 1, pp.36-37.

⁴⁵⁵ 'Gay Guide', *Jeremy* Vol.1 no.2, p.51.

⁴⁵⁶ Author Interview, Brian Wilkinson, 30/08/2012.

Less staid than the private members' clubs these promised both a Juke Box and a dance floor although rarely at this point a DJ. People frequently danced at the clubs but there were varying policies on how much contact was to be allowed between men. *Jeremy* assured its readers that at the *La Deuce* '[no] one's going to stop you dancing cheek to cheek – and you'll probably find someone to egg you on.'⁴⁵⁷ And there are oral history testimonies of public sex happening at some of the other coffee clubs.⁴⁵⁸ However, other sources report tightly enforced restrictions on physical contact between men. As Andrew Lumsden recalls: 'you were still not allowed to dance with somebody else ... so the owners of the club would come and part people or throw them out if they tried to touch.'⁴⁵⁹

In April 1970 *Spartacus* published its first *International Gay Guide*, starting a series which would be published annually (with the exception of 1971) throughout the seventies.

Designed initially to be sold to English readers through outlets in London and the South East, the guide listed venues across the world, as well as cruising grounds and other even less salubrious sexual opportunities.⁴⁶⁰ This international perspective would be important for the development of the gay scene in England and Wales, as through both the press and their own travel experiences gay men at home would draw comparisons between the gay bars

⁴⁵⁷ 'Gay Guide', *Jeremy* Vol.1 no.2, p.51.

⁴⁵⁸ NSA C547 (Tony Deane Interviews): F4279, F4265.

⁴⁵⁹ Author Interview, Andrew Lumsden, 21/06/2011. The only way of reconciling these contradictory accounts is by coming to the obvious conclusion that different clubs had different policies, probably on different nights. Nevertheless the idea that you could not dance at the early gay clubs became a commonly held view, something which entrepreneurs like Tricky Dicky (discussed below) would react against a few years later.

⁴⁶⁰ *Spartacus*' international coverage drew criticism from many gay activists due to its tendency to point readers to circumstances where their comparative wealth would make it easy to procure sex through either overt prostitution or offering 'gifts' to locals. In 1979 *Gay News* declared that 'a fetid slave-trade odour winds its ways through too many of these entries for those with weak stomachs' 'David and Goliath', *Gay News* 166, 3-16 May 1979, p.23. Worse was to come, at the time of his death in 1994 John Stamford was under arrest in Belgium facing accusations of child abuse and that *Spartacus* had been used to front a service distributing information about child prostitution in the Philippines see <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/paedophiles-who-prey-on-youngsters-worldwide-1310556.html> accessed 19/01/2014

and clubs abroad. The British section of the guide lacked *Jeremy's* vivid descriptions but contained the largest list of gay venues that had been published up to that date – including the first extensive list of gay venues outside of London.⁴⁶¹

Each venue listed was followed by a series of codes to describe its facilities and clientele. Codes like D for 'dancing or Discotheque', B for 'Bar', or E or 'Elegant' ('coats and ties advisable') unsurprisingly indicated the facilities that were available and atmosphere at a venue. Others, however, illustrate the unstable nature of what constituted a gay venue at this point. Bars with the label 'M', were mixed but this did not indicate an open coexistence but a venue that 'appears straight but sufficiently active to make it worthwhile.' 'WE' indicated that the pub was only gay on weekends and 'not too active otherwise' – a form of shift system which would informally occur in many venues long before the emergence organised gay nights. More darkly, the label 'AYOR' meant 'At Your Own Risk' and designated 'an entry where you might like the people there but it is highly questionable that they will like you.'⁴⁶² In 1970 a gay venue was not necessarily a place openly run for and accepting of gay men, but a less specific marker of where there may be queer sexual and social opportunities.

This was particularly true outside of London. Although some private members' clubs run specifically for gay people emerged in major towns the late 1960s, such as The Moulin Rouge in Bristol, The Flamingo in Wolverhampton and The Nightingale in Birmingham, in

⁴⁶¹ J Stamford (ed.), *Spartacus International Gay Guide* [1st edn] (Brighton, 1970), p.2. London and Brighton (where *Spartacus* was published) were of course well covered but for other provincial towns the amount of detail available was highly varied. This should not be regarded as necessarily a measure of the vibrancy of any town's gay scene - the guide relied on information sent in by readers, rather than active research trips, and so coverage was rather inconsistent.

⁴⁶² *Ibid*, p.3.

general provincial gay venues were mostly pubs.⁴⁶³ Without being advertised, and with no system of membership, these venues became 'gay' because of the people who went there informally and unofficially. Indeed often only part of the pub would be a regular hangout for gay men, who would be deliberately indistinguishable from the rest of the clientele. Many towns were like Oxford where, in the sixties, as Peter Scott-Presland has said, 'there wasn't a gay pub as such ... there was the Gloucester Arms which was semi-gay... there was like one corner of one bar.'⁴⁶⁴ All this meant that while queer venues formed an important social institution for many men they were, if not strictly inaccessible, unknowable for many others – something which the publication of gay guides would change. Tony Openshaw for instance described the shock of discovering from *Gay News* that the pub on the corner of the Manchester street he had lived on all his life was in fact gay.⁴⁶⁵ This informality also made such venues unstable, with a clientele which could change overnight. As the second edition of the *Spartacus* guide declared, 'The gay scene changes swiftly, as we all know. A swinging gay club can suddenly close and a useful gay bar may, without warning, become deserted.'⁴⁶⁶

The descriptive work of gay guides revolutionised the kind of knowledge which was needed to access gay venues. Instead of knowledge of complex codes and signals, or dumb chance, with the guide in hand all that was needed was a map. Men far away from London were able to plan their visits to its gay bars and clubs, allowing venues they had not yet set foot in to become a focus of their sexual identity. In 1980 an ex-GLF member described how he

⁴⁶³ For the Moulin Rouge see Howes, *Gay West*, pp.35-36. For the Flamingo and the Nightingale see 'Welcome to Gay Birmingham Remembered', <http://gaybirminghamremembered.co.uk/> - accessed 23/02/2013.

⁴⁶⁴ Author Interview, Peter [Formerly Eric] Scott-Presland, 02/06/2011.

⁴⁶⁵ NSA C456 (Hall Carpenter Collection): 102/01-02.

⁴⁶⁶ J Stamford (ed.), *Spartacus International Gay Guide* [2nd edn] (Brighton, 1972), p.1.

discovered the gay scene after receiving his first copy of *Spartacus* in the post. Aged 19, studying in Gillingham, Kent he occupied himself making plans to visit the venues: 'I bought myself an A to Z and sat, after I'd done my homework [and worked out] how if I lived in London ... how I'd get to these places and the tube lines I would get.'⁴⁶⁷ For those who had already reached the scene, the guides were a vital part for keeping track of how it was developing. As Brian Wilkinson put it, '[when] I read any gay mags ... it was to find out where there was to go and what was happening.'⁴⁶⁸

The gay public sphere did not merely identify and envelop existing queer venues. It also had an active role in creating them. Martin Meeker has written how 1960s American gay guides such as *The Lavender Baedeker* had the effect of exporting the very idea of dedicated gay spaces, transposing the San Franciscan concept of the gay bar to other parts of the country.⁴⁶⁹ Similarly, British guides did not merely describe gay venues, they also performed work of *definition*, creating and spreading the idea of 'a gay pub' as recognisable institution. Over the seventies a slowly and unevenly liberalising legal climate, combined with the political efforts of gay campaigners, and the emergence of the gay press changed the definition of a gay venue. A 'gay pub' went from being a venue where gay men happened to gather to a venue which was explicitly run *for* gay men (or, as some would argue, for their money).

The changing nature of the drag scene is a good example of this phenomenon. When the first edition of *Gay News* appeared in 1972, instead of a printing a guide to gay venues the

⁴⁶⁷ NSA C547 (Tony Deane Interviews): F4262.

⁴⁶⁸ Author Interview, Brian Wilkinson, 30/08/2012.

⁴⁶⁹ M. Meeker, *Contacts Desired*, pp.211-24.

paper used a proxy and listed pubs which had drag acts.⁴⁷⁰ These had long been popular venues for gay men in London and beyond, as places they felt at home and were able to see entertainment aimed at least partly at them. As one patron of drag pubs on the Isle of Dogs in the mid-sixties said,

[T]he crowd was mixed, predominantly gay. And the biggest mistake you could make was to take on these artists because you'd get: 'Put your handbag down and come up here, dear.' And it was kind of liberating because you felt, 'Yes!' You could fight back. People came there and we felt we had a right to be considered.⁴⁷¹

Drag acts took two main forms, both of which had an appeal to gay men and allowed queer messages to be part of mainstream entertainment. The first involved acts dressed in glamorous clothes miming to records by female artists, allowing a form of homoeroticism to appear under the guise of parody. The second form went in the other direction with men creating deliberately grotesque depictions of older women, the classic pantomime dame character, performing stand up comedy characterised by its sexual content (either explicit or innuendo) and harsh wit.⁴⁷² By performing as women these comedians could make jokes about relationships with men, as the authors of the book *Drag* wrote in 1994: 'In drag a gay man had permission to talk and sing about other gay men – about loving them, hating them and shagging them.'⁴⁷³

It is therefore easy to see why *Gay News* chose to list places with drag acts, but at this point they were not widely understood as gay venues. The scene had its origins in a series of ex-

⁴⁷⁰ 'Information', *Gay News* 1, p.12.

⁴⁷¹ 'Ron and Roger' quoted in C. Summerskill, *Gateway to Heaven*, p.74.

⁴⁷² For more on the drag scene, see in particular K. Kirk and E. Heath, *Men in Frocks* (London, 1984).

⁴⁷³ R. Baker with contributions by P. Burton and R. Smith, *Drag: a history of female impersonation in the performing arts* [rev. edn] (London, 1994), p.238. The book is an interesting case study in changing meaning of drag performances. The first edition was written by Roger Baker in 1968 before his politicisation, and discussed the history of drag to the then present yet avoided discussing how it related to gay men. After Baker's death his friends produced an updated edition which was able to discuss the importance of drag to the nascent gay scene.

military revues with titles such as *Soldiers in Skirts* and *Forces in Petticoats* which had toured regional theatres in the immediate post war period, before becoming a common form of entertainment in pubs and working men's clubs.⁴⁷⁴ The late 1960s and early 1970s had seen a boom in drag as a mainstream form of entertainment. Venues emerged across London and Danny La Rue had mainstream television success.⁴⁷⁵ Despite their obvious queer appeal drag venues were attended by and marketed to straight audiences to the extent that in 1969 the *Hampstead and Highgate Express* reported that drag acts were how The Black Cap in Camden's manager planned to turn the venue 'into a cosy family pub'⁴⁷⁶.

By 1974 however The Black Cap was listed by *Gay News* as a gay pub, and in 1977 a new set of managers used the paper to announce to its customers that it would still welcome gay people despite the change of personnel.⁴⁷⁷ As such this was an example of a profound change in gay commercial sociability: the integration of queer venues into a wider gay male public sphere. Venues like The Black Cap, along with other Drag pubs like both the Royal Vauxhall and Union taverns in south London, became defined as meeting places for gay men and through *Gay News* pub managers were able to recognise and address their clientele. Inclusion in a gay guide was therefore a way to appeal a much wider gay public. As the gay press became more established and gay guides became more extensive they became a determining factor in the establishment of gay venues. Michael Mason describes how pub managements would contact *Gay News* to inform them that a venue was 'going gay'⁴⁷⁸.

⁴⁷⁴ K. Kirk and E. Heath, *Men in Frocks* (London, 1984), pp.15-16.

⁴⁷⁵ D. Montmorency, *Drag Scene: the secrets of female impersonators* (London, 1970).

⁴⁷⁶ LAGNA. Greater London. Gay Scene: 'Pubs', *Hampstead and Highgate Express*, 01/04/1969.

⁴⁷⁷ 'Black Cap', *Gay News* 131, 17-30 November 1977, p.10.

⁴⁷⁸ Author Interview, Michael Mason, 16/12/2011.

Conversely, when the management of a venue wanted to distance them from the gay market the first step was to ask to be removed from the paper's listings.⁴⁷⁹

The establishment of the gay male public sphere also allowed a third type of gay commercial social opportunity to emerge: the gay disco. From the early seventies gay organisations or individual businessmen would take over the function rooms above local pubs and turn it in to a gay dance floor for a single night. The most prolific promoter of Gay nights within London was Paul Scanes, aka Tricky Dicky, an ex-public health inspector from the East End. Having DJed in straight venues and attended the gay coffee clubs in the late sixties (inspirations he acknowledged), and having observed the GLF take over pubs for their 'People's Dances' (an influence he was more circumspect about), he wanted to expand the gay men's social opportunities in two ways. Firstly he wanted there to be gay venues in places other than Earls Court and the West End, so that men did not have to leave their communities in order to be themselves.⁴⁸⁰ Secondly he wanted gay men to reject the restrictions which other clubs put on dancing, as he said to *Gay News* in 1973:

And in the places I work the gay people have the liberty they should have. You go to The Catacombs and try dancing together there ... At my discos the boys and gay girls can dance together and no one is going to say a word. This time last year you wouldn't have seen gay people dancing together.'⁴⁸¹

Starting in The Father Redcap in Camberwell in 1972, by the mid-seventies Scanes' company Dicks Inn Discotheques was running gay nights all over London, as well as boat parties and coach trips for evenings out in coastal towns.⁴⁸² At the same time, outside of central London

⁴⁷⁹ For Instance in 1976 the Blossoms Hotel in Chester threatened *Gay News* with legal action if they kept the reference. See NCCL Archives (University of Hull) U DCL/701/16: Taylor to Quartier 20/12/1976.

⁴⁸⁰ NSA C547 (Tony Deane Interviews): F4269; 'Tricky Dicky: The Gay liberator', *Gay News* 12, p.8.

⁴⁸¹ NSA C547 (Tony Deane Interviews): F4269.

⁴⁸² HCA Ephemera/168: 'Dicks Inn Discotheques'.

many gay groups tried to expand the social opportunities in their towns by putting on gay discos. For instance Reading Gay Activists held a disco every Wednesday night at The Railway Tavern, which proved so lucrative for the pub's managers that they ejected the RGA and decided to run the night on their own.⁴⁸³ Whether run by activists or entrepreneurs these discos were only possible because of the new gay male public sphere. To fill each of these venues on the required night they had to be advertised whether through activist newsletters, the gay press or gay switchboards.

By the mid-seventies the gay commercial scene had become part of a wider gay male public sphere. Pubs and clubs which had previously been sites of queer life due to the ad hoc sociability of queer men now became recognised as gay clubs and pubs: venues explicitly run for gay men as consumers. This marked a move from a scene which was defined by informality and the need to avoid official censure to one which relied on being openly identified with an emerging gay identity. The temptation is to say that the scene had 'come out', but to use the term would be to conflate these developments with the actions of gay activists. In fact the emerging gay movement had a tense and problematic relationship with the emerging gay scene, which the following section will explore.

Nighthawks: Gay Activism and the Commercial Scene

Nighthawks is a 1978 film written/directed by Ron Peck and produced by Paul Hallam, which depicts the life of a gay school teacher, Jim. It works on a cyclical plot, alternating between his days in the classroom and his evenings on the gay commercial scene. The film is not just about the scene, it is also product of it. Every character other than Jim (portrayed by gay

⁴⁸³ 'Reading Storms', *Gay News* 44, 11-24 April 1974, p.3.

professional actor Ken Robertson) is played by a volunteer, encouraged to improvise a version of themselves, and it was recorded in the actual gay bars and clubs of London.

By its very existence *Nighthawks* is a significant film: in a UK context it is possibly the first attempt by gay men themselves to depict the emerging gay male commercial scene of the 1970s. It is of historical interest not only as a documentary source on gay venues, but because it is a product of the overlap between the gay commercial scene and the gay activist movement. The film was conceived and marketed as an act of political activism, and produced using the infrastructure of the gay movement, but portrayed the seemingly apolitical world of the bar and club. This reflected Peck's twin influences: he was both a political activist and a frequent customer of gay clubs and pubs. *Nighthawks* therefore is unlike most other activist critiques of the club scene in that it does not present itself as a view from the outside. Instead it is an attempt to integrate a political ideology, coming out, with a lived social reality, going out. As such the film, and discussions around it, can reveal the complex interrelationship between the two, showing what political activists and gay hedonists had in common as well as what divided them, and that often the same person would play both roles.

A project like *Nighthawks* would have been inconceivable in the earliest days of gay liberation. From the sixties onwards gay campaigners of all political hues had criticised gay venues, seeing them as at best inadequate and at worst an active part of gay men's oppression. At its height the GLF condemned those who attended gay bars, as Jeffrey Weeks recalls: 'We regarded them as beyond the pale, as traitors. Much of our energy was directed

not against straight people but against the commercial scene.'⁴⁸⁴ Similarly CHE in its early leaflets condemned bars for their 'exploitative and predatory atmosphere'⁴⁸⁵. Activists, whether reformist or revolutionary, condemned the secretive gay scene of the late sixties and early seventies as a ghetto, one which perpetuated the marginalisation of gay people. Much early activism was concerned with creating completely independent alternatives, whether through the GLF's 'people's dances' or CHE's abortive Esquire Clubs project.⁴⁸⁶

For his part Peck only became aware of gay activism (through *Gay News*) after the peak of the GLF, at the point that gay campaigners were beginning to realise that they had to come to terms with the gay scene. This was partly because by 1973 both Esquire Clubs and the GLF had collapsed while the commercial scene persisted. Campaigners were starting to realise, as Alice Echols has said of America, 'that gay men were about as likely as the working class to renounce the pleasures of consumption'.⁴⁸⁷ But this was also because innovations such as the guides discussed above were making pubs and clubs into more public enterprises. Venues were moving from being entirely secretive towards admitting that their clientele were gay men. By the mid-seventies the scene and the closet were not synonymous and gay activists had to come to terms with commercial venues as key sites of the emerging gay identity. But if standing entirely apart from the scene was no longer possible, entirely embracing it was difficult, as the production of *Nighthawks* shows.

