

Dee & Cath's LGBT History of Cornwall

Just For The Record: Filling in the gaps of local LGBT history

We recently attended a debate & discussion about LGBT history, culture and community, in Cornwall and the South West. This took place at the Royal Cornwall Museum & was organized & hosted by Cornwall Record Office.

It was an interesting & thought-provoking evening & what we noticed was the very little amount of information displayed about Cornwall's LGBT history, culture & community prior to last year's Pride event. What we took away from this evening was that the only way for our history to be remembered, is for each of us to take responsibility to archive, with the County Record Office, what was important & significant, or let it be forgotten forever. As a result of our views, Gay Cornwall have suggested a separate section about LGBT History & have invited us to kick it off!

We have lived in Cornwall more years than we care to remember & have been together 20 years. There are lots of places & events that we do remember, but also lots of things we've either forgotten, or didn't attend. There may also be information that we've got wrong. So, we will start the ball rolling & hope that other people will join in to reminisce, share memories, add more detail & fill in the gaps of our knowledge. Our hope is that this discussion may also form a document that can be archived, so that Cornwall's rich LGBT history will be shared, remembered & available to those who might be interested in future generations.

Go here goes: our potted history of the last two decades!

In the mid 80s, the gay venue, on Saturday nights was Saddletramps, in Carbis Bay, (which later became Tamara's). There was a small dancefloor, which was always packed & all the guys used to like to sit astride the saddles! The last song was always 'Blueberry Hill', so we all knew when to go home.

In the late 80s there was the Ops Room in Portreath on Saturday nights. This is special to us as we met there in 1989. People were always asked if they knew it was a 'private party' on the door! It started in a large function room & later moved into a previous skittle alley. Cornwall's Lesbian Line was set up in 1989 & has always been staffed entirely by volunteers. For the first time, lesbians had somewhere they could ring to talk about their sexuality & find out what was happening in Cornwall. Women's evenings began at the Acorn Club, Penzance, with discos, line dancing, cabaret & the hilarious pantomimes by the 'Thespian Lesbians', under the talented direction of Greta & Joan. (We particularly remember 'Dyke Whittington'!)

The early 90s seemed to herald a gay & lesbian 'coming out' process & lots of things started to happen. Firstly, there was the arrival of the Independent Cornish Triangle, (ICT); a monthly newsletter, which provided interesting & informative information & a lifeline for lesbians & gay men, in terms of reducing isolation. We think this began in 1992 & continued until around 1996, but hopefully Malcolm will confirm this? Sue began 'Alternatives'; selling books for women, which as far as we know, still continues. There was the 'Somewhere on a Sunday'; tea garden, where you could sit in the sun, (which always seemed to shine!), have tea & fairy cakes, chat to others, catch up on gossip, check out the community noticeboard, or browse the shop for gifts, artwork & gay publications.

The infamous annual gay fetes; (Cornwall's early 'Prides'), started in 1993 & attracted over 100 people. These were a hilarious mix of stalls, games, entertainment, cabaret & garden party; all in a secluded farm near Hayle, discretely signposted by a handful of pink balloons. There was always a tug of war & the girls inevitably beat the boys hands down; on several occasions being butch enough to snap the rope completely! People dressed up in outrageous costumes & strutted their stuff to the tunes from 'Out of The Blue'; the all-lesbian band. We aren't sure when or why the fetes finished - can anyone help?

On Tuesday nights every fortnight, the Ashton Lady, (in Ashton!), hosted evenings where you could have dinner, (for £2 in 1994!) & play the odd hand of 'bastard brag'! We were running 'Up The Creek Canoe School'; at that time & regularly took out groups of lesbian & gay men dressed in rubber gear for a spot of watersports! The Gay Outdoors Club went off at weekends for regular walks along the coastline.

We think that the Arts Club gay evenings on a Sunday began sometime in the early 90s. This provided an alternative to club evenings & as far as we know, still continues. Similarly, we think that Lesbian & Gay Switchboard started around this time, & a number of AIDS - related organizations began to spring up in response to the emergence of HIV & AIDS, which at that time was usually fatal. There was a bar in Hayle called Harvey's, but we never went - can anyone give any information?

The lesbian monthly magazine 'Outback', began in 1996 & continued until very recently. This was a welcome source of information, aid to networking & instigator of more women's activities: quiz & games evenings, discos, coastal walks, support groups & the like.

'Out in the Open': our gay & lesbian campsite opened in 1999. Like many local farmers, we set up a

campsite for the solar eclipse & then decided to keep running in order to provide a safe camping environment for lesbians & gay men. The campsite has grown & evolved over the years & has remained the only gay & lesbian campsite in the UK. There has always been an annual party, or event, to add colour & excitement! These have catered for 100-150 people & include men's events, (like the 'Outback' weekends), women's events, (such as 'Pink Parties', Women Within Tent, Late To It Lesbians', 'Black Lesbians UK' & Women & Children gatherings), & mixed 'Camp Weekends'. We also held our own three-day Civil Partnership celebrations here in 2006. This year marks the campsite's 10th anniversary &, in May, we are holding 'Camp!'; a fun-filled party weekend with music, cabaret, workshops, great food & a Sunday market, to celebrate 10 years of gay camping.

As the campsite kept us busy & meant that our social life came to us, we haven't got out much since! So we are hoping that other people can offer memories of the many venues & events of the 00s: the Eclipse club in Truro, (which we think also opened in eclipse year & has only recently closed), the women's discos at Gaslights, the Radical & the Albany in Redruth, bars that have been & gone, (like Pinkies & the Queen Vic in Newquay, Mavericks & the Blue Pepper in Falmouth), bars that have recently arrived, (like Qdos), & Pride events, such as the Beach Picnic in 2007 & the Pride event in Truro in 2008.

So for us, who now form the older generation, (OMG!!!!), this summary is probably just the tip of the gay iceberg & we look forward to reading other people's memories & recollections of the 'good old days'!!

Dee & Cath

Out in the Open Campsite