

BRIGHTON OURSTORY PROJECT

newsletter

Feather Boas and Rave-Goers

It was our great delight this autumn to lend a hand to Patrick Lilley who chose to celebrate the twelfth anniversary of his Brixton Club, Queer Nation with an ambitious photographic exhibition of gay clubbing since the Second World War. Called Queer Nation O2, its curator, Alastair O'Neill scoured the country and tracked down numerous photographers, looking for images. He found some crackers. The beautifully produced exhibition ran in London for ten days at the end of November. Brighton Ourstory Project supplied most of the pre-Liberation images from our collections in the archive, including photos of the Sussex Arts Balls, the Variety Club and the Curtain Club. There's talk of bringing the exhibition to Brighton for the week before Pride next year, if sponsorship can be found – so, fingers crossed.



Queer Nation O2 Exhibition, London, November 2002

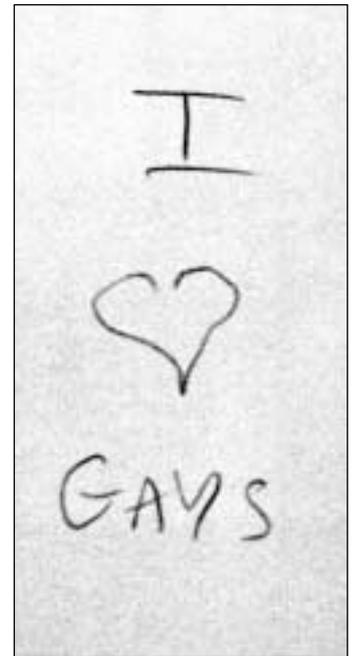
Less glamorous but just as important to our continued success is the £2,500 grant received from the Scarman Trust to help with running costs at the archive and to enable us to learn from the experiences of other community archives. Brighton and Hove Council has also stumped up some money to get us started with major fundraising, so thanks to them and to all the Friends of BOP who dug a bit deeper into their pockets last time round to help us out.

Ronnie aka Cairo Connie

Thanks are also due to Val, Nina and Martin for giving us office equipment and to all who have contributed photographs and magazines to add to our collections. We are particularly grateful to Eunice and to Peter for sending our way some photograph albums of Ronnie (aka Cairo Connie) who used to be a doorman at the Curtain Club, in the basement of the Queens Hotel in the 1960s. They include shots inside the Club and were a timely gift as we were able to put one of them in the Queer Nation O2 exhibition.

Access to Archives

Cataloguing is well under way now and lists of our holdings will soon be entered onto a state-of-the-art computer database. In time we might consider participating in the wondrous A2A (Access to Archives) project, run by the Public Records Office. One search on their website produces results from all participating



Spotted on the comments board next to the Lesbian and Gay Section at Brighton Museum, November 2002

organisations so, for example, someone looking up 'Brighton in the Second World War' might have a whole new dimension opened up to them! It could change lives.

Lavender Lounge

In the nearer future, we're looking forward to a repeat performance of the Lavender Lounge Bar, probably in the run-up to Pride next year. This immensely popular show sold out very quickly last time so lots of our fans missed it. Maybe we could find some money to make a CD of it this time or perhaps BBC Southern Counties Radio would like to do a live outside broadcast...

Unveiling Illusion

It's a tricky business researching lesbian and gay history. We know that even today many people feel compelled to disguise the nature of their relationships for fear of rejection by family, friends, neighbours, for fear of careers stagnating or of being disinherited or beaten up. So must it have been in bygone decades and centuries.

Anne Marshall has been researching pioneering women doctors and has discovered a rich vein of them in Brighton and Hove in the first half of the twentieth century. Self-declared lesbian, Louisa Martindale is quite well known – she set up in private



Dr Louisa Martindale, 1925

practice in Brighton in 1906, became school doctor to Brighton High School and Roedean and developed the New Sussex Hospital for Women and Children in Windlesham Road (now sadly being turned into flats). Just before the First World War she met the Hon. Ismay Fitzgerald, who according to Louisa's autobiography, *A Woman Surgeon*, came for a visit and stayed thirty-five years.

Less straightforward is Dr Helen Boyle, who never wrote her autobiography and who, despite remarkable achievements, too numerous to detail here, has faded from sight. When she arrived in Brighton in 1897, she and her partner, Mabel Jones were the first women doctors to set up in general practice in the district. Three years later she started the first Dispensary for poor women and children in Brighton (at 145, Islingword Road), and soon after founded two small hospitals in ordinary houses, together known as the Lady Chichester. The first of these was revolutionary in

offering early – and free – therapy to poor women, who would otherwise end up in the asylum. The second had a medical and surgical focus and was later renamed the New Sussex. All these initiatives instantly had women flocking in, which was a poke in the eye for local male doctors, who'd greeted the women doctors' arrival with scorn. In addition, Dr Boyle founded the National Council for Mental Hygiene, which we now know as MIND.