In many ways *Nighthawks* is an entirely typical product of mid to late 1970s gay activism, to the extent that its production delays are casually used by Jeffrey Weeks in *Coming Out* to

⁴⁸⁴ J. Weeks quoted in A. Lent, 'The Transformation of Gay and Lesbian Politics in Britain', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (2003), p.30.

⁴⁸⁵ HCA CHE/13/9: 'Introducing the Campaign for Homosexual Equality'.

⁴⁸⁶ Weeks, *Coming Out*, pp.182, 194, 210.

⁴⁸⁷ Echols, *Hot Stuff*, p.53.

exemplify the wider gay movement in the period.⁴⁸⁸ The ideology behind the project and the method of its production derived directly from the ideas of Gay Liberation, and indeed both Paul Hallam and Ron Peck were briefly members of the Gay Left Collective. Like much of gay lib activity the film was an act of coming out. According to Peck, in the film's 1989 'sequel' and exegesis *Strip Jack Naked, Nighthawks* was meant to 'put up on the screen something of that life that I and others, were living' and challenge the way mainstream cinema either ignored gay people or portrayed them as tragic or camp stereotypes.⁴⁸⁹ Challenging such stereotypes was an entirely typical gay activist project, doing that by focusing on the gay scene, however, was incredibly unusual.

Like most important projects of the mid-seventies *Nighthawks* reached a wider audience through an article in *Gay News*. Peck launched the project in an interview in 1976, and said that the planned film would show '[h]ow large, how rich, and how full of variety gay life is. And that it can be another area of sexuality that can be very exciting and positive.'⁴⁹⁰ He was subsequently inundated with 260 letters from people wanting to tell their story, including Paul Hallam who then became the film's producer. The responses showed a widespread desire for a representation of gay life that was not based on stereotypes, something the proposed film would aim to avoid by showing a diverse range of characters. As well as reflecting gay people's lives the film was to challenge straight people's preconceptions. As Hallam wrote, 'Even the most dedicated homophobe might be a bit surprised by the

⁴⁸⁸ The fact that the second, 1990, edition of *Coming Out* still refers to *Nighthawks* as a permanently stalled project demonstrates the hybrid nature of the book, reminding us that the early chapters need to be seen as a product of mid-seventies gay politics. Weeks, *Coming Out*, p.228.

⁴⁸⁹ *Strip Jack Naked*, BFI Production Board and Channel Four Films, 1991. Directed by Ron Peck.

⁴⁹⁰ 'Director Needs Gays for First "Real" Gay Film', *Gay News* 87, 29 January - 11 February 1976, p.16.

characters, some of whom are so ordinary that he will have to look a lot more closely at his colleagues, friend and family to detect signs of “infection.”⁴⁹¹

Throughout 1976 Peck and Hallam interviewed the people who had written in and went round meetings of gay groups, trying to capture their experiences and form them into a script. However as this process continued Peck and Hallam realised that ‘a four hour panoramic film just wasn’t feasible’ and that the film would have to be focused on the story of one character, the school teacher Jim, whose life bore striking similarities to Ron Peck’s.⁴⁹² Much of the later criticism of the film would have its origins in this decision because although *Nighthawks* was film which sought to challenge stereotypes and depict the variety of the gay scene it became focused on only one character’s experience of it.

According to Peck *Nighthawks* was ‘structured on a state of mind that most homosexuals “adapt” to, a rigid separation of their sexual life from their everyday experience’⁴⁹³. The film showed both Jim’s nights out on the gay scene and his days working as a geography teacher at an inner London comprehensive. It oscillates between showing Jim exploring and cruising at a variety of gay venues, from ‘Streets’ disco (a barely fictionalised version of The Catacombs club in Earls Court) to gay pubs like The Salisbury at night, and his developing friendship with his fellow teacher Judy, to whom he gradually opens up. But in the early parts of the film Jim says nothing about his night time activities to any of his co-workers. He is not alone in this secrecy, for there are frequent discussions between the gay men he meets about who knows and who does not. For one character, a younger man called Neil, even the three other men he lives with do not know where he goes at night (‘I just say I’m

⁴⁹¹ P. Hallam, ‘Your chance to back a gay film – “*Nighthawks* needs you”’, *Gay News* 96, 3-16 June 1976, p.11.

⁴⁹² ‘*Nighthawks*’, *Gay News* 249, 24 August - 6 September 1978, pp.21-22.

⁴⁹³ Lagna. Ab. *Nighthawks*: P. Hallam and R. Peck ‘*Nighthawks* – an appeal’, *Time Out*, 11/6/1976.

going to a disco, straight boys don't like it.')⁴⁹⁴ This separation mirrored Peck's own initial experience of the gay scene. He recalled in *Strip Jack Naked* that 'when we walked out in the morning, to our separate jobs and occupations, we left our homosexuality behind us, we were normal people, travelling on buses and tubes.'⁴⁹⁵

It is not just a series of gay venues that Jim visits, but also a series of men's bedrooms. The film depicts Jim beginning a series of short term relationships with a wide variety of men, including an art student, an unemployed man just come down from Bolton and a visiting American banker. The film does not shy from the fact that many customers attended gay bars for one reason, to meet men for sex. In the early parts of the film it is the search for a partner for the night that governs all of Jim's interactions in the club. On the one occasion he talks to someone he already knows, he's mocked for not having left with someone else already ('you're still here – disgraceful!'). In one of the most resonant shots of the film we see Jim staring out onto the dance floor coldly assessing the men on it, as Peck explains:

The script was full of references to the 'cruising eye' shot. The camera was not only to record eyes searching and scanning but what the eyes sought out, a desperate eye, in many ways a cruelly discriminating eye, picking out some men, rejecting others. We never really accomplished it. Not the discrimination. Nor the cruelty. We achieved a kind of approximation.⁴⁹⁶

This reflected Peck's experience of the gay scene as a place of intense sexual competition. According to him years on the gay scene made people 'harder, more calculating, in the way you dressed , the way you talked, the way you moved. Everything became a calculation in a

⁴⁹⁴ *Nighthawks*, Nashburg Limited with Four Corner Films, 1978. Directed by Ron Peck.

⁴⁹⁵ *Strip Jack Naked*.

⁴⁹⁶ R. Peck, 'Nighthawks: A Few Reflections', in *Nighthawks/Strip Jack Naked* [DVD Booklet] (London, 2009), p.20.

game that you hoped would checkmate that obscure object of your desire.’⁴⁹⁷ But Jim’s life is not one of carefree promiscuity; the film shows gay men experiencing intense anxiety about trying to form the right relationships. We see Jim forlornly pursue the art student he hooks up with, doggedly contacting him despite unanswered messages and finally going back to his house only to be firmly rejected. But on the morning after his night with the American banker it is Jim who is obfuscating, not committing to meet again and turning down a lift to avoid revealing where he lives.

All this makes it sound like *Nighthawks* is meant to be a work which condemns the club scene, but this was clearly not the intention. For Peck, the club was not just a place of competition, it was his first introduction to other gay men, and a stark contrast to the loneliness he felt growing up in the London suburbs. In *Strip Jack Naked* he vividly describes how when he was 14 a crush on the boy in the year above him at school led to humiliation, isolation and being offered-cum-threatened with aversion therapy by his parents.

Homosexuality as a suburban teenager is portrayed as a life of loneliness with no solace, the only way he knows there are other men like him is through the descriptions of arrests and murders in the *Merton and Morden Borough News*, and the occasional television caricature. Upon reaching adulthood he lived with a woman for a while, playacting heterosexuality because he did not know where to find other gay men.

It was a chance visit to The Coleherne with old art school friends which ended this isolation. Instantly recognising what the pub was Peck headed straight back there the next day, followed the crowd round the corner to The Catacombs, and for the first time slept with another man: ‘That night was the first time I had touched another man. I was 22. The

⁴⁹⁷ *Strip Jack Naked*.

lightning didn't strike and the earth didn't open. I felt that life had just begun.' And it was not just sex that he found in the gay pub but a sense of community. He did not just sleep with the men he met, he also talked and shared experiences: 'the map of London began to light up for me at night, and behind closed doors we exchanged he stories about our lives.'⁴⁹⁸

A version of the story of that night at The Catacombs is recounted by Jim to Judy in a scene towards the end of *Nighthawks*. In this conversation he also hints at that there might be other reasons than cruising for going to a gay bar. When Judy asks him if he usually meets someone on a night out he replies: 'Usually, I mean no, not always. I mean sometimes I don't particularly want to meet someone, sometimes I just want to talk to friends', despite the fact that rest of the film only shows him talking to friends for the briefest of moments. He also talks of the lasting friendships he's developed with ex-lovers, hinting at a much wider social circle that remains unseen in the film. Judy notices this and contrasts it with the constricted nature of her social circle which consists of just a few friends, and her conventional nuclear family.⁴⁹⁹

As Peck and Hallam came to edit their footage together they found they had a three-and-a-half-hour film, much of which made for unintentionally bleak viewing. This was in part because the majority of the roles had been played by improvising amateurs, which made many characters seem hesitant and vulnerable in a way the volunteer actors were not in real life: 'A certain vitality was lost, it compounded a downbeatness, and that became a

⁴⁹⁸ *Strip Jack Naked*.

⁴⁹⁹ *Nighthawks*.

serious problem – not what we’d intended at all.⁵⁰⁰ Faced with this problem of tone and the excess of footage, they brutally cut down the film to tighten its focus – sacrificing scenes on Hampstead Heath, a gay group disco and a commune in South London along the way. These milieux were removed in order to concentrate on the central story of Jim at first becoming more open about his gay life and then more directly confrontational ‘because the most positive signal this film could send was that this man was prepared to stand up for himself, and come out, and begin to make an issue of it.’⁵⁰¹

In the film’s denouement and most conventionally politicised moment, Jim’s life as a school teacher and his life as a gay man stop being separate. Whilst he’s covering a class for another teacher a boy asks him ‘Is it true that you’re bent?’ Instead of lying Jim opts for complete openness, and invites the whole class to ask him questions. When he is castigated for this honesty by the headmaster, he defends his actions not in purely personal terms but by talking of the wider political implications:

They were asking the usual, stupid questions that children that age do ask because they don’t know anything about the subject... They were asking me questions like, is it true that you fancy little boys sir? Do you wear women’s clothing? Do you carry a handbag? The usual prejudices and they’re going to leave this school with the same thing ... They’ll probably end up going queer bashing.⁵⁰²

The sequence was based on the story of London school teacher John Warburton, and the questions the children ask were taken from Warburton’s book *Open and Positive*.

Warburton is almost the textbook case of a politicised coming out story. Spotted by one of

⁵⁰⁰ *Strip Jack Naked*. This was a reaction which was shared by many others. A writer in Lancaster CHE bulletin declared: ‘For me, even the “positive” parts of the film lacked credibility. All conversations held were terribly ‘formal’, even when he was speaking to people he knew.’ HCA CHE/7/72: ‘Nighthawks’, *Lancaster Gay Groups Newsletter*, February 1980, p.1.

⁵⁰¹ *Strip Jack Naked*.

⁵⁰² *Nighthawks*.

his pupils at a gay protest he was, like Jim, challenged about it during the middle of a lesson, and, like Jim, gave his pupils the opportunity to ask questions. Warburton was sacked and banned from teaching by the Inner London Education Authority, leading to a series of protests and stories in the national newspapers.⁵⁰³ Warburton took the stance that his sexuality should not be hidden and became, although not entirely by choice, an out gay man in the most comprehensive way possible. Jim goes through the same incident, but not the same journey. Jim is not sacked and does not become a cause celebre, despite his angry protestations. In the next scene his friends advise him to be careful and the remainder of what we see of his life is not a trip to barricades, but rather one last trip to the club.

This totemic coming out story sits uncomfortably within the story that *Nighthawks* tells, reflecting the discomfort between gay liberation ideology and the commercial scene. *Within These Walls*, a 1976 article by Gay Left written while Peck was part of the collective, contemplated the relationship between the two. Gay Left described the increasing range of openly gay venues as one the clearest achievements of the gay liberation. But this was still a *subculture*, one which men could only be visit on a part time basis (on evenings and weekends) and was, in Gay Left's view, based solely around sexual contacts. Gay liberation had failed to create a compelling alternative to the gay ghetto, which had instead expanded and become more overt: 'Coming out no longer involved rejection of the ghetto but rather an open assertion of one's membership of it.'⁵⁰⁴ But they felt, even as ardent socialists, that they now could not reject the commercial gay world entirely because 'as a group of gay men we need what the gay world can offer. Friendships, love, sexual contact do not drop out of

⁵⁰³ J. Warburton, *Open and Positive: an account of how John Warburton came out at school and the consequences* (London, 1978).

⁵⁰⁴ 'Within these walls', *Gay Left* 2, Spring 1976, p.4. This article is highlighted in a montage sequence in *Strip Jack Naked*.

empty skies, or confront us daily on the bus into work.'⁵⁰⁵ *Nighthawks* is a product of this tension, it is an attempt to come out, to unflinchingly represent an aspect of gay life previously ignored by cinema, yet it looks at a scene which is not unambiguously out. The struggles the filmmakers had in establishing an appropriate tone reflect how for many men like Peck the club scene was a locus of their identity, a place to be defended and celebrated, but one that could also be segregated from the rest of their lives.

When the film finally emerged from its long and troubled production with press screenings in late 1978 it was clear that it was not only Peck and the Gay Left Collective who saw this tension. Some saw the film as a straightforward recapitulation of the gay movement's complaints about the commercial scene, but others castigated Peck and Hallam for failing to portray an alternative. Some claimed *Nighthawks'* portrayal of gay life was an anachronistic throwback to the days before gay liberation. Roger Baker writing in *Gay News* called it 'a film of 1968 not 1978' and was dismayed that 'after a decade of public reassessment of homosexuality, after the establishment of a wide range of gay social structures, a right-on gay movie can be made which nowhere suggests that there might be an alternative to this lifestyle.'⁵⁰⁶ The Icebreakers collective felt that the film accurately portrayed many gay men's lives but was irresponsible for sidelining gay politics: 'the film depicts the lifestyle adopted by many gay men but it is a negative, unliberated one which totally ignores all the achievements of the gay movement over the past ten years.'⁵⁰⁷

⁵⁰⁵ 'Within these walls', *Gay Left* 2, Spring 1976, p.1.

⁵⁰⁶ R. Baker, 'The Times they were a changing', *Gay News* 157, 14 December - 10 January 1979, pp.22-23.

⁵⁰⁷ Lagna. BA. *Nighthawks*: J. Duncan, L. Hughes and P. Norman of the Icebreakers collective, 'Night Hawks', *Time Out*, 30/03/1979.

Whereas *Nighthawks*' bleak depiction of gay life was a betrayal of gay politics according to Baker and the Icebreakers, others saw the film as encapsulating gay activists' jaundiced attitude towards the scene. As a correspondent to *Gay News* declared,

The film was less of a surprise to those of us who regularly use gay clubs and gay bars. We are well used to the hysterical bleatings of the (mainly left) gay movement, and their silly myth that 'the scene' exists solely for the purpose of a casual pick-up.⁵⁰⁸

Peck and Hallam defended themselves by saying the gay movement and gay scene could not be easily separated. Being involved in one did not mean that you were not involved in the other, and equally it could not be said that "alternative" meetings, assemblies and marches are not also places where gay men cruise each other.' Icebreakers were putting up an artificial barrier between scene gays and political milieu and attributing all progress over the previous decade solely to the latter. Instead Peck and Hallam pointed out that 'the gay scene has proliferated enormously over the past ten years, *alongside* the growth of the gay movement, and for most gay men, it probably constitutes the larger part of their reality.'⁵⁰⁹

Other gay critics had a more nuanced take, and saw that the film still had a political message despite not containing much conventional politics. *Gay News*' film critic Jack Babuscio saw signs of a larger political message, saying that the cyclical nature of the film encouraged viewers to ask 'whether the "gay world" isn't really a "straight" created form of apartheid.... that the heterosexual majority cunningly provides to satisfy certain basic requirements (eg physical) while denying almost all our others.'⁵¹⁰ *Q International*'s critic David Herbert even went as far as to portray the film as a call to arms, seeing Jim's developing friendship with

⁵⁰⁸ J. McNally, 'Nighthawks', *Gay News* 166, 3-16 May 1979, p.12.

⁵⁰⁹ Lagna. Ba. Nighthawks: R. Peck and P. Hallam, 'In Defence of *Nighthawks*', *Time Out*, 06/04/1979.

⁵¹⁰ J. Babuscio 'Every Night Fever', *Gay News* 162, 8-21 March 1979, p.31.

Judy and the final classroom scene as a call for viewers to abandon the ghetto. '[It is] in its demand that gay and straight people learn to behave honestly and accept one another completely that the film makes its strongest appeal,' he wrote: 'Go and see it, and tell your friends – yes, *all* of them – about it.'⁵¹¹

By the mid-seventies the expansion of the commercial scene improved the social possibilities open to gay men beyond anything that early seventies gay activists had expected. Gay men had embraced going out in far greater numbers than they had embraced coming out. Gay activists could not ignore this change, and indeed many wanted to take full advantage of the social opportunities it offered, but found that it challenged their wider political beliefs. The difficulty *Nighthawks* had in integrating an ideology based on unambiguously coming out with a commercial scene which was expanding and increasingly overt, but also segregated, challenges the conventional narrative of gay history in the 1970s. To portray the post-gay liberation era as one of gay men increasing coming out as an act of revolutionary will is to ignore that much of gay identity was formed in locations which had a substantially different understanding of the public/private binary. The formation of the gay male public sphere was based as much on adapting and forming spaces within the structures of market capitalism as it was on calling for them to be overthrown.

