

# NEW IN THE ARCHIVE...

The last few months have seen some unusually voluminous donations to the archive, testing the limits of our capacity for storage once again. From that inky old dearie Peter Burton have come two collections. Firstly a series of 300 (and then some) videos of queer interest. And secondly a remarkable haul of over 700 lesbian and gay magazines and newspapers, including such treasures as the 1950s European title *Amigo*, the British *Man and Society* and a long run of the Seventies Canadian powerhouse *Body Politic*. These periodicals were collected in his career as Britain's senior gay journalist, his first articles appearing exactly 40 years ago in *Spartacus* magazine. Thank you Peter and long may you scribe.

A third large collection has come to us from the estate of the human marvel and Brighton character Betty Lou (see reminiscences on the centre pages of this issue). A good sampling of his remarkable drag wardrobe is now, thanks to Linda's carpentry skills, hanging safely with us. The drags include what appears to be a Victorian mourning

jacket and two creations of his own, heavily encrusted with spangles and baubles in dazzling shades of blue and green. Thanks to John, his executor, for these and also to two of Betty Lou's former neighbours on opposite sides of Powis Square, Zita and Anna.

From Brian have come several copies of *Square Peg* and from Mark some *Boyz* and *Capital Gays* and a single 1978 copy of the short-lived fortnightly paper *Gay Times* with splendid artwork by Oliver Frey. Ashley at the University of Brighton's LGBT Soc has donated a banner and

the society's old pink furry comments box, full of ancient flyers. Mark and Simon of The Arun Gay Society, one of Sussex's oldest gay organisations, have given us a large number of back-copies of their newsletter, importantly documenting gay life in the little-explored western half of the county. And finally, thanks to the estate of the late Wallie Hodges, we are the proud owners of a carboy lamp and shade which stood for many years on the piano at Brighton's old seafront queer drinking club, the 42. Many thanks to one and all.

## A good sampling of remarkable drag wardrobe...



## WALLIE HODGES 1916-2008

Many years back, when little was written about Brighton's gay history, and I was a young man hungering for some sense of rootedness in this fugacious town, desperate to make contact with my tribal elders, I was fortunate enough to meet Wallie Hodges. Wallie had been a pianist in many of the clubs in Brighton's underground in the bad old illegal days. With a mind sharp as a pin he poured out tales of long drunken nights peopled with prostitutes, bent coppers, back-street abortionists, brawling sailors, hob-nailed lesbians and impudent queans with the wickedest tongues. 'It was debauchery,' he said, 'but it was fun.'

I sat enthralled and eventually taped nine hours of his memories, some of which were featured (under the nom de guerre of 'Grant') in the Ourstory book *Daring Hearts*. We became friends and I visited him regularly for the last nineteen years of his life, which ended, I'm sorry to say, in April of this year.

That appetite for ancestry which drives straight people to the laborious compilation of family histories and genealogies has no obvious equivalent in the gay world. But listening to Wallie's stories, which sounded like a grandmother's tales of the Old Country, of a homeland I'd never known, I felt a connectedness, a new confidence in the survivability of my own desires. I need not die as a miserable and lonely old poof as my mother had once - ominously - predicted.

Apart from anything else, Wallie was good company and I've giggled more at his fireside than anywhere else in town. His impersonation of Hilda Baker was an experience in its own right. He said himself he'd never been lucky in love but he was endlessly interested in the ups and downs of my own love life and his advice was always profoundly wise. I am honoured to have known him and find I am missing him even more than I had imagined. Goodbye Wallie, and thanks for the laughs.

Tom Sargent

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# brighton ourstory..

NEWSLETTER \ Issue 23 \ Summer 2008

## THE FIRST LGB MUSEUM IN BRITAIN?

Picture this: you're browsing round the North Laine area of Brighton - the arty, cultural quarter where ecologically sound shoes mix with classy cheese and vegetarian cafes - a photograph in a window catches your eye. You go into the shop and it's like stepping through the looking glass into Wonderland. Your attention is immediately caught by the dazzling, extravagant flamboyance of a Betty Lou costume. Tucked in a corner is the old Lesbian Line office, another holds the 42 Club or the Variety. Banners, clothes, placards, club cards, flyers, records, magazines from bygone days. And memories - you find that at the press of a button you can hear people reliving moments that have stayed in their hearts for years - the first touch, the love that was not to be, the love that lasted a lifetime; the lost job, the fight for custody, being in custody; the joys and jealousies of clublife; claiming Brighton's beaches, streets and homes.

