**A Great Recorded History transcript**

Introduction

**Diarmuid:** This is *A Great Recorded History*, a queer Cambridge audio trail.

My name is Diarmuid Hester, and I'm a research fellow in English at the University of Cambridge. I came to Cambridge a couple of years ago and when I arrived, it seemed to me that there were no obvious signs of a queer community in the city. There were, for instance, no queer bars or cafes and as far as I could tell only one regular monthly club night. Chatting with other recent arrivals in the city, I found that my impressions were not unique.

Now, maybe I shouldn't have been so surprised. While these were the same streets down which money important queer writers had once strolled -- EM Forster, Edward Carpenter, Ali Smith -- it was Forster himself who described queer past as 'a great unrecorded history'.

So I decided to dig a little deeper. Guided by conversations with older members of Cambridge's LGBTQ community and with a stack of books under my arm, I set about exploring the city's past. As you'll hear, Cambridge has an incredibly rich queer history, from its political activism to its social spaces and community groups.

You'll hear the stories of five people aged between 51 and 82, who've lived in Cambridge for more than 20 years, and who identify as gay, lesbian, or queer. The audio trail takes in seven locations, and you'll spend around five to six minutes at each. In between, you'll listen to the work of Cambridge queer authors whose writings reflect on their experience of the city or view it from a fictional angle.

The Anchor - Paulina

We'll begin at the Anchor Pub on Silver Street, and wind our way through the city, ending up at Eden Street in about an hour's time. The first person I spoke to was Paulina Palmer. In this segment, she reflects on the political organising in the city, and the importance of setting up provisional queer spaces in its pubs and clubs.

**Paulina:** I was born in 1937, and came to Cambridge to do what was known as a dip ed—Diploma of Education. During this time, I'd identified as lesbian. I had lived with a guy before that—I'd had several relationships with men, but identified as lesbian. And in those days, it was unusual to say you were bisexual. In fact, the bisexuals were the bad renegades of the queer society! Now interestingly, I'm living with a man: I identify as queer. It's quite interesting. I think queer is a very good designation, a very good term, because it implies sexuality is mobile.

Cambridge in the 1970s and 80s was, like most towns, I think, like most cities, and like the UK generally, was very much a place of contradictions. On the one hand, there was a kind of oppressive climate because homosexuality and lesbianism were still considered to be rather scandalous and seen as an aberration. There was no protection at all for gay people, and this particularly emerged for me, I saw the effects of all this when I was working on the Lesbian Line. We used to have interviews from people and one woman rang up, she was a secretary working in a pool of typists in a small business. She said that somebody had discovered she was lesbian and left a dead mouse in her drawer. She assumed that one could do something about it. I said, No, there wasn't really… There wasn't any law you see at all. It was all pre- any kind of protection. And there was one judge in a period who said it was preferable to have cancer than to be lesbian.

Gay life was a constant kind of risk in a way—if you were working and would you lose your job? Did you have to keep your identification secret or not, was quite nerve shattering at times.

But what really was good was the groups that were starting, and the political groups. I mean, they started I think, out of desperation—that people desperately need to support. Groups like CHE, the Campaign for Homosexuality was very good. This was in the 70s. It was originally founded in 1969, CHE. They had social groups and they also did political work. And I remember being on Strawberry Fair, collecting money and handing out leaflets with a friend of mine, Les Brooks.

The Anchor pub is still going strong. It used to have mixed discos; that started up, I think probably in the late 70s or early 80s, but they were very popular. Obviously, it was a lovely site to have it by the river. We really enjoyed this. But sadly, women's participation in them was suddenly brought to an end by the landlord. He came up to us at the end of one evening, and said he was afraid that only men would be welcome not women anymore. We said, ‘Well, what have we done?’ And he said, ‘Well, it's not exactly that, but you haven't drunk enough’. He wasn't… We weren't giving them enough money and so we weren't able to come anymore, which I thought was really funny. I mean, I suppose if we'd had any sense, we could have taken our hands out of our pockets but we were also cross out it so we sort of stomped off, which is quite comic.

And another venue that was popular: the Petersfield pub. It was somewhere I went quite early in the early 70s and about four of us used to go along together, and one woman was quite imposing and tall. She had quite a big bust but nonetheless, she managed to look pretty butch. And she was full of confidence. And she used to smoke a lot. We went along there one evening, I think it was on a Saturday, the gay evening, and it was usually mixed. There weren't many people there when we got in, but we did see two rather odd men standing by the bar. They looked terribly conventional, and rather butch, and they also looked rather embarrassed. We suddenly realised they must be policemen! And this woman afraid I can't remember her name, this rather butch woman among us, she said, ‘Well, I know if I'm going to do’. So when the music started, she went up and asked one of them to dance! I think he was shorter than she was, and he was so embarrassed! The idea of being approached by this queen of evil or whatever! He just couldn't bear it. And I think they did dance for a time, because he felt he had to play the game, and it was just so funny, and I thought she had such courage. It's just such a way to take society on and I thought it was marvellous, so that was very funny.