Nighthawks was released on the cusp of even more dramatic developments. Peck referred to the film as out of time, the production problems had forced a film conceived in 1974 to appear in 1979, when many of the smaller venues it showed were closing. The final disco scene showed Glades, one of the larger gay nights of the late 1970s, held in the Global Village club near Charing Cross. By the time the film was released Global Village had been

⁵¹¹ D. Herbert, 'Nighthawks', *Q International* Vol. 3 no.8, p.10.

taken over by new owners, closed down and was in the middle of refurbishment. It would reopen in late 1979 as Heaven: a new type of club that was to become one of the most iconic of gay venues of the eighties.

‘Heaven is Gay Power!’: Ultradiscos and gay consumerism

Gay Activists criticised the pub and club scene not just because they were often secret, but because they were fundamentally capitalist. That the denizens of the bar scene treated each other as objects was regarded as inevitable in a space which was organised around an exploitative economic relationship. As Jeremy Seabrook put it,

the gay scene is a strictly private enterprise and the values which prevail there are, not surprisingly, those that characterize the whole mainstream of the culture: the marketability of the individual, youth, fashion, style, the self-presentation of people who exercise their consumers’ freedom like pets on leases.⁵¹²

This criticism was not only based on anti-capitalist ideology, but a reaction to the specific actions of gay club and club owners. In the early seventies, when venues were mostly owned and run by straight individuals and large mainstream breweries, activists criticised venues for refusing to recognise that they relied on gay men’s custom or to listen to gay men when they called for better facilities. From the early seventies onwards a generation of club promoters would emerge who would fundamentally rethink the nature of the relationship between gay men and commercial clubs. In doing so they echoed many of the key ideas of gay liberation but also articulated through a distinct, consumerist philosophy.

The term consumerism is often associated with either a right-wing belief in the power of the market to meet human needs or the abandonment of politics for individual pleasure. But the work of Matthew Hilton has shown that the word can have more nuanced meanings.

⁵¹² J. Seabrook, *A lasting relationship: homosexuals and society* (London, 1976), p.154.

Hilton's identifies consumerism in the twentieth century as a political movement of the centre left, aimed at identifying and altering the circumstances when the market fails to serve the interests of the consumer. Consumerism therefore does not necessarily involve complacently settling for the distractions supplied by capitalism, but altering the balance of power between businesses and the consumer.⁵¹³ To talk about gay consumerism is not to imply that the gay entrepreneurs of the mid-seventies were disciples of Michael Young or Antony Crossland. Creating commercial spaces which responded to the needs and wants of gay men was nonetheless an explicitly politicised act, especially in a context of frequent police harassment.

When early gay liberation activists attacked gay venues for their closeted nature they were criticising their customers for their refusal to come out, and the venues' owners for exploiting gay people. In a parody of the gay scene which appeared in *Come Together*, the supercilious, self-oppressed character 'Jeremy' praised the club scene whilst refusing to recognise its extortionate nature: 'For only a few quid you can have a really fabulous time. Most of them are very spacious and geared to what we really want – just as well as there's not close dancing allowed or I'm sure we'd all have our pants off in no time!'⁵¹⁴ The parody suggested that Jeremy was deluded: that the clubs were expensive, small and actively tried to restrict any overt demonstration of gay sexuality.

Gay Liberation also challenged the managers and owners of clubs directly. One of the earliest gay protests involved GLF members going out to the 'gay' pubs of Notting Hill and announcing 'I am a homosexual and I would like a drink' - making the staff have to recognise

⁵¹³ M. Hilton, *Consumerism in twentieth-century Britain: the search for a historical movement* (Cambridge, 2003).

⁵¹⁴ 'Jeremy', 'Well Really', *Come Together* 8, p.23.

that they made much of their money from gay people.⁵¹⁵ A leaflet distributed during the protest made their position clear:

WE'RE PISSED OFF BEING OVERCHARGED, HERDED TOGETHER IN A SMALL NUMBER OF OVERCROWDED GAY GHETTO PUBS AND COFFEE BARS WHICH EXPLOIT GAYS AND GIVE LITTLE IN RETURN – no holding hands. No close dancing, and behave or you're out.⁵¹⁶

Gay liberation rhetoric at this time was orientated towards creating completely non-capitalist gay spaces. 'Is it not time that there was some place where gay people could meet without the overhanging obligation to buy alcohol?' asked another article in *Come Together*.⁵¹⁷ But the rhetoric also implied a potential consumerist critique of gay venues. Instead of the relationship between gay consumer and gay business being automatically oppressive, and true liberation achievable only by stripping capitalism from gay sociability, it could be argued that gay men needed to be treated *more* like consumers. The argument was not that gay venues were merely taking gay men's money, but they were refusing to acknowledge this and to supply the services that gay men desired. A potential solution to the problem was for gay venues to become more consumerist, to openly admit to making money out of gay men, to ask what facilities they wanted, and then supply them. The ghetto gay scene could be criticised for economically exploiting gay men *and* for denying them full benefits of consumer capitalism. In 1974 a *Gay News* article took Allied Breweries and the Boltons Hotel in Earls Court to task for this very reason:

Probably 80 per cent of its revenue is provided by gays. But it is a ghetto revenue: as long as it continues this way, one can be sure the brewery will remain unruffled. Another perhaps pertinent aspect is this: in the US, a hotel with a gay clientele potential would be developed to fit the needs of its customers. In New York, Boltons

⁵¹⁵ L. Power, *No Bath but Plenty of Bubbles*, pp.171-80.

⁵¹⁶ Quoted in Power, *No Bath but Plenty of Bubbles*, p.174.

⁵¹⁷ 'Time for a new Scene', *Come Together* 9, p.3.

would be exploited to its fullest –perhaps a specialised leather bar would be installed, along with a fully-equipped upstairs disco and other middle-class appointments. As it is, The Boltons, and many pubs like it, remain houses that are merely adopted by gays.⁵¹⁸

As the reference to New York shows, gay venues were criticised through comparison with facilities available abroad, especially in America. From the a brief postscript describing the gay clubs of Majorca in the first issue of *Jeremy*, through the global itinerary of the *Spartacus* guides, to frequent travel pieces in *Gay News*, the gay press had constantly reported on facilities abroad. As the seventies went on travelling to America became a more common experience among gay men, a source of prestige among those who had done so. As Brian Wilkinson describes, '[to have done] the famous clubs in New York and San Francisco was a big status symbol ... I didn't do it but you know and some of them wouldn't talk to you because you know you hadn't done that so you weren't worth talking to[.]'⁵¹⁹ Gay venues back in Britain rarely came off well from the comparison with those abroad, and the descriptions and commentary of the gay scene reveal a sense that the scene was inadequate, that English venues were embarrassing compared with international offerings.

A guide published in *Him* in 1976, allegedly for international visitors, struck a tone somewhere between apology and defensiveness when declaring 'London is no gay clubland.'⁵²⁰ International travellers (or English men who had travelled) were in its view likely to be disappointed at the facilities available and the restrictions which were placed on them: 'Many London clubs are unlike those abroad, they close early (sometimes ridiculously so), serious club-goers will have to search hard for the kind of action they expect.'⁵²¹ This

⁵¹⁸ 'The Brewers Block Gay Pub Potential... but men will strip', *Gay News* 29, p.7.

⁵¹⁹ Author Interview, Brian Wilkinson, 30/08/2012.

⁵²⁰ 'Him's Gay Address Book', *Him International* 6, [Insert], p.3.

⁵²¹ *Ibid*, p.3.

conflation of petty regulation, the restricted opening hours, with sexual repression, the lack of 'action', was a common critique. Compared with grey, declining, reserved England, American venues were thought to be more liberated in possibly every way. As one of Tony Deane's 1980 interviewees put it, '[The English] they're institutionalised right from birth really, it's the way we were brought up. [The Americans] never seem to have the red tape not just about gays or, or anything their attitude is so much more relaxed.'⁵²²

'A Sex Guide to London Discos and Pubs' in *Q International* cast the English gay scene as bizarrely chaste and repressed. Its author Len Richmond declared that 'I like sex a lot' before asking rhetorically, '[w]hy then, you ask, do I live in London?' The answer was that he liked English men, and felt that the gay scene could be improved by them getting over inhibitions, which were as much as about complaining as about sex. He described slow, rude service and exorbitant prices and criticised the venues' owners and staff focusing especially on the fact that many of them were heterosexual. 'The management and employees of most gay places are straight, and frequently don't even like gays. They help to create an uptight atmosphere,' he commented.⁵²³ Richmond also attacked the size of the gay venues, imploring his readers to complain about the lack of ventilation, and management refusing to open additional rooms. In doing so he linked inadequate facilities with sexual repression, and implied it was hard for gay men to express their sexuality in spaces which were supplied so grudgingly by others and were so disrespectful of them and their custom.

The turning point was the opening of Bang in 1976. Like Tricky Dicky's discos Bang took over an existing venue for one night a week but that venue, the Sundown club, was able to host a

⁵²² NSA C547 (Tony Deane Interviews): F4284.

⁵²³ L. Richmond, 'Sex Guide to London Discos and Pubs', *Q International*, pp.17-18.

party far larger and more luxurious than any previous gay night. Taking over the 1,500 capacity Charing Cross venue Bang was an event which brought what was the largest number of gay men together outside of a Pride march, and in a space which was designed for dancing, rather than a converted pub or a basement coffee bar. Bang's founder Jerry Collins had worked at the club nights both gay and straight since he started at the Marquee in the 1970, but his inspiration came directly from America. Like the critics in the gay press he saw the existing English scene as restricted and repressed, something which could be attributed to the poky, semi-hidden nature of the venues. A trip to the west coast of America had opened his eyes: 'I'd been to San Fran/Los Angeles the year before, I'd seen some clubs over there, and I thought "why on earth couldn't we do something a little more across the board over here instead of tucking everybody down into grotty little cellars...?"'⁵²⁴ So he approached the temporary manager of the Sundown, who agreed to allow Collins to open the venue on the otherwise inactive Monday nights. Publicised through leaflets distributed at The Catacombs and an advert in *Gay News*, Bang was an instant success both in terms of the numbers of men and the critical praise it attracted. Following its opening night *Gay News* declared: 'AT LAST a large, cheap, licensed (9pm-2am) disco with very good music and an attractive clientele, which is neither pisselegant nor scruffy.'⁵²⁵

'Pisselegant' was an antique piece of gay slang, referring to a form of fussy, affected opulence with camp and old-fashioned connotations – a word Brian Wilkinson used to describe The Rockingham – and a summation of what Bang rejected. Speaking to Tony Deane Jerry Collins vilified the gay scene of the past, contrasting its discretion with Bang's

⁵²⁴ NSA C547 (Tony Deane Interviews): F4262.

⁵²⁵ 'Bosie', *Gay News* 89, 28 February - 10 March 1976, p.2.

openness: 'suddenly you could go to this great big place, that was a public dancehall and, but you could be gay, everybody there was gay, there were hundreds of them, and they were all gay! And instead of going to like, to these tiny little insular clubs where all these naughty pervs go.'⁵²⁶ To distinguish themselves from the 'pervs' of the past clientele and management eschewed any association with camp instead opting for the hyper masculine clone look.⁵²⁷ An attempt to put on a 'Fur and Feathers' night was both a notable exception and a disaster. Rejecting effeminacy had been an important part of the identity of gay men before but, unlike the 'respectable homosexuals' Matt Houlbrook describes in the 1950s, Bang did not praise restraint and discretion. It celebrated gay male sexuality through overt commercialism. A projection screen hung above the dance floor, showing a mixture of videos and adverts, focusing on pictures of male bodies. In 1976 a journalist from the *New Statesman* vividly described the presentation:

A film clip of Kiki Dee and Elton gives way to a series of stills. Young boys, some in underpants, some with slightly more on, a caftan or a pair of jeans, appear and disappear. Slotted in between are adverts for magazines like *Black Male* and *Him*, a plug for Queen's LP, *A Night at the Opera*, and a slogan which recurs constantly: 'Advertise to YOUR market here: ring.' – and a telephone number follows.'⁵²⁸

Ron Peck wanted to use Bang in the final scene of *Nighthawk*, showing the 'semi-pornographic pin ups' on the projection screen to echo the cruising eye shots from earlier in the film. The scale and the public sexuality would have been unlike any of the other clubs

⁵²⁶ NSA C547 (Tony Deane Interviews): F4262.

⁵²⁷ For more on the evolution of the clone look, see S. Cole, *Don We Now Our Gay Apparel: Gay Men's Dress in the Twentieth Century* (London, 2000), pp. 94-100.

⁵²⁸ Lagna. Greater London. Gay Scene: Y. Roberts, 'Gay Night Out', *New Statesman*, 13/08/1976.

the film had depicted, but hiring Bang was beyond Peck's meagre budget, and so the film 'lost that glimpse of the future.'⁵²⁹

For some activists like Michael Mason the opening of Bang was a directly comparable with Gay Liberation. As he said in 2011,

I remember the impact it had on me when I first went to Bang. It was almost the same impact I felt when walking into my first GLF meeting back at the LSE. Before Bang opened, the most popular discos in London were run by Tricky Dicky. Small discos in fairly grotty pub rooms with a hundred and fifty people. They were great fun but homely, somewhat ramshackle. But the first night I went to Bang ... You walked downstairs through the club entrance, paid your way in then climbed a staircase to a balcony with a brass rail which overlooked the dance floor. I walked up to that rail, and looked down, there were twelve or fifteen hundred people dancing, and it brought tears to my eyes, I'm actually choking up a bit at the moment at the thought of how far we've come. And it was not just the impressive size of the crowd (though fifteen hundred gay people in one place was astonishing then, maybe twice the size of a gay pride parade) but that they were carefree. That was a real turning point. I've spoken since to any number of people who vividly remember the first time that they walked up those steps and looking over the railings, unheard of.⁵³⁰

This was a development no member of the GLF would have been likely to predict in the early 1970s; Jerry Collins had created a regular public gay commercial space on a scale previously reserved for ad hoc political events. Gay consumerism had emerged as a force which answered *some* of the criticisms that gay liberation had levelled against gay male commercial sociability. This was a venue which celebrated gay male sexuality, and responded to the needs and wants of a gay clientele, instead of taking their money whilst denying the profit they made from their custom. But Bang only filled with gay men on Monday, and later Wednesday, nights. When Heaven opened nearly four years later it was

⁵²⁹ Peck, 'Nighthawks: A Few Reflections', p.23.

⁵³⁰ Author Interview, Michael Mason, 16/12/2011.

the first permanent large scale gay club, and it inverted the usual pattern by only allowing straights in on its quiet Tuesday evenings.

Work on Heaven began in early 1979, when the people behind the Embassy Club, financial backer Jeremy Norman and front man Stephen Hayter, acquired the Global Village underneath the arches on Charing Cross tube station. The Embassy had been a deliberately small-scale and exclusive venue based on New York's Studio 54, and had acquired a reputation for the sexually *outré* but was only, in Hayter's words, 'about 30% gay'⁵³¹.

Heaven was a very different proposition. From the start Norman and Hayter wanted it to become London's biggest gay disco. The club's opening was heavily trailed in articles and adverts throughout a six month long refurbishment period rumoured to have cost £250,000. Annual memberships were sold ahead of opening for £15 a head, on a promise of luxury and modernity. An early leaflet read: "'Heaven" will be "divine". The sound system will be the largest and best in Europe and the lights will blow your minds.'⁵³² As ever the bench mark of such affluence was America. Hayter took pains to point out that they would have the same lighting system as used by Studio 54 and would be importing such innovations as a 'cruise bar' and games room which would create quieter areas to make it easier to pick people up.⁵³³

Marketed as an 'ultradisco', Heaven was designed according to a brutal modernist aesthetic, one which emphasised its affluence not through elaborate decoration but through scale and

⁵³¹ 'Heaven is ready for you now sir', *Him Monthly* 24, p.24.

⁵³² HCA/Ephemera/1281: Hayter to Applicant.

⁵³³ 'Heaven is ready for you now sir', *Him Monthly* 24, p.24.

cutting edge technology, the very opposite of 'pisselegant'. Jeremy Norman described it as an attempt to design a club suitable for the eighties:

We decided to move away entirely from the traditional club design of tables around a dance floor. Heaven was all about being young, sexy, bold and raw. I wanted something startling for a new decade. Derek [the designer] came up with an outstanding 'high tech' design, an innovation at the time. All wires, pipes and conduits were exposed and painted silver; walls were painted all black and surfaces hard... The ethos created was of a downtown warehouse space in an American city, totally appropriate and in tune with the style and feel of the new decade.⁵³⁴

The emphasis on affluence initially caused problems for the club, as high prices put off potential customers. Following a successful opening during which the *Evening Standard* declared that Heaven 'could prove Gay Lib's smartest move,' numbers trailed off.⁵³⁵ Hayter was reported at the time to be worried 'that the gay community is being given a rawer deal than promised' and that the need to fill the club could lead to a relaxation of the entrance policy, which would risk the club turning fashionable and mixed.⁵³⁶ This would have completely gone against its founders' intentions. Manager David Inches emphasised that they wanted to create a space specifically for gay men, 'a club along modern American lines – a place where gay guys can cruise without too much hassle.'⁵³⁷ Publicity officer Doug Lambert revealed even larger ambitions, to *Gay News*: 'What we want to build up is a gay community centre,' he stated, promising 'lectures, discussions, get-togethers, video

⁵³⁴ J. Norman, *No Make-up: straight tales from a queer life* (London, 2006), p.160.

⁵³⁵ 'I'm in Heaven' [Supplement], *Gay News* no.182, January 1980, p.1.

