Supporting statement for an application to have the Royal Vauxhall Tavern added to the National Heritage list for England

By Ben Walters

Of Vauxhall's pomp sole remnant I
By tavern garden's side
That I should be permitted my
Diminished head to hide![1]

Introduction

The Royal Vauxhall Tavern (or RVT) can look a bit like an island or a fortress – and there have been times in its history when it has served as an idyllic getaway or a bastion of safety, been isolated or under siege. Its qualities as a building are evident from the outside. Less obvious are the deep and unique historical and cultural roots that make it such a precious but increasingly vulnerable treasure: it is believed to be the country's oldest continually operating site of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender socialising, and the last vestige of a culture of experimental recreation that stretches back four centuries.

This application seeks to demonstrate that the RVT is worthy of preservation both as a noteworthy structure of special historic and architectural interest, and in terms of the historic and cultural significance of what's housed within its walls.

The RVT satisfies all of English Heritage's selection criteria with regard to buildings erected for the arts, entertainment and cultural pursuits: it is a living testament to "the factors of pleasure, escapism and self-improvement"[2] and one of "the most evocative reminders of past patterns of culture and leisure"[3]. As well as possessing "special architectural or historic interest"[4], it has a unique claim to "embody particular social phenomena"[5] and survives "in a form that directly illustrates and confirms the historical claim"[6]. Though it is "a more modest establishment"[7] than some, it represents with "rarity and eloquence"[8] an aspect of British cultural history that has for too long been unacknowledged on the National Heritage List for England.

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[1] 'The Lament of the Colonnade', *Punch*, LVII, August 21, 1869, p.71
[2] *Designation Listing Selection Guide: Culture and Entertainment*, English Heritage, April 2011, p.2
[3] Ibid
[4] Ibid
[5] Ibid, p.9
[6] Ibid
[7] Ibid
[8] Ibid

The Tavern is an impressive example of a mid-Victorian public house, boasting an unusual convex façade with a particularly strong architectural presence for an 1860s corner pub. It has been locally listed by Lambeth Council on the strength of the façade alone. It merits preservation on the basis of its design and importance as part of a planned urban streetscape of which it is among the final remnants. Its importance is further thrown into relief by the rapid pace of commercial redevelopment in the surrounding area, while an imminent threat is presented by the building's recent acquisition by a property development company.

But architectural value is not the only or indeed the main plank upon which this application rests. English Heritage has already designated the childhood homes of the Beatles in recognition of their significance to the nation's popular music culture, and also Brixton's covered markets for their significance to our legacy of post-war Caribbean immigration, as well as the architectural merits of these buildings. The RVT warrants designation for its unique importance and contribution to the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community and the nation's history of innovative popular performance culture.

While Britain's LGBT history has been recognised by some in the wider heritage sector, including the National Trust[9], English Heritage has yet to designate any structure, landscape or monument on the basis of its significance to that community. This shortfall is all the more significant given the lack of a British equivalent of the museums of LGBT heritage found, for example, in San Francisco, Berlin and Amsterdam.

If one were to seek a building to list by virtue of its significance to England's LGBT community, it is hard to think of a stronger candidate than the RVT. Unrivalled in the depth of its unique history, seven decades long and counting, of social and cultural service to the rich and diverse LGBT community, it is the heart of the local community, a London landmark and an international attraction. The drag and experimental performance nurtured on its stage for more than 60 years links LGBT and queer subculture with mainstream national entertainment too, thanks to the popularity of figures such as Paul O'Grady, MBE, who has credited his success to skills learned at what he cheekily calls "the Royal Vauxhall Tavern School of Dramatic Art".

"There's very little material to link LGBT communities in the present back to different LGBT communities in the past," according to Matt Houlbrook, Senior Lecturer in Modern British History at the University of Birmingham and author of *Queer London: Perils and Pleasures in the Sexual Metropolis, 1918-57* (University of Chicago Press, 2005). "Place is important to our sense of community. The RVT carries the impress of the past and brings it forward into the present. Where other places [with LGBT significance] have come and gone, this one has stood the test of time, despite problems with the law and social hostility. Other previously

[9] Through its *Soho Stories* app (http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/article-1356398419972/), supported by a gay-history-themed event (http://www.claytonlittlewood.com/merc_news/soho-app/)

marginalised social groups have this sense of place and identity about their past recognised and preserved. Why exclude the LGBT community from that?" [10]

The pub's community heritage grows directly out of the legacy of social and cultural transgression and innovation associated with the pleasure gardens that stood on the same site for two centuries before its construction – a fact Lambeth Council has recently promoted in marketing literature. The Tavern might even contain the last known material remnants of the gardens in the form of 12 distinctive iron columns.

The RVT remains an engine of cultural and community projects that both evoke its heritage and cater to contemporary sensibilities and needs. Partly through good fortune, partly through proud tradition, it remains standing as the sole marker of a site-specific cultural tradition more than 350 years old, one of very few remnants of a significant architectural development more than 150 years old and, after nearly 70 years, the most enduring venue with significant meaning for a British minority community. With its future in doubt because of its form and its location, it warrants the protection of a listing by English Heritage.

Vauxhall Gardens

Vauxhall has been a popular area for taverns since the sixteenth century but it was in the middle of the seventeenth that a new form of recreation took shape there. On July 2, 1661, John Evelyn made the first recorded reference to public Gardens in Vauxhall, recording in his diary a visit to a "pretty contrived plantation" called New Spring Garden. Pepys repeatedly mentions them in his diary too, taking note of the exotic foods, acrobats and singers, drunkenness and debauchery that made the Gardens a distinctive new London attraction.

After Jonathan Tyers took on the lease in 1729, however, the Gardens' renown reached new heights. Tyers installed lavish new walks and buildings, many with international themes (such as a Chinese pavilion and Turkish tent); introduced spectacular entertainments such as grand-scale recreations of battles; and commissioned artworks from the likes of William Hogarth and Louis-François Roubiliac, new music by Thomas Arne and G.F. Handel and performances by J.C. Bach. Handel's *Music for the Royal Fireworks* had its first public performance at Vauxhall in 1749 and Roubiliac's statue of the composer, created for the Gardens, is now at the Victoria & Albert Museum.

The Gardens offered new kinds of food and drink, including London's first cocktails, as well as the city's first bandstand and, later, its first balloon rides. The 'Vauxhall song', born in the Gardens, was arguably the precursor of pop music as we know it. The Gardens' marketing and publicity techniques were also groundbreaking, and made it probably the most popular single attraction of its time. [Figs 1a, 1b and 2]

The Gardens' premium on innovation and accessibility reshaped the capital's culture, and arguably the world's. "Vauxhall had an enormous influence," says David Coke,

[10] Interview with the author

author (with Alan Borg) of *Vauxhall Gardens, A History* (Yale Press, 2011).[11] "It pretty well invented modern leisure culture, replacing bear-baiting and cock-fighting" with unprecedented popular access to music and visual arts. The open-air setting contrasted with the smelly, crowded city north of the river, and entrance was a mere shilling, making the experience open to all classes.

"It did change society," argues Coke. "It was very egalitarian: people of all sorts in the same place, enjoying the same entertainment, eating the same food. There was no social divide at all. At the Gardens, you were accepted for whoever you were: an apprentice could easily be standing next to the Duke of Cumberland." Indeed, the Prince of Wales became an enthusiastic regular, leading to the redesignation of the site as the Royal Gardens, Vauxhall in 1822. An 1813 cartoon by George Cruikshank shows HRH vomiting against a tree while an amputee veteran begs him for money, the Duke of Wellington holds forth, a punch-up breaks out and another character declares "Now the girls are come we'll have some fun" – all with the Gardens' splendid bandstand, illuminations and lush foliage in the background. [Fig. 3]

Spectacular artificial illuminations were among the Gardens' most famous innovations – an internationally renowned draw in themselves but also a means by which the open-air site could operate late into the night. Parts of the Gardens, however, remained dark and were soon appreciated for their facilitation of types of social and sexual activity deemed shocking in polite society. In this sense, the Gardens were a carnivalesque site. "It was known as a place where the sexes could meet," Coke says. "The etiquette laws applied less there than anywhere else – you could escape parents and governesses because they were distracted. And I think it's probably right that people who were gay were more comfortable there too."

The Gardens and early drag culture

Cross-dressing military musical groups might have performed at the Gardens, and they were a natural site for cross-dressing molly culture, the eighteenth-century precursor of today's drag community. "Vauxhall became a centre for it because when you went there after dark, anything could be believed," Coke says. "Your stubble didn't show so much and it was the best place to show off. And there were people of all sorts there who were after a sensual evening. You never knew what you might get up to."

One of the most renowned figures of molly culture was John Cooper, known as Princess Seraphina. "She was the first recognisable drag queen in English history," Coke says. "That is, the first gay man for whom dragging up was an integral part of his identity, and who was well known by all his neighbours as a drag queen. Everyone called him Princess Seraphina, even when he was not wearing women's clothes."

"I know the Princess very well," an acquaintance declared in 1732. "I was told that he was dress'd in Woman's Cloaths at the last Masquerade…at Vauxhall." [12] Seraphina

[11] Interview with the author
[12] Rictor Norton (ed), Homosexuality in Eighteenth-Century England: A Sourcebook, http://rictornorton.co.uk/eighteen/seraphin.htm

tried to borrow lace garments from a dressmaker to wear "to the Ridotto at Vauxhall last Night, but I cou'd not persuade her to lend 'em me; but however she lent me your Callimanco Gown and Madam Nuttal's Mob [cap], and one of her Smocks, and so I went thither to pick up some Gentlemen to Dance." The men she picked up also wore drag, "and very good Gentlewomen they were. One of them…went to the Masquerade in a Velvet Domine, and pick'd up an old Gentleman, and went to Bed with him, but as soon as the old Fellow found that he had got a Man by his Side, he cry'd out, 'Murder'."

