

In the fourth of a series in which he explores London's gay ghettos, HAYDON BRIDGE surveys his own manor



Joe Orton

Joe Meek

Joe Orton frequented cottages in north London, in particular this one on South End Green, Hampstead. Other popular cottages included one under the railway bridge in Holloway Road, frequented by another gay legend, record producer Joe Meek.



South End Green Cottage, Hampstead



Ossie Clark



George Michael

"Met a wonderfully muscular guy in ripped vest and peaked cap called Dennis, a banker from Victoria." Ossie Clark on Hampstead Heath

"This is my culture!" George Michael to a News of the World reporter on Hampstead Heath. Never was a truer word spoken.



# northern exposure

For London's newest gay village and most famous cruising ground head north...

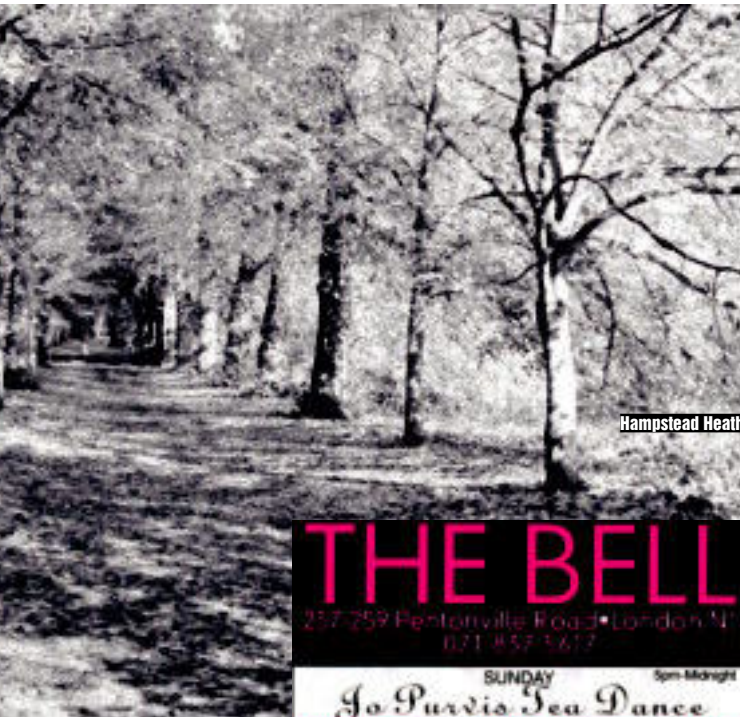
ACCORDING to the 2001 census, there are more cohabiting same sex couples in Islington than anywhere else in the country. Gay rights group, Stonewall, recently named Islington Council the most gay-friendly in London. No wonder then that Islington has been dubbed London's newest gay village. But if Islington conjures up images of well-heeled couples flitting from **The Green** to The Screen On The Green, think again. Inner London's biggest borough also includes the mean streets of Holloway and Finsbury Park to the north and the monster construction site of King's Cross to the south. Down-and-going for years, this area is now up-and-coming in readiness for the opening in 2007 of the new Channel Tunnel rail link. Visitors from across Europe will be able to pile out of St. Pancras station and into gay shops, bars and restaurants, perhaps even the UK's first gay museum. The chances are it'll be housed in the derelict stables next door to Central Station, the bar that claims it was the first to re-introduce a dark room (**Glory Hole**) in 1993. "They were queuing round the block," says co-manager Mark Graham. Central Station is just one of the landmarks that made north London a gay destination decades before Islington Green became chic. A working-class area, with cheap housing for the men who laboured on the canal, the railways, and the factories and warehouses that grew up around them, Islington was once literally a dump. Until 1826 there was a huge dust heap at the end of what is now Gray's Inn Road. As late as 1902, journalist Robert Machray claimed that Euston Road had "as malodorous a reputation as any in London." This was not the place for well-off gentlemen to hunt for soldiers and telegraph boys. That happened in the West End. But in Islington, gay working-class men found each other. Historian Matt Houlbrook discovered that **Collins' Music Hall** on Islington Green was "one of the most important cruising sites in the early 20th century." Lord Rowton's poor men's hostels, built in the 1890s, became notorious for rough sex. There was one hostel in King's Cross, another in Vauxhall (also destined to become a gay ghetto). George Orwell writes disapprovingly of Rowton House homosex in his 1933 book *Down And Out In Paris And London*. It's possible that

Islington's first "gay" pub was the **Duke Of Cambridge** in St Peter's Street. Drag-artists appeared here in 1954.

In 1959 Islington was still regarded as a slum. One of its dirt cheap flats, at 25 Noel Road, was bought by impoverished actor Kenneth Halliwell, who shared it with his lover, playwright Joe Orton. In 1962 the pair were jailed for six months for defacing the dust jackets of books borrowed from Islington libraries. Today the jackets are so valuable that visitors to the Joe Orton Collection at the Central Library, Fieldway Crescent, are shown photocopies. Although, in the 1960s there were no gay bars in Islington, there were plenty of cottages, and Orton trolled them all, most famously one under the railway bridge in **Holloway Road**. This was also frequented by another gay legend of the period, speed freak record producer Joe Meek. There's a plaque on his flat-cum-studio at 304 Holloway Road.