⁵³⁶ *Ibid*, p.2.

⁵³⁷ 'Confusion Reigns in Heaven', *Gay News* 184, 7-20 February 1980, p.9.

facilities, film shows, even a gymnasium.’⁵³⁸ So prices were duly lowered and, on the advice of Gay Switchboard, a quarterly membership scheme introduced.⁵³⁹

According to Inches this required abandoning some of the club’s most upmarket pretensions: ‘we quickly realised it wasn’t going to work and the whole concept was changed to give Heaven as wide appeal to the whole cross section of the gay market.’⁵⁴⁰ This decision showed a willingness to prioritise and respond to the needs of gay men as a market in stark contrast to Gay Liberation’s portrayal of those who ran gay venues in the early seventies. Like the GLF, and CHE in their quieter way, the people behind Heaven were determined to create openly gay spaces, only they desired to harness capitalism rather than reject it. And unlike the GLF they were happy to say that this was an exclusively gay *male* space. According to Heaven’s management, women had to be kept out not in order to exclude lesbians, but to avoid the club turning ‘fashionable and mixed.’ They pleaded: ‘One of the main ways to keep a club gay is to keep out straight women – who, in turn, attract straight men.’⁵⁴¹ This caused tension with the gay political organisations which Heaven tried to support; an attempt to hold a benefit night for Gay Switchboard ended in acrimony because the management refused to relax the door policy. Still, advertising for Heaven explicitly drew parallels between the two endeavours by adapting the iconography of post-1968 radicalism. A full page advert placed in *Direction One* featured a gay man on the dance floor, fist raised in a black panther salute, with the caption ‘Heaven is Gay Power!’⁵⁴²

⁵³⁸ ‘Knocking on Heaven’s Door’, *Gay News* 186, 6-19 March 1980, p.14.

⁵³⁹ J. Norman, D. Inches and D. Lambert, ‘Heaven’, *Gay News* 184, 7-20 February 1980, p.18.

⁵⁴⁰ P. Burton, *Parallel Lives*, p.48.

⁵⁴¹ J. Norman, D. Inches and D. Lambert, ‘Heaven’, *Gay News* 184, 7-20 February 1980, p.18.

⁵⁴² *Direction 1*, Issue 2, p.48.

This is not to seek to portray Heaven as an altruistic political action. It was clearly a business designed to make money for its owners. But some of the rhetoric and impulses behind gay liberation had an appeal to even the hardest-headed of capitalists – such as Heaven’s main financial backer Jeremy Norman. In many ways it would be hard to find a more conventional establishment figure than Norman. His attendance at Harrow and Cambridge did not of course rule out radicalism - many members of the GLF had similarly followed that route though public school to Oxbridge - but after university, far from embracing revolution he instead became the owner of *Burke’s Peerage*. His politics were radical for the era, but this was because he rejected political consensus from the right rather than from the left. In his 2006 biography *No Make Up* he sets out a conventional, New Right narrative of Britain after 1945. It blames both political parties for allowing the British economy to become by the late sixties ‘a shambles brought about by anachronistic labour practices, over-manning and low productivity coupled with lack of investment and entrepreneurial innovation.’⁵⁴³ And in the seventies, being both a proto-Thatcherite fearing decline and a gay man unsatisfied with the commercial scene, he looked principally to America. ‘High taxes and grey uniformity drove many friends across the Atlantic to find excitement. Gay men idolised the USA as the land of sun, handsome hunks and sex,’ he recalls.⁵⁴⁴

Norman’s criticisms of postwar Britain were not restricted to economic affairs but took in the whole of British culture and lifestyle. According to him the young of the late sixties reacted to a culture of obedience and conformity through ‘revolutions in music and clothes, sex and drugs, but the deeper reality was that the young were not going to be told what to

⁵⁴³ Norman, *No Make-up*, p.97.

⁵⁴⁴ *Ibid*, p.105.

do anymore.⁵⁴⁵ So he had sympathy with the impulses behind the protests of 1968 but could not agree on the solution proposed: 'I was in tune with the revolutionary ideas of personal freedom and fulfilment but I could not understand how this could be achieved by even more socialism.'⁵⁴⁶ Norman therefore saw no contradiction between personal liberation and consumer capitalism, and could describe the experience of Heaven using the language of political radicalism, claiming that 'for gay men, the dance floor was truly a place of liberation: a place where we could feel free to express our sexuality and the unity of our tribe.'⁵⁴⁷

In 1981 rumours started to circulate that the club was about to be sold to Richard Branson's Virgin Group. This concerned many in the gay press who feared that Branson would stop running it as gay club, and rumours circulated that he would use the space to replace the recently closed Virgin Rock Theatre. The anxiety was not helped by the increased security the club received following a *News of the World* exposé, which led to full searches on the door and renewed efforts to stop their being any sex on the premises.⁵⁴⁸ These fears turned out to be unfounded, for when Branson took over he declared the venue would stay gay. 'A number of bidders wanted to change the format of Heaven, but I feel it is one of the nicest gay venues and should continue as such,' he remarked, although he noted that there were three quiet nights when 'we could do other things with it'⁵⁴⁹. Managers David Inches and Doug Lambert were retained and months later *Him Monthly* was able to say 'that Heaven is

⁵⁴⁵ Ibid, pp.97-98.

⁵⁴⁶ Ibid, p.98.

⁵⁴⁷ Ibid, p.161.

⁵⁴⁸ 'First word: Heaven in Limbo' and R. Kean 'Heaven fizzles out in a puff of steam', *Him Monthly* 38, pp.17, 34.

⁵⁴⁹ Lagna. Greater London. Gay Scene: 'Virgin boss Branson buys his way into Heaven', *The Stage and Television Today*, 09/04/1981.

certainly getting better under its new owner Richard Branson and is definitely staying GAY.

Some people have really weird fantasies and they certainly let them out at Heaven.⁵⁵⁰

If a straight businessman was to take over Heaven Branson was perhaps the ideal candidate.

Branson was a vigorous entrepreneur of the type that Thatcher valorised in theory, but was

also iconoclastic and disrespectful of tradition. His early business ventures had been at the

edge of the sixties youth culture, such as founding *The Student* newspaper and running

Virgin Records, and as the former head of The Sex Pistols' record company he clearly knew

how to combine radical cultural aesthetics with shrewd business practice. A 1984

newspaper profile made Branson's political position clear; he was a fan of what the

Conservative government was doing to the economy, and what Roy Jenkins had done to

society.⁵⁵¹ As such it is not surprising that Norman approached him to buy the club on the

condition that he would keep it as a gay venue.⁵⁵² The purchase coincided with a new-found

media interest in the gay market and the first coinage of the term the pink pound, as more

mainstream businesses began to recognise the benefits of appealing to gay men as

consumers. This was not an entirely new development, as Justin Bengry has demonstrated

prior to 1967 there was a long tradition of seeing homosexual consumers as a lucrative

market.⁵⁵³ However this new gay consumerism was both more overt and explicitly

politicised and it was articulated in terms of gay men's needs and rights. The expansion of

the commercial scene therefore did not necessarily represent the politics being stripped

wholesale from gay liberation, but adapted and deployed in surprising ways.

⁵⁵⁰ 'Bill the Glove's STREET LEATHER incorporating STREETRUBBER', *Him Monthly* 39, p.30.

⁵⁵¹ Lagna. People. Richard Branson: 'Virgin of the Skies', *The Observer*, 04/03/1984.

⁵⁵² R. Branson, *Losing My Virginity: the autobiography* (London, 1998), p.196.

⁵⁵³ J. Bengry, *The Pink Pound: Commerce and Homosexuality in Britain, 1900-1967* (Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of California at Santa Barbara, 2010).

Conclusion

In 1982 Peter Burton, then clubs correspondent for *Gay News*, noted that the commercial and political wings of the gay movement 'generally regard each other with distrust, dislike and contempt. Yet – I consider – it has been the commercial “wing” which brought homosexuality a long way out of the closet.'⁵⁵⁴ This chapter has highlighted that such a binary division is difficult to make. There were deep connections between gay politics and gay commercial sociability, often mediated through the institution of the gay press which owed its existence to both, but each had divergent understandings of the meaning of terms like 'way out of the closet'.

In the late sixties and early seventies gay activists had condemned the nascent gay scene as a ghetto, predicated on secrecy and exploitation, part of the closet rather than a plausible way out of it. As the gay scene evolved throughout the seventies however it became more firmly integrated in to the emerging gay male public sphere. Venues, pubs in particular, went from being ventures which informally benefited from the custom of queer men to ones which deliberately and openly appealed to them as a market. This meant that not only were venues more accessible to gay men than they had been before, but also that they became sites where the emerging gay identity developed, part of a network of communication which also included gay activism. Attending pubs and clubs became identified as part of the 'gay lifestyle' and therefore something which could be the focus of activist projects such as *Nighthawks*.

⁵⁵⁴ 'Peter Burton's Hotspots: I Cover the waterfront', *Gay News* 243, June 24-July 7th 1982, p.48.

The emerging gay scene did not fit comfortably into Gay Liberation's model of coming out, but it did not straightforwardly repudiate it. It involved men self identifying as gay, going to spaces overtly organised around gay male sexuality which recognised and actively sought their custom, but at the same time it was an experience which could be separated from their everyday lives. It ameliorated the shame and isolation of 'the closet', but it did so by sitting within society rather than by aiming to overthrow it. But although it would be easy to portray the gay commercial scene as passive, seeking reconciliation and abandoning politics, this is not the case. The emergence of new clubs like Heaven and Bang involved gay men asserting the rights to be recognised as consumers, and for businesses to respond to their needs and desires as a legitimate market.

Chapter Five – Opposing the Gay Male Public Sphere: the *Gay News* Trial

The 1977 *Gay News* Trial was both the most high profile attack on the gay male public sphere and the largest political mobilisation of gay people in the era examined in this thesis. In 1976 *Gay News* published the James Kirkup poem, 'The Love That Dares to Speak its Name', which depicted Christ engaged in several homosexual acts. In response Mary Whitehouse disinterred the common law offence of blasphemous libel, which had last been used in 1921, and launched a private prosecution against the paper. The prosecution provoked a flurry of activism and fundraising on a scale which had not been seen since the peak of the GLF and culminated on the weekend of the appeal in what was at that point the largest ever protest march for gay rights. Yet despite being a standard part of the history of censorship in postwar Britain, the controversy has never been analysed to tell us what it can tell us about both the gay movement and its enemy, the moral right.

It is important to consider the two together. Tina Fetner and Fred Fejes have argued that emergence of the religious right was crucial to changing the nature of gay politics in the United States. They both consider Anita Bryant's 1977-8 campaign to reverse pro-gay rights ordinances in a series of states as a turning point on American queer history.⁵⁵⁵ Fejes, borrowing from Benedict Anderson, has argued that this is the point when the disparate local gay organisations and scenes which had characterised the American gay movement became an imagined national gay community with a voice beyond municipal and state

⁵⁵⁵ T. Fetner, *How the Religious Right Shaped Gay and Lesbian Activism* (Minneapolis, 2008); F. Fejes, *Gay Rights and Moral Panic: The Origins of America's Debate on Homosexuality* (New York, 2008).

level.⁵⁵⁶ Fetner argues that the entire nature of the gay movement was changed by these campaigns, and that the development of gay rights can be considered through the frame of 'oppositional politics'. Before Bryant's campaigns gay activists had been concerned with a positive process of world building, considering radical new ways forward for themselves and society. Afterwards they concentrated on short term defensive actions against the religious right's attacks and a long term policy of asking for acceptance into some socially conservative mainstream institutions, including the military and marriage. More positively, it motivated a far larger number of lesbians and gay men to become involved in activism, if sometimes only at the level of writing cheques, and resulted in there being a voice for gay people in national politics for the first time.⁵⁵⁷

Bryant and Whitehouse's actions occurred in very different contexts. For instance the weakness of local political democracy in Britain meant that the gay rights movement in England and Wales was already nationally focused. However 1977-8 did see disparate parts of the gay movement in the UK uniting against a common enemy, and earned *Gay News* a public profile which it had never had before. Both sides were aware of these similarities, the gay press covered the Bryant case in detail and the gay press drew explicit parallels between the two. Whitehouse avoided making any comparison but would have been more than aware of campaigners in the United States, from whom she had borrowed both the rhetoric and evidence base of her concurrent campaigns against child pornography.⁵⁵⁸ Furthermore, this model reflects the fears and the hopes of some in British gay movement at the time.

⁵⁵⁶ Fejes, *Gay Rights and Moral Panic*, p.215.

⁵⁵⁷ Fetner, *How the Religious Right Shaped Gay and Lesbian Activism*, pp.xi-xvi.

⁵⁵⁸ M. McCarthy & R. Moodie, 'Parliament and Pornography: the 1978 Child Protection Act', *Parliamentary Affairs* Vol.36 No.1 (1981), pp.47-62.

They thought that the prosecution was part of a much larger attack against the gay community and that the response could motivate far more gay people to get involved in politics and give the issue higher national profile in the future. However, this did not happen. The brief explosion of militancy brought about by the prosecution faded soon after the paper's defeat, which was not followed by similar prosecutions.

Previous work on gay politics has given the trial only the most cursory consideration. Jeffrey Weeks portrays it as a straightforward example of an expected moral backlash and a reminder that the militancy of the early seventies had not faded entirely. Lucy Robinson discusses the trial solely as the incident which led to the foundation of another left wing group, the Gay Activist Alliance.⁵⁵⁹ It is considered in more detail in histories of censorship and blasphemy. However, these accounts de-queer the whole incident by focusing entirely on the issues of blasphemy and censorship more generally, and make little reference to the gay perspective. The controversy from this perspective was the latest episode in the series of high profile obscenity trials not an incident in the history of gay rights, and therefore such accounts are far more likely to quote *The Times* than any gay media.⁵⁶⁰ In both sets of literature *Gay News* is portrayed as a passive victim, a defenceless institution which activists rallied around during a crisis. Yet, as chapter three has shown, *Gay News* was an active political force capable of defending its own interests and making ideological choices about how to do so. Similarly Mary Whitehouse is never presented as anything other than an

⁵⁵⁹ Weeks, *Coming Out* (rev. edn), pp.229-30; Robinson, *Gay Men and the Left*, pp.124-25.

⁵⁶⁰ For instance in Nash's account the only time *Gay News*, or any gay activist material is referenced is to refer to the poem under consideration itself, D. Nash, *Blasphemy in modern Britain: 1789 to the present* (Aldershot, 1999), pp.239-35; See also L. Vey, *Blasphemy: Verbal Offense Against the Sacred, from Moses to Salman Rushdie* (New York, 1993), pp.534-50; Sutherland, *Offensive Literature*, pp.148-59; D. Nash, *Christian Ideals in British Culture* (Basingstoke, 2013), pp.143-50.

almost monolithic face of conservative reaction, her campaigns and ideology are seen as a force of nature rather than actions which can be analysed and placed in historical context.

That moral right organisations are not simply uncomplicated throwbacks but products of the same political environment as more progressive campaigns is one of the important insights from the developing historiography of post war NGOs. Lawrence Black's work on Whitehouse argues that she should not be seen as anachronistic Victorian figure, but as a product of the 1960s, a woman leading a grass roots campaign concerned with the politics of the media.⁵⁶¹ Matthew Grimley has portrayed both the Festival of Light and the Gay Liberation as twin reactions to permissiveness, seeking either to reverse it or to point out its inadequacies but both defining themselves against an unsatisfactory consensus.⁵⁶² A more frequent parallel has been drawn between the moral right and another emergent political force, Thatcherism.⁵⁶³ However the British moral right was never absorbed into the mainstream of the Conservative party, in the way the American religious right was absorbed into the Republican Party.⁵⁶⁴ In the seventies moral right campaigners, like gay activists, were independent political actors operating outside of both the state and the mainstream political parties.

This chapter is therefore made up of two separate accounts of the trial, one which considers the perspective of the gay male public sphere and another which considers Mary Whitehouse's viewpoint. It also makes two arguments. Firstly, its account of the activism

⁵⁶¹ L. Black, *Redefining British Politics*, pp.105-38.

⁵⁶² M. Grimley, 'What is Marriage?', <http://blog.oup.com/2012/09/church-lives-oxford-dictionary-national-biography/>: accessed 28/06/2013.

⁵⁶³ A. Whipple, 'Speaking for Whom? The 1971 Festival of Light and the Search for the "Silent Majority"', *Contemporary British History* Vol.24 no.3 (2010), pp. 319-39; M. Grimley, 'Thatcherism, Morality and Religion', in B. Jackson and R.Saunders (eds.), *Making Thatcher's Britain* (Cambridge, 2012), pp.78-94.

⁵⁶⁴ M. Durham, *Sex and Politics: Family and Morality in the Thatcher Years* (Basingstoke, 1991).

which surrounded the trial demonstrates how firmly established the gay male public sphere had become by 1977. Despite the frequent disagreements noted in the previous three chapters, the gay press, campaigners, and commercial scene all responded to oppose Whitehouse's actions. Secondly, it considers why the trial was such an exception to the general pattern of gay politics in the seventies, and it did not become a national mainstream political issue at any other point before the 1980s.

'An Attack on *Gay News* is an attack on us all': The mobilisation of the gay male public sphere

The *Gay News* trial saw an unprecedented mobilisation of the gay public sphere around a single issue. The protest was significant not merely because of the numbers involved, but because of the diverse strands of gay life which contributed putting aside previous differences to rally around a single cause. Yet this mobilisation did not bring about a new sense of gay unity or militancy in the long term, despite many hoping that it would. The question of this section is how and why did the controversy over *Gay News* build into the biggest example of gay political solidarity before Section 28 and why did it not last? This is a question that is best answered through a chronological account because it is at its heart temporal, about how support for *Gay News* was built up over time and why this did not have a long term legacy.