**Diarmuid:** Our next stop will be King's College. Keeping the Anchor pub on your right, walk to the end of Silver Street. Pause the recording now and press play again, once you reach the intersection of Silver Street and Trumpington Street. You'll see St Botolph's Church on the other side of the road.

Kings Parade – Robin Maugham

Robin Maugham came to Cambridge in 1934 and was educated at Trinity Hall. While he was here, he was under pressure from his family to study law but he much preferred writing and directing plays at the ADC theatre with his friends. Ultimately, he'd follow in the footsteps of his uncle, W Somerset Maugham and become a writer. His first novel, *The Servant* was published in 1948, and made into a film in 1963 starring Dirk Bogarde.

Now unlike his uncle, who was also gay, Robin Maugham wasn't afraid to deal candidly with same sex desire in his writing. As his 1973 memoir *Escape from the Shadows* illustrates, he was also unafraid to confront homophobia in his life, even during his Cambridge days.

Turn left and listen to this excerpt from his memoir while you're walking down Trumpington Street towards King's College. You can see it's chapel steeple there in the distance.

*Marcus Rueff and I, we're producing an evening of short one act plays at the ADC theatre. I was directing three of them, and I found it convenient to have preliminary readings in my rooms in college. Two of the actors were slim, and very effeminate, and they sometimes in their dotty way, used heavy makeup in the streets in daytime. One of the senior members of the Trinity Hall Boat Club, who also wrote for Cambridge was called Whitelaw. He was very tough, and already a great womaniser. Whitelaw was enraged by seeing my two young painted friends, tripping gaily across the college quadrangle. He voiced his complaints to four or five other rowing hearties and a message was sent to me telling me that I was sullying the good name of the college by inviting obvious perverts to visit my rooms. I was warned that if I continued to encourage such visitors, my rooms would be broken up. Both the message and the threat enraged me. I made up my mind to confront Whitelaw directly. But it was obvious that if physical violence occurred, Whitelaw would knock me out easily. Suddenly, I found a solution.*

*I was walking down Kings Parade with two college friends when the moment I'd been waiting for came. Advancing towards us along the pavement was Whitelaw in the centre of a group of his red faced, loutish friends, I walked straight up to Whitelaw and slapped him with the back of my hand across the face. Before he could recover from his surprise. I spoke: 'I'm challenging you to a duel', I said. 'Since I'm the one who's been insulted. I shall have the choice of weapons. I choose Sabres. My seconds will call on you in the morning to arrange a time in place.'*

*While he still gaped at me, the three of us walked past Whitelaw and his group of friends, and went to have a drink at a pub to discuss the best place for the duel. I had no intention of maiming the man, but I had been taught a particular fencing feint, whereby I could make a slight cut at his wrist and so disable him.*

*Whitelaw, I discovered later, was in a state of consternation, so he went to see Dr. Owen Wansborough-Jones. Once again, I was summoned to appear before the senior tutor. Once again I appeared punctually, suitably dressed in cap and gown. 'Now Maugham', Wansborough, as we called him, began, 'I'm not going to allow you to stroll around the college challenging my senior undergraduates to duels.' Suddenly he smiled, and his stern creased face was transformed. 'It's just not on', he said. 'So I've arranged for Whitelaw to make you an apology for any threat he may have used. And I am now asking you when he comes to shake hands with you, to apologise for slapping his face. Is that clear?' 'Yes, sir', I answered. 'Right', Wansborough said, moving towards a side table. 'And now, shall we take a glass of sherry together.'*

Please pause the recording until you reach King's College.

King’s College – Les and Phil

The most famous King's College queer alumnus is the modernist writer EM Forster, who was a student here between 1897 and 1901, and was subsequently elected to the position of Honorary Fellow in 1946. A member of the Bloomsbury set, which also included Cambridge graduates, Lytton Strachey, and John Maynard Keynes, along with Duncan Grant and Virginia Woolf. Forster didn't publish overtly homosexual work during his lifetime.

However, after he died, his novel *Maurice*, which was published in 1971, was celebrated far and wide by a queer reading public emboldened by Gay Liberation, which had started a couple of years earlier. It would become a landmark work of gay literature in the years to come. But King's connections to queer cultural life run much deeper than this association with its favourite gay student. As I found out in speaking with Les Brooks and his partner, Phil Bales, in years past Kings was an important hub of gay political organising.

**Les:** I'm Les Brooks, born 1943. Yeah, well, I grew up in Devon, in Plymouth, actually. I came to Cambridge, though, in the very early 70s. Because knowing I was gay, I just wanted to be able to find a sort of gay life away from my home base. In fact, because it was the very early 70s, I mean not much organised gay life had really taken off at that point in Britain.