Most of the cottages are now gone, but an important survival can be seen at **Highbury Fields**. Here, in 1970, a prominent Young Liberal, Louis Eakes, was arrested for cruising. A protest, held on 27th November 1970, by the fledgling Gay Liberation Front, was, according to Peter Tatchell, "a milestone in gay history. For the first time in Britain, gay people demonstrated to demand human rights." In 2000 OutRage! unveiled a plaque on the disused loo. The only public toilet known to have been used by Joe Orton and still open for business is at **South End Green, Hampstead**.

In the 1970s King's Cross was a centre for gay activism. The GLF held discos at the **Prince Albert** pub in Wharfedale Road. (You know it today as Central Station. Why the name change?) The London Lesbian and Gay Switchboard began in **Housman's Bookshop** in Caledonian Road in 1974. The most famous gay pub was **The Bell** in Pentonville Road, which later serviced the freaks (one of whom was me) who got up to all kinds of hanky-panky in the nearby **Scala** cinema. The Bell became **Sahara Nights**, which made several attempts to get back to its gay roots until it closed earlier this year. The Scala became a dance club, which is still renowned for its polysexual indie night **Popstarz**.



**THE BELL**  
257-259 Pentonville Road • London N1  
021 852 3677

**SUNDAY** 5pm-Midnight  
*Jo Purvis Sea Dance*

**MONDAY** 9pm-Late  
with DJ Billy

**TUESDAY** 9pm-Late  
**Fantasy Island**

**WEDNESDAY** 9pm-Late  
indie night with Mel

**THURSDAY** 9pm-1am  
**Sound & Vision** with Heathcliff

**FRIDAY** 9pm-Late  
with Jo Purvis

Up in Islington, the oldest surviving gay pub is the **King Edward VI** in Bromfield Street, which, despite refurbishment, thrives on 1980s charm. It's described by a contributor to one pub website as "How the scene used to be before all the pubs were run by chains." The only reason for gay men to visit Finsbury Park was to cruise the **Parkland Walk**, a disused railway line with "ghost" stations, that heaved in the evenings. Following a series of muggings, it was closed... Thanks for spoiling it for the rest of us, you creeps. Islington seemed to change overnight from a dilapidated no-man's-land ruled by gangsters to the ultra-fashionable birthplace of the chattering classes. The process, which in fact took about a decade, was probably kick-started by this famous statement in 1984: "My name is Chris Smith, I'm the Labour MP for Islington South and Finsbury and I'm gay." By the 1990s Islington had a couple of gay bars and the fetish shop **Regulation**; but in 2004 Martin Chadderton told QX that he opened "London's first gaystropub", **The Green**, because "Islington has loads of affluent gay men and women and, at the moment, there isn't that much for them."

King's Cross took longer to clean up its act, and it wasn't until the 21st century that the hookers and dealers mostly disappeared from the streets. Now some of the restored buildings look very elegant. But dominated as it is by its three mainline stations, King's Cross probably will always attract a far more diverse gay crowd than snobbish Islington. While the **Play Pit** and **Oscar's** cinema recall the sleazy past, the drop-in centre, **London Friend**, provides one of the few alternatives to the commercial scene, and Central Station, now established for 14 years, caters for fetishists downstairs and such groups as OutRage! and Stonewall Football Club in the meeting rooms upstairs. Everyone seems to get along. Once scary, King's Cross is now pretty trouble-free. Adjacent Euston has several important gay connections. The gay dis-

**THURS 9th**  
**11pm - 3am**  
**entry £3**

**Central Station,**  
**Wharfdale Rd,**  
**King's Cross N1**

**DJ**  
**Stewart Who?**

cos begun in 1968 by Richard Scanes (Tricky Dicky) at the **Euston Tavern**, now an O'Neill's pub, are said to have been the UK's first. The **Glass Bar**, outside Euston Station, is London's pre-eminent lesbian club. **Gay's The Word** in Marchmont Street has been London's leading gay bookshop for more than 25 years. North of Euston, Camden Town's **Black Cap**, dating from 1776, has been famous for its drag acts – Mrs Shufflewick, Hinge and Bracket, Regina Fong – since the 60s. And of course no survey of north London would be complete without a tribute to **Hampstead Heath**. The area behind the Jack Straw's Castle apartments is by no means London's oldest cruising ground. Matt Houlbrook's research through police records suggests that the Heath didn't begin to attract gay men in any numbers until the 1930s. Rapidly, however, its fame eclipsed more venerable grounds, such as Hyde Park and Clapham Common. It's name-checked in many a celebrity memoir. Tragic fashion designer Ossie Clark (like Joe Orton, murdered by his lover) couldn't keep away throughout the 1980s. ("Later went to the heath...met a wonderfully muscular guy in ripped vest and peaked cap called Dennis, a banker from Victoria.") Famous men, most recently George Michael, continue to hide among the Heath's shrubbery. "Are you gay? No? Then fuck off!" George screamed at a News of the World reporter last month. "This is my culture!" Never was a truer word spoken.

Surprisingly, despite this army of presumably exhausted and thirsty lovers, Hampstead has only ever had one successful gay pub, the **King William IV** in Hampstead High Street. This 17th century tavern turned discreetly gay before World War II specifically to cater to men visiting the Heath. This makes the Willie one of the three oldest gay pubs in London and a vital part of the capital's gay history.

**Read more about London's gay history in Matt Houlbrook's Queer London (£20.50), available at Gay's the Word, 66 Marchmont Street, London WC1.**