Nor was it only a place where men dressed as women. Later in the Gardens' history, on August 14, 1829, the *Times* reported on the trial of two girls charged with committing a disturbance. [Fig. 4] "It appeared that the two defendants were fellow servants in the same house, and feeling a strong desire to witness the humours of Vauxhall and being in want of a beau to afford them protection, they hit upon the following expedient—namely, that one of them should dress as a man and escort the other… The lot, as it happened, fell upon the smaller of the two, who made, however, a very tidy little man. Having stolen up the kitchen staircase on tip-toe, away they went arm in arm to share in the festivities of Vauxhall." At the end of a drunken night, they gleefully rang nearby houses' doorbells and ran away until a nightwatchman "pounced upon the man-woman in the act of pulling the house-bell with all her might, while her companion stood laughing at the joke." The unfortunate pair lost their jobs as a result. They probably weren't the only women in trousers: an 1846 illustration of a bal masque at the Gardens appears to show several women in male garb. [Fig. 5]

The Gardens had lost some of their social lustre by this point but remained hugely popular, with more of an emphasis on charity events and live performance. An 1848 poster for the Royal Vauxhall Gardens advertises not only the Grand View of Constantinople, Fountain of Neptune and Coral Cave but acrobats, clowns, lions, tigers, horses, fireworks and a ball – as well as a performance by William Henry Lane. [Fig. 6] Lane was an African American performer known as Master Juba, highly praised by Charles Dickens in his *American Notes* of 1842, published under Dickens's nom de plume, Boz. "The great Boz immortalised him; and he deserved the glory thus conferred," wrote the *Illustrated London News* on August 5, 1848 (p77). "If our readers doubt this, let them go the very next Monday or other evening that arrives, and see him at Vauxhall Gardens".

There, they could also have seen him perform in drag as Lucy Long. "With a most bewitching bonnet and veil, a very pink dress, beflounced to the waist, lace-fringed trousers of the most spotless purity, and red leather boots, – the ensemble completed by the green parasol and white cambric pocket handkerchief, – Master Juba certainly looked the black demoiselle of the first ton to the greatest advantage," reported the *Manchester Guardian* in its review of October 18, 1848. His performance comprised "a series of steps, which altogether baffle description from their number, oddity, and the rapidity with which they were executed… surely their like was never before seen for grotesque agility, not altogether unmixed with grace."

Over the coming years, acts such as those showcased at Vauxhall would find a new home: the music hall, which found its stride as an institution from around 1850 and had deep roots in Vauxhall. "Music hall sprang directly from Vauxhall Gardens," says David Coke. But times were changing in other ways. During the 1840s, the Gardens

were separated from the river by the construction of a large brick railway viaduct, part of the extension of the London & South Western Railway mainline route out of Waterloo, which opened in 1848 [Fig. 7]. In 1859, after two centuries, the Gardens closed.

The building in context

Following the closure of the Gardens, work quickly began on the redevelopment of the site, with new terraced streets taking shape, their names inspired by or lifted from the Gardens. Laid out across an area bounded by Goding Street to the west, Upper Kennington Lane to the south, Miller's Lane to the east and Vauxhall Walk and Leopold Street to the north, the new structures included houses, two children's schools, an art school, a marble works and St Peter's Church, finished in 1864 and now Grade II*-listed.

The Royal Vauxhall Tavern, located at the southeast corner of the site – on the former location of the Kennington Lane entrance to the Gardens, as depicted in illustrations of 1850 [Figs. 8a and 8b] – was one of the first buildings constructed as part of the redevelopment. It could plausibly have been a flagship structure for the new development – the first up and, as it turns out, among the last standing.

The pub's name seems likely to have been conceived consciously to evoke associations with the Royal Gardens, Vauxhall, which remained a site of nostalgia long after their closure. "The Tavern may well have been set up by someone associated with the Gardens," says Coke. "There was something called the Royal Vauxhall Tavern that opened before the Gardens even closed so it's possible there's an ongoing tradition." (A court proceeding of 1835 gives a witness's address as "Royal Vauxhall Tavern, Vauxhall-road".)

The Tavern's architect is likely to have been James Edmeston, who was responsible for planning redevelopment of the area when work on the pub appears to have begun, and submitted plans to the Metropolitan Board of Works for new streets on the site of Vauxhall Gardens between December 1859 and February 1860.[13] (This presumably was the architect James Edmeston born in 1823 or 1824 rather than his father, of the same name and profession, born in 1791.)

Construction seems to have taken place between 1860 and 1862. An advertisement for the sale of the Vauxhall Gardens Estate, including both building ground and structures from the Gardens, appeared in the *Times* in 1860.[14] In 1873, the Tavern's lease was sold with 86 years to run, which suggests that it might have run originally from 1860 (99 years being a common lease term), indicating that as the date building work began.[15] This is corroborated by an 1860 development plan for the site held in the Museum of London library. An 1861 map appears to show some kind of structure at the pub's location with the rest of the site vacant. [Fig. 9] An 1862 map shows the site

[13] *Metropolitan Board of Work Minutes*, 27 Jan and 24 Feb 1860, pp.76 and 147
[14] *The Times*, July 18, 1860, p.15
[15] *London Standard*, February 11, 1873, p.3

cleared, with streets marked out but the pub apparently the only building in place.[16] [Fig. 10]

In 1863, the *Times* mentioned "Mr Garrard's Royal Vauxhall Tavern",[17] while four years later the *London Gazette* recorded the bankruptcy of Edward Gooch Garrard, formerly of the RVT.[18] Certainly, Ordnance Survey maps show the whole area in its finished state by 1875 [Fig. 11] with the pub facing the busy intersection [as evoked by the much later photograph Fig. 12]. Aerial photographs from the 1930s, 40s and 50s give a sense of how the brick terraces stood adjacent to the railway arches. [Figs. 13a-c]

The 1881 census records the pub's residents as landlord Benjamin Griffin, his brother and sister, four barmen and a servant girl. The RVT was bought in 1889 by the publicans Poole and Venner, who employed architect R.A. Lewcock to refurbish the interior.[19] Lewcock (1846-1932) specialised in pubs and is best known for the Grade II*-listed Black Lion in Kilburn and for the interior of the Grade II-listed George Tavern on Commercial Road, London E1. His work on the RVT from around 1896 included the installation of a curved bar that drag acts would later delight in running along, at the peril of any drinks not hastily removed.

The 1970s saw the demolition of the streets laid out on the footprint of the Gardens. Auckland Street, Burnett Street, Gye Street, Italian Walk – which took its name from one of the Gardens' promenades – and Leopold Walk disappeared entirely, while a vestige of Glyn Street remained.[20] The area reopened as parkland under the name New Spring Gardens, referring to the pleasure gardens' earliest name. The Royal Vauxhall Tavern is one of very few remnants of the demolished streets, and the sole remaining building from the block to which it originally belonged. [Fig 14.] It now acts both as gateway to the park and as an important remnant of mid-nineteenth-century urban planning that has been otherwise erased.

Curves and columns: plan form, elevations and special features

The Tavern's distinctive footprint – triangular, with one curvilinear and two straight sides – reflects its design as the dominant building at the apex of two terraces in an area bounded by Goding Street, Auckland Street and the now-vanished Italian Walk.

A parapetted roof creates a simple, curving ridge line, emphasising the footprint of the corner site. Four confident yet harmonious Italianate brickwork arches spring from decorative brick pilasters, two generous storeys high, which define the upper floors. These four central bays are flanked by slightly projecting end bays with well-proportioned pediments. The ground-floor pub frontage is supported by six structural

[16] Edward Stanford's *Library Map of London and its Suburbs* (Sheet 14: Chelsea, Pimlico, Battersea, Kennington, Lambeth and Stockwell)
[17] *The Times*, May 14, 1863, p.16
[18] *The London Gazette*, November 22, 1867, p6313
[19] *Victorian Pubs*, Mark Girouard (Studio Vista, London, 1975), pp86
[20] The streets are shown intact on the 1966 Ordinance Survey map TQ3078 SE

external composite columns, grouped in pairs that marked the entrances to the three bars of the pub's original design.

This broad, striking elevation boldly addresses the flow of traffic from the junction at Vauxhall Cross on the other side of the railway viaduct, testifying to the building's status as a prominent landmark structure conceived as a gateway between the station area and the streets that stood to its north. A longer distance vista of the frontage from the south was opened up in the mid-1930s, when buildings were cleared to make way for one of the capital's earliest traffic gyratories. (This necessitated the construction of a new section of highway between Kennington Lane and the Wandsworth Road via a realigned South Lambeth Road and the new Parry Street, completed in the 1940s.)

The interior of the pub has undergone significant changes since its construction but one extant feature is worthy of special note: its columns with elaborate Corinthian capitals. As well as the six exterior columns, the RVT has six interior columns. All 12 are potentially structural: the internal columns are aligned with the beams and the centre of the ceiling.

Columns were a characteristic feature of the elaborate, decorative constructions for which the Gardens were so celebrated, with some original covered walkways replaced by others in 1811. Pavilions and colonnades containing columns of apparently similar design to those found at the RVT are visible in illustrations such as the frontispiece of a 1778 edition of the *Vocal* magazine, a 1799 engraving for the *Lady's* magazine, an 1827 drawing by George Scharf in the British Museum's holdings and 1850 illustrations of the Kennington Lane entrance at the site where the pub now stands. [Figs 7, 8, 15, 16 and 17]

There is strong continuity between the dismantling and availability of the ornamental structures and the Tavern's construction very soon after. In fact, material from the Gardens were auctioned off at exactly the time the pub was built. The catalogue for the auction on August 22, 1859 of the "Fixtures, Fittings, Plant, and Building Materials of the Royal Gardens, Vauxhall" lists "about sixty-one iron columns".[21] [Figs 18a and 18b] An advertisement for the sale of the Vauxhall Gardens Estate from the *Times* on July 18, 1860 also mentions "columns". There is therefore strong circumstantial evidence that the columns at the RVT were salvaged from the Gardens.

The strength of association between the Gardens and columns is illustrated by a verse entitled 'The Lament of the Colonnade', published in *Punch* in 1869.[22] [Fig 19] The spur appears to have been the resale of one such colonnade advertised as follows: "This remnant of the past has witnessed many a scene of merriment with lords and ladies of high degree. It is suitable for the Gardens of a tavern or place of amusement". The verse demonstrates the nostalgia in which the Gardens were still held a decade after their closure – and their close association with alcohol ("I date the downfall of Vauxhall,/Whatever parties thinks,/I date its sad decline and fall/To its decline in drinks"). The installation in 2011 next to the Tavern of two 18-metre high columns of a contemporary cylindrical design by DSDHA, as part of the Spring

[21] NB the bill of sale lists them as octagon iron columns – but this could refer to the two Octagon Temples (see Fig. 1b) rather than the columns' own shape.
[22] *Punch*, LVII, August 21, 1869, p.71

Gardens refurbishment and renaming as Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens, reaffirms their totemic importance to the site. [Fig 20]

"It's certainly worth preserving the [RVT's internal and external] columns in situ until we know [their origin] for sure," says David Coke. "If they are from the Gardens, they're fantastically important because there's no other surviving architecture from Vauxhall Gardens anywhere that we know of. If these columns aren't from the Gardens, where are they from?" Whatever their source, the Tavern's columns offer continuity with the built character of the Gardens that preceded it. The strong probability of a direct link adds substantially to the building's importance.