**Phil:** I'm Phil Bales, born 1951. You know, I grew up in the Fens in a small village near Wisbech, a small village called Gorefield, you know, on a pig farm. And I was sort of like the only guy in the village. Well, I thought I was anyway! When I was sort of 18/19, I realised that I was gay, sort of got very depressed about it. I went to the Samaritans, you know, and all that sort of stuff. When I was about 22, I think, I was working in a factory in Wisbech as a press mechanic, making tin cans for peas and things like that, you know. And we used to do shift, I used to shift work. So every third week would be a night shift. Lots of kind of porny magazines would go around at night, you know. I never used to look at, be interested in the pictures, they were heterosexual porn magazines, you know. But there were, I used to read the self-help columns. And one of them was written by Ann Summers, who went on, I think, to do the sex shops… Anyway, there was one from a gay man in Norwich, wanting to know how he could get in touch with other people and she actually gave the phone number for Gay Switchboard, which was in London. I phoned up Gay Switchboard and spoke to them, and they gave me Bernard Greaves’ phone number from Cambridge. So I used to come over and he’d say, ‘oh, let's go’, and we went to the gay clubs and pubs and things, you know. He just started taking me out and introduced me to these things.

**Les:** There were two things going on in Cambridge at that time. There was these meetings in Glisson Road and there was the Gay Soc at the University. The University Gay Soc was just a very different place, because, well it seemed to us so much more exciting, or to me, so more exciting and radical. They used to have these wild sort of discos in the cellars of King's College. Also, there were people there who kind of, they would organise interesting events. Speakers would come along; often it would be very acrimonious. There was one politician that came along—I think that the big topic then was paedophilia and the association with gay people and that kind of thing. It was a quite a sort of riotous sort of meeting. And then they organised a forum, which was also in Kings, and they had Lord Longford, and a man called Ian Harvey, who had been a Tory minister, but had been found cottaging and had lost his position.

**Phil:** He was found with a guardsman somewhere wasn't he.

**Les:** Oh, that's right. Yeah. What stands out in my mind is, in the middle of this thing, the Sisters of Mercy, are they called that?

**Diarmuid:** I think Les means the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence. A radical drag troupe founded in the 1970s.

**Phil:** There were a group who dressed up as nuns.

**Les:** And they came parading down through the middle. And if you can imagine Lord Longford sitting on the stage [Laughs] and one of them went up and sat in his lap and started playing with his hair. [Laughs] He didn't do anything, actually, I think he was pretty good actually, Lord Longford. Just treated it as one of those things that happened at university.

**Phil:** I remember another time when Graham Chapman came to speak, from Monty Python. He was a drinker, and he was blotto. wasn't he?

**Les:** Oh, yes, he was.

**Phil:** He was started rambling on about something or other. Then someone from the audience (that chap, forgotten his name now), got up and told him how disgraceful it was. I think the speech was a bit of an argument and then it just sort of broke up.

**Les:** They were pretty well attended. Yeah. I mean, the one that I taught this forum, I mean, there must have been well over 100 maybe a couple of hundred people there. Yeah. Yeah. So they were pretty well attended.

**Diarmuid:** Our next stop will be Trinity Hall. Start walking now. Continue on Kings Parade until you get to the end of the street and take a left down Senate House Passage to the entrance to Trinity Hall.

Clare College - Kwame Anthony Appiah

Next door to Trinity Hall is Clare College, the setting of Kwame Anthony Appiah's novel *Avenging Angel*, which came out in 1990. Appiah is a British Ghanian, who's better known as a philosopher working in the tradition of American civil rights activist WEB Dubois. Appiah studied at Clare College for almost a decade, which gave him a deep familiarity with what life was like in the city for a gay man and *Avenging Angel* draws on that experience.

Just a quick reminder, by now you should be walking towards the big black gate of Gonville and Caius. When you get there, take a left down Senate House passage and stop at the entrance to Trinity Hall.

A detective novel in the mould of Agatha Christie, the story's about the suspicious suicide of a young gay Cambridge student and the arrival of detective Sir Patrick Scott. In the following excerpt, Sir Patrick receives an envelope from an unknown source that seems to incriminate his prime suspect, Dr. Peter Treadwell.

*As I opened his blue envelope I wondered what new lies he had concocted. All there was in the envelope was a folded sheet. I opened it. It was a Xerox copy of a page from private I dated the day before. Treadwell had circled a passage from a section entitled University news. 'Fellows of Clare College Cambridge', it began, 'one of the oldest foundations in our second oldest university will no doubt be interested to hear of the nocturnal activities of one of their number. They will be especially interested because these activities involve a tutorial pupil of the learned Peter Treadwell, Doctor of Philosophy, and the pupil is none the less than the young nobleman Viscount Glen Tannock scion of the house of Ivor. It seems that the fellows gardens of the college has become their nightly trysting place. Dr. Treadwell, whose lectures this term included a series on the foundations of probability, no doubt hoped that the sight of an older and a younger man earnestly discussing Uganda by the college pond would strike passers-by on their way up to Trinity lane as to improbable to be believed. We wonder whether the good lady Clare, the college's foundress, had any special fondness for the Socratic method. Our university correspondent has written to suggest that Dr. Treadwell should announce a lecture course on the Symposium this autumn. We feel certain that many of the university's large band of sad dons would attend.' It's very difficult not to sympathise with anyone whose name appears in Private Eye, and I felt a twinge of regret. This was a particularly nasty piece of work.*

Please pause the recording until you reach the entrance to Trinity Hall.