All round the walls is traced a line linking you, through pictures and stories, with those who've lived in or visited Brighton & Hove over the last two hundred years - a multitude of lesbians, gay men and bisexual people. You've wandered into Brighton Ourstory's trial museum. We feel it's time stop talking and start doing ('Deeds Not Words' as the suffragettes proclaimed). The required feasibility study for our much-longed-for LGB heritage centre would cost tens of thousands of pounds. For much the same price we could rent temporary premises and test it out in reality. After all, we already have the contents, contributed by literally hundreds of people over the last twenty years. We think it's a great idea and are working towards it with grant applications. If you can offer help in kind (eg shopfitting skills, estate agency skills, fundraising

skills) or if you'd be interested in running a fundraising event to help Ourstory on its way to having a real presence in Brighton, please get in touch. We need a surge of support to create the first LGB museum in the country.

## BORACIC LINT

In the meantime, we need to pay the next quarter's archive rent! Brighton & Hove City Council has helped pay our running costs again this year, for which many thanks but there's still more to find. You can help by coming to our Barn Dance on

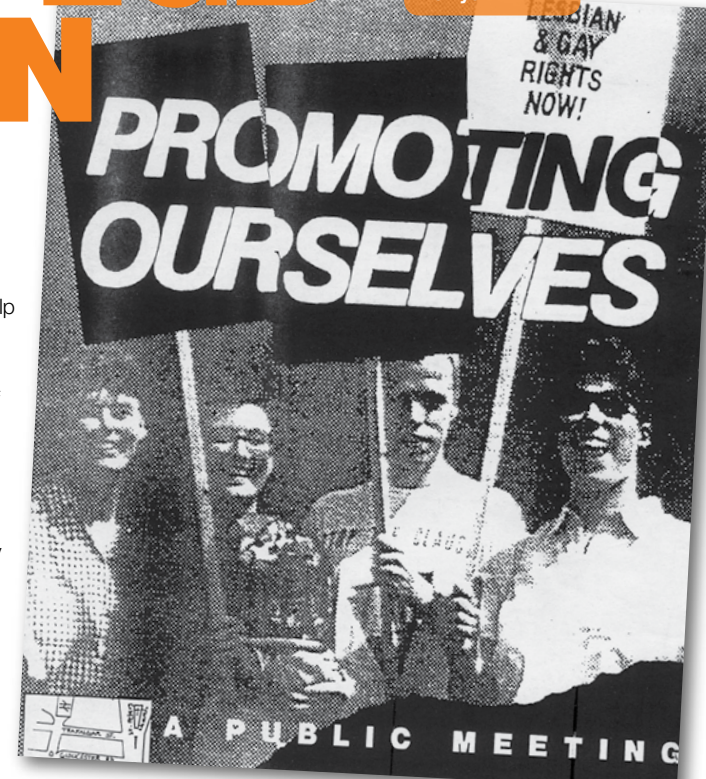
Friday, 1st August. It's at Middle Street School in central Brighton, 7.30pm-11pm. Tickets cost £7.50 (£6 concessions) and can

be bought on the door or reserved in advance by ringing 01273 206655. See you there!

## PLEASED

We were very pleased with our contribution to Winter Pride and LGBT History Month in February - a show called Promoting Ourselves, celebrating the twentieth anniversary of Brighton Area Action Against Section 28. Many thanks to all those who took part by contributing their memories, reading, playing guitar, carrying banners and getting it all sorted out generally. More from the show on the inside pages. Congratulations go to Abi for staging our Bona Books exhibition at Shoreham Library during LGBT History Month - it attracted a lot of interest.

Vintage Section  
28 flyer



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# PLUCKY CAMPAIGNERS

For Winter Pride this year Ourstory staged a show celebrating Brighton's campaign against Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988. Forbidding the 'promotion of homosexuality' and dismissing gay people with children as 'pretended family relationships', it stayed on the statute book for fifteen years – blighting the education of an entire generation. Right wing sponsors of the legislation paid a visit to the Brighton Centre in 1990 for their International Congress for the Family. In this extract from our show, Promoting Ourselves, Dani recalls the campaigners' response:

Somewhat they'd got Princess Di to speak at the opening of their conference and so we thought, well, if she's going to be here, the

whole of the world's media's going to be here, we'll do something. And I don't think we really thought about it. We could have been killed. We could have been shot. Anyway, we registered as delegates for this conference. We were all dressed up as respectable as we could manage - which was quite hard for some of us. And we

**As respectable as we could manage...**

went in. We couldn't carry anything in with us - it wasn't proper security like you have at conferences now, it wasn't a problem to get in - but we didn't think we could smuggle in any banners or anything so we just took in marker pens and pieces of paper. And then we went to the loos and hastily wrote banners. We sat all through Princess Di's speech, which was actually quite nice and I was thinking oh my God, am I

going to do this? And then we just did it - we walked onto the stage and stood there for a few seconds while the cameras took in the message on our placards (Lesbian Mothers Aren't Pretending) and the audience slowly realised who we were. Then we walked off the other side, having deposited our placards on the platform table.