Choosing not to marry

Anne treads with caution around the issue of whether or not Helen Boyle and her colleagues were lesbians – there were social and demographic reasons why women might have chosen not to marry. There were also good reasons why unmarried women might not have thought of themselves as lesbians. The new science of sexology had produced the stereotypes of 'real lesbian' and 'pseudo-homosexual women'. The real lesbian was supposed to be masculine in both clothes and demeanour and, according to Havelock Ellis, have "an incapacity for needlework and domestic work and a fondness for athletics". The pseudo-homosexual woman, on the other hand had been seduced by the real homosexual, was intellectually inferior to her and was seen to be inadequate in her relationships with men. So a lot of women that we would now consider to be lesbian didn't name themselves at all because they didn't see that they fell into either of these two categories.

Helen Boyle was driven by a conviction that mind, body and social conditions all contributed to a person's state of health. Her 1939 presidential address to the



Royal Medico-Psychological Association concluded with a Keynesian quote, in which she exhorted her colleagues to aid in "the assertion of truth, the unveiling of illusion, the dissipation of hate, the enlargement and instruction of men's hearts and minds" (suitably amended in the gender department, this could be Ourstory's mission statement today!) Her leisure time was spent at her cottage in an isolated spot on top of the Downs at Pyecombe, where, according to Anne Marshall she had hordes of visitors. Described by people who

Rockrose Cottage, Pyecombe

worked for her as a very private person, she ordered all her personal papers to be burnt on her death, which occurred in 1957, the day after her 88th birthday.

Anne's conclusion, having conducted thorough research, including talking to friends of Helen Boyle and her partners is that she had a series of monogamous relationships. She arrived in Brighton with Mabel Jones, with whom she set up the Dispensary and Lady Chichester Hospital. Mabel, just before she met Helen, had been working in



The medico-surgical branch of the Lady Chichester Hospital, 4–6, Ditchling Road, c1914. "[The illness of] the patient who lay for five weeks in the sunniest bay window ... could be traced to her weary struggle to make shillings go further than was possible ... these five weeks were the happiest and brightest period of her whole life". Miss A. H. Bennett, *English Medical Women*. Photo: The Wellcome Library London



Dr Helen Boyle. "[A] slender, vivacious Irishwoman, quick of brain and witty of tongue", according to the *Brighton & Hove Gazette* in 1939

Hull under Dr Mary Murdoch (who was definitely a lesbian, identified herself as such and was a lifelong friend of Louisa Martindale.) When she left Brighton in 1910 Mabel is known to have adopted a child with a woman friend. A later partner of Helen's, Cecily Lamorna Hingston, lived during her student days with the first woman stockbroker, Beatrice Gordon Holmes who went by the name of Gordon Holmes and had no problem identifying herself as a 'real lesbian'. Helen spent the last seventeen years of her life with Marguerite du Pre Gore Lindsay who continued to occupy Helen's cottage in Pyecombe until her own death in 1977.

Count Me In

Despite enough circumstantial evidence to send a murderer down for life, there are those who are still, nearly half a century after her death, reluctant to acknowledge the likelihood that she was a lesbian. Helen Boyle talked about "unveiling illusion" and I feel sure that, had she lived in our age – and had she known about the mental strains on LGBT people revealed in the Count Me In survey two years ago – she would have been glad to help out as the courageous, compassionate and wise role model she surely is.

Linda
Grateful thanks to Wendy Walker at East Sussex County Records Office and Dr Louise Westwood at Sussex University for supplying additional information for this article.

Homo from Homo

From the pages of *Gay News*, thirty years ago, we discover that the Queen of Clubs was the first Brighton Club to advertise in the hairy press. Peter remembers when he used to live there at about the same time.

Really dreadful

"Ray Jacobs used to own the Queen of Clubs – he had the club for quite some time and then somebody else took it over and it really got down trodden, it was really dreadful. It was a gay girls' club really which you were terrified to go in cause you thought you'd get your throat cut – they were very butch some of the girls that were in there!

And then Tony, who owned the lease of that building, took it over and I took on the basement flat. We changed it all to a gay men's club. I'd met Tony years before – when I first left school, I went to work at Hubbards of Worthing, which was a departmental store. And this Tony came in to look at curtain material and over the curtain material made eyes at me.

Tony gutted the club really and had very little money to do it with. There was a shop in Brighton

that was closing down and it was an old fashioned tailor's shop, which had this mahogany fixture – at one time it had been drawers where they used to put all the hats. And the mahogany counters. We took the drawers out and that's where you stacked all your beers and things and this mahogany counter became the bar. We used to go out on Saturday sometimes, round all the junk shops. I remember we found this statue of a nude man, not very well-endowed. By the time we'd finished with him – and some plaster of Paris – he was adequate for the top of the bar!