Mary Whitehouse was not the first person to object to 'The Love That Dares to Speak its Name'. When *Gay News* published it in June 1976 its publishers knew very well that it would offend people of faith. Indeed, it would be tempting to see a poem which takes its name

from a line made infamous by the Oscar Wilde trial, the very model of homosexual martyrdom, as a deliberate provocation. Even in 2014 it is clear that the poem could cause offence. Jesus is portrayed not only as being gay, but as having had sex 'with Herod's guards, with Pontius Pilate/With John the Baptist, with Paul of Tarsus/with foxy Judas, a great kisser/with the rest of the Twelve, together and apart.'⁵⁶⁵ It does not stop at promiscuity, it describes an act of necrophilia, as the Roman Centurion makes love to Christ's body on Golgotha, and it does so in extremely graphic terms ('The shaft, still throbbed, anointed/with death's final ejaculation').⁵⁶⁶ However the poem's author James Kirkup, fellow of the British Academy and at that time Professor of Literature in New York, at all points expressed mortification that the poem became a *cause célèbre*, and would in later years disown it entirely.

'The Love That Dares to Speak its Name' was a part of a long sequence of homosexual poems that Kirkup said were 'inspired by the liberated and liberating sexual climate' of New York at the time.⁵⁶⁷ The poem was based on the initial revulsion he felt aged five when the crucifixion was described during his Methodist Sunday School lessons, 'the grisly, gory details' of which he claimed led to him fainting on the spot. He expected people to be shocked by the poem but expressed deep hurt at the accusation of blasphemy as he saw the poem as actually a reflection of his 'deeply religious nature':

My poem was to be all things to all men. It was to express passionate love of Christ, with intense realism. The 'love that dares to speak its name' of my title is not specifically homosexual love, but the simply and purely the passionate love of a great and exceptional individual rejected and murdered by conventional society. This

⁵⁶⁵ 'The love that dares to speak its name', *Gay News* 96, 3-16 June 1976, p.26.

⁵⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁶⁷ J. Kirkup, 'Denis Lemon (obituary)', *The Independent*, 23/11/94, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/obituary-denis-lemon-1415564.html>: accessed 24/06/2013.

is the kind of love the Church does not allow us to think about, and which most people fail to imagine in the banal religiosity of worship.⁵⁶⁸

These words were written during the trial, when there was an obvious imperative to deny that the poem was ever meant to vilify Christ or offend Christians, but it is a line from which Kirkup never deviated. Furthermore he was not himself the subject of prosecution for reasons discussed below and lived outside of the UK during the build up to the trial, so he had little contact with the *Gay News* legal team throughout. The stance may have been convenient to the paper, but he was not just quoting the party line.

The *Gay News* editorial team's motivations were more deliberately provocative. Denis Lemon is alleged to have handed the poem to *Gay News*' resident scholar and typesetter Rictor Norton with the words 'that'll get the Christians going.'⁵⁶⁹ However the Christians he was thinking of were not Mary Whitehouse and her followers but readers of *Gay News* itself. The poem satisfied two of the paper's key editorial aims: to publish work by 'respected' literary figures which could not be published elsewhere (Kirkup described the paper as the 'only place likely to accept [the poems] in Britain') and to be the site of the major debates in the gay world.⁵⁷⁰ Discussions about whether gay people could or should be Christians, or whether religion was automatically a homophobic force, were underway in the letters page of the very issue in which the poem was published.⁵⁷¹ In this context the publication of 'The Love That Dares to Speak its Name', accompanied by an illustration

⁵⁶⁸ James Kirkup cited in N. Walter, *Blasphemy in Britain: the practice and punishment of blasphemy, and the trial of 'Gay News'* (London, 1977), pp.9-10.

⁵⁶⁹ Michael Mason, Author interview, 16/12/2011.

⁵⁷⁰ J. Kirkup, 'Denis Lemon (obituary)', *The Independent*, 23/11/1994, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/obituary-denis-lemon-1415564.html> accessed 24/06/2013.

⁵⁷¹ T. Spires, 'Christian allies', *Gay News* 96, 3-16 June 1976, p8; R. Norton, 'Mean Culpa', *Gay and Lesbian Humanist*, summer 2002, <http://www.pinktriangle.org.uk/glh/214/norton.html>: accessed 24/06/2013.

called *The Well Hung Christ* showing a particularly generously endowed messiah being taken down from the cross, was clearly a provocative act - even when buried in the back of the paper under the innocuous title 'Poetry and Classics'.

On these terms the poem was entirely successful; letters appeared in the following issue decrying its publication and declaring it blasphemous. Reader Paul N. Howarth stated that 'I found it thoroughly distasteful that Our Lord's death should have become the subject of such a morbid sexual fantasy ... many, I am sure, will be saddened by the perpetration of this blasphemy.'⁵⁷² The controversy continued with some ferocity for several weeks; by issue 98 the editorial team were already referring in exasperation to 'that poem!' In their defence the editorial team made their traditional argument that it was their job to portray as many different opinions possible and by emphasising the quality of the poem as literature, stating: 'We respect James Kirkup as a poet and felt that "The Love that Dares ..." had more to offer than offence.'⁵⁷³ Some readers however did not buy that line, sharing the view expressed in a generally celebratory article celebrating 100 issues of the paper by Ian Harvey that the poem constituted an unjustified 'attack' on Christianity.⁵⁷⁴

Controversial though the poem was, at this point there was no discussion of the publication leading to prosecution, and the debate remained one conducted entirely within the gay public sphere. The subjects of Mary Whitehouse, homosexuality and the blasphemy law, were, however, of concern to the mainstream media at the time, due to her actions against Danish director Jens Thorsen's plans to make a film called *The Many Faces of Jesus* in the

⁵⁷² P. Howarth, 'Distasteful', *Gay News* 97, 17-30 June 1976, p.8.

⁵⁷³ 'That Poem!', *Gay News* 98, 1-14 July 1976, p.8.

⁵⁷⁴ I. Harvey, 'Ton Up', *Gay News* 100, 29 June - 25 August 1976, p.20.

UK, which would portray Christ having both homosexual and heterosexual sex.⁵⁷⁵ As controversy raged in the mainstream press, *Gay News* took a predictably secular liberal line, stating that 'In case *Gay News* readers are in any doubt, there is no such crime as "hurting people's feelings."'⁵⁷⁶ It argued that religious sensibilities deserved no special protection and that a work was obscene only if it would still be considered so if the name 'Fred' was substituted for 'Jesus' throughout. One reader rejected this logic entirely, expressing sympathy for Christian protests against the film:

Substitute for Jesus or Fred, a homosexual. Make him the epitome of the worst homophobic vision of a homosexual. Show him importuning small boys; show him in his dirty mac running in and out of public conveniences; show him knowingly spreading VD through both gay and straight society. Would the gay community sit back and accept such a film? Would they not do everything in their power, legal or illegal, to prevent the making of such a film?⁵⁷⁷

This initial controversy demonstrates that the eventual show of unity against Whitehouse's prosecution was not something which could be automatically assumed. Uniting to defend *Gay News* involved setting aside differences that were not merely between participants, but about the very issue of whether the poem should have been published in the first place. The framing of the prosecution as something which was an attack against the gay community as a whole was not an inevitability, but a stance which developed over the course of the affair.

Despite the viciousness of the initial disagreement, the controversy seemed to have been dead for months when, on 29 November 1976, the *Gay News* staff read in the pages of the *Evening Standard* that Whitehouse would be applying to a judge to prosecute Denis Lemon,

⁵⁷⁵ Sutherland, *Offensive Literature*, pp.149-51; A. Holden, *Makers and Manners: politics and morality in postwar Britain* (London, 2004), pp.216.

⁵⁷⁶ 'Gay News Comments', *Gay News* 102, 9-22 September 1976, p.8.

⁵⁷⁷ P. Hawkins, 'Banal Argument', *Gay News* 103, 23 September - 10 October 1976, p.10.

Gay News and their distributor Moores Harness for blasphemous libel.⁵⁷⁸ Although the prosecution was completely out of the blue, the paper's tactics emerged quickly. In consultation with shareholder and solicitor Richard Creed they decided to seek no compromise and to pursue every possible legal avenue to oppose Whitehouse.⁵⁷⁹ Michael Mason told *The Guardian* that 'We are fighting not merely in a case over a single poem but for our very future and survival. The case is of a very rare kind indeed and the hearing may well go as far as the House of Lords.'⁵⁸⁰ The same article announced their intention to start a fighting fund to pay the costs of the defence, which would be impossible to meet from *Gay News*' normal operating budget.

Previous accounts have concentrated on the 1978 protest at the time of the appeal as a moment of gay unity, but in fact the community mobilised over a much longer period, especially in the run up to the original trial. *Gay News* set a £20,000 target for the fighting fund and challenged their readers to meet it both through private donations and arranging benefit events.⁵⁸¹ It used three tactics to gather support: using participatory rhetoric to encourage sympathy and solidarity, portraying the prosecution as part of a wider trend, and making fundraising fun and social.

The cover of the first issue after the announcement of the prosecution asked for funds by appealing to the idea that *Gay News* was run solely for its readership: 'All our income and profits go into trying to produce a better paper for you to read. If we do have to fight this

⁵⁷⁸ Whitehouse never in fact brought charges against Moores Harness. Lagna. Ba. Gay News Blasphemy Trial: "'Blasphemy": Whitehouse action against *Gay News*', *Evening Standard*, 29/11/1976.

⁵⁷⁹ Michael Mason, Author interview, 16/12/2011.

⁵⁸⁰ Lagna. Ba. Gay News Blasphemy Trial: N. de Jongh, 'Paper fights for survival', *The Guardian*, 10/12/1976.

⁵⁸¹ 'GN Fund', *Gay News* 110, 13-20 January 1977, p.2.

case without your help, there is no way of doing it without the paper suffering.’⁵⁸² This participatory rhetoric would be used by *Gay News* throughout. An advert asking members of CHE to donate to the fighting fund was headed ‘If *Gay News* has ever helped you ...’ The paper emphasised its role as a crucial community resource, pointing out that ‘[f]or many ... still isolated in small towns and villages, *GAY NEWS* remains their only link with the gay community.’⁵⁸³ This was an appeal based not only on the narrow utility of the paper, but on emphasising the existence of a gay community, or in the thesis’s terms, a gay public. Mary Whitehouse was not attacking a, barely, profitable limited company owned in the most part by private shareholders, but attempting to take something away from a broader gay community for whom the paper was made. To resist the prosecution *Gay News* not only leaned on the resources of that community, but asserted its legitimacy. ‘You are the only ones with the right to decide whether what we’re doing is worthwhile, and whether we should carry on doing it.’⁵⁸⁴

Gay News portrayed the prosecution as not just a threat to the paper but to the entire of the gay world. The spring of 1977 saw several political attacks on gay men: including a proposal for soliciting cases to be only tried summarily, and Shadow Education Secretary Rhodes Boyson protesting against public funding being given to the theatre group *Gay Sweatshop*. *Gay News* argued that the decade since 1967 has seen an almost uninterrupted improvement in gay people’s lives but that now ‘chillier winds have started to blow’ and imploring that ‘What cannot and must not happen is that we all stand idly by and watch the

⁵⁸² ‘Help’, *Gay News* 109, 16 December 1976 - 12 January 1977, p.1.

⁵⁸³ ‘If *Gay News* Ever Helped You’, *Out*, February/March 1977, p.3.

⁵⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

progress of the last ten years being slowly eroded.’⁵⁸⁵ The terror was genuine, the disinterment of an offence which had been presumed dead as it had not been used for over fifty years set a worrying precedent. Organisations such as Gay Switchboard looked to confirm their legal position and structure to prepare for legal action which suddenly seemed more likely.⁵⁸⁶ Anita Bryant’s successful campaigns against the employment of gay school teachers in the United States also supplied a terrifying vision of where Mary Whitehouse may be heading if unchecked.⁵⁸⁷

If the prosecution was seen to be symptomatic of a wider backlash, the campaign against it remained focused on Whitehouse herself. The head of the National Viewers’ and Listeners’ Association (NVALA) had been a long standing hate figure for the paper throughout its existence, often as convenient shorthand for moral reaction.⁵⁸⁸ Her celebrity status and easy to parody appearance made her the perfect figure to rally against. Barely an issue of *Gay News* was published in the months leading up to the trial without a picture of her on the cover. Fundraising and protests mocked her personally, auctioning copies of her biographies for the defence fund and going carol singing outside of her house in Essex.⁵⁸⁹ Her image’s ubiquity allegedly led one reader to assume she was the papers’ editor rather than its principal antagonist.⁵⁹⁰ *Gay News* portrayed her as an unworthy and underhand opponent,

⁵⁸⁵ ‘*Gay News* Comments: Backlash’, *Gay News* 111, 27 January - 9 February, p.10.

⁵⁸⁶ HCA/Ephemera/262: Robert Banks to All Volunteers [Gay Switchboard], 16/10/1977.

⁵⁸⁷ A. Purnell, ‘Publisher’s Page’, *Him International* 8, p.11.

⁵⁸⁸ See for instance B. Sturgess, ‘The ugly face of discrimination’, *Gay News* 39, 31 January – 13 February 1974, p.9. An article of the policing of cottages, which makes no reference to her in the text but is nonetheless illustrated with an image of her face superimposed onto a policeman’s goggles.

⁵⁸⁹ ‘Students visit Mary at home’, *Gay News* 137, 23 February – 8 March 1978, p.7; ‘Mary Helps GN’, *Gay News* 112, 10-23 February, 1977, p.11.

⁵⁹⁰ This anecdote may have been concocted by Doug Pollard to make another dig as part of his long term grudge against the newspaper. ‘Choking back the images of *Gay News* run by the Hairy Whitehouse (and trying

accusing her of circumventing the legal process by avoiding an early hearing at the magistrates' courts and of perverting the course of justice by publishing a discussion of the issues in her book *Whatever Happened to Sex* whilst the trial was still ongoing.⁵⁹¹ The paper also emphasised that she was a marginal and extremist figure by systematically writing to every newspaper who had alleged that the case had been taken over by the DPP, emphasising that it still remained a private prosecution without official sanction.⁵⁹²

However, it was not just political commitment which inspired support and supporters were not just the usual NGOs and activists. The first half of 1977 saw a range of benefits for *Gay News*, remarkable for both diversity of people organising them and for their geographical spread. CHE groups predominated as expected, but the commercial scene also rallied to the cause, either on their own, as in the case of the Elephant and Castle Pub London, or in collaboration with local activists as in Club Maria, Tyneside. The events merged the social, the political and the commercial, raising money not through dour calls to self sacrifice in the greater good but through offering entertainment. The financial means to defeat Whitehouse were raised by bringing gay people (men mostly) together in defiance, through hedonism as much as protest. Club Maria declared: 'quite simply we just want to make it the best damned gay night Newcastle has ever known.' *Gay News* summed up this tactic in

to imagine the difference), I managed not to laugh my head off, and painstakingly explained the whole GN/Whitehouse battle.' Hot Flashes: We Trot through gay Britain with Doug Pollard', *Him International* 7, p.14.

⁵⁹¹ 'Mrs Whitehouse takes short cut', *Gay News* 110 January 13-26th 1977, p.11; 'Whitehouse in Contempt?', *Gay News* 120, 2-15 June 1977, p.1.

⁵⁹² See Michael Mason's correspondence in Lagna. Ba. Gay News Blasphemy Trial: 'Blasphemy Trial', *Yorkshire Post*, 20/07/1977; 'Gay News Trial', *Belfast News Letter*, 20/07/1977; 'Crown had no part in it', *Sheffield Morning Telegraph*, 20/07/1977; 'Mrs Whitehouse v. *Gay News*', *Birmingham Post*, 21/07/1977; 'Purely private', *Western Morning News, Plymouth*, 21/07/1977.

its strap line for its listing of events: 'Gay News Benefits – Enjoy Yourself – help fight Mary Whitehouse.'⁵⁹³

That so much money was required puzzled at least one observer, Geoffrey Robertson QC, who was both the papers' defence barrister and most heavy legal expense. Writing in his autobiography Robertson claimed that he had offered to work pro bono due to the clear importance of the case, and that he charged a full commercial rate for his services only on Richard Creed's incidence.⁵⁹⁴ This mysterious behaviour was explained when:

...a gay friend took to telephoning me with accounts of his contribution to the *Gay News* Defence Fund at events around the country. 'Contributed another £5 to your brief fee, old boy, cost of the disco in Leicester last night. Met the most delightful young man who wants to thank you personally. May I put him on?' The penny began to drop, as did my further offers to waive my fees. The Defence Fund climbed to £30,000 [sic.], some indication of the number of gay relationships initiated by Mrs Whitehouse.⁵⁹⁵

This is almost certainly an exaggeration, especially since Robertson's fee was not the only likely cost. The paper were well aware that they had a very good chance of losing the case and could possibly need the money to pay a likely fine, which is what the excess of the fund was eventually used for. But it reflects the way in defending themselves against Whitehouse, gay men strengthened the gay male public sphere by associating openly.

At the July trial the jury returned the result expected by the defence, a guilty verdict, although only by a majority of 10 to 2.⁵⁹⁶ The paper was fined £1,000, and Denis Lemon was

⁵⁹³ 'GN benefits', *Gay News* 111, 27 January – 9 February 1977, p.9.

⁵⁹⁴ As Richard Creed was a director of *Gay News*, his firm acted as pro bono solicitors on the case and the cost of John Mortimer, Dennis Lemon's barrister, was borne by Legal Aid.

⁵⁹⁵ G. Robertson, *The Justice Game* (London, 1998), p.138.

