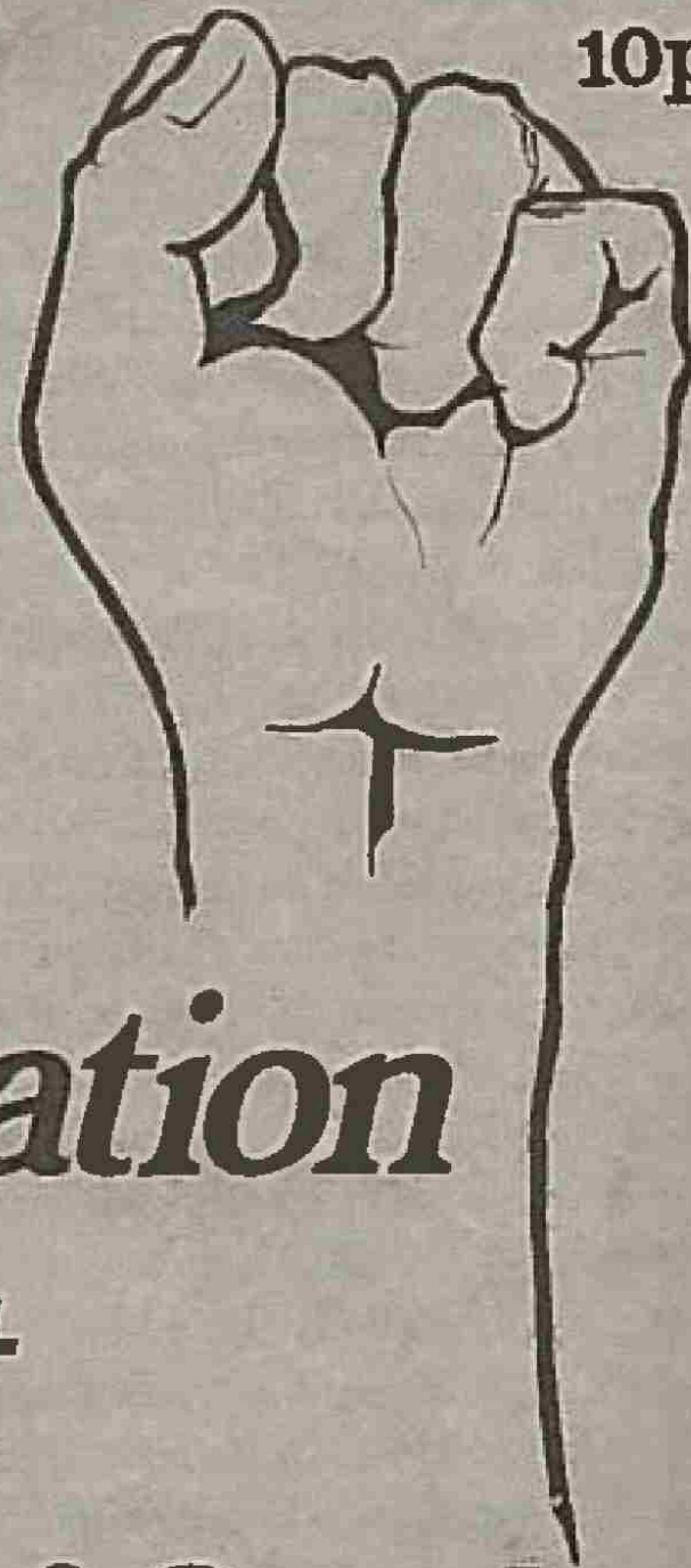


london 1971

10p



*gay*  
*liberation*  
*front*  
**manifesto**

18

Howl

When the lights went out, during the Second World War, a strange mood compounded of fear, hysteria and excitement affected the people of London. Everything was turned upside down, including once more the role and status of the sexes. Any particular sexual orientation was of lesser interest in a world where you might be killed or injured at any moment. Those who have watched the domestic films of the forties may recall that the voices of the women carry more weight than those of the men – whether it be on the factory floor, in the bomb shelter or in the kitchen.

A genuine confraternity existed in the streets and public spaces of London, and it was not unusual to find soldiers and seamen frequenting public houses, particularly those in the East End, which would remain open all night for whatever purposes were deemed necessary. The added vein of darkness during the blackouts increased the sexual tensions of a world where everything seemed permissible. As Quentin Crisp put it, 'never in the history of sex was so much offered by so many to so few'. It is often quoted as 'to so many by so few'. It can be taken either way without distortion. In any case it did not last long after the lights were lifted.

As a form of official retribution, perhaps, the immediate post-war years were dominated by fear and suspicion. Nightclubs as furtive as their clientele, public houses that somehow survived by bribery of the police, 'cottaging' in always dangerous

215



situations, clandestine street encounters were the order of the night. The campaign by the upholders of the law against queers was in fact intensified in the fifties. Ever more sensational and salacious cases were publicised by the ever-devouring press. Those affairs have now been forgotten but at the time they were the subject of front-page headlines. It is not too much to confirm that the police, and the newspapers, were then the objects of terror among gay people. Letters and photograph albums were burned in case of incriminatory suspicions. Men who were visited by the police often fled their immediate neighbourhood. Suicide may have occurred in numbers larger than reported.