As you went in the door, the bar was to your left and the dance-floor was the front bit, with a juke box in the corner – you had to pay to put the music on to dance to. It was tiny because it was only the ground floor of one of those houses in Bedford Square and it was just two rooms. There was a big coal fire in there and a white fireplace with a big mahogany top. It had this black seating that went all the way round.

Vibrating ceiling

In those days, to stay open later than twelve o'clock, you could have an extension but you had to have a good excuse – you had to be doing something for somebody, raising money for some charity, then you were allowed to have a two o'clock extension. That used to be packed with people like sardines. How the floor stayed up I'll never know because I lived downstairs and if I was going upstairs to do my duty behind the bar and they were dancing, the ceiling used to vibrate and all flop about!"



Gay News, October 1972

The Queen of Clubs, early 1970s
"We thought there must be a lot of lads that, at Christmas time have got nowhere to go. So we used to do a Christmas party. It was nothing to do with alcohol, it was just a tea party for the people that were on their own for Christmas Day."



A Stone in her Shoe

A year or so back we (as Ourstory Books) were approached by a Sussex author, Jo Burgess. She'd read our book, *Just Take Your Frock Off*, (Barbara Bell's autobiography) and asked us to read the manuscript of a novel she'd written, loosely based on her own life. We thought it a good book, well-written and interesting – a compelling account of relationships between women in pre-liberation times.

We were delighted to hear this year that Jo has found a publisher and that the book, *A Stone in her Shoe*, is now available. She has very kindly donated some copies to us to sell and we are glad to offer them to you! If you would like a copy, please send £9.99 (includes p&p) to Brighton Ourstory Project, PO Box 2861, Brighton, BN1 1UN.

From the back cover
Corinna had always known that she was a boy, but that it was a difficult proposition to wear in the England of the 1930s. Despite her strength and resilience of character, even she falls in line with social expectations and marries a young airman as the Second World War begins. She joins up and the process of her liberation from conventional morality, so slow in development,

begins to gather momentum. She meets and falls in love with the erudite and witty Stevie and her life seems to be complete. However, Corinna has not taken into



account the beautiful and tempestuous Lisa, who attracts her like a moth to a flame and opens up new horizons which enable Corinna to fulfil her true nature to a depth she had not thought possible, forcing her to a decision she had never contemplated.

Some words from the author

A Stone in her Shoe intends to show the difficulties of being an outsider as seen by society at large, to show this experience as worth every minute of the fight by the individual to win, to make a success of life, to show it is worth all the loneliness and fear.

Jo Burgess



Women of Brighton

Visitors to cyberspace might like to take a trip round the new website of Ourstory cataloguer, Val Brown. Told in a charming, accessible style, brief life stories of 31 women of substance, some of them from our own gay family, grace the screen along with pictures of themselves and their abodes. Find them on:

www.womenofbrighton.co.uk

Treading the Boards

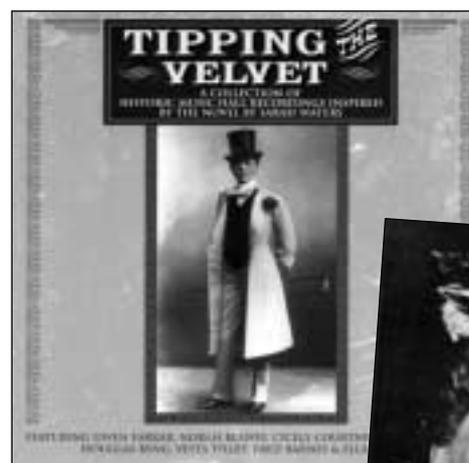
If you enjoyed the recent TV dramatisation of Sarah Waters' novel, *Tipping the Velvet*, you might well appreciate a new CD of original music hall songs by male and female cross-dressing artistes of the 1920s and '30s. With the authentic sound of a slightly crackly old seventy-eight record, you can enjoy such delights as *Moanin' for You* sung by Norah Blaney and deep-voiced cellist, Gwen Farrar, who were partners both on and off stage according to the sleeve notes.

Of local interest, there are four numbers by Douglas Byng, who came to live in Arundel Terrace, Brighton, when he retired from the stage. He regales us with such camp choruses as *She May Be All*

That's Wonderful (But She Doesn't Appeal to Me) and *I'm a Mummy (An Old Egyptian Queen)*. Recognising the heritage of today's camp performers, the notes also remark that "Douglas Byng's comedic turn back then was as courageous as he was talented, for there was still homophobia in theatre management as a residue of Oscar Wilde's earlier notoriety."

The CD is called *Tipping the Velvet* (although it isn't actually the soundtrack to the TV programme) and is definitely worth a listen.

(Thanks to Joyce and Margaret at MonoMania for pointing us in the direction of this CD.)



Above: *Tipping the Velvet*, a collection of historic music hall recordings inspired by the novel by Sarah Waters

Below: Douglas Byng, a stalwart of revue, variety, cabaret and most famously a star of pantomime usually as the dame.