Trinity Hall – Alison

The queer history of Cambridge wouldn't be the same without Trinity Hall. Robin Maugham, who we heard earlier, was a student here, as was Ronald Firbank, Donald McLean, and Edward Carpenter, about whom I'll tell you a bit more in just a moment. Most recently, one of its most notable queer fellows was Alison Hennegan. She talked to me about her activist work with the Campaign for Homosexual Equality and Gay Cambridge, and how important literature -- specifically Greek literature -- was to her understanding of sexuality.

**Alison:** Alison Hennegan, born in 1948. I arrived in 1967 to begin a BA in English literature at Girton College. School was important in terms of coming out, because I took up the option of learning classical Greek, and that gave me Plato, and that gave me a world in which same-sex desire was okay. Even if women, same sex desire between women was virtually invisible—apart from Sappho. It didn't actually matter to me. What mattered was that *same-sexness* was okay, and all right, and indeed honoured and respected. But I was already aware before I arrived of the Hellenism of the Oxford or Cambridge tradition.

One of the important things that happened was the publication of Phyllis Grosskurth’s biography of John Addington Symonds, the late 19th century man of letters. Homosexual but married with four daughters, eventually a self ejected exile in Venice, with strong, passionate, and often sexual relationships with various gondolieri who were also married men with wives and children, etc. Phyllis Grosskurth, the American scholar, produced her biography of Addington Symonds, I think in 1966, and it was a very expensive 2 guineas, 42 shillings. So that of course, as a much of that is about the importance of Plato and particularly the Socratic dialogue of the Phaedrus to the young Addington Symonds in giving him—opening the door, actually, to his sexuality. He has this account of being with friends in London going to Theatre in the evening coming home being not quite tired enough to go to sleep, yet, and beginning to read the Phaedrus and reading it through the night, as he finds ‘My God, my God, this is my world!’ and talks about that moment. And I made a very similar series of explorations. Through those texts as well.

I became increasingly involved in aspects of, of gay politics. The Campaign for Homosexual Equality, CHE, was the main campaigning body of the UK, brought into being in order to work for the repeal of the 1885 Criminal Law Amendment Act with of course, the *partial* success of 1967, with the *partial* decriminalisation, only for men twenty-one or over. Only for sexual activity in private, which, as you know, could be constructed as a whole house. So if you're in your own individual room, which you might think was private, were having sexual relations, that meant you’d breached the privacy requirement, because the house was the entity not your room. There were lots and lots of problems with it. And there was a branch in Cambridge to which Les and Phil, whom you’ve also spoken to, in which they played a very active part.

But also, of course, the rumbles of Stonewall were beginning to be felt, so something called Gay Cambridge came into being. And some members of Gay Cambridge also put in a friendly presence at the CHE meetings; others saw it very much as a great ideological and demographic divide. Gay Cambridge tended to be University-based, whereas CHE was town with some gown people there. But I began to meet some Gay Cambridge people, including a number of charming young men, most of whom are now dead because of AIDS. A particularly charming young man called Derek Hughes, who was a scholar at St. John's: articulate, cheeky, gutsy. And his more muted northern boyfriend, Hudson. And one young man who I now realise, though I'm not sure we did then, was grappling with genuine transsexual concerns, because of course, transsexualism was much less prominent, vocal, audible, visible, than it's become over recent years.

**Diarmuid:** Alison was also close friends with John Pollard, a gay leather man, co-founder of the East Anglian Bikers club (or the EAB) and, according to Allison's account, quite the craftsman who liked to turn his hand to tapestry and embroidery. Other members of the EAB had more, let's say *risqué* hobbies. Here's Les and Phil again:

**Phil:** You know, there were the, what were they called, the Cambridge Bikers. Have you heard of them? They were leather bikers. They were mostly schoolteachers and university dons and things. They dressed up in all the leather and did all the biking.

**Les:** Oh yes, they liked that.

**Phil:** And one year we got invited, somehow, to a garden party out… Alison, because she was working for Gay News, she was invited to open the garden party. So she came, I mean, you know, this is pre-AIDS as well, so you can imagine what sort of things they got up to. You know. So Alison came along, I seem to recall she had a big sort of hat, like, a bit like a lady mayoress. There was one sort of activity, where there was a chap naked under a bush and you could, you could pay sort of 50 p to pee on him! [Laughs] I'm not sure if Alison saw that bit! She probably doesn’t know.

**Les:** She’ll probably hear about it now! [Laughs]

**Diarmuid:** The next stop on the tour will be Green Street. Continue along Trinity lane; it will curve to the right before it meets Trinity Street. When you get to Trinity Street, you will see the entrance to Green Street on your left across the road. Start walking now. En route, I'll tell you a little bit about Edward Carpenter.

Trinity Lane – Edward Carpenter

Edward Carpenter studied at Trinity Hall, and was elected a fellow there in 1869. A poet, environmentalist and radical socialist, his ideas were far ahead of their time. His book, *The Intermediate Sex*, which was published in 1908, railed against the prevailing idea that homosexuals were ill or infirm, and argued for their acceptance in society.

If in his later life, Carpenter was rather out and proud, as evidenced by this extract from his memoir, *My Days and Dreams*, which was published in 1916, his student days were marked by the same isolation, secrecy and loneliness of many closeted young queer people.