⁵⁹⁶ Before the trial noted legal commentator, and co-founder of the Homosexual Law Reform Society, C. H. Rolph declared that 'Looking at the common law of blasphemy as it still stands, I couldn't see how any jury, unless you drugged them or got them all tight, could possibly acquit.' Lagna. Ba. *Gay News Trial*: C.H. Rolph,

fined £500 and given a 6 month prison sentence, suspended for 18 months putting him in a precarious position if there were any more prosecutions. The paper announced its intention to appeal immediately and the focus of activity went from fund raising to protest.⁵⁹⁷

Throughout the trial there had been demonstrations outside of the Old Bailey but these were discouraged by *Gay News* themselves as they risked being in contempt of court.⁵⁹⁸ The defeat saw new alliances being made, immediately after the conviction All London Gay Groups was formed to coordinate protests and pickets. October saw the formation of the *Gay News* Defence Committee, which was, unlike the defence fund, independent of the newspaper. The group was to be a wide coalition taking in delegates from gay groups across the country to co-ordinate action, building up to a large scale protest in the week of the appeal.⁵⁹⁹

That all sections of the gay world would rally around was not a given and many people with disagreements with *Gay News* had to justify taking such a stance despite long-standing disagreements with the paper. Ian Harvey for instance maintained his contempt for the poem itself (calling it 'nothing but intellectual graffiti') and for the decision of *Gay News* to publish. However, he still disapproved of the prosecution, arguing that it had become apparent that 'it was homosexuality as much as *Gay News* and Denis Lemon that was on

'Personally speaking', *Police Review*, 22/07/1977. Lemon later described losing the initial case as a near inevitability, and regarded the fact that they managed to covert two jurors as an unexpected victory. Lagna. Ba. *Gay News* Blasphemy case: J. Ellison, 'The good thing about a bad poem', *Evening Standard*, 12/07/1977.

⁵⁹⁷ 'We Will Appeal', *Gay News* 124, 28 July - 10 August 1977, p.1.

⁵⁹⁸ Lagna. Ba. *Gay News* Blasphemy Trial: 'Judge refers Gay Lib protest to the DPP', *Guardian*, 5/7/1977.

⁵⁹⁹ HCA Ephemera 123 (*Gay News* Defence Committee): Minutes, 15/10/1977.

trial.⁶⁰⁰ From a secular perspective Richard McCance, writing in *CHE Broadsheet* in August 1978, said:

There is no doubt that, but for *Gay News*, thousands of gays would continue to remain in total isolation and loneliness, for it is often the only gay lifeline in their lives ... Does it have to be so sexually exploitative in most of its advertising and in most of its features? Do we really need page after page about homemaking hetero-style, which just perpetuates the myth that gay equals young, white, male and middle class ... Many women and men, against our better judgement, gritted their teeth and turned out in support of the *Gay News* demonstration in February because we recognised that we were all under fire.⁶⁰¹

The feeling of collective danger, that 'we were all under fire', was crucial and was what distinguished the trial from previous prosecutions against gay magazines. When *Spartacus* was prosecuted in 1971 John D Stamford used similar rhetoric to appeal for support, declaring that the prosecution was 'part of an attack on all homosexuals ... the time has come for united action on the part of all homosexuals'⁶⁰². Such widespread support was not forthcoming. *CHE* reluctantly, after much discussion, agreed to condemn the prosecution but was unwilling to launch a large scale protest. GLF members simply condemned Stamford as an exploitative pornographer, making money selling gay men caricatures of their sexuality.⁶⁰³ In contrast to *Spartacus*, despite the years of criticism *Gay News* could still be seen as part of the movement it had emerged from. Writing in *Gay Left*, Simon Watney proposed that Whitehouse attacked *Gay News* rather than more formally radical publications because of its public visibility. He stated 'whatever one thinks of its editorial

⁶⁰⁰ I. Harvey, 'Homosexuality on Trial,' *Q International* 7, p.30.

⁶⁰¹ *CHE Broadsheet*, August 1978, p.4.

⁶⁰² 'Editor's Letter', *Spartacus* 19, p.4.

⁶⁰³ 'Pornography and the Festival of Light', *Come Together* 9, p.1; 'Unnamed article', *Come Together* 4, p.7

policies and explicit sexual politics, it is the most "out" example of gay pride in Britain. It is important to recognise *Gay News* in terms of its comparative availability.⁶⁰⁴

The groups organising to oppose Whitehouse agreed with this analysis, and saw the prosecution as an attack on gay people having any kind public role. Brighton CHE declared: 'those who brought the prosecution of the only gay newspaper we have, whatever we think of it, are now ready to try to tighten up other laws to harass gay people.'⁶⁰⁵ Another leaflet encouraging gay people to get their union branches to affiliate to the campaign stated 'the prosecution is not just about blasphemy, but about the right of free speech, the right of gay people to communicate with each other ... The attack on *Gay News* is an attack on all gay people in this country.'⁶⁰⁶ It saw this not as not only a side effect of Mary Whitehouse's action but as her sole motive, and eventual plan – the offence was manufactured in order to attack the paper as a whole. A Gay Activist Alliance pamphlet featured a cartoon of her scouring *Gay News* exclaiming 'at last – bottom of page 23 – something disgusting and obscene!' This was portrayed as part of a plan to drive gay people back into the closet: 'simply by attacking our public profile she is trying to condemn us to a private hell where we have to hide our true selves from the world.'⁶⁰⁷

In this context a large scale, visible protest became vital not just for overturning the verdict but for emphasising that the gay community would not be forced back into the closet. They proposed that the protest should be 'the largest show of gay strength and solidarity ever seen in Britain!' and that 'everyone involved in Gay rights, men and women, straight or gay

⁶⁰⁴ S. Watney, 'The *Gay News* Trial', *Gay Left* 5, Winter 1977, p.38.

⁶⁰⁵ HCA/Ephemera/123 (Gay News Defence Committee): 'Do We Care?' (leaflet by Brighton CHE).

⁶⁰⁶ HCA/Ephemera/123 (Gay News Defence Committee): 'Blasphemy: The Prosecution of *Gay News*'.

⁶⁰⁷ HCA/GAA/1/1: 'Why We Are Here' (GAA pamphlet).

will be expected to turn out. This has got to be the big one.’⁶⁰⁸ And it was. Five thousand people descended to march and then heard speeches in Trafalgar Square. *CHE Bulletin’s* report summed up the achievement:

We came out in our thousands, in fur coats and woolly hats, sheepskin and denim, with beards, banners and badges galore, we came out on to the streets in our triumphant thousands and marched through London.

This was more, much more, than a gesture of protest against an archaic and irrelevant law; more even than a gesture of warm support for a newspaper which is our focus and our rallying point. It was more than a march of protest against gay violence, narrow-minded bigotry, and orchestrated attempts to send us back to our closets. More than protest, it was pride – in our values, in our life style, in the simple fact of being gay.⁶⁰⁹

The article was full of optimism, saying that although ‘Saturday 11th February was not yet our Stonewall... it marked a great step forward along the road to a positive, collective identity.’⁶¹⁰ In this they predicted what Fejes and Fetner retrospectively diagnosed in America, that resistance to opponents would form a national gay and lesbian political community, unified with common ideals and goals.

These hopes proved to be somewhat forlorn and no other political cause succeeded in unifying the gay male public sphere in quite the same way. The idea that the support mobilised around the trial could be used to campaign on wider issues was discussed at the very first meeting of the GNDC – but was initially dismissed in favour of concentrating on the issue at hand.⁶¹¹ Eventually a small group from the GNDC decided to found the Gay Activist Alliance, which aimed to be an umbrella organisation for a series of autonomous

⁶⁰⁸ T. Sanderson, ‘In Defence of *Gay News*’, *CHE Broadsheet*, December 1977, p.4.

⁶⁰⁹ ‘A Day for Gay Pride’, *CHE Broadsheet*, April 1977, p.2-3.

⁶¹⁰ Ibid

⁶¹¹ HCA Ephemera 123 (Gay News Defence Committee): Minutes, 15/10/1977.

campaigning groups. The GAA organised many individual political actions, including protests against WHSmith's refusal to stock *Gay News*, but was unable to co-ordinate its activity into any single concerted and popular campaign. By 1979 Jamie Gough, a key member of the GAA, was writing dispiritedly about how hard it was to rally support suggesting among other reasons, that the 'euphoria' of the *Gay News* demonstration had worn off and that no big unifying issue had come along since.⁶¹² A 1980 newsletter encapsulated the organisation's dilemma, stating that 'It is easy for GAA to respond to isolated attacks but how do we go into the offensive? How can we sustain groups and mount mass campaigns without greater participation?'⁶¹³

No campaign had come along which could bring the disparate strands of gay public life together in the same way. Partly this was because of the target. Although cottagers and the owners of clubs and other gay magazines were regularly prosecuted, such figures rarely made the decision to politicise their days in court in the way *Gay News* did. However, it was also because of the unique nature of Whitehouse's action against the paper. Other anti-gay actions, whether by the police, the press or queer bashers, were generalised and local, not a concerted attack by a national political celebrity against one of the most easily accessible national gay institutions. Despite the frequent criticisms of *Gay News* it was a resource used by almost all in the gay male public sphere, making it easy to rally around. But more than that, the trial formed a perfect moment for an oppositional politics in which, as Fetner has described in the American case, people could co-ordinate against a political threat rather

⁶¹² HCA/GAA/4/1: Jamie Gough, 'Why we should take the law seriously'.

⁶¹³ 'HCA/GAA/1/1: 'What is GAA?', *Gay Activist Alliance Newsletter*, p.3. For more on GAA see Robinson, *Gay Men and the Left*, pp.225-26.

than attempt to agree on a form of political progress.⁶¹⁴ To gay activists the implications of the *Gay News* trial were obvious. Whitehouse's actions were an attack on gay people's right to live openly in society, overturning all the achievements of the previous decade. The trial was, however, a one-off, not, as in the US, the start of a long era of oppositional politics. More concerted anti-gay political action did not emerge from Whitehouse or the rest of the moral right, an absence which is considered in depth in the following section.

'A kind of re-crucifixion': Mary Whitehouse, blasphemy and 'the gay lobby'

Mary Whitehouse's role in the entire controversy could easily be portrayed as simple, expected, even axiomatic. Whitehouse is seen as *the* anti-permissive figure, a by-word for and embodiment of conservative reaction and backlash. Whitehouse's antipathy toward gay people was well known and, in common with most other political groups on the 'moral right', she was particularly hostile towards homosexuals either organising among themselves or being supported by the state.⁶¹⁵ From this perspective it is easy to come to the same conclusion of many gay activists: that the prosecution of *Gay News* was a straightforward attack on the new gay male public sphere, with blasphemy charges being merely a convenient weapon. However, Whitehouse denied that this was the aim, and throughout the trial (and indeed, until her death) maintained that her only motivation was to protect the name of Jesus. Neither Whitehouse nor *Gay News*' liberal supporters shared the gay community's conviction that the prime issue at stake in the trial was gay people's

⁶¹⁴ Fetner, *How the religious right shaped gay and lesbian activism*, pp.123-24.

⁶¹⁵ I use the term 'moral right' rather than religious right because notionally secular organisations such as The Responsible Society shared so much of both the NVALA and NFOL's analysis. Similarly the word conservative is generally not used in order to avoid conflating Whitehouse's views with that of the Conservative Party. See D. Cliff, 'Religion, Morality and the Middle Class', in R. King and N. Nugent (eds), *Respectable Rebels: middle-class campaigns in Britain in the 1970s* (London 1979), pp.127-45.

right to organise publicly. Instead they framed the controversy as part of a wider debate about free speech and secularism. This gap in understanding was one of the key reasons why Whitehouse's actions, unlike Bryant's, did not lead to gay rights becoming a mainstream political issue.

Before the *Gay News* trial homosexuality was not something which Whitehouse or the NVALA had particularly focused on. It was clear that her particular brand of Christianity meant that she disapproved of homosexuality, but she rarely made gay people a specific target. Her most vocal interventions on the subject occurred in the context of her continued battles against the BBC. In the late sixties she had objected to several television plays about male homosexuals, complaining that they concentrated on the misery of their existence without offering any kind of hope or alternative. This was a critique GLF may have agreed with if it were not for her suggested alternative, which involved homosexuals finding happiness 'by getting back to reality'⁶¹⁶. She saw these plays as political, as attempts to argue for a change in the law in dramatic form. 'Time and time again, whenever there has been an organised attack on our moral defences, the TV playwright has been the propagandist for legal change in the direction of sexual violence,' she argued: 'We saw it happen with abortion and homosexual law reform.'⁶¹⁷ However, although her views on homosexuality were well known, before 1976 she could not be said to have a fully developed analysis or strategy in the area.

⁶¹⁶ Lagna. Mary Whitehouse: 'Clean Up Broadcasting', *Haslemere Herald, Farnham*, 15/03/1966; 'She's quite a gal', *Lincolnshire Chronicle*, 07/11/1969.

⁶¹⁷ Lagna. Mary Whitehouse: 'Mrs Whitehouse accuses TV of Promoting incest', *Western Mail, Cardiff*, 05/04/1976.

Her first attack on what she saw as a specifically gay target occurred on 24 November 1976, after she had received a copy of 'The Love That Dares to Speak its Name' but before the prosecution had begun. Speaking to a meeting of Christian Lunch and Dinner Clubs in Central Hall, Westminster, she attacked the government for giving a grant to the HLRS's charitable arm, the Albany Trust.⁶¹⁸ The speech was a microcosm of the moral right's most common critiques of gay male organisation. Firstly, she associated advocating for gay rights with an extreme socialist agenda ('does the right hand of the government know what the left hand is doing? And I mean the left hand.') Secondly, she portrayed the trust as a proselytising force, with youth leaders prepared to 'go into schools' to talk to "'gay teenagers'". (The scare quotes indicated that she thought there was no such thing). Thirdly, she tied the gay movement to child abuse in general and to the emerging paedophile movement in particular, by alleging both that the Trust had supported the Paedophile Information Exchange and found common cause over the age of consent. Finally, she concentrated on the Trust's recognition by government, and crucially its receipt of public funds. It was these markers of legitimacy which meant that Whitehouse was able to identify the Trust as 'homosexual lobby front runner' at a time when they were dismissed as the old guard by the Gay Liberation movement.⁶¹⁹

Typically when Whitehouse and other moral right campaigners attacked gay men, they concentrated on the new gay male public sphere in general and on gay NGOs in particular. No group in the seventies was explicitly calling for the Sexual Offences Act to be repealed, and Whitehouse frequently denied that she wanted any such thing. They also did not spend

⁶¹⁸ At this point the HLRS had changed name and become the more general Sexual Law Reform Society.

⁶¹⁹ National Viewers and Listeners Association Archives, Essex University (hereafter NVALA) Box 116: Mary Whitehouse speaking at Central Hall, Westminster to Christian Lunch and Dinner Clubs, 24/11/1976. More information in Grey, *Quest for Justice*, pp.211-15.

much time opposing cottaging or other forms of public sex. No alliance was sought with the residents' associations mentioned in Chapter One, and there was no 1970s equivalent of the Public Morality Council policing cruising grounds. It was gay men organising, communicating and advocating their rights which drew Mary Whitehouse's ire.

She set out her reasons for this stance in her 1977 book *Whatever Happened to Sex?* To her gay groups were a sinister undemocratic political force, something they shared with most groups who sought to extend permissiveness. In Whitehouse's view the law reforms of the late sixties and the broader changes since had been secured by the illegitimate actions of a self-satisfied elite. In *Whatever Happened to Sex?* she excoriated a portmanteau Marxist/secular/permissive 'lobby.' She described a series of 'humanist' groups who rejected religion out of 'political as well as theological conviction' and consisted not only of organisations like the British Humanist and National Secular Society but other campaigning groups such as National Council for Civil Liberties and the Abortion Law Reform Association. 'Gay Lib' (a term she took to include all gay groups including CHE and the Albany Trust) was a key part of this organised political force. Whitehouse felt that these organisations had an unfair and underhand influence, and worked to secure reforms by 'lobbying' against public opinion.⁶²⁰

Her conspiracy theory belied the fact that the methods she identified being used by her opponents ('correspondence columns ... radio and television ... lobby[ing] parliament') appeared to be very basis of open debate and democratic engagement. In particular she objected to what she saw as the entryist strategies of the gay movement: 'they take – and make – every kind of opportunity to establish "gay" groups within "the establishment",

⁶²⁰ M. Whitehouse, *Whatever Happened to Sex?* (Hove, 1977), pp.57-74.

within schools, colleges, universities and, of course, the Church.’⁶²¹ She justifiably saw that, by seeking recognition from and a place within the institutions of the state and civil society, gay groups were working to establish both the acceptability of homosexuality and their own democratic legitimacy. But to her this was self-evidently perverse, attempting to convince people that the ‘abnormal’ and ‘sick’ was normal and ‘healthy.’

In particular, she claimed that the actions of gay groups were a risk to the young. She rejected the ‘essentialist’ view that homosexuality was in some way innate, a stance that she associated with ‘gay lib’. Instead, she argued that psychiatrists were increasingly coming to the conclusion that homosexuality was an illness, caused by ‘abnormal (in terms of moral as well as physical norms) sexual behaviour of parents during pregnancy or just after’⁶²². As homosexuality was an illness, she argued, there was ‘a possibility of healing’ which gay groups negated by arguing for self and social acceptance. In particular she was concerned about gay rights campaigns around sex education and the age of consent, which she feared could corrupt the young. Whitehouse held the quasi-Freudian view that a ‘homosexual phase’ was an entirely natural part of adolescence, but to expose young people to gay rights messages at such a delicate time risked leading them permanently into a lifestyle that was both unhappy and immoral. She declared:

The pressure which is now put on the adolescent to accept for himself or herself life styles which are, by their very nature, immature and abnormal is callous. To use the young to justify one’s own inadequacies is cruel. To involve them with often extremely unhappy people living on the precarious edge of unstable emotional relationships is immoral. The pressure is a denial of freedom, a prostitution which is at best unenlightened, at worst deeply exploitative.⁶²³

⁶²¹ Ibid, p.68.