In the early 1980s, the interior was remodeled to form a unified space. The sweep of R.A. Lewcock's long curved bar was retained in a modified form, with small bar 'islands' attached to the iconic columns at waist height. These are still sometimes used by performers. The new interior configuration proved to be a major boost to the RVT as a performance venue. With a curtained stage at the rear of the unified space, a single bar down the length of the east wall and a raised seating area stretching across the interior of the building's curved frontage, the room now combined the spatial properties of a single-room bar and a theatre, with flexible seating arranged in a fan-shaped area facing the stage, allowing for clear acoustics and sightlines from throughout the room (columns permitting). In my own experience as *Time Out London*'s cabaret editor from 2009 to 2013, I found the effect to be unparalleled among London venues for its success in fostering the collaborative, conversational dynamic between performers and audience that is crucial to cabaret performance.

A continuing tradition

There would probably have been substantial continuity between the Gardens' patrons and employees and those who used the new pub. "Vauxhall became the home of all sorts of people in the entertainment trade," Coke says. "The Gardens employed musicians, singers, acrobats and firework-makers and they tended to move into the district. That carried on because the young of the family get trained in the family trade. A lot of the musicians, singers particularly, are known to have had houses nearby." There were numerous music halls in the area too – Lambeth Walk, after all, is barely a few hundred yards away. "That bohemian tradition is very strong in the area well into the twentieth century," Coke adds. "Charlie Chaplin comes out of exactly that tradition – he was local."

There was continuity in the site's use for recreation and escapism too, though there might have been a shift from excitement and novelty to mere consolation. Just as the Gardens provided people with relief from ordinary city life, pubs like the Royal Vauxhall Tavern provided respite from working-class drudgery.

"Vauxhall was one of the poorest areas in London in the 1860s and 70s," says Coke. "Most people there didn't have the vote because they weren't householders. The only people who had the vote were publicans and there were 50 of them." Yet, like the Gardens, pubs were also open to all comers and would have had ample music and entertainment. And Vauxhall's longstanding association with breweries and gin

distilleries kept the taps flowing. Anecdotally, the RVT acquired a reputation as "a kind of music hall, a boozer with acts".[23]

Edmund Bird, former head of conservation at Lambeth Council and author of four volumes of architectural histories commissioned by Lambeth Borough Archives, notes the significance of such places. "Victorian pubs play a very important part in the country's social history. Like any public or civic building, it's where the community meets and forges its identity. They're as important – or probably even more important in terms of social history – as a town hall or cinema."

The RVT could also be seen as "a vestige of a Victorian party culture," suggests Matt Cook, Senior Lecturer in History and Gender Studies at Birkbeck, University of London, author of *London and the Culture of Homosexuality, 1885-1914* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), editor of *A Gay History of Britain: Love and Sex Between Men since the Middle Ages* (Greenwood, 2007) and co-editor of *Queer 1950s: Rethinking Sexuality in the Post-war Years* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012). "It picks up on a specific carnivalesque tradition and its queerness. It's on the edge of the city as was yet maintains a central position in queer cultures and queer lives… It's the last vestige of something we should cling on to."[24]

Gay Vauxhall and the pub as a lifeline

Vauxhall and its environs remained associated with illicit sex. According to *QX*, a magazine for London's gay scene, "the first reports of gay cruising south of the river come from the Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens" and even after their closure "gentlemen came here to pick up working lads"[25] – though there's no evidence the RVT was part of that trade. By the turn of the century, homosexuality was common in hostels including those at Vauxhall and Elephant & Castle.

It's hard to ascertain when drag performance started at the Royal Vauxhall Tavern, though some unconfirmed reports date it back to the 1880s or earlier.[26] It's even more difficult to establish exactly when it established a regular homosexual clientele. It is in the nature of essentially illicit subcultures that much of their history is unwritten or even deliberately concealed or destroyed for the sake of discretion in a nation where homosexuality remained illegal until 1967. This lack of certainty, though frustrating from the point of view of documentation and research, is itself an index of the fragility of the heritage of LGBT experience. What isn't in question is the importance of such places to many of those whose sexuality alienated them from mainstream society.

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[23] Rupert Smith, speaking at Duckie's Vauxhall Bacchanal all-day event, Southbank Centre, August 10, 2013 (http://www.southbankcentre.co.uk/whatson/festivals-series/vauxhall-bacchanal)
[24] Interview with the author
[25] Haydon Bridge, 'Southern Comfort', *QX*, 2006. http://www.qxmagazine.com/pdf/gayhistory-south.pdf
[26] Kate Pullinger's novel *When the Monster Dies* (Cape, 1989), set in 1984, reports the RVT "had hosted drag shows for over one hundred years" (p.82) but gives no source

"One of the ways we've begun to commemorate gay space has been around people's homes," notes historian Matt Cook. "What hasn't been held to have cultural value is those pivotal spaces of socialisation. Protecting an iconic queer space is important from that point of view. In the context of illegality, points of community – wherever they can occur, at home or in the open air or at bars and pubs – become really important in beginning to forge a sense of community."

Historian Matt Houlbrook argues that current popular conceptions imagine lesbian and gay people before the liberalisation of the 1960s to have been "isolated, marginalised, hidden, repressed, full of guilt and shame – all these negative qualities. But if you start looking at cafes and bars in central London from the 1920s, and places like the RVT from the 1940s, that's not the case."

The Vauxhall Tavern has been recognised as "London oldest surviving gay pub".[27] Its nearest rival, the Black Cap in Camden, seems not to have attracted a consistent gay clientele until the 1960s. Outside London, meanwhile, the oldest such venue might be the New Union, formerly the Union, on Manchester's Canal St. "Sometime around 1960 the pub began to welcome homosexuals openly", according to Ed Glinert's *The Manchester Compendium: A Street-by-Street History of England's Greatest Industrial City* (Penguin, 2008), so it is "believed to be the second oldest gay pub in the country." Certainly, no other English building seems to offer a comparably continuous and enduring interwoven history of LGBT socialising and performance.

According to D. Maudlin and M Vellinga in *Consuming Architecture*, "The Royal Vauxhall Tavern, one of London's oldest drag pubs after World War Two first established Vauxhall as a destination for gay men looking for a night out"[28] – although, as we've seen, gay men were in fact enjoying nights out in Vauxhall's pleasure gardens long before that. Other anecdotal reports suggest drag acts developed during wartime by members of the Entertainments National Service Association (ENSA) were performed there in the 1940s.

The writer Rupert Smith recalls being told by "an old queen whom I knew from this period" that in the post-war years, the pub's long opening hours and location on an arterial route attracted lorry drivers and market traders "and then they started getting the cabaret in as a way of entertaining that crowd. And because there were a lot of drag acts around… that brought in a gay clientele… But it may equally have been that the lorry drivers and market traders attracted gay customers themselves because they, you know, liked a bit of trade."

According to Jason Dickie, the RVT's general manager since 1995, "just after the war…it was like a private drinking club for men" and an object of interest for local residents, including those at neighbouring Vauxhall Gardens Estate, built in the 1930s. "A lot of the old dears in the estate out back remember it being there from

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[27] Haydon Bridge, 'Southern Comfort', *QX*, 2006.
http://www.qxmagazine.com/pdf/gayhistory-south.pdf
28 James Swinson, 'SE11: [RE] GENERATIONS', in *Consuming Architecture: On the Occupation, Appropriation and Interpretation of Buildings* (eds Daniel Maudlin, Marcel Vellinga, Routledge, 2014), p.260

their childhood," he reports. "As young girls and young boys growing up, even if they're 80 now, there was some fascination… Obviously, their mothers and fathers had said, 'Oh, that's a den of men!'"[29]

"In the 1940s and 50s, pubs like the RVT are," says Houlbrook, "social hubs, places where men and women who don't know anyone can make contact with broader social networks and communities and where groups of friends can arrange to meet. They create a sense of solidarity or community in a world that is often quite hostile, offering something that approximates privacy and security. They almost fill the role of the family home. It's precarious – there's always a chance of a raid or being shut down – and lots of the pubs are remembered as quite rough and dodgy. But they also had the sense of affirmation that comes from being with people like yourself."

This combination of rough-around-the-edges and home-away-from-home attributes would prove to be an apt characterisation of the RVT for decades to come.

The performer Bette Bourne went to the pub as a customer in the 1950s, "when I was about 17". "There was a lot of 'side' in the 50s – a lot of covering up going on – and that prevented gay people from getting to know each other," Bourne recalled at Duckie's Vauxhall Bacchanal, an all-day event in honour of the RVT at the Southbank Centre on August 10, 2013. "There were plenty of gay clubs all over Soho" at the time, Bourne says in *A Life in Three Acts*, the autobiographical play he created with Mark Ravenhill (Methuen, 2009). "The Cricketers, the Vauxhall, the Union, the Manor House, gay places all over London, the Duragon. You'd get on the bus and you'd go down there." Of all of these, the Vauxhall Tavern is the only one still operating as an LGBT venue.

At that time, the RVT was divided into three sections with the bar at the far end from the street doors. "The gay bar was (on the right hand side) and then you'd have the snug and I think there was a straight bit on the other side," Bourne recalled. "The biggest part was the gay part because it was packed and that was the part that made the money." The bar itself "was about two feet wide and curved like a yellow brick road and followed the pillars round and all the drag queens would come off the stage at the back because the bar was sort of in the middle and they'd run around saying, 'Ere we come!' And you'd have to get your drinks off quickly otherwise they got smashed." [Fig 21.] Cabaret drag acts were by now thoroughly entrenched in the culture and identity of the RVT. There was also a swing that performers could use as part of the show.

Steve Ellis, who later ran nights at the pub, first went as a customer around 1966. He says that for many who went, "it was their only chance to be gay because of the rules and regulations and the law. Outside, you had to put on as straight a face as possible so once you got into an atmosphere where everyone else was gay it was a case of, 'Oh, I can let [my guard] down now! I can be whatever I want to be!'"[30]

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[29] Interview with Tim Brunsden as part of the *Happy Birthday RVT* project (http://happybirthdayrvt.com/)
[30] Interview with Tim Brunsden as part of the *Happy Birthday RVT* project (http://happybirthdayrvt.com/)

Decriminalisation was just around the corner but mainstream society was still often intolerant and the area around the RVT no friendlier than anywhere else. "It wasn't good," Ellis recalls. "Walking down there, it was dark and not very safe. You mainly had to go through a tunnel and you'd get people calling at you and that sort of thing especially…if you dared to camp it up… It was something you had to accept. I think quite a few people still preferred to come in groups" for safety.