It was the scariest thing I'd ever done. But it was fantastic as well. And they didn't even arrest us! They just threw us out! I was all prepared to be arrested. We did our interviews and then collapsed, shaking into the much-needed hugs, kisses, laughter and jubilation of those waiting outside. We were all over the papers. It was great!

Princess Di averts her eyes...



The Evening Argus, 10 January 1910

## ...AND TWO DUSTY CAMPAIGNERS

As every Brightonian knows, *The Evening Argus* is not a reliable source of interesting or startling news. How refreshing then to turn to its pages of 5 January 1910 and see the headline Found! Two Women Secreted in Dome Organ.

Herbert Asquith, the Liberal Prime Minister of the day, who had been dragging his feet for four years over votes for women, was in Brighton to address an evening gathering of the faithful at the Dome, prior to a General Election. In the afternoon a suppressed sneeze was heard from inside the organ. A ladder was called for and two very dusty suffragettes, who had been crouching there all night, were extricated. Miss Eva Bourne explained that they had planned to disrupt Asquith's speech by shouting through the pipes.

Later there were lamplit protests outside the men-only meeting and Bessie Newsam, another suffragette dressed in a man's overcoat and cap, managed to gain and shout out 'Votes for Women!' before being bundled outside.

The Brighton militants were evidently quite a feisty crew, a dab hand at vandalising pillarboxes and braving the ruckus of open-air meetings at the Peace Statue in Hove. Many of them were spinsters, but were they lesbians? We would like to think so and mean to find out.

## BETTY LOU: A HERO OF THE UNDERWORLD

In recent years a regular sight in the Montpelier area of Brighton was an old man with thinning hair in a ponytail and a woollen hat like a teacosy. Tottering along clutching a Forfar's bag of cake, he looked innocuous and a stranger would not have guessed that he had once been the brightest star of this town's twilight world.

Harold Humfryes, known to many as Betty Lou, who died in April of this year, was a drag performer of consummate skill. Stories of his doings in Brighton are legion. For a generation of gay men he was a figurehead; adored for his peerless chutzpah and, as Michael Smith remembers, 'the air of camparaderie she created around herself'.

Betty Lou looked immaculate in drag. His costumes were industriously assembled from the most unlikely fragments and he repeatedly towered above his competitors at the great drag balls at the Aquarium in Brighton and the Vic Wells and Lyceum in London, sweeping away with the first prize in cash. Even fifty years later his appearances - as a peacock with an 11-foot train or an Indian goddess with six arms on an altar or a butterfly escaping from its chrysalis - are remembered.

'She'd get down to sewing the sequins and baubles onto her various outfits and she

would take them down to the men's beach,' recalls Michael. 'All the glitter and sparkle, the sunshine coming down on them, I wonder how on earth she didn't get blinded.'

For many decades Lou had lived in the same flat in Powis Road, his front room a triumph of Amateur Regency in swathes of deep red and gold. The elaborate Christmas decorations he contrived in his window each year were a fixture of the season. An underwater scene complete with a sunken pirate galleon was particularly admired.

## All the glitter and sparkle...

In the post-war years Montpelier was something of a gay enclave. Jackie Godfree then lived with his

boyfriend on St Michael's Place and enjoyed occasional private theatrical performance from Betty Lou. 'Our kitchen backed onto hers over the garden and all of a sudden there'd be all this screaming and hollering and clashing of pans and 'Don't hit me Bert! Don't hit me Bert!' She had this huge window in the bedroom and she'd appear ten foot up high with black eyes where Bert had bashed her up. Of course all this was fantasy. Another time she was being strangled by Bert - she had a bonnet on and was leaning out backwards screaming, 'I'm sorry I burnt your eggs on toast.'

'Oh, she was fabulous,' remembers Jackie. 'She really was.'



Betty Lou in his 1950s zenith

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