⁶²² Ibid.

⁶²³ Ibid.

However the fact that she held these views does not mean that the prosecution was a straightforward attempt to act on them. Whitehouse diagnosed 'permissiveness' as a widespread problem affecting all society, but deliberately limited her concerted campaigning activity to a select few of its manifestations. She criticised Raymond Johnston of the National Festival of Light for losing focus by trying to address the whole gamut of anti-permissive issues.⁶²⁴ In contrast, from the beginning her public life in the mid-sixties with the Clean Up TV campaign, to the string of private prosecutions against obscene material in the 1970s, she remained resolutely focused on the issue of the media in general and obscenity in particular. Her political programme outside of these areas remained notably underdeveloped. Similarly, although she was adept at deploying obscure legislation to further her campaigns, this tactical flair should not be confused with a fully developed political strategy. She resisted any attempt to read this into her activity, when Michael Tracey and David Morrison published their seminal 1979 study of her work she welcomed it as accurate but said that its attempts to show her activity as 'thematically consistent' took her 'a step forward on every issue than she wanted to go'. On the *Gay News* case she stated that 'I went to my files and looked up the law on blasphemy, but I don't take each case as an opportunity of bringing in the law – I just don't work that way!'⁶²⁵

According to Whitehouse, she took legal action because the poem was a uniquely blasphemous piece of writing and it was her responsibility to defend Christ from its accusations. The trial was therefore an action to defend Christian sensibilities, not an attack on gay people. As we have seen above, activists in the gay male public sphere were not inclined to believe her when she made this distinction, and accused her of being

⁶²⁴ A. Atherstone, 'Johnston, (Olaf) Raymond (1927-1985)' *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

⁶²⁵ HCA/Palmer/7/1/4: 'Whitehouse speaks out', *British Weekly and Christian World*, 16/11/1979.

disingenuous when talking about her motivations. Historically it is difficult to mediate between these two viewpoints. All of her public statements until her death agree on the matter, but she could be accused of being merely a consistent liar. This disagreement is, however, important to discuss not because a definitive judgement of Whitehouse's motivations is possible, but because the ambiguity over what was the central issue at stake is a reason why the controversy did not leave a similar legacy to the Bryant campaigns in America.

Whitehouse had been campaigning to have the law on blasphemy revived for years. In 1968 she had written to the Director of Public Prosecutions asking him to take action against the use of the phrase 'Your Bloody God' in an episode of *Till Death Do US Part*.⁶²⁶ In early 1976 the use by Denis Potter of the phrase 'Jesus Christ' as an expletive led to another letter to the DPP, asking whether it was the fact that it was on the BBC or the state of the blasphemy laws which meant he was not taking action.⁶²⁷ Most significant, however, was her campaign against Jens Thorsen's *Many Faces of Christ*, in which she succeeded in provoking a popular outcry, supported by the press and the church which led to the Home Secretary (Mervyn Rees) preventing the Danish film maker from being allowed in the country.⁶²⁸ Such high-profile success and popular support may have strengthened her resolve to test the blasphemy laws. In October 1976, before she was aware of *The Love That Dares to Speak its Name*, she sought legal advice (funded by a £100 donation from MP Cyril Black) which gave

⁶²⁶ NVALA Archives – Box 57: Whitehouse to Skelhorne, 17/02/1968.

⁶²⁷ NVALA Archives – Box 57: Whitehouse to Skelhorne, 08/04/1976.

⁶²⁸ Sutherland, *Offensive Literature*, pp.148-52; Holden, *Makes and Manners*, p.216.

her ‘the basis on which we will be able to give speedier consideration to any further instances which may unfortunately occur’⁶²⁹.

On 1 November 1976 Whitehouse received a copy of Kirkup’s poem through the post, with no indication of where it had been published.⁶³⁰ Throughout the trial she refused to identify who had sent the poem to her, and the most commonly identified suspect, prosecution witness and member of the Festival of Light Kenneth Kavanagh, denied he was responsible.⁶³¹ According to her later accounts she found the poem so shocking that it practically provoked her later actions:

I felt, quite simply, deeply ashamed that Christ should be treated in this way. It seemed to me like a kind of re-crucifixion, only this time with twentieth-century weapons. I experienced out of love for Him a great longing to try to make some kind of reparation. It seemed to me that if I did nothing I would be like that Levite priest in Jesus’ story of the Good Samaritan, who ‘passed on by the other side.’ Despite all that came and went in the months and indeed years that followed – and much did – nothing changed that initial reaction or altered my motivation.⁶³²

This was the stance that she maintained throughout the trial, that the prosecution was about the unique blasphemy of Kirkup’s poem. The fact that it had appeared in *Gay News* was an irrelevance. The fact that she had decided to prosecute *Gay News* and Lemon but not Kirkup, the originator of the blasphemy, could be seen to contradict this stance. Writing to Tracey her solicitors explained the decision, saying that:

When we first saw the poem, we had no knowledge of its author but we were of the opinion that the poem was the product of a tortured mind. We subsequently discovered that the author is now a distinguished academic but we were informed

⁶²⁹ NVALA Archives – Box 57: Robins, Olivey and Lake Solicitors to Whitehouse, 30/01/1976.

⁶³⁰ M. Whitehouse, *A Most Dangerous Woman?* (Tring, 1982), pp.160-61.

⁶³¹ Lagna. Ba. Gay News Blasphemy Trial: ‘No Contact’, *Spectator*, 15/04/1977.

⁶³² M. Whitehouse, *Quite Contrary: an autobiography* (London, 1993), p.47.

that the poem had been written in his early years and that he considered it lacked maturity.⁶³³

Certainly the revelation that the author was a respected literary figure made prosecuting him tactically difficult. Whitehouse confessed that when she found out about Kirkup's pedigree she instantly envisioned John Mortimer crying 'Philistine!' in court.⁶³⁴ Ironically when prosecuting for blasphemy against Christ, she thought it best not to give the other side a convenient martyr.

In fact she objected to all the gay community's cries of martyrdom and persecution. She was shocked by the level of personal vitriol her actions provoked; offended not only by the protestors outside her house and death threats chanted in Trafalgar Square, but by the very implication that her campaign was an attack on gay people. According to her it was a mistake to think that she was singling out *Gay News* or had been looking for a pretext to prosecute:

I do not 'pore over', or for that matter ever buy *Gay News* ... The blasphemy trial was not about homosexuality. It was about the right of Christians and sympathizers with the Christian faith not to be offended in the matter of their religion feelings. But this right had been almost submerged in an argument about the right of homosexuals not to have *their* feelings offended!⁶³⁵

By characterising the prosecution as an attack on gay people, the gay community were in Whitehouse's view demonstrating the disingenuousness of their political case. They were a small minority who were organising to impose their political views on the Christian majority. They were not a powerless group under attack, but a pervasive and influential group which was trying to change the entire nature of society. She was especially concerned about their

⁶³³ NVALA Box 58: Robins Olivey and Lake to Tracey, 20/10/1978.

⁶³⁴ M. Whitehouse, *A Most Dangerous Woman?* (Tring, 1982), pp.163-64.

⁶³⁵ Lagna. Ba. Gay News Blasphemy Trial: Letters, *The Times*, 19/07/1977.

influence in the church, and found the idea of a Gay Christian Movement particularly perverse. When the Archbishops of York and Canterbury both refused to give evidence in court, she declared that 'the church allowed itself to be so overwhelmed with what you might call the general gay lobby.'⁶³⁶ To her this was an example of the sheer mendacity of gay politics; she was being misrepresented by gay activists who refused to see that the prosecution was solely about the issue of blasphemy. Her lack of 'establishment' support was an example of just how far they had managed to get their sinister agenda accepted.

Since both sides disagreed on the nature of the prosecution it was not clear which issues would be discussed in the court room. *Gay News* team, Geoffrey Robertson and John Mortimer, were experts in defending publishers from charges brought under the Obscene Publications Act, which allowed a defence of literary merit. Such a trial would have allowed for arguments about the importance and legitimacy of *Gay News*, which would have led to an extended debate about the status of the gay male public sphere. In the lead-up to the trial the paper was preparing such a strategy and calling for readers to come forward as potential witnesses.⁶³⁷ However, the common law offence of blasphemy did not necessarily allow them to make a defence of literary merit. The presiding judge at trial, Alan King Hamilton, therefore declared testimony on the literary merit of the poem or the paper more broadly could not be heard, nor could readers be encouraged to testify.⁶³⁸

Gay rights did not therefore get its moment of judicial theatre in the manner of the Chatterley or *Oz* trials. The only cross-examination would be of Bernard Levin and Margaret

⁶³⁶ B. Thompson (ed.), *Ban this filth! letters from the Mary Whitehouse archive* (London, 2012), p.340.

⁶³⁷ 'Fourth of July', *Gay News* 115, 24 March – 6 April 1977, p.6.

⁶³⁸ In his autobiography Judge King-Hamilton admitted that if he had allowed expert witness a not guilty verdict would have been the most likely result because of the 'overwhelming environment of permissiveness.' Alan King-Hamilton, *And Nothing But the Truth* (London, 1982), p.175-76.

Drabble, both of whom would be acting as character witnesses for the paper. The defence strategy avoided broader questions of gay representation and community and instead concentrated solely on the law of blasphemy. Mortimer sought to portray the law as ridiculous and antiquated, implying that the whole trial was a comic anachronism. The defence also pointed out that Kirkup's poem, unlike all previous texts prosecuted for blasphemy, had not argued that God did not exist. Instead it was a poem by a believer, portraying God's love in unusually explicit and physical, but undeniably sincere and reverent, terms.⁶³⁹ This tactic was made inevitable by the state of the law, but drew criticism from some in the gay movement who thought it obscured the key issue. Concentrating on the offence of blasphemy meant that any call for change which came out of the trial would be about that specific legal archaism, not the place of gay men in society. As Doug Pollard sniped in *Him International*,

Also the campaign against the blasphemy laws has rumbled into existence. Perhaps to front the exercise but in any case to get the whole issue to revolve around that damn law instead of around the gay issue. Thus we might get repeal of the blasphemy law out of the GN trial, but we probably won't see much change regarding gays.⁶⁴⁰

However the two issues were not so clearly bifurcated and the prosecution's arguments against the defence line specifically relied on marginalising the relevance of gay men's opinions. Speaking for Whitehouse, Smythe declared that the issue was: 'does this outrage the feelings, not of a few hundred homosexual, gay Christians, the gay Christian movement, or whatever, but of the ordinary mass of people in this country?'⁶⁴¹

⁶³⁹ Parliamentary Archives (*hereafter* PA) HL/PO/JU/4/3/1368: Appeal Cases 1979, pp.10-200.

⁶⁴⁰ D. Pollard, 'Hot Flashes', *Him International* 9, p.16.

⁶⁴¹ PA HL/PO/JU/4/3/1368: Appeal Cases 1979, p.120.

The argument that the case was merely about blasphemy and the Kirkup poem became harder to defend during Levin and Drabble's questioning. Both appeared as members of the literary establishment and their role was not to talk about the merit of the particular poem, but to testify to the respectability and responsibility of *Gay News*. The prosecution, in what were the most thoroughly reported exchanges of the whole trial, sought to question the ethics of the paper. Levin was asked about illustrations which accompanied a review of a sex manual for gay men and to discuss a series of articles which had been published discussing paedophilia. Drabble declared that *Gay News* was 'a serious and responsible newspaper which deals with the arts in a very professional manner' and did not rely on titillation. Similarly, her testimony was dragged back to feature articles on paedophilia and the wording of a contact ad which asked for someone 'boyish, into shorts.'⁶⁴²

Judge King-Hamilton, whose sympathies were clearly with the prosecution, officially ruled that the context of the poem was irrelevant:

If the poem in question is a blasphemous libel, which it is for you to decide, it would still be a blasphemous libel even if it were published in *The Times*, *The Church Times* or *The Catholic Herald*. The framework which it appeared could not make it not a blasphemous libel, if it is one.⁶⁴³

This was not a statement which convinced *Gay News* or the gay movement more generally.

As the papers' editorial said during the trial:

Most of the time has so far been spent on articles published four years ago in the paper, on two classified advertisements, on reader's letters, on book reviews, on

⁶⁴² When challenged by the Judge on this point with reference to an advert for prints by Aubrey Beardsley, Drabble declared that they were 'erotic in a highbrow way.' Lagna. Ba. Gay News Blasphemy Trial: P. Norman, 'Is blasphemy charge "an insult" to Christianity?', *The Sunday Times*, 10/07/1977, p.2. See also R. Lustig, 'Mrs Whitehouse, *Gay News* and Mr Levin', *The Observer*, 10/7/1977 and N. de Jongh, 'Margaret Drabble to the defence of *Gay News*', *Guardian*, 08/07/1977.

⁶⁴³ PA HL/PO/JU/4/3/1368: Appeal Cases 1979, p.182.

feature articles. All of which tends to support the view that what's on trial here is not a 'blasphemous libel'... but the newspaper itself – a newspaper that is happily, cheerfully, published for homosexual men and women to bring them news and information sadly lacking elsewhere.⁶⁴⁴

This was not a view which outside observers, including *Gay News*' supporters, necessarily agreed with. The controversy fitted conveniently into arguments about secularism and freedom of speech which the mainstream literary establishment both understood more readily, and in which it had more of a personal stake. The mainstream press coverage after the verdict discussed blasphemy more often than gay rights, with the papers divided between viewing the law as an archaism or much-needed protection for Christians. *The Times*' editorial criticised both sides of the case for trying to bring in wider issues, saying that 'It is unfortunate at times it seemed to be not the poem that was on trial, but the general morality of *Gay News*... [the character testimony] confused the issue as a whole.'⁶⁴⁵

From the opposite perspective, a letter protesting the verdict of the trial by 140 leading figures in the arts and academia mentioned homosexuality only in passing. Organisations such as the National Secular Society had been campaigning against the remaining blasphemy law for some time, and saw Whitehouse's actions as a vindication of their long-voiced complaints about the offence.⁶⁴⁶ In 1982, when the incident reached its final conclusion with the European Court of Human Rights' refusal to hear an appeal, *Gay News* complained about being locked out of a programme on the blasphemy law. The paper was perplexed that the programme makers had 'not asked any gay onto the programme –

⁶⁴⁴ 'Gay News Comments', *Gay News* 123, 14-27 July 1977, p.10.

⁶⁴⁵ Lagna. Ba. Gay News Blasphemy Trial: 'It is right to respect other men's gods,' *The Times*, 13/7/1977.

⁶⁴⁶ The press release they issued immediately after the prosecution was announced therefore put Whitehouse's actions in the context of other recent calls for the blasphemy laws to be used, implying a general theocratic backlash rather than a homophobic one, see HCA/Grey/42/2/16: 'Mary Whitehouse Resurrects Blasphemy Law to Crucify Freedom', 03/12/1976.

specifically, any *Gay News* gay' despite them being the most recent group prosecuted under the law.⁶⁴⁷ Instead the counter weight to Whitehouse as a guest was the former editor of *New Humanist*, Nicholas Walter.

The most tangible legacies of the trial were also in the field of blasphemy not gay rights. In 1978 Lord Willis proposed an easily defeated bill to reform the law, and in 1982 the Law Commission conducted an enquiry into the blasphemy laws, recommending their abolition.⁶⁴⁸ At the beginning of the twenty first century 'The Love That Dares to Speak its Name' remained an iconic piece of writing to campaigners against the blasphemy laws, who read out the poem in protest in 2002, much to Kirkup's distress.⁶⁴⁹ Whitehouse felt that her actions were successful because they established that blasphemy was still an offence in England and Wales, and she was particularly delighted by how unambiguously this point was endorsed by the House of Lords judgement. But she did not pursue any further prosecutions. The symbolic victory was enough, and after that it was the duty of the Church and the State to intervene.⁶⁵⁰

Despite her clear antipathy towards 'gay lib', Whitehouse had refused to characterise her actions as an attack on gay politics. The trial therefore did not act, as some had feared, as the beginning of a more concerted legal campaign against the institutions of the gay male public sphere. The *Gay News* case was Whitehouse's first and final legal action against a

⁶⁴⁷ 'People we don't meet', *Gay News* 238, 15-29 April 1982, p.17.

⁶⁴⁸ Lagna. Ba. *Gay News Blasphemy Trial: 'Abolish the Crime of Blasphemy, says Law Commission, Terrance Shaw'*, *Daily Telegraph*, 30/04/1981.

⁶⁴⁹ T. Branigan, 'I am being used, claims blasphemy trial poet', *The Guardian*, 11/07/2002 - <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2002/jul/11/books.booksnews> accessed 19/07/2013. The offence of blasphemous libel was finally abolished in 2008.

⁶⁵⁰ Whitehouse, Mary, *Quite Contrary: an autobiography* (London, 1993), p.70.

specifically gay target, although she continued to speak against 'so-called "gay" organisations'.⁶⁵¹ In 1981 she launched private prosecution against the director of the Harold Breton play *The Romans in Britain* for procuring an act of gross indecency between two actors performing a homosexual rape scene.⁶⁵² But the National Theatre was not a vital resource for the gay community and the case caused no comparable upsurge in activism. Whitehouse's insistence that the trial was primarily about blasphemy also meant that, although the controversy brought *Gay News* further into the public eye than it had ever been before, the debate it caused in the mainstream press was not on gay rights but on more general issues of freedom of speech.