Andrew Pryor, who would later work at the RVT as a barman, first visited the pub aged 21 in 1973, while on leave from the army. Its importance as a lifeline for gay men remained crucial. "I didn't have a bloody clue where the gay places were," Pryor says. "Being in the army, you couldn't talk about being gay. I couldn't ask me army mates, 'Do you know if there's any gay clubs in London?'"[31] He found out about the Tavern from a listing in *Gay News*. "Even though this was my first experience in the gay scene, for some reason the Vauxhall had this very natural, easygoing atmosphere. It wasn't the real scary experience I expected it was going to be. And the [cabaret] act was fabulous and I had a terrific night. I met this guy called Brian who invited me to stay with him. He lived on Stockwell Road – which is not too far from the Vauxhall, 'cause I remember we walked – and I spent the rest of my leave with him."

During the 1960s and 70s, the 'straight' bar at the Tavern was known for its preponderance of rough sleepers and alcoholics – perhaps not an alluring prospect for all potential customers, but a sign of the venue's tolerant attitude towards the socially excluded. This is a tradition that continues to this day in the form of RVT resident performance company Duckie's Slaughterhouse Club project, which works with local addicts and homeless people.

And just as the Gardens hosted numerous charity events, the RVT was frequently a site of fundraising for good causes. Photos record charity nights involving celebrities such as Diana Dors and Barbara Wodehouse around 1980. [Figs 22a and 22b]

"Nobody ever mentions all the money that we raised," says Breda McConnon, landlady at the time. "We used to raise it for hospitals… before that it was the guide dogs… All the gay pubs in London raised thousands… They were fantastic."[32] An annual charity sports day dates back to 1982: the inaugural programme shows events including a competitive male strip, a yard-of-ale contest and a drag race ("Contestant to run to end of field in team uniform, to change into frock, wig and heels, and run back"). The event would go on to involve up to five pubs and the tradition continues to this day. [Figs 23a-e]

The shows go on

The RVT's association with performance warrants special attention. Performer Stuart Feather, who would later work with Bette Bourne as part of the internationally acclaimed experimental queer theatre troupe Bloolips, was a customer in the mid-

[31] Interview with Tim Brunsden as part of the *Happy Birthday RVT* project (http://happybirthdayrvt.com/)
[32] Interview with Tim Brunsden as part of the *Happy Birthday RVT* project (http://happybirthdayrvt.com/)

1960s. "You went there for the entertainment," Feather says.[33] "It was part of a circuit" of gay pubs featuring nightly performances in Vauxhall, around the Oval and along Camberwell Road.

Acts he recalls seeing include classically trained Canadian drag soprano Jean Fredericks with her cod-opera act (complete with trombone finale) and the popular duo Rogers and Starr, who also appeared in the West End and on film. Mrs Shufflewick, after whom the the upstairs bar of the Black Cap in Camden is now named, was another regular. Lee Paris was perhaps the Vauxhall Tavern's most consistently successful act of the 1960s and 70s. He often used the swing installed above the bar in performances and continued appearing at the RVT into the 1990s. Performances at this time tended not to make explicit reference to social or political subjects – but drag queens, as Bette Bourne puts it, "are political in a sense without even trying to be because of their underground lives that they led all those years"[34].

Listings from *Time Out* magazine in the late 60s show drag performances taking place five nights a week at the RVT – a tally superceded only by the Black Cap. [Fig 24] The RVT's preeminence as a site of transgressive performance was reinforced by its inclusion as a location for the 1970 film *Goodbye Gemini* featuring Michael Redgrave; it appeared, including a drag performance, during a scene in which the lead characters took a walk on the wild side. [Fig 25] (The soundtrack included a number called 'Vauxhall Tavern Strip Melody'.)

A newspaper clipping from 1975 refers to the Tavern as "London's best known drag pub"[35] and shows Jerry Courbrinck performing while standing on the bar, holding on to a column. [Fig 26] Many acts "used to swing themselves round the pole and we had to duck behind the bar," Ellis recalls. Adrella first played the RVT around 1976; her *Sunday School* show began there in 1983 and ran for more than a decade.[36] She also played the West End, toured internationally and inspired one of the lead characters in the film *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*. David Dale had many trademark acts, including a lip-synch number set to American performer Lily Tomlin's switchboard-operator comedy routine and a striptease set to Charles Aznavour's 'What Makes a Man a Man?' involving the removal not only of clothing but of make-up and all the accoutrements of drag itself. Regina Fong's *Monday Madhouse* was another long-running RVT institution, including her signature performance of the theme to *Skippy the Bush Kangaroo*, among other numbers.

In 1981, Steve Ellis began running nights at the Vauxhall that amalgamated music, performance and DJing in a new and influential way. He also started using the acronym 'RVT' in publicity for the first time. For Ellis, music was vital to renewing the venue's appeal but only as a means to the end of socialising. "We kept [the music] down enough so that people could talk," he says. "It was a meeting place – there's no

[33] Speaking at Duckie's Vauxhall Bacchanal all-day event, Southbank Centre, August 10, 2013 (http://www.southbankcentre.co.uk/whatson/festivals-series/vauxhall-bacchanal)
[34] Interview with Tim Brunsden as part of the *Happy Birthday RVT* project (http://happybirthdayrvt.com/)
[35] Caption to photo of performance by Rhythm and Black
[36] http://www.qxmagazine.com/feature/adrella-9th-april-1956-11th-april-2012/

two ways about it." Still, dance music became and remains a consistent and integral part of RVT programming, with current dance nights including *Push the Button* and *Anthem*.

At the same time, a new drag renaissance was approaching that would have a huge impact on mainstream popular culture. The key acts of this innovative resurgence – especially Paul O'Grady (aka Lily Savage), Regina Fong, Adrella, David Dale and the Trollettes – all had close associations with the RVT. David Dale and Adrella were among the first drag performers to move from lip-synching to live performance of their own material. As historian Julie Peakman has noted, in this period "places that had been marginalized and underground in the 1970s, such as the Union pub on Canal Street in Manchester and the Royal Vauxhall Tavern in London, were being attended by straights as well as gays. A new wave of drag artists… such as Paul O'Grady and Julian Clary both toured clubs and pubs before they obtained television fame"[37].

For both Clary and O'Grady, the RVT was a crucial early venue – if not necessarily a genteel or an indulgent one. Clary played one of his first gigs there as a 21-year-old in 1980. He and his performing partner of the time were, he recalled in his memoir *A Young Man's Passage*, "booked for a Saturday night at the famous, if notoriously rough, south London drag pub the Vauxhall Tavern".[38] It didn't go well: "ice cubes started to be thrown. A slow hand-clap started at the back of the pub and swiftly gained momentum… We hurriedly retreated to the dressing room where we stayed long after closing time in case we were lynched."

When O'Grady first went as a customer, he too "thought it was really rough" but after he moved to Vauxhall in 1983, he observed its sense of community. "There was a wonderful atmosphere in there when it was cooking with gas, which it frequently was," he says. "It was a working-class pub, predominantly working-class audience, all in the same boat and all knew each other… It was like the village hall for those that lived in the area. It was where we all congregated… When somebody died, the funeral would be held in the Vauxhall, always. We celebrated birthdays there. Every Christmas we all went down there… It was a real community pub… All the people who went there were locals… It was a home from home."[39] As he affirmed in his memoir *The Devil Rides Out*, "it was to become my spiritual home for over ten years and in that time I would learn to love every brick in the place".[40]

O'Grady considers his early years at the RVT – during which he developed his hugely popular drag persona Lily Savage – his apprenticeship. When asked in 2004 where he had trained, he replied: "The Royal Vauxhall Tavern School of Dramatic Art on South London's Barbary Coast".[41] He went on to enjoy a Thursday night residency at the Tavern from 1984 to 1992. "It was a real carnival atmosphere on a Thursday night

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[37] Julie Peakman, *The Pleasure's all Mine, A History of Perverse Sex*, London: Reaktion Press, 2013, p.164
[38] *A Young Man's Passage* (Ebury, 2006), p.134-5
[39] Interview with Tim Brunsden as part of the *Happy Birthday RVT* project (http://www.happybirthdayrvt.com/2014/06/04/paul-ogrady-remembers-the-rvt/)
[40] *The Devil Rides Out* (Bantam, 2011), p.397
[41] http://www.whatsonstage.com/west-end-theatre/news/12-2004/20-questions-withpaul-ogrady_24406.html

– absolute carnival," he later said, again evoking memories of the Gardens. Towards the end of this run, he was nominated for the prestigious Edinburgh Perrier comedy award and was soon appearing on TV and in the West End, eventually being made an MBE. His transition from subcultural performance to national prominence could be seen as marking a shift in public attitudes to drag acts and gay performers.

Royalty and the avant-garde

O'Grady also recalls being told that the Royal Vauxhall Tavern "was once a famous music hall where the likes of Marie Lloyd frequently performed, and how even Queen Victoria once paid a visit (hence the Royal) en route to the palace".[42] Such tales might be without literal substance – indeed, O'Grady dismisses them himself – but they emphasise the extent to which the venue had already become semi-mythical, bound up with London lore linking crowned heads, show business and the demimonde as well as establishing its vital role to the local LGBT community. It's no surprise that the pub's sign at this time was decorated with performing figures who simultaneously harked back to the heritage of the Gardens and evoked what still happened week in, week out. [Fig. 27]

Nor was this a matter only of myth, or only of the past. There's an iconic incident from the 1980s that demonstrates the continuity of a whole range of strands in the site's history including its associations with royalty, with cross-dressing, with transgressive performance and with radical social mixing: the time Princess Diana visited the RVT dressed as a boy. [Fig. 28]

In her memoir *The Power of Positive Drinking*, the performer Cleo Rocos recalls how one evening she was watching *The Golden Girls* with her frequent collaborator Kenny Everett, his friend Freddie Mercury and Diana, who knew both men. What, the princess wondered, were their plans for the night? "Freddie told her we were going to the Vauxhall Tavern – a rather notorious gay bar in London. Diana said that she had never heard of it and she'd like to come too. Now this was not a good idea… But it was clear that Diana was in full mischief mode… She just wanted the thrill of going in, undetected", so Everett dressed her in military and leather garb and dark glasses and off they went.[43] The foursome achieved their aim of getting to the RVT, ordering a drink and bundling Diana into a cab without her being recognised. Like an earlier Prince of Wales, she just wanted to have fun; and like those Victorian maids, she found liberation through cross-dressing. Such links are at the heart of the meaning of the RVT.