Eight policemen, in groups of two, monitored the public lavatories in a well-worn circuit from Victoria Station to Bloomsbury Way. The level of arrests increased exponentially, as did the incidence of blackmail. Some men were given immunity from persecution if they testified against others. All of them were, according to one prosecuting barrister, 'perverts, men of the lowest character'. Other expressions of disgust were common. It would not be too much to say that an incipient police state was beginning to emerge, assisted by the various home secretaries, directors of public prosecution and assorted judges and magistrates.

Numerous well-publicised cases sustained prurient attention among the readers of newspapers. A group of young guardsmen were caught 'riding around in a harness' for the benefit of their customers at a flat in Curzon Street, Mayfair. The activities of the customers in the Fitzroy Tavern also became the subject of a court case. A student of this history might be forgiven for thinking that she or he has read it all before. It is part of the London story.

In the fifties the deities of family, home and marriage were all

the more venerated after the destruction of the previous decade; they were also the triune figures of the new welfare state. Half of eligible men were married in 1921, three-quarters of them in 1951. The public state was closing ranks, and there emerged once more what was known as 'the threat of homosexuality'.

It was in the context of quiet and not so quiet persecution that the Wolfenden Committee was established in 1954 to inquire into the legal status of homosexual acts. The committee comprised the great and the good, but they were neither conventionally 'liberal' nor unprudish in their social attitudes. For the sake of the ladies present at the proceedings, homosexuals were known as Huntleys and prostitutes as Palmers after a well-known firm of biscuit makers.

Its report, published in 1957, recommended that 'homosexual behaviour between consenting adults in private should no longer be a criminal offence'. It was followed in 1958 by the establishment of the Homosexual Law Reform Society to support 'those suffering from intolerance, persecution and social injustice'. This was complemented by such studies as Michael Schofield's *A Minority: A Report on the Life of the Male Homosexual in Great Britain*, published in 1960, in which the author suggested that 'the homosexual must be studied in the wide context of the whole community'.

But the Wolfenden recommendations were not passed into law as the Sexual Offences Act until 1967; the new Act followed the Labouchere Amendment of 1885, and so for more than eighty years the Victorian edict had remained in force. The paradoxical result was that, by the time the new Act had passed, many queer people had lost interest in the technical provisions of the law. Such provisions already seemed irrelevant and even farcical. The reports and observations of the Wolfenden



Committee may have brought much needed light and air to a pursuit that had been shrouded in darkness and mystery. Yet it made very little difference to queers themselves. The lifting of certain regulations seemed to have no effect upon magistrates and policemen who simply redoubled their efforts. Criminal convictions rose in the years following the acceptance of the recommendations of 1957.

It has been suggested that in the 1960s London became in many respects a sexually liberated space. It did not seem like that at the time. In the early part of the decade – before the Sexual Offences Act of 1967 – it was still cloistered and claustrophobic, a city where queerness was discussed in low voices and where police activity was still eminently visible. In September 1960 E. M. Forster wrote in an epilogue to his novel of 1914, *Maurice*, that 'we had not realised that what the public truly loathes in homosexuality is not the thing itself but having to think about it'. He turned out to be spectacularly wrong. But the furtive nature of the time may have contributed to his nervousness. Few came out yelling and screaming in support of a more liberal attitude to homosexuals in England, although Allen Ginsberg's 'Howl' of 1955 helped the process in the United States. Someone, somewhere, may have been 'swinging' in Queer City but the general mood among homosexuals was still one of discretion and subdued gaiety. The playwright Joe Orton was the Rimbaud of what he called 'pissoirs'; in his diary of 1967, there are references to 'the trade' and to a variety of 'queens'. Sex seems to have been readily available, but treated in a haphazard and rather pointless manner. The lacklustre atmosphere may well be a testament to the real rather than the mythic conditions of London in the sixties.

Places of assignation were as well frequented as ever, but the new arrivals in London had some difficulty in finding them.

A little club in High Street Kensington, a little pub in Hampstead were slim pickings. Soho and Earls Court raised the temperature, but London was lukewarm and always vulnerable to the attentions of what was known as 'Lillie Law'.

'Lillie Law' knew all the old haunts. The White Bear, beneath the 'circus' of Piccadilly, was one of the survivors. The Criterion, close by and happily above ground, attracted its regular clientele by ten in the evening. In case of customer fatigue, the Standard and Ward's Irish Bar were in the immediate neighbourhood. To the north of Oxford Street stood the Bricklayers Arms, the Fitzroy Tavern, the Wheatsheaf and the Marquess of Granby. Le Gigolo, in the King's Road, was the favourite of those who liked to wilt in a crush of men. The Kandy Lounge and the Pink Elephant and the A&B were all in Soho, while the public houses there were joined by coffee bars, among them the Haymarket Coffee House and the Matelot in Panton Street. The geographical dispersal of coffee bars in Soho was the harbinger for the gay occupation of that neighbourhood in later decades. The map of London could in fact be marked by myriad scarlet stars as signs of occupation, but the venues remained for the most part unknown to name and fame except by those who frequented them.

One of the most famous venues in the city in the 1960s was like some remnant of an earlier age; the Biograph, known colloquially as the Bio-Grope, was close to Victoria Station and must have been one of the few cinemas where no one came to see the film. Instead it was filled with the creaking of old seats as one or another customer moved from one row to the next in search of more obvious fun.

Among women, according to queer memoirs of the period, the process of meeting a partner was often hesitant and diffident . . .