Conclusion

The *Gay News* trial is a unique event in the period covered by this thesis, but it is one which can be used to illustrate wider trends. Firstly, it demonstrates the extent that the gay male public sphere had grown and the resilience it had achieved by the mid-seventies. The trial has previously been interpreted as a revival of the militancy of the GLF, but in fact it mobilised gay groups across the ideological spectrum alongside the commercial scene, as well as more radical activists. Whitehouse's attack motivated the diverse membership of the gay male public sphere temporarily to put aside their differences (many of which were about the nature of *Gay News* itself) and to organise in defence of their mutual interests. This was both because there was a widespread feeling that gay people's right to meet openly was under threat and because the very existence of *Gay News* made such a mobilisation possible. As such the campaign demonstrates the dual purpose of the gay male

⁶⁵¹ Lagna. Mary Whitehouse: 'Well, are you still for the permissive society?: Mary Whitehouse throws a challenge to Roy Jenkins', *Daily Mail*, 10/06/1981.

⁶⁵² Sutherland, *Offensive Literature*, p.180-89

public sphere. Gay groups, publications and venues created an unprecedented space in which gay men could organise and discuss ideas, and allowed them to represent their views to wider society.

The trial also demonstrates the nature of political opposition to the evolution of the gay male public sphere in the Seventies. Whitehouse clearly recognised that the years since 1967 had seen the emergence of new and stridently political voices for gay people, and these voices became the focus of her rhetoric against homosexuality. She objected to the political actions of 'gay lib' both because of what she saw as its revolutionary left-wing leanings and apparent acceptance within the liberal state. Therefore she opposed all the actions of the gay male public sphere. However despite this ideological analysis she refused to characterise the *Gay News* prosecution as an attack on the gay community. This distinguishes her campaigns from those of Anita Bryant in the US, who specifically set out to repeal pro-gay laws and to impose further restrictions.

What made the *Gay News* trial unique in this period is that it represented a determined attack on a central institution of the gay world by a high profile national political figure which led to a political mobilisation of the newly established gay male public sphere. This is not to say that the rest of the period from 1967 to 1983 was not rife with homophobia, but that it was mostly generalised, local and inconsistent. The analysis of policing in Chapter One shows that there were frequent vicious acts of discrimination, but that they did not amount to a consistent national campaign. Moral Right NGOs consistently lamented the development of a political voice for gay people, but launched no concerted campaign for further legal restrictions. Even Mary Whitehouse refused to portray the prosecution of *Gay News* as being an attempt to attack the idea of there being publications for gay men and

instead insisted that she was only objecting to blasphemy. Because of this the actions of moral right campaigners did not have the effect of permanently mobilising gay men or making gay rights a national political issue. Such a large scale, high-profile mobilisation of the gay male public did not happen again until the late 1980s and the protests around Section 28.

Conclusion

This thesis has reassessed gay male politics in England and Wales between the decriminalisation of homosexual acts in private in 1967 and the beginnings of the HIV epidemic in the 1980s. It has challenged two of the main assumptions of the current historiography: the limited impact of law reform and the central role of the Gay Liberation Front in defining homosexuality as a political issue. As such it has sought to modify a historical narrative which portrays gay men in the seventies as 'coming out' in the way the GLF understood the term. Previous accounts by authors such as Weeks and Robinson have celebrated the influence of GLF and credited their revolutionary energy with inspiring most of the achievements which followed. However, the emergence of a new public gay male culture did not necessarily involve gay men declaring their sexuality to all possible audiences, or demanding the overthrow of the existing structures of state and society. In order to understand the change in the political and social lives of gay men in the 1970s, it is necessary to address the politics of reformists and entrepreneurs as well as revolutionaries. Instead of considering gay male politics solely in the terms of one political movement or ideology this thesis has stressed that the seventies saw the creation of an broad range of political groups, communication media and social spaces which, taken together, can be said to have created a new gay male public sphere.

The gay male public sphere was a novel development for three reasons. Firstly, because it enabled the emergence of new, public forms of gay sociability. Previously queer social life had been based in sites which could only identified through knowledge of signs and signals, participating in existing homosocial cultures, or through informal friendship networks. In contrast, innovations such as CHE's local groups aimed to challenge the isolation of many

gay men by creating an alternative network of social groups which were openly advertised and available to all. The gay commercial leisure scene moved from being a set of venues where queer men happened to gather, to being spaces which were openly advertised as catering for gay men. Similarly, magazines like *Films and Filming*, which had covertly courted a queer segment of the market, were replaced by publications like *Spartacus* and *Gay News* which overtly addressed a gay male readership.

This is not to say that gay men can be characterised as unambiguously or uniformly 'coming out' in this era. It was still possible for a man to be part of the gay male public sphere without declaring his sexuality to the rest of society. However, individual gay men's seemingly private activities still contributed to the formation of a gay male public. Such activities required men consciously to align themselves to a gay male identity and often to 'come out' to other gay men. This contrasted with queer cultural practices, which had allowed men to have sex with men without marking themselves in any way distinct from the rest of society. Moreover, the collective result of individual gay men engaging with these institutions was to strengthen the gay male public sphere. CHE's large membership allowed it to be able to claim to represent gay men in general, even if most of its members would never even write to their MP. The size of *Gay News*' circulation allowed it to speak for the 'gay community', even if many readers hid their copies from their friends and family. And clubs like Heaven and Bang could be seen as part of a booming pink economy because of the thousands of men who filled the club every night, even if few of them would tell their work colleagues where they had been the next morning.

As the production of *Nighthawks* demonstrates, many gay activists found it hard to come to terms with these new public forms of gay sociability. Both reformists and revolutionaries

lamented that readers of gay magazines, members of social groups and customers of gay venues seemed unwilling to take part in overt political campaigning. In particular they had difficulty reconciling themselves with the increasing prominence of the commercial scene, which they had previously associated with a ghetto mentality based on both enforced discretion and exploitation. As the seventies went on it became clear that attempts to create an alternative, completely non-commercial 'scene' were doomed to failure and men like Ron Peck began to consider the gay bar as an important focus of gay male identity. The distrust between the movement and the scene was mutual, however, and in the early eighties entrepreneurs like Alex McKenna, and even former GLF activists like Denis Lemon, came to criticise gay politics for appearing to stigmatise the pleasures of consumption.

Such controversies are an example of the second key characteristic of the gay male public sphere: the way it facilitated debate and the exchange of information between gay men as gay men on an unprecedented scale. Gay NGOs such as CHE, and especially publications like *Gay News*, created new forums where gay male identity and the potential demands of the gay movement could be discussed. The politics of the 'respectable homosexuals' of the 1950s had involved marginalising other queer men and using them as examples of the sort of disreputable activity that would be discouraged by decriminalisation. Such men had no voice in these debates, and no way to respond to these elite men's tactics. After decriminalisation, however, competing visions of gay life emerged within a diverse and argumentative public sphere. In particular the commercial scene became a public part of gay life by being advertised and discussed in the gay press. However, it was still possible to marginalise forms of queer association which did not involve some form of public organisation, as shown by the debates on cottaging. Sex in public spaces was criticised

because it did not necessarily require men to adopt a gay male identity. The cottager and the cruiser were therefore treated as tragic figures and objects of pity who by definition did not have access to the facilities of the wider gay community.

Thirdly, the emergence of the gay male public sphere allowed gay men to claim a form of citizenship for the first time. This form of political action was distinct from the covert lobbying which had occurred around Wolfenden, as it involved gay men campaigning as gay men. Their voices were not filtered through medical or legal professional discourses, as many interwar advocates of law reform had been or, like Wolfenden's witnesses, heard only in private. Instead gay men after 1967 developed an increasingly public political voice and asserted that they were a legitimate part of the community with legitimate demands. The Gay Liberation Front is the most celebrated example of this development, but concentrating on the most radical of political groups obscures the extent to which gay men tried to integrate themselves into the existing structures of the state and civil society. From the NWHLRC's first negotiations over the legal status of Esquire Clubs onwards, reformist political groups sought to engage with the state in an unprecedented way. Through seemingly prosaic campaigns to use council buildings and place copies of *Gay News* in local libraries, local CHE groups sought to establish that they were recognised parts of local communities. National CHE challenged those who felt that the 1967 Sexual Offences Act had not granted gay men any right to a public life, by giving evidence to government committees, holding events at party conferences and lobbying MPs just like any other civil society group. Similarly, *Gay News* imitated and sought acceptance from the key democratic institution of the national press. Such activities may not have involved calls to revolution,

but they did secure a profound and unprecedented change in the political status of gay men.

Law reform was a precondition for this development. The Wolfenden report was opposed to homosexual men having any form of public life, as were many of the parliamentarians who secured the implementation of its recommendations in 1967. Yet the Sexual Offences Act did not prohibit most public manifestations of male homosexuality. The bill's provisions heightened the penalties around physical acts of sex in public spaces, but said nothing about the legality of publishing newspapers, forming political campaigns or running commercial clubs for gay men. Men trying to create public institutions of gay life were therefore in an ambiguous and precarious legal situation. The gay male public sphere was regulated using an eclectic array of statute and common law provisions, none of which had been designed with homosexual men in mind. Parts of the state shared the view expressed in the 1972 *Kneller* judgement that homosexuality was not 'legal in the full sense' and that the emerging institutions of the gay male public sphere were consequently against the law. However, there was no *concerted* action taken to close down such institutions, and instead gay men preceded both consciously and unconsciously to test the limits of the law. Some groups like the Gay Liberation Front did this in a direct and confrontational way, whilst others mixed deliberate challenges with tactical compromises. For instance *Gay News* overtly flouted the *Kneller* judgement by printing gay male contact adverts under the title *Love Knoweth No Laws*, but at the same time worked very hard not to include adverts from men under 21 or those in pursuit of more *outré* sexual practices. Similarly the Coleherne Patrons Committee negotiated with the police, the licensing authorities and the brewery to keep The Coleherne

open as a gay pub, but at the same time sought to restrict the more disruptive late night activities of the pub's customers.

Although this thesis has sought to redress the balance of historiography by concentrating on the actions of more moderate political groups, this should not be taken as a denial of the importance the GLF and its offshoots. They were profoundly influential on the language of gay rights, to the extent that even arch-Thatcherite club owner Jeremy Norman borrowed their terminology and iconography when arguing for the importance of Heaven.

Furthermore the vast majority of gay liberationists' activities can be viewed as in some way contributing to the development of the gay male public sphere. They are few more strident assertions of gay men's citizenship in the era than the first line of the Gay Activist Alliance evidence to the Royal Commission on Criminal Procedure: 'This submission is written by a group of homosexual men.'⁶⁵³ GLF offshoots, especially outside London, were often primarily social community groups, in a similar way to CHE, rather than being militant campaigning organisations.⁶⁵⁴ And of course, GLF activists were crucial in establishing such services as *Gay News* and Lesbian and Gay Switchboard. But the GLF has to be seen as part of much broader range of emerging gay political voices, an important and influential part of the gay male public sphere but not its sole creator or determining influence.

The forces of the moral right such as Mary Whitehouse indiscriminately used the term 'gay lib' to refer to all cases of gay men campaigning for political change. Whitehouse particularly opposed the formation of gay political organisations because she saw them as proselytisers who risked damaging young people in their attempts to normalise homosexuality.

⁶⁵³ TNA/BS/12/18: Evidence 259 (Gay Activist Alliance).

⁶⁵⁴ See the details of group activities in HCA/GLF/11: *Broadsheet* nos. 5-27, March 1972-December 1974.

Furthermore she objected to the newfound citizenship claimed by gay men, especially when they sought to form groups inside mainstream institutions. Against this background her prosecution of *Gay News* in 1976-7 was seen by some as a flagrant attack on the right of gay people to meet openly. Gay groups from across the political spectrum joined forces with the commercial scene to protect the paper from this perceived threat. This was a spectacular demonstration of the strength and the resilience that the gay male public sphere had achieved in the ten years since decriminalisation, and led some to hope that the political fervour the trial had generated could be siphoned into further political campaigns. This did not happen because another such high-profile legal action was not forthcoming, especially as Whitehouse maintained throughout that she was prosecuting the poem for its blasphemy rather than its appearance in a gay publication. That the most high profile attack on a gay institution was such a singular event underlines the dispersed nature of the opposition to the gay male public sphere in the seventies. Although moral right figures like Whitehouse vehemently objected to gay men organising and the limited moves the state had made towards accepting them, unlike in the religious right in the United States they did not launch concerted legal campaigns against them. Figures like Whitehouse did not gain the full support of any political party or the established church. Although they condemned the emergence of the gay male public sphere in the most vicious of terms, in the seventies they remained, like gay men, outside of the political mainstream.

This thesis ends in spring 1983, as the mainstream media began to turn its attention to the HIV epidemic and Margaret Thatcher was elected for her second term. It has been commonly agreed that homosexuality became an increasingly fraught political issue in the 1980s. Jeffrey Weeks has stated that the decade saw 'the first concerted attempts to roll

back the achievements of the late 1960s and early 1970s, culminating in the passage of “Section 28” in 1988⁶⁵⁵. As the decade progressed the equality work undertaken by some Labour councils came under attack as the Conservative party sought to demonise the ‘loony left’. This was accompanied by the media’s coverage of AIDS which drew a distinction between ‘innocent’ straight victims such as haemophiliacs and gay men who were putting the rest of society at risk. Public opinion grew measurably more hostile and by 1988 48 per cent of survey respondents were saying that homosexuality was ‘a very serious social problem’ compared with 17 per cent in 1981.⁶⁵⁶ In the seventies almost no one had publicly contemplated re-criminalisation, but by the middle of the eighties some journalists and Christian campaigners were calling for the repeal of the Sexual Offences Act.⁶⁵⁷

Gay men were, however, able to resist this onslaught because of the resilience of the structures of the public sphere which had evolved in the seventies. Information about AIDS was distributed by gay NGOS and the gay press before the Government launched its own education programmes. In 2011 Michael Mason described how, after seeing that the American gay press had lost the trust of the community due to its early reluctance to talk about the disease, he and his co-editor Graham McKerrrow ‘began trickling out short stories on the inside pages of *Capital Gay* about the development of HIV/AIDS in the States’:

⁶⁵⁵ Weeks, *Coming Out* (Rev. edn), p.237

⁶⁵⁶ Gallup polling data cited in M. Collins, ‘Introduction: the Permissive Society and its Enemies’, p.20.

⁶⁵⁷ See Auberon Waugh cited in Poulter, *Peers, Queers and Commons*, p.182; HCA/Grey/4/30: ‘Conservative Family Campaign: submission to Select Committee on social services of the House of Commons Investigating the disease AIDS’, 11/12/1986.

As the epidemic grew, so our stories became longer and more frequent. In the end, the first case was reported in the UK and the story became our front page lead. ... With *Gay News* gone and the national gay mags taking little interest in AIDS (they nicknamed us *Capital Aids* because of our reporting) we were concerned that gay men outside London were not getting reliable information about AIDS and the precautions they should be taking. The infection rate was rising fast – with the number of new cases doubling every six months. So we started sending copies out to places like Manchester and Brighton in those early years of HIV. One of the satisfying things about it was that when Fleet Street suddenly caught on to it and started going berserk about the gay plague, catching it off lavatory seats and all that, the gay community in this country had been reading about it for two or three years ... ⁶⁵⁸

The eighties also saw both the newly formed Terrance Higgins Trust and Lesbian and Gay Switchboard being brought into what Virginia Berridge has called the AIDS ‘policy community’, which worked to define the eventual government response to the epidemic. In Berridge’s words, ‘An alliance, albeit a brief one, was formed between public health interests in the department, the new scientific and medical experts and the gay lobby.’ As Berridge points out, the main achievement of this policy community was to ensure that, after initially failing to take any concerted action, the eventual government response to the disease was both ‘liberal’ and ‘voluntary’. Despite the calls of the press and the moral right, coercive measures such as notification and quarantine were rejected.⁶⁵⁹ The seventies tradition of gay voluntary and campaigning groups had continued and, in the worst possible circumstances, had secured gay men a limited voice in the formulation of policy.

There is much further work to do to trace the development of the gay male public sphere in the eighties and to consider how it has altered in response to the more liberal climate of the last twenty years. That work, like this thesis, would contribute to advancing our understanding of the nature of Britain’s ‘Permissive Society’ beyond the 1960s. The extensive work done around Wolfenden and the Sexual offences Act has shown that

⁶⁵⁸ Michael Mason, Author Interview, 16/12/2011.

⁶⁵⁹ Berridge and Strong, ‘Aids in the UK: Contemporary History and Study of Policy’, pp.150-74.

permissiveness cannot be thought of as uncomplicated emancipation granted by parliament, but an account concentrating on the activities of post-1968 radical politics is not sufficient to understand it either. Instead, for gay men permissiveness was a long process of negotiation with the state, which extended beyond the period this thesis discusses. Gay men in the seventies worked to establish a new public form of social and political life and in doing so demanded the recognition of the state and the rest of civil society, who had previously considered them only patients or criminals.

This was a substantial change in gay life and the politics of sexuality, but it was not a straight forward liberation. The concept of the gay male public sphere is therefore a useful one because it is model which can encompass the activities of the individual, the formation of group identity, and negotiation with the state and society at the same time – and therefore allows us to consider the ambiguities of the relationship between all three processes. This concept could be usefully used to extend our understanding of social and political change in postwar Britain even further. Most obviously there is work to be done considering the parallel but overlapping development of the lesbian public sphere in this era, and to explore the contexts in which trans* and bisexual people came together to form publics (and to what extent they formed counterpublics within the gay male public sphere.) But there is scope for even broader work which would examine the plurality of political voices in postwar Britain, including the formation of publics based on gender, religion, and race. Such work would allow us to consider one of the most important trends in postwar Britain, subaltern groups working to make their voices heard in politics, without embracing the most simplistic narratives of liberalisation.

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Michael Mason - 16/12/2011
Nick Billingham – 12/01/2012
Bernard Greaves 26/01/2012
Ian Studd - 13/07/2012
Brian Wilkinson – 30/08/2012

v) Secondary Literature

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