Writer and director Neil Bartlett, OBE, has directed work at the Tavern as well as at more widely recognised institutions such as the National Theatre, Royal Shakespeare Company and Lyric Theatre Hammersmith, where he was artistic director from 1994 to 2004. He credits the RVT as an indispensable part of his cultural education. When he was an RVT regular in the early 80s, he says, "I was interested in the radical, the dangerous, the free and the queer, and in the Vauxhall I found artists who were so good and who were bridging very different traditions."

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[42] *The Devil Rides Out*, p.397
[43] *The Power of Positive Drinking* (Square Peg, 2013), p.44-48

At the same time, he was watching Fassbinder movies and Pina Bausch at Sadlers Wells and Tadeusz Kantor at the Edinburgh festival: "serious, heavyweight avant-garde artists. And the first time I saw Lily [Savage]," he says, "I knew this is an avant-garde performer who also happens to be a completely authentic working-class drag queen telling filthy jokes and making you fall over laughing."[44] To Bartlett, the RVT's artistic bona fides are second to none. "I often get asked…'Mr Bartlett, what are the most memorable performances you've seen in your life?' And they're expecting Judi Dench or whatever – and I can quite seriously put my hand on my heart and say Lily and Reg [Fong] and David [Hoyle, who began performing at the RVT in the 1990s]. These are three of the most extraordinary and accomplished avant-garde artists that I've ever seen working."

It's important that these performers have all had long-running regular residencies – standing weekly arrangements that result in shows that are, in Bartlett's words, "like church, because when you get there, you know the rest of the congregation. When you go to the West End, to the commercial theatre, you're in a room full of strangers. For me, you see, one of the defining aspects of church ritual is that you know your fellow celebrants and they know you… [Seeing] Lily Savage at the Royal Vauxhall Tavern back in the early '80s, that was like going to church – we were the congregation and she was the celebrant. Absolutely."[45]

And the RVT's tradition of long-running residencies, each with its own unique mix of social interaction, raucous entertainment and formal experimentation, continues. The company Duckie has put on every Saturday night since 1995. David Hoyle (formerly the Divine David) still holds regular six-week runs, combining radical satire with song, dance, live painting, interviews and wilder actions such as on-stage tattooing. Jonathan Hellyer, performing as The Dame Edna Experience, took over from Adrella to appear every Sunday from 1999 to 2013. Current long-running nights include Bar Wotever (Tuesdays since 2005), which has especially strong female and transgender following, and Timberlina's *Big Bingo Show* (Mondays since 2006). There's also a monthly Friday night by the LipSinkers, who deliver an altogether modern take on the most venerable form of drag. LipSinkers member Blanche Dubois even performs a striptease act involving the removal of all drag that recalls David Dale's take on 'What Makes a Man a Man?' [Figs 29-38 show performers and nights with strong RVT associations]

These regular events could be seen as queer micro-communities in themselves, combining community and creativity in ways distinct from either mainstream theatre culture or regular pub or bar socialising. "Each night means something to people," as general manager Jason Dickie puts it. They have been the vessel for real significance in generations of LGBT people's lives, and their existence is inextricable from the building and its history. Dickie says the RVT has "never been a venue where every day Joe Bloggs came in and bought a pint of Guinness at the exact same time – but it

[44] Speaking at Duckie's Vauxhall Bacchanal all-day event, Southbank Centre, August 10, 2013 (http://www.southbankcentre.co.uk/whatson/festivals-series/vauxhall-bacchanal)
[45] David M. Halperin and Valerie Traub (eds), *Gay Shame*, University of Chicago Press, 2009, 'Plunge Into Your Shame', 339-348, interview with Neil Bartlett, p.348

is that way on individual nights. At Duckie, you have certain people who've been coming for years who come in at the exact same time every week."[46] He recalls how one octogenarian fan of Jonathan Hellyer called Norman flew over from retirement in Spain especially to see Hellyer's final show. "When people like Norman come back, we make a fuss of him because he's been [coming] here for 30 years or more."

AIDS panic, morale building and the 'rubber gloves raid'

Neil Bartlett has talked of the particular importance of the RVT as a community space during the 1980s, a time of general economic hardship as well as frequent violent hate crime. "You have to remember what else was going on at this time in our lives. In the same way that I didn't know anyone who had a job, I didn't know anyone who hadn't been beaten up," he recalls. "You were dealing with a level of both casual homophobia just all the time and also state-sponsored homophobia: the police and the media and the government, a constant barrage of hatred with a big capital H. So to go into this absolute knockdown ramshackle old pub with all of these extraordinary people like you having come from all over London, and then to have this magnificent queen [on stage] going, 'It's all right to be unemployed. Fuck 'em…' It was meat and drink. It was lifeblood… and that's why the Vauxhall Tavern was important. To turn all that misery and hardship around with that much panache and sheer bloody nerve!"[47]

The importance of the RVT as a site of moral and practical support for an embattled minority was made painfully clear by the devastation of AIDS. "It was a war against AIDS and we were on the front line down at the Vauxhall, every single night," recalls Paul O'Grady.[48] Unlike during the Blitz, however, there was no expectation of general social solidarity. "This was known as the gay plague. There was loads of prejudice surrounding it."

The impact of the disease accelerated rapidly in the early 1980s but was initially met with minimal government action, widespread media hostility and a police crackdown on gay socialising. Homophobic violence showed a marked increase in these years but many were reluctant to report it to the police, who often ignored such crimes and still regularly entrapped gay people. In one far from uncharacteristic instance, a gay man who was hit on the head with a hammer in a fight was arrested and left in a cell with his wound untreated and the words "Beware AIDS" chalked on his cell door.[49]

In the absence of help from the state, the Vauxhall Tavern quickly became a key site of organised support and information exchange. "A lot of people felt that the Vauxhall was like the campaign headquarters," recalls the writer Rupert Smith, an

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[46] Interview with Tim Brunsden as part of the *Happy Birthday RVT* project (http://happybirthdayrvt.com/)
[47] Speaking at Duckie's Vauxhall Bacchanal all-day event, Southbank Centre, August 10, 2013 (http://www.southbankcentre.co.uk/whatson/festivals-series/vauxhall-bacchanal)
[48] Interview with Tim Brunsden as part of the *Happy Birthday RVT* project (http://happybirthdayrvt.com/)
[49] *Gay London Policing Group 3rd Annual Report 1986-1987* (GALOP, 1987), p.7

activist and RVT regular at the time.[50] "The Vauxhall was one of the first places where I definitely remember buckets being rattled and people collecting money… Most of the people who went to the Vauxhall were quite involved in fundraising and counselling."

"We were doing charities nearly every other night of the week," says O'Grady. "The Vauxhall raised thousands. Absolute thousands! We used to buy things like mattresses for them in the hospitals, pillows, sheepskin rugs… I think people tend to forget that as well. We were the soldiers."

According to Smith, the Tavern offered "a safe space" for acknowledging and addressing the ongoing trauma of AIDS that contrasted not only with mainstream society but other LGBT spaces too. "You knew that if you'd had a really horrible day and really bad things were happening to you and your friends and you couldn't really talk about it with the outside world very much, at least in there you could. Because actually there were some places on the gay scene where that was not the case. This is hard to believe but there were a lot of places at that time where if you tried to talk to people about what was going on and to talk about health risks and the political aspect of it – because the government's inactivity was very alarming, and the police activity that was going on – people would go, 'Oh, don't come in here with all your political talk. I don't want to hear about AIDS. I'm here for a good time'."

As well as being the 'soldiers', acts like Lily Savage and Adrella were entertainers – the ENSA of the era, if you like. Drag performance was never more vital than at this time. "We were the Vera Lynns of south London!" O'Grady suggests. "Meanwhile, we had the same problems [the audience] did, and they knew that. Bloody great camaraderie. There was a very strong community spirit."

The defining incident of this period was a police raid on the RVT. In fact, according to a report by the Gay London Policing Group (GALOP), there were two raids, on December 17 1983 and January 24 1984. The second, which took place during a Lily Savage performance, was the "more dramatic and alarming in its consequences": "35 police officers raided the pub, some of them wearing rubber gloves. Eleven men were arrested for being 'drunk on licensed premises' and later released without charge,"[51] though they reported suffering verbal abuse at the police station. The evening's performer was among those arrested; when told to give a name to the desk sergeant, she said "Lily Savage". The officer pressed for a 'real' name. "Lillian Veronica Mae Savage," came the reply. Morale thrived on such camp defiance.

The raid instantly entered the city's LGBT lore. The rubber gloves stood out for their combination of symbolic marginalisation – they were assumed to be an attempt on officers' part to defend themselves against potential exposure to HIV-infected blood, intimating both the threat of violence and abhorrence at queer bodies – and their sheer camp value. It was the subject of political cartoons [Fig. 39] and was described a few

[50] Interview with Tim Brunsden as part of the *Happy Birthday RVT* project (http://happybirthdayrvt.com/), http://www.happybirthdayrvt.com/2014/07/05/rupert-smith-the-vauxhall-at-the-early-time-of-the-AIDS-crisis/
[51] GALOP report, p.15

years later in Kate Pullinger's novel *When the Monster Dies*. One night, the protagonist, Mary, witnesses

> some kind of commotion at the Royal Vauxhall Tavern, a local gay pub which had hosted drag shows for over one hundred years. Every spring Mary watched from her window as the patrons held their version of the Gay Olympics in the Gardens. She thought it looked fun; she wanted to put on a dress, high heels and a wig and take part in the egg and spoon race herself. But today there were half a dozen police cars parked in front of the Tavern. As Mary watched, a gang of policemen came through the doors, pushing and crowding a group of ten men they were obviously arresting. From where she stood she could see that the constables all had rubber gloves on. The men were shouting and Mary heard an officer yell, 'Fucking pariahs. Wouldn't touch you if they paid me.' He shook a rubber-gloved fist in the air.[52]

Performers offered valuable practical advice too. In the days after the raid, Adrella delivered from the RVT stage an update about the situation and other legal challenges facing the venue. She also advised those present "if you see anyone taken away in a police van at any time, hang around, watch what happens and then go down to the police station because you are their witness, and if there is going to be harassment in this pub, it's your duty to look after your own." Video recording – the means by which we know about this speech – was itself deemed a form of resistance. "Should the police walk in while I'm on stage right now, I do have my surveillance cameras operating," Adrella pointed out.