*How well I remember going down as I so frequently did, alone to the riverside at night, amid the hushed reserve and quiet grace of the old college gardens, and pouring my little soul out to the silent trees and clouds and waters. I don't know what kind of longing it was something partly sexual, partly religious, and both owing to my strangely slow growing temperament, still, very obscure and undefined. But anyhow, it was something that brooded about an enveloped to my life, and makes those hours still stand out for me as the most pregnant of my then existence.*

*What a curious romance ran through all that life. And yet, on the whole, with a few exceptions, how strangely unspoken it was, and unexpressed. This succession of athletic and even beautiful faces and figures--what a strange magnetism they had for me. And yet, all the while how insurmountable for the most part was the barrier between. It was as if a magic flame dwelt within one burning, burning, which one could not put out and yet, whose existence one might on no account reveal. How the walks under the avenues of trees at night, and by the river sides were haunted full of visionary forms for which, in the actual daylight world there seemed no place.*

Pause the tour until you arrive at the corner of Trinity Street and Green Street.

Green Street – Queer bars

One of the most important queer pubs in Cambridge was the Turks Head, also known as the Stable Bar, which formed part of the Burney Inn. The black and white half-timber house you can see on Trinity Street was once the entrance to the Burney Inn. The Turks Head could be entered discreetly via an entrance on Green Street. Please pause the recording. Walk to number 25 on Green Street and press play. The old entrance to the Turks head will be directly opposite.

**Alison:** The Burney. The Burney Inn. Front entrance in Trinity Street. In Greene Street was the entrance into a particular bar, which was part of the Burney. The Turks Head. And it was run by Terry, who was a lovely large equable gay man who ran a very efficient bar, he was a very fine barman, I mean, no dirty slops whenever there—it was impeccable, everything was properly run. But his manner was relaxed, and there’s all the time in the world, but by God, he was a good barman. And he created a space, which though very clearly a gay space, was not hostile to the odd straight. As long as the straight behaved itself and wasn't there to make trouble and be a pain in the arse. In which case they’d get shown the door.

**Les:** And then the bar was actually a very friendly place because there was a barman called Terry.

**Phil:** They used to they used to call him mother

**Les:** They used to call him mother.

**Phil:** So on Mother’s Day there’d be lots of flowers around the place! [Laughs]

**Les:** And he had this great gift of like, sort of (you know, I'm sure there are plenty of them around now), two people will be sitting alone at a bar, and he would introduce them. That sort of thing. So he had a great manner.

**Diarmuid:** Terry and his pub were crucial to connecting people, combatting queer loneliness and creating a sense of community. As were places like the Scaramouche Club and the 451.

**Phil:** Because there was a club as well called the Scaramouche, and it was a place off Mill Road, Catharine Street. It was a little Victorian house really, like this, but with a little stage and a bar, and things, and a door with a sort of grill. So you knocked on the door, and then someone would say ‘Yes, how did you find out about this place?’ So you tell them and then they’d know it was all right, they'd let you in, wouldn't they? And you had to pay something to go in?

**Les:** Yes. Because it was a club they had to supply some food. Yeah, but the food they supplied was very minimal. [Laughs]

**Phil:** Sausage and chips on a paper plate! It wasn’t really food, it was just to cover the licence.

**Les:** It was just to cover the licence. Yeah.

**Phil:** But it used to be disco, well, disco music, drag. What was she called? Oh

**Together:** Gloria Glamour!

**Les:** There was a drag artist called Gloria Glamour.

**Phil:** She did Shirley Bassey, mimed to Shirley Bassey. Actually the first time I went, I went on my own to the Scaramouche Club. I went in there and there was my ex-English teacher from secondary school, and another engineer from the factory that I worked in—together. So that was a bit of a sort of shock.

**Les:** I think the thing there was that, you know, he was a gay man living in a fairly isolated…

**Phil:** He was teaching this, you know, in a school in the 50s, early 60s and fairly hostile kind of environment.

**Paulina:** And another pub, which used to run a gay evening, a kind of club place, is the 451 on the Newmarket road. That is still functioning as a pub, the 451. That's its number. That used to be a place where the police hung out, not in the pub, but they’d lurk around in their cars, and trail you and accuse you of being drunk, I remember that. And this happened with me. I was coming back with my partner from the 451. Luckily, I hadn’t drunk very much, I was coming back with my lesbian partner and this police car tried to flag us down. So we stopped and the policeman came out and he made me blow into this thing. And he was obviously lurking around outside to try and get the gays because they were, you know, easy fodder. It was very typical in a way of the sort of period, because we were still very much harassed—men and women. But on the other hand, because of the strength we were getting from solidarity, we were feeling stronger. And I remember Linda and I saw this more as a joke when we got away because a policeman seemed like such an idiot, honestly. That it became a joke and a story to tell, rather than something really threatening.

**Diarmuid:** Our next location will be the ADC theatre, though we won't be stopping there. Continue to the end of Green Street until you get to where connects with Sidney Street. Turn left and follow along the wall turning right along Jesus Lane. Start walking there now. En route, I'll tell you a little bit about Ali Smith.

ADC Theatre – Ali Smith

Ali Smith is an experimental Scottish writer who came to Cambridge in 1985, to study for a PhD in English at Newnham College. Her works are known for being extremely economical and compressed, while at the same time playful, even whimsical in terms of their approach to language. Smith's first novel, *Like* which was published in 1997, is set in Cambridge and revolves around Aisling or Ash, who's hopelessly in love with her best friend Amy, who's here studying archaeology. Infatuated with Amy, Ash moves to Cambridge just to be close to her. However, she's penniless and lives for a time and an abandoned theatre in the centre of town--a lightly fictionalised version of the ADC theatre. As a young working class Scottish woman with no interest in education. Ash initially feels alienated in Cambridge, as her first impressions of the town demonstrate.

*Where was I? I was in England, and not just in England, but the epitome of England. Flags flying off turrets, the land of Blue Peter and the royal family and Sunday Times colour supplement advertisements for glossy Barbours. The southeast, that place of learning. The sun was out. It was the middle of February and my jacket was hanging open. The air that morning was as mild as April. The money. The smart clothes. The light. The expensive shops. The bookshops. Bookshop after bookshop-- a place where bookshops belonged as if naturally; as if they were a special culture grown there. I lost count of the bookshops on my first walk through the streets.*

*Building after building was etched with beauty against the sky. A flat land. Its light and sky spread like it was near the sea. The streets filled with people my age, calling to each other like rare birds. I'd never heard anything like it. Tabithas. Ophelias. Justins and Julians, Jacostas and Fionnulas. Books under their arms in the open air, all going somewhere terribly important.*

*I had stepped off the bus onto a different planet. I stood on the cobbles in the middle of the road outside a kind of castle, a palace, or was it a huge churc--stained glass like that? And watched the bicycles pass and pass. A Midas town. I was seeing it turn the casual people who touched its streets into gold. I watched them. They glinted past. The virgin shine of the place. I walked across a bridge by a river with no rubbish in it. There were willows, they were weeping. There were signs up saying keep out, and members only. There were cows grazing in the distance by another beautiful bridge. Somewhere, a perfect church bell was ringing. I was finding it hard to breathe. The river water looked putrid. But there were ducts on it with fluffed out ducklings. I held on to the rail, saw my reflection down there wavering between the green. The place of education, new things for me to learn. Like that near can actually be further than you ever imagined. That cold can mean hot. Nothing can mean something, something can mean nothing. Even words can mean nothing. And as soon as they're said or thought or written down, they can immediately mean the opposite of what they seem to say. There is magic on the borders where opposites meet, and there is bloody war. The reflection I was looking at, I thought it was just a reflection, the play of light on water but no, I was here. And so was she.*

Road to Christ’s Pieces - Janie

Please pause the recording until you can see the ADC theatre over on the other side of the road. Like Ali Smith's Ash, Janie Buchanan also came to Cambridge from Scotland. And when she arrived, she too became aware of a split between University and city. As Janie relates in the following snippets from our conversation, this division between town and gown, as it's known, led to the founding of Sister Act, a local group for women who like women, which was set up in 1993.

Sister Act has never been rooted in one particular place in Cambridge. So we're going to wander a little bit while listening to Janie's story. Continue on Jesus Lane, and take the third right down Belmont Place. Then walk straight ahead until you get to Christ's Pieces Park. Start walking there now.

**Janie:** It's Janie Buchanan and I was born in 1968. I came to Cambridge actually in 1990. I came down from St. Andrews in Scotland, I’d just finished as a student in St. Andrews and got my first job in Cambridge. It was part of a women's collective called Choices and we supported young women and escaping sexual violence. So my first job was in Cambridge as a hostel worker.

I knew I was gay from a very young age: went to girl school, crushes and all my teachers, they determined what subjects I studied… You know, I only did Greek and Latin because I was in love with Mrs. Craig! But actually was brave enough age 19 to go to the Gay Soc in St. Andrews, and met a woman and kind of fell in love and my whole world turned upside down after that point. So my experience of Cambridge isn't the classic one or the classic academic one. When I first moved to Cambridge, I lived in shared housing, but then I moved into a women's housing co-op, Paradise Housing Co Op, which essentially was a women's housing co-op, but in fact, when I was there, there were 11 lesbians in it. It really by definition was a lesbian housing co-op. And that was just the most fantastic thing ever. They were kind of radical times you know, this was in the throes just after Clause 28, and it was a very safe space. I really loved it. I spent 10 years in that housing co-op—became very institutionalised! [Laughs] And so, yeah, I met some fantastic women in my time there.

**Diarmuid:** Just a quick reminder, continue on Jesus Lane, and take the third right down Belmont Place. Then walk straight ahead until you get to Christ's Pieces Park.

**Janie:** Yes, so Sister Act, and actually Sister Act’s been a major force for lesbian Cambridge, lesbians of Cambridge for the past 26 years. Started really, because for townswomen, there wasn't a lot for lesbians to do. There was a real dichotomy between the students, you know, every college had its Gay Soc in those days, they were called, nothing for townswomen, that those weren't open to townswomen. So one woman decided really to set about and find the lesbians of Cambridge and sort of created Sister Act in order to do that. And in its heyday we had about maybe 300-400 women as part of our group. It was the only thing for lesbians in those days. And it's a very much an activities-based group.