The incident also marked something of a turning point. The wide perception was that it was carried out with the intention of intimidating the LGBT community. "It felt like a really deliberate strategic assault on the HQ of the gay scene," says Rupert Smith. "'We're going to hit you where it hurts. We're going to close down the Vauxhall Tavern'." This seems borne out by the 1984 Report of the Metropolitan Police Commissioner, which discusses targeting "symbolic locations".[53]

But, Smith suggests, "the Vauxhall was *such* a symbolic place that once that had been attacked once too often, I think the tide turned." GALOP's report on the incident notes "the negative publicity generated by the raid on the Vauxhall (it became the subject of a television documentary and numerous press reports)", including sympathetic coverage in the *Guardian*. The case also attracted the attention of the gay MP Chris Smith, who attended a public meeting at the RVT in the wake of the raid, reporting rumours he'd heard about police plans to close almost all London gay pubs.

The event was arguably the catalyst for starting the slow process of ameliorating relations between police and the LGBT community that has resulted in today's largely harmonious relationship – the difference between night and day. In this respect, the 'rubber gloves' raid is analogous to the 1969 raid on the Stonewall Inn in New York that catalysed the American struggle for LGBT rights.

The RVT can therefore be said to have played a key role in social and cultural progress in the 1980s. It would build on these in the 1990s, while also helping to effect great economic change in Vauxhall.

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[52] Kate Pullinger, *When the Monster Dies* (Cape, 1989), pp.82-83
[53] GALOP report, p.15

A regenerated Vauxhall

By the turn of the decade, the Tavern's international reputation was assured. In his 1989 guide to *The Pubs of North Lambeth*, Peter Walker describes it as "London's first drag pub ages ago… clientele mainly male gays and tourists".[54] O'Grady also noticed the venue's fame had spread far and wide. "I was in a tea room in Shanghai and someone came up and I said, 'I saw you at the Vauxhall!' You meet the strangest people all over the world who used to go to the Vauxhall. Always the Vauxhall…"

The 1990s would see huge change to Vauxhall and to London's LGBT scene in general, as the darkest days of the AIDS crisis gave way to unprecedented social and economic confidence and self-assertion. The two key sites of this resurgence were Soho, long London's LGBT heartland, and Vauxhall, whose scene, less predictably, has grown over the past quarter century into one that "now rivals Soho as a gay London location"[55].

The RVT is the heart of the Vauxhall scene, given a new lease of life by the arrival in 1995 of Duckie, a young collective of performers, producers and DJs. These progressive purveyors of 'working-class homosexualist honkytonk' launched a Saturday night party that proved enormously and enduringly popular, ultimately helping to generate a huge volume of internationally renowned performance work. Elsewhere in Vauxhall, the opening in 1996 of fetish club The Hoist and in 1998 of Crash, the first of the area's large-scale dance clubs occupying spaces under the railway arches bordering the former Gardens site, led to the opening of more nightlife venues along with shops, bars and restaurants catering to LGBT consumers, affirming Vauxhall's new status as a 'gay village'.

The associations between the history of the pleasure gardens and Vauxhall's new nightlife culture have been widely noted, particularly the continued emphasis on accessibility, pleasure, transgression and experimentation. Culture and enterprise researcher James Swinson notes that the gay village "continues a link to a long history of pleasure and perversity which boomed in the eighteenth century" while observing that it "happily co-exists with the rest of the Vauxhall community".[56] Urban historian Chris Roberts notes that "Vauxhall carries on its tradition of hedonism into the twenty-first century, with more nightclubs in the area than just about anywhere else in London. The more specialist of these continue to draw people from across Europe and from all sections of society."[57] The cultural geographer Johan Andersson has described the area as "a site of embedded hedonism".[58]

And at the heart of it all is the Royal Vauxhall Tavern. As the architectural historian Andrew Saint notes: "Chucking-out time at Vauxhall Gardens in the small hours two

[54] *The Pubs of North Lambeth* (London, 1989), p.57
[55] *Consuming Architecture: On the Occupation, Appropriation and Interpretation of Buildings*, Maudlin, D., & M Vellinga, M. (eds), (Routledge, 2014), p.273
[56] 'SE11 [Re]generations' in *Consuming Architecture*
[57] *Cross River Traffic – A History of London's Bridges* (Granta, 2005), p.15
[58] 'Vauxhall's Post-industrial Pleasure Gardens: "Death Wish" and Hedonism in 21st-century London', *Urban Studies*, 48(1) (2011), p.85–100.

centuries ago probably resembled the weekend raffishness of the RVT pretty closely. As far back as records stretch, this bit of Vauxhall has always been louche".[59]

Duckie and a reinvigorated RVT

The past two decades have been a period of considerable cultural as well as economic growth for the RVT itself. When Duckie began its Saturday night residency in 1995, Adrella's regular *Sunday School* show remained popular and on Friday night there was *Vixens*, a lesbian club at which all performers, DJs and bar staff were female. But the pub was closed during the week. Duckie's popularity helped reinvigorate the venue, leading to week-round opening once more and a series of resident nights as detailed above.

Duckie's own work is highly significant. In the mid-90s, popular gay culture was generally depoliticised with a premium on dance music and body worship. Encouraged by the example of the gay indie night Popstarz, Duckie pioneered an alternative form of queer nightlife with influences ranging from music hall to punk: musically eclectic, boozy rather than druggy, artistically ambitious, politically savvy and open to unconventional forms of dress, performance and sexuality.

The success of Saturday nights, which are still going strong, led to bigger one-off nights and theatrical ventures undertaken with the backing of the Barbican Centre, the Southbank Centre and the Live Art Development Agency, as well as productions in New York, Sydney, Tokyo, Berlin, Vienna and at the Edinburgh Festival. The 2003 show *C'est Barbican* won an Olivier Award and the company has been an Arts Council national portfolio organisation since 2002.

Performers who have worked regularly with Duckie include Christopher Green (since backed by the Barbican and BBC Radio 4), Ursula Martinez (Soho Theatre, Southbank Centre, *La Clique*), David Hoyle (National Portrait Gallery, Chelsea Theatre, Manchester Contact), George Chakravarthi (Royal Shakespeare Company, British Council, Royal Academy), Marisa Carnesky (Arts Council, *Carnesky's Ghost Train* in Blackpool) and Scottee (Roundhouse, Radio 4).

The significance to the contemporary live performance scene of Duckie's and others' work at the RVT has been acknowledged in various academic publications, including *Contemporary Theatre Review*[60], *Dance Theatre Journal*[61] and Goldsmiths,

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[59] Saint, Andrew. (2011) Vauxhall Gardens: A History – review. http://www.vauxhallcivicsociety.org.uk/history/vauxhall-Gardens-review-andrew-saint/

[60] Gavin Butt, 'The Common Turn in Performance', *Contemporary Theatre Review* 22.1 (2012), p.46-61; Catherine Silverstone, 'Duckie's Gay Shame: Critiquing Pride and Selling Shame in Club Performance', *Contemporary Theatre Review* 22.1 (2012), p.62-78; Dominic Johnson, 'Introduction: The What, When and Where of Live Art', *Contemporary Theatre Review* 22.1 (2012), p.4-16; Lois Keidan, 'Frightening the Horses: An Interview with Neil Bartlett', *Contemporary Theatre Review* 22.1 (2012). p.152-160

University of London Sternberg Press.[62] One of the leading academic authorities in live art, Dominic Johnson of Queen Mary, University of London, who has performed at the RVT himself, singles it out as an exemplary venue for allowing cross-fertilisation, letting accomplished performers like Hoyle cross over to more mainstream venues while providing a smaller, more experimental stage on which they can continue to create innovative work.

Duckie's engagement with LGBT history is playful and provocative yet sincere. It has produced multiple events that deal with queer life before decriminalisation, including *Gross Indecency* and its forthcoming *Servants' Ball* project – subject matter still rarely broached in mainstream popular culture. And since its early days, the company has cherished and made use of the RVT's historical connections in undertakings such as the *Vauxhall Pleasure Promenade*, which explicitly connected Duckie's work to the pleasure gardens, and the *Readers Wifes Fan Club*, a dramatic production that included recreations of Regina Fong's performance on the RVT stage.

"The Duckie history itself is important as a radical intervention into queer culture," says historian Matt Cook, "bringing together those artistic and historical and clubbing pulses. It has a significance that the RVT is its home." In the words of Duckie co-founder and pleasure-gardens aficionado Amy Lamé, the pub "was built on hallowed ground. We really feel we are carrying on the tradition that was established in 1661."[63] Duckie co-founder Simon Casson agrees: "It has an important history but they never wrote down the histories of back-street boozers. But for queers in London it's a massively important landmark and historical building."[64] To David Hoyle, the Tavern is "the beating heart of queer London. When I'm on stage there I'm very aware of all the people who've gone before and very proud to be part of this incredible history. And it's that legacy that we're all carrying forward."[65]

This is borne out by the fact that veteran performers such as Bloolips' Stuart Feather and Lavinia Co-op continue to be involved in performing and nurturing work at the RVT. Within the past year, the latter has appeared on stage as a guest of David Hoyle and as a member of the LipSinkers, and has helped to develop work off-stage with young performers participating in showcases such as UnderConstruction. The Tavern's queer performance community continues to support itself and to develop forms that engage consciously and explicitly with the venue's unique history.

Most striking of all in this respect is the *Happy Birthday RVT* project, conceived to mark the venue's estimated 151st birthday in 2013 and backed by the Heritage

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[61] P. Ros, 'Russian Roulette: images and memories of The Cholmondeleys and Featherstonehaughs' residency at London's Royal Vauxhall Tavern', *Dance Theatre Journal* 23:3 (2009), p.26-32
[62] Gavin Butt and Irit Rogoff (eds), *Visual Cultures as Seriousness* (London, 2013)
[63] *A Tour of Vauxhall With Amy Lamé*, http://www.happybirthdayrvt.com/2014/12/02/a-tour-of-vauxhall-with-amy-lame/
[64] Interview with Tim Brunsden as part of the *Happy Birthday RVT* project (http://happybirthdayrvt.com/)
[65] Paul Burston, 'Time Out tells the remarkable story of a true London survivor', *Time Out London*, January 2007 http://thervt.tumblr.com/post/27217896219/time-out-tells-the-remarkable-story-of-a-true-london

Lottery Fund.[66] Focusing on the Tavern's "historic importance as a site for LGBT culture, innovation in entertainment and influence on wider British popular culture", particularly over the past 60 years, the project also involved Battersea Arts Centre and Lambeth Archives.

Events included a filmed tour of the area with Amy Lamé; the creation of a large drawing by Robin Whitmore celebrating the Tavern's life in the context of the history of the Vauxhall community as a whole [Fig 40]; a day-long discussion, performance and social event at the Southbank Centre called *Vauxhall Bacchanal – The Joy and Pain in Duckie's Pleasure Gardens*; and a short film by Tim Brunsden presenting the fruits of the project and interviewing figures involved with the Tavern since the 1950s (https://vimeo.com/115737746, password: duckie). Duckie also organised a 'summer school' for young queer performers resulting in a show at the RVT, hosted by Stuart Feather, that made explicit reference to facets of its history, including Victorian mores, the post-war social context and the 1984 police raid – a contrast to friendly relations with local officers today. [Figs 41a-c] (The project as a whole and Brunsden's research in particular have been invaluable resources for this application.)

Projects such as *Happy Birthday RVT* are vital in helping to construct and narrate the history of LGBT people in this country. In this context, it is vital to protect the built and cultural heritage embodied in the Royal Vauxhall Tavern.

The RVT's national influence

As important as the Royal Vauxhall Tavern was and is to its local community and to the culture of London, its influence is national in scope. The mainstream success of performers such as Paul O'Grady and Julian Clary in the late 1980s and early 1990s demonstrated increasing public acceptance of drag performers who, in a break from showbusiness tradition, were also openly gay men – a significant step for social and cultural progress. And, more recently, work created at the Tavern has been seminal to LGBT culture across the nation.

"The RVT has basically spawned the rebirth of the Manchester scene," says Kevin Henry, founder of Manchester cabaret night Mother's Ruin and the associated registered charity Cake Tin Foundation.[67] Mother's Ruin – which has held more than three dozen events to date, involving more than a hundred performers – sprang directly from Henry's experiences at the RVT. He first went in 2004 and became a regular visitor over the next few years.

The Duckie-era renaissance was in full effect, with regular events including Nathan Evans's variety showcase Vauxhallville on Thursdays, Zoe Lyons's comedy night BrouHaHa on Wednesdays, and the Monday bingo night hosted by Timberlina (Tim Redfern), who would become the co-founder and host of Mother's Ruin and an administrator and trustee of Cake Tin Foundation.

[66] http://www.happybirthdayrvt.com/
[67] Interview with the author

Henry was struck by the scope of work on show at the RVT compared to what was available at home. "I'd never seen anything like that breadth of LGBT performance," he says. "I thought, 'My God, this is brilliant.' In Manchester, it was always a drag queen in a corner competing against a DJ – whereas the RVT was putting the drag queen on the stage and showing off the talent."

Not that it was just drag. "There was a complete range of artistic expression being put on every week at the RVT. It wasn't just a man in a frock and a wig miming to other people's songs. You'd see everything from bingo to poetry, spoken word, mime, puppetry, performance art, film, circus artists. There was original, clever LGBT comedy – always different and always relevant to what was going on politically at the time. One night the London Gay Symphony Orchestra were on. You had Q&As with Vivienne Westwood, Ken Livingstone, the former police commissioner of London… And the sound and lighting were professional, the guys on the door were friendly, the bar staff were welcoming and recognised you. And you met people from all walks of life – including judges."

At first, Henry brought friends down from Manchester to share his discovery, as by that stage "the Manchester scene had largely died compared to what it had been in the 80s and 90s". Eventually, though, "I thought, 'Why isn't this happening in Manchester? It shouldn't be limited to one place in London.'" So in 2009, especially inspired by Duckie and its "template of a warm, welcoming, inclusive, queer, broad church", as well as various other London discoveries, he created Mother's Ruin. "Originally, there weren't the artists or performers in Manchester so we had to bring everyone up from London," Henry reports. "We brought up so many acts that never got gigs in Manchester."

The night was a hit with local audiences. "People were amazed," Henry says. "It showed them what was possible – and now they've made their own stuff and their own nights. These days, a Mother's Ruin show might have one act from London and five or six from Manchester and the region." The company has now worked with artists from Manchester, Rotherham, Huddersfield, Liverpool, Bradford and Birmingham. London-based performers have also benefited, with Scottee, for instance, getting a residency at Manchester's Contact theatre after working there with Mother's Ruin.

More than producing shows, Mother's Ruin and the Cake Tin Foundation aspired, in Timberlina's words, to promote "a more attainable, visible and tenable sense of national LGBT and above all queer identity, pride and mobility" nationwide, "especially in more isolated regions where that has never existed before. The RVT is an enabler for Queers and LGBT outsider artists to feel like they belong somewhere, and to grow. There is no other venue in England like the RVT that exists as a working model of a social centre and a performance platform. It is this sense of community" that makes the venue so inspirational.

Mother's Ruin has also catalysed the creation of a whole new alternative LGBT scene in Manchester, including dozens of nights and venues such as Cha Cha Boudoir, Pop Curious?, Bollox, Rock Hard, Tranarchy and Drunk At Vogue. Henry estimates this new scene's overall constituency to number around 5,000 people. Recent years have even seen an Alt Queer weekend spring up as an alternative to commercialised Pride

celebrations. "The scene up here has been revolutionised," Henry says, "and if I hadn't gone to the RVT it wouldn't have happened. It's as simple as that."

Many of these new Manchester artists are now regularly showcased at the Contact and across the country – including at the RVT itself. And it's not just Manchester. "The RVT has inspired stuff in Brighton, Liverpool, Norwich," Henry says. "If that ability to spawn stuff outside the capital goes, it will be a tragedy. Actually, it would be vandalism."

Mother's Ruin enjoys fruitful relationships with other RVT shows. While based at the Tavern between 2011 and 2014, Lisa Lee's platform for new work UnderConstruction produced 55 new pieces of performance by more than 75 emerging and established artists. Many of these pieces have subsequently been programmed at Mother's Ruin and at theatres and performance spaces in London and at festivals in Edinburgh, Brighton, Glastonbury, Suffolk (Latitude) and the Isle of Wight (Bestival).

"Sadly, the northwest does not have a venue like the RVT," says Lisa Lee, who is now artistic director for Mother's Ruin. As a consequence, the event has been presented in Manchester venues including the Contact, Roadhouse and Royal Exchange, as well as the King's Arms in Salford, bringing innovative LGBT work to venues with little or no such programming otherwise.

"The artists emerging out of the RVT have a significant local and national impact on LGBTQ communities and other audiences, as well as other artists," says Lee. "Long may she reign!"

The RVT and Vauxhall today

The Royal Vauxhall Tavern continues to thrive. Beyond its regular weekly and monthly nights, there are events that mark a distinctive RVT calendar, including the long-established annual charity sports day, a month-long Hot August Fringe festival of queer and alternative performance, and a grown-up Christmas panto. The 2009 panto, *Vixens in the Wood* – an all-female production from lesbian performance company Lustre and Bluster – explicitly evoked the site's history with a set-up in which "a group of women escape from the Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens and go into a dark wood". [Fig 42]

The venue still plays a vital role as a community hub too. Bar Wotever, for instance, provides a weekly performance-based space for socialising among trans and non-gender-conforming people (as well as others) without equal in London. The Vauxhall gay scene, like other gay scenes around the city and the world, has experienced problems around drug use and unprotected sex. The RVT itself has never been associated with high levels of dangerous drug use but has held numerous events addressing the issue from a community perspective, such as *CHEM-SEX; Danger in Our Bedrooms, Our Lives, Our Communities* on November 21, 2013.[68] In Tim Brunsden's *Happy Birthday RVT* film, one regular suggests that "the phrase 'gay community' doesn't mean much but it does sometimes mean something here."

[68] http://rvt.org.uk/whatson/single/sleazy-michael-presents-a-panel-discussion

Another says: "Whenever I'm down, I just come here and I feel happy… It's just so friendly. So friendly."

As part of the *Happy Birthday RVT* project, emerging queer artist and summer-school participant Vijay Patel invited patrons to write their favourite RVT memories on bricks – a powerful metaphor for the fundamental link between the building's material structure and its meaning in people's lives. In his words, it's about members of the community "imprinting their thoughts into the fabric of the building". Memories ranged from drag queen running along the bar to recent visits with straight friends, demonstrating the pub's longevity and eclecticism.[69] [Fig. 43]

The Tavern also retains its importance to the local area, architecturally and otherwise. As an unusual freestanding building, it adds variety to the Vauxhall streetscape, with the remainder of Kennington Lane characterised by continuous frontages. It acts as a marker for the entrance to Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens, along with the two large columns installed in 2011, reflecting its role as a public symbol of the park and a visual point of reference.[70] [Fig. 19] The gaps in the building line either side of the Tavern provide glimpses of the Gardens – a reminder to passers-by of the open space behind.

"The entire area north of the gyratory system is given over to modern riverside developments that tend to turn their back on Vauxhall," notes Ross Davies, chairman of the Vauxhall Society. By contrast, the RVT is "a defiant reminder of community and of locality", as well as of centuries of heritage. "These layered histories are invaluable to Vauxhall's residents, and encourage other people to move to and feel welcome here," Davies asserts. It's "more than a tavern, but also a village hall, a centre for fund-raising, community events and protest, a dance hall, and a stage for performance. RVT has anchored the 'gay village' in Vauxhall, been its public face for openness, tolerance and inclusion, and through place-making is a driver of Vauxhall's regeneration… To people throughout this country and beyond, the Royal Vauxhall Tavern is an essential feature of the capital's history and culture."

The venue is "a true London survivor", as *Time Out* put it in an in-depth appreciation of the venue in 2007. As well as featuring in numerous guides to London's pubs, performance spaces and LGBT venues, the Tavern won the *Fringe Report* award for best venue in 2010, the inaugural London Cabaret Award for best venue in 2012, and a *Time Out* Love London Award in 2014. It was recently used as a key location in the internationally acclaimed feature film *Pride*, about the alliance between LGBT activists and striking miners.