Where we have visited places or sort of spaces that have been associated with Sister Act, were the Harris Suite at the Cambridge football club where we had a fantastic monthly disco there for about nine years, and that was well known in Cambridge. It was a funny old venue, full of pictures of male footballers, but we loved it, we loved it. When we were looking to find a venue for a disco, it was quite tough in those days. A lot of venues weren't interested in lesbians, didn't think we drank enough or didn't think there'd be enough sort of pink power behind it. The bar staff and the manager at that venue was very reluctant. And he only gave us it for six weeks, you know, a six month trial. But my God, they loved us. Like I said, we drank lots. We had a great night, we rarely fought, we cleared up after ourselves. So they were very happy to have us and you know, once a month, I don't know we'd have 150-200 women every month come into those discos. We certainly can't sustain that now. So that was a very special place for Sister Act.

I mean, the venue was really odd, it was like a bloody wedding! So, I remember it. So the disco and the stage were one end, and the rest was all seating. It was long known as a bit like running the gauntlet to get onto the dance floor. And so you'd probably see a bunch of women not particularly fashionable, not particularly trend, but having a great time and listening to really crap music. It was kind of 1980 school disco, and we were kind of proud of that! In nine years, I think we'd only one fight which is which is quite good, I think, for lesbian venues in those days.

And the other great place for Sister Act was Jesus Green during the summer on a Wednesday evening. 20 to 30 lesbians could be found playing rounders. That lasted for about five or six years and that became a very well-known space. Wednesday night rounders. Sister Act rounders.

I think what Sister Act prides itself on is that we were very welcoming. And we were set up to welcome women and that's always been our philosophy. So you know, if you are new and coming on your own to that venue, you could be guaranteed somebody would meet you and introduce you to people and Sister Act’s often complimented for that. We really go out of our way and we often have new members events, even now.

I mean, we certainly have a dwindling membership. We're not getting lots of new members. I think there's more in Cambridge for young people to do. Certainly, the choir is picking up a lot of younger people. There’s queer groups, there's queer beers, you know, these things weren't around 20 or 30 years ago, and I think actually, Sister Act, we’re aging, you know. Whereas our demographic 20 years ago was 20 to 30, we're all getting a bit older in our 50s and you know, we're not going to attract young people. [Laughs] So I think Sister Act had its day really, and we're on a slow decline. And even the young queer women I talked to don't necessarily define themselves as lesbians. I mean, Sister Act, we're women who like women in the very broadest sense, and we're very welcoming of trans women as well, but I think we're perceived as you know, tired old lesbians. [Laughs] But yeah, I think we're a product of our time, really. And it's not necessarily a bad thing that we're not needed anymore. Or that kind of lesbian-only, you know, activity group isn't needed anymore.

**Diarmuid:** Please pause the recording until you reach the entrance to Christ's Pieces Park.

Christ’s Pieces – Stephen Fry

*The Liar* is the first novel by comedian and actor Stephen Fry, and it was published in 1991. The book is a wry satire of college life in Cambridge, and follows the exploits of a flamboyant homosexual young man, Adrian Healy, from public school to the fictional St. Matthew’s College. If the novel's inspired by Fry's student days here, it also draws on aspects of queer life in Britain that many gays and lesbians in the period would easily recognise, such as police harassment. In the following excerpt, the fellows of St. Matthews college discuss whether or not they should punish Adrian's friend, Professor Trefusis, who's just been charged with gross indecency, having been found having sex in a public toilet. As you're listening, walk straight across Christ's Pieces and stop at the public toilets on the other side of the park.

*The professor had been arrested in the Parkers Piece men's toilet at three o'clock the previous night. A youth described as in his late teens escaped after a struggle with police. The Professor, 66, pleaded guilty. The president of St. Matthews college was unavailable for comment this morning. Donald Trefusis, who is well known for his articles and broadcasts told the evening news that life was very extraordinary.*

*'If an undergraduate were compromised in this fashion', said Garth Menzies, 'we would have no hesitation in sending him down. Professor Trefusis as a member of the college just like any student, I submit that under the college ordinance of 1273, and subsequent statutes of 1791 and 1902, we are duty bound to take disciplinary action against any fellow who brings the good name of the college into disrepute. I move that this meeting of the fellows immediately invite Professor Trefusis to relinquish the post of senior tutor. And furthermore, I move that they insist he withdraw from any active teaching post in this college for one year, at the very least.'*

*'Now steady on Garth', said the president, 'I'm sure we're all as shocked as you are by Donald's well, Donald's well, his behaviour, but remember where we are. This is Cambridge. We have a tradition of buggery here.'*

*'Bottomy is everywhere. You know', the 90 year old treble of Emeritus Professor Adrian Williams sang out. 'Wittgenstein was a bottomist, they tell me. I read the other day that Morgan Forster -- you remember Morgan? next door at Kings? Wrote A Passage to India and Howards End -- I read that he was a bottomite too! Extraordinary. I think everyone is now. Simply everyone.'*

Please pause the recording until you get to the public toilets at the entrance to Christ pieces Park.

Melbourne Place – Section 28

Our next stop will be Melbourne place. Turn left and walk straight down drummer street towards Parker's Piece Park. You'll see Melbourne Place on your left. Start walking there now.

The kind of harassment and homophobia that Fry satirises in his book was enshrined in British law in 1988 by Margaret Thatcher and her Tory government when they passed Section 28. A nasty, bigoted amendment to the Local Government Act, section 28 banned the promotion of homosexuality by local authorities and forbade any attempt to teach children in schools that homosexuality was acceptable. Most maliciously, it also characterised homosexuality as a 'pretended family relationship'. Section 28 caused uproar in queer communities across Britain when it was rolled out and precipitated a groundswell of support for political action. As Les and Phil point out, Cambridge was no different.

**Les:** *Gay News* had been prosecuted, and then it closed down as a result of the blasphemy trial and so on. And then the next thing was, you were getting these reports, which were coming across the Atlantic really about what was going on, you know, gay men were dying of some mysterious disease and you didn't know what it was and it just didn't seem as if it was related to us. And then, of course, you were aware that this was actually creating a sort of backlash, which was gathering momentum. And then all that stuff about the gay plague started to appear on the front pages of papers… So, there was a period of absolute hysteria really. Then the section 28. And that galvanised the gay community again.

**Phil:** The gays were being laid back thinking everything was going well. Before AIDS, everything was going forward, you know, was all fine, and then suddenly it went back and section 28 kind of as you say galvanised people.

**Diarmuid:** In general however, everyone I spoke to said that while they felt persecuted by Thatcher, Cambridge itself didn't feel like an unsafe or homophobic space.

**Janie:** I've not ever experienced any direct homophobia in a way that maybe I have in Glasgow or Edinburgh. I've been very fortunate and I've been surrounded by a large lesbian community and I feel confident with my sexuality. So yeah, I've always been able to out at work which is important, as well. Is it progressive? Yeah, pretty progressive. You know, they're not huge areas of poverty or extreme right wing or the BNP party. As far as I'm aware, and actually, as a social worker, yeah, I visited what would appear to be the poorer parts of Cambridge, but it's all relative, because they're quite posh compared to Glasgow. I can't complain about living in Cambridge, and I think there's some study that shows that per capita we've got quite a high rate of gay people. Second only to Brighton?

**Diarmuid:** Please pause the recording until you get to the entrance to Melbourne place. You should see a black signpost for the Grafton Centre. For the last leg of the tour, continue up Melbourne place to number 48 Eden Street, which was the site of the Cambridge Women's Centre in the 1970s. Start walking now.

Eden Street – Queer Spaces

As we make our way towards the final stop, it's worth reflecting on the fictional and remembered spaces we've explored today, and their importance for LGBTQ lives in Cambridge, past and present. Here's Alison again.

**Alison:** But I'm not sure there is a gay space in Cambridge, in the sense of something that is always there as a gay space, I suppose. Has anyone spoken to about Millers? Okay. We know where the Chop house is, in Kings Parade? Not all of that frontage, but much of it used to be Miller's Wine Bar. And that was a very gay male space. My recollection is that it was almost entirely gay, gay male. In the same way that actually, as Terry ran, the separate bar of the Turks Head. That too was a gay space, straights were there on sufferance. If they behaved nicely, that's fine. If they didn't, piss off. And if you're not going to go under your own steam, you’ll be helped, this is *our* space.

**Diarmuid:** Exclusively queer spaces like Miller's Wine Bar no longer exist in Cambridge. The kind of queer spaces that did exist once upon a time, now reside only in fiction, in memory; in the kind of stories that were told to me and that I've passed on to you.

**Paulina:** The Women's Centre was located in the aptly named Eden Street. There are a number of different groups. There was the National Abortion Campaign group, and the Mother and Parenting group, and a number of other groups as well. And what it lacked at that time in the early 1980s, there wasn't any lesbian group there. So myself and some friends started one and the women there were, you know, happy to have it because with feminists, being lesbian feminist is quite a fashionable issue.

So that was all right, there was somewhere that we were welcome, which was very good. And so we formed this group, and we used to meet I think it was probably every two weeks. It focused on both consciousness-raising—discussing our problems and saying what we could do to solve them—and also talking about the new lesbian feminist ideas and theoretical perspectives of remerging. I found this group extremely exciting and we all really enjoyed it. We kind of built our own Nirvana in a way, in this room.

**Diarmuid:** Something that's become very clear to me as I've spent time talking to these wonderfully kind and inspiring members of Cambridge's queer community, is that the history of queer spaces in Cambridge is in some respects the history of spaces *shared*. Of friendships and coalitions and provisional alliances with other politically progressive causes who are working towards similar goals.

Thanks for listening.

Credits

This audio trail was created by Dr Diarmuid Hester and produced by David Bramwell. It was funded with an award from the University of Cambridge Diversity Fund and the Faculty of English at the University of Cambridge. Thanks to my interviewees, Paulina Palmer, Les Brooks, Phil Bales, Alison Hennegan, and Janie Buchanan. Please share your feedback by filling out the short survey on the website.