In 2010, Sarah Brown, wife of then-Prime Minister Gordon Brown, appeared on stage during Duckie – some change from the hostile attitude of authorities a quarter of a century before. In recognition of its historical, architectural and townscape value, the RVT was locally listed by the London Borough of Lambeth on in April 2013,[71] and listed as an asset of community value in October 2014, with councillor Jack Hopkins

[69] http://www.happybirthdayrvt.com/2014/09/08/duckie-summer-school-vjay-patel/
[70] http://www.bdonline.co.uk/vauxhall-spring-gardens-light-poles-by-dsdha/5030953.article
[71] http://lambeth.gov.uk/sites/default/files/pl-buildings-local-list.pdf, p.77

hailing it as "a key nightclub and LGBT cultural venue for both Lambeth, and the whole of London".[72] Lambeth Council is currently considering extending the nearby Vauxhall Conservation Area to include the RVT.

It's testament to the Tavern's richly layered identity that it can still be seen, as it always has been, as both "a seedy South London pub [and] a form of escapism from the drab grey winter streets"[73] (in *Ballet* magazine's words) – even as its status as a bona fide cultural institution gains increasing recognition.

From the outside, the venue's position has never seemed more secure. "The Vauxhall Tavern's now-iconic status at the heart of Vauxhall hopefully makes it immune from further development plans," one researcher recently wrote.[74] This, unfortunately, is not necessarily the case. On the contrary, there is serious cause for concern over its future.

Threats

The pub's future has been repeatedly jeopardised in recent years. In the words of Jason Dickie, the RVT's general manager since 1995, "it's always under threat."

Not long after Dickie started working at the pub, its operator at the time, Scottish & Newcastle brewery, planned to convert it into a backpackers' hostel but were denied the requisite terms by Lambeth Council, then the site's freeholder.

Then in 1999, the Spring Gardens site, including the RVT, was targeted for redevelopment by Vauxhall-based developers CLS Holdings, who proposed a £300 million shopping centre incorporating a hotel, water park and 'snow dome'. (This plan is believed to be the reason the Tavern was excluded from the 1998 extension of the Vauxhall Conservation Area, which was expanded to include nearby St Oswald's Place and Vauxhall Park.) The council initially backed the proposals, presented in the document *A New Plan for Lambeth – Key Issues Paper for New Unitary Development Plan*. Duckie members and others protested colourfully at council meetings, offering vigorous resistance to the plans, which were eventually quashed by then-Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott – apparently because it would have meant constructing an underground car park. [Fig. 44]

Then in 2005, Lambeth put the pub up for auction – another crucial juncture at which it could easily have been purchased and subjected to commercial redevelopment or demolition. In the event, gay businessmen James Lindsay and Paul Oxley bought the Tavern and continued to operate it as an LGBT pub and performance venue. A decade of generally harmonious growth and development followed but during that decade,

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[72] http://www.pinknews.co.uk/2014/10/15/iconic-vauxhall-gay-bar-awarded-community-asset-status/

[73] http://www.ballet.co.uk/magazines/yr_09/jan09/lc_rev_cholmondeleys_and_the_featherstonehaughs_1208.htm

[74] Swinson

two developments in the booming real-estate market have rendered the site especially vulnerable.

In the first instance, the RVT is a pub, a type of structure that has proven conspicuously susceptible to redevelopment, with a recent estimate suggesting their closure at a rate of 31 per week.[75] "It is utterly perverse that developers are able to demolish or convert a pub into a convenience store or many other uses without any requirement to apply for planning permission," argues Tom Stainer, head of communications at the Campaign for Real Ale. "It is wrong that communities are left powerless when a popular local pub is threatened with demolition or conversion".

Architectural historian Edmund Bird suggests that pubs are "a very threatened breed, closing at a high rate and being demolished in large numbers. They often occupy prominent sites, such as corner plots, that developers find attractive. In terms of rarity, pubs of this [Victorian] period are no longer as prolific as they were so it becomes even more important to save the best examples of the kind – especially those in use, as so many have been lost or converted, often quite badly."

And in the second instance, the RVT stands in the Vauxhall Nine Elms Opportunity Area, at the heart of one of the country's most intensive development hotspots, with the Vauxhall Tower and United States Embassy and related projects only the most prominent of a large number of new developments geared towards high-end investment. Having made a significant contribution to the economic revitalisation of the area through the nighttime economy, a number of the more recent LGBT venues are now being closed, reducing opportunities for the local and London-wide gay community to socialise. Within the range of such local venues, the Royal Vauxhall Tavern is not only the oldest but arguably the most inclusive and most highly valued.

"Vauxhall is an area undergoing huge change," says Bird. "Anchors from the past are crucial to maintain a sense of identity and belonging in a community. In terms of its physical character, as a marker moving from twenty-first-century Vauxhall to the older historic core of Kennington, [the RVT] is very good. And it's the only surviving building on that site – a strong survivor of an area that was leveled."

In autumn 2014, the threat became significantly more acute when the RVT was sold to Immovate, an Austrian property-development company specialising in luxury redevelopment of historic buildings.[76] Despite repeated requests, the property's new owners have declined to offer any confirmation that they acknowledge and value the pub's history and importance to the LGBT community, or to give any confirmation of their plans for the site.[77] James Lindsay, who remains involved in its operation, has made it clear that, as things stand, the pub's future will be determined by commercial imperatives.[78]

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[75] http://www.theguardian.com/business/2014/aug/12/pubs-closing-rate-31-week
[76] http://www.nottelevision.net/rvt-bought-austrian-property-developer/
[77] http://www.nottelevision.net/questions-property-developer-buying-rvt-wont-answer/
[78] http://www.nottelevision.net/five-years-save-rvt/

Given the site's size and location, there can be no question that it would be most profitable if redeveloped with an eye to the high-end commercial or residential markets. "There's a very clear urgency," Bird says. "It's an area of great change and a great number of planning permissions have been granted. Anyone can see it's an area of intense development activity and the threat is very great."

In the absence of any direct communication from the new owners whatsoever, the possibility of pre-emptive action cannot be ruled out. It therefore seems reasonable to see the Tavern as under considerable threat of demolition or major alteration for purposes incompatible with the factors that give it historical significance. The loss of this historic building would be utterly detrimental to the preservation of the social history upon whose importance this application partly rests. The fact that this social history remains unbroken to the present day is of crucial importance.

There is already considerable concern in Vauxhall and across the capital's LGBT and performance communities at the idea of the Tavern's future being in jeopardy – not least because sites of cultural significance to these groups are facing commercial redevelopment almost on a weekly basis, with Madame Jojo's in Soho and The Joiners Arms in Hackney two prominent recent examples.

The Tavern remains a site of romantic attachment [Fig. 45] and passionate defiance. The Anglican priest, poet and librettist Alice Goodman (*Nixon in China*, *The Death of Klinghoffer*) created an audio performance especially for the final show in David Hoyle's latest RVT run, *Illustration*, on November 27, 2014, in which she powerfully articulated the concerns at hand. "I've been thinking about the Royal Vauxhall Tavern and how it's changed and what's going to happen to it," she says, going to on describe a dream in which she finds herself standing outside the pub.

> And as I stood there, waiting to cross, with the new United States embassy at my back and the MI5 HQ at my right hand and the Vauxhall Tower blotting out the moon, the four winds of heaven poured through the viaduct like water through a sieve. And as I stepped down over the curve I saw the frontage of the RVT peeled back, bricks and mortar and girders peeled back as if a bomb had done the trick, revealing the space between floors, the wallpaper upstairs, loose wires, pipes, the stage, the bottles on the shelf behind the bar and the green collecting box with the food chain on the bar… There is no life here because the worship of money drives out life. The insects are dead, the pigeons have left their nests under the arches, the dangerous dogs have all been put to sleep. Your friends have gone away. You may find them but you'll have to look hard. There are spikes on the pavement and not just where the rough sleepers once lay. Nobody lies down on the smoothly made beds in the luxury flats. No smell comes steaming out of the ventilated kitchens. Interest accrues. Imaginary heaps of gold are deemed to pile up in imaginary vaults… I looked down and saw that the wreck of the RVT was complete and another tower had been built in its place. My thoughts terrified me.

Conclusion

If English Heritage were to list the Royal Vauxhall Tavern, it would offer vital protection to a unique living monument cherished by a minority community that has too often been marginalised and has no specifically designated built heritage in Britain.

"Starting to reverse the tendency to render invisible those cultures and pasts is really significant," says Matt Cook. "This is a chance for English Heritage to say there is a queer history that is substantial and deeply meaningful for many people that warrants recognition. The past gets gathered into the RVT. It gathers in the carnivalesque of the pleasure gardens and the carnivalesque of the twenty-first century. It's a lodestone in a queer urban culture that is ephemeral and comes in and out of focus – a rare point of visibility and continuity. If you changed the building's use and opened a new gay bar next door called the Royal Vauxhall Tavern, it wouldn't have that same history."

"There's nothing like the RVT," says Matt Houlbrook. "As a building that embodies England's LGBT heritage, it's unparalleled. We don't know of anywhere else in the country where people have been creating community and culture for as long – and where they continue to do so. It's not just inert and static. There's something creative about how it works as a place. To lose it would be to lose something that's living and breathing in the present. It's not just somewhere to go out. It's somewhere where histories are still being written."

And although this would be the first building listed in part for its significance to the LGBT community, other listings do offer precedents by implication. Edmund Bird has highlighted the successful community campaign to win the listing of Brixton's covered markets and notes that other sites, such as cafes with significance to Italian, Cypriot or Jewish immigrant communities, have been listed on comparable grounds of cultural significance. "The parallels with the RVT are strong," he suggests. "It's a meeting place that fostered a much greater sense of identity, where a community has developed over time. There's the human dimension to consider as well as its bricks and mortar."

The past seven decades have seen an extraordinary transformation in the condition of LGBT people in this country. It is a complex story of suffering and celebration, confrontation and communion. Things were never wholly bad and they have not become entirely good. And it is a story fragile from fear and forgetting, too often written in whispers and saved in scraps.

Nowhere is that story stored more securely than in the bricks of the Royal Vauxhall Tavern – bricks that might well be supported on the columns of the pleasure gardens that taught London and the world new ways to create and have fun, to be together and be free. It is a building that testifies to a proud and exuberant past, and houses a vibrant and influential present.

That the strange, handsome architecture holding this unbroken heritage has managed to survive so long is a fluke. Its future survival, in a landscape that does not always cherish history, culture or difference, should not be left to chance.

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List of images

Two images of RVT streetview (one front, one rear)
Four images of RVT exterior
Four images of RVT interior

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