Against Our Vanishing transcript

Introduction

**Diarmuid:** *Against Our Vanishing*, a climate art commission.

Here we are in the picturesque town of Rye in East Sussex. My name is Diarmuid Hester, I'm a writer and a cultural historian. And with me is my producer friend David Bramwell. We're going to take you on a queer audio trail of Rey that'll go around the town in a very easy, walkable circuit, bringing us back here in about 15 minutes. The trail begins on the iconic Mermaid Street, just at the bottom, where it intersects with Traders Passage. There's a house in front of us called Oak corner. We'll be going up Mermaid Street, and I'm gonna let you know where we're going along the way but the audio trail has been designed so that if you can't make it to Rye, you'll be able to listen from the comfort of your own home.

So let's head off, shall we? The first step is going to be Jeakes House just a little way up Mermaid Street, you can stop when you get there. We'll be standing outside Jeakes House for five minutes or so.

As we're going along, I want to tell you a little bit about the trail and how it came about. It was commissioned by Climate Art, which is an arts organization, and the theme of their residency was ‘A Vanished Sea’, which is a reference to when the sea withdrew from the land around Rye and left Camber Castle stranded.

This audio trail engages with the theme of vanishing—in a queer way. It's called *Against Our Vanishing*, which takes its name from a 1989 show of AIDS art in New York called *Witnesses:* *Against Our Vanishing*. The organiser Nan Goldin said that the show wanted ‘to demonstrate how hard we have been hit and at the same time to affirm how much is left’: the audio trail that you're listening to now aims to preserve the traces of queer past and affirm all that's left.

Jeakes House – Larry and Paul

During the trail, you're going to hear about the life and work of queer artists that lived in Rye and you're also going to hear from queer residents. They're going to tell us their stories and their impressions of the town and what inspires them. Residents like this literary couple:

**Larry:** Hi, Diarmuid.

**Paul:** Hello, how are you

**Larry:** Fancy seeing you here in the middle of Mermaid Street.

**Paul:** My name is Paul Camic. I'm 65 years old. I'm currently a professor of health psychology at the dementia Research Centre at UCL.

**Larry:** And I'm Larry Wilson. I'm a retired English teacher. And I am currently writing a lot of poetry and making pots and making prints and…

**Paul:** And you’re 64

**Larry:** And I’m 64.

We had been in Amsterdam, we came on the train, the train was very, very late, and so we didn't get in trying to close to 9 at night. We were staying at the Jeakes House. Jeakes House was the very first place where we stayed and I had wanted to stay there because that's where Joan Aiken was born. And she's one of my favourite writers in the world. And they told us that we had her room. Maybe they tell that to everybody. But it's just, it was a wonderful, wonderful place. And the woman who runs it is just charming. And… everything was closed, there were no restaurants open at nine o'clock on the day we got there so she just called the Mermaid and said, ‘I've got two people, you need to feed them’. And then the next day, she saw us over breakfast and we had our map of, of Rye—but I don't think was actually the Rye one we had. We had the Tilling map, which had been produced by one of the societies. And she just sort of sat with us and said, ‘oh you’re here to see Tilling are you? Well… And she said, ‘You don't realise, of course, there's two competing societies in town. There's the Tilling Society and the EF Benson Society, and they don't speak to each other!’

**Paul:** And she told us why they didn't, because one thought that Benson was definitely gay and the other one totally denied that—so that was the divide!

**Larry:** But there are also references from a novel of Joan Aiken’s called *Foul Matter* that's set in Rye (though she doesn't call it that), where she speaks about Watchbell Street. She speaks about the train station and the Tudor houses which now have Georgian facades on them and stuff. So that sense of place was very strong, and I was following along where it was, and trying to figure out where the burned down house was in the story—which I think she just made up, but that's alright, I still pinpointed it in my own mind!

I know you've only read it and I know it's only fiction, but you're still looking for that sense of atmosphere. Where the light falls, and where the shadows are, and where the ghosts are. It just made for a fascinating first visit, you know, I'm looking down the street that a character looked down. And you know, there goes a lady and *she's* carrying a shopping basket. And you know, those sorts of things, you just get just little, little glimpses. Plus the ghosts you see out of the corners of your eyes, when you're not looking…

**Paul:** It kind of grew on us, I don’t know. There was the people we met. There's quite a lot, you know, in the arts here; there's a lot of festivals—good quality festivals.

**Larry:** there's lots of music, lots of singing.

**Paul:** And there was something about maybe, because we're from a newer country, but living (even though in this little, little maisonette in the old town) that you could be in this *ancient place*, you know? You could open up your front door in the morning, and you're in this really old, ancient town. And it's, it's still exciting, kind of walking around it, but then it was just incredible.

**Larry:** Our house in Illinois was built in 1903 and that was *old!* Here, that's a new build, practically!

It seems you know, coming to Rye was not to have a gay life, but to have a *life*. And just to immerse yourself in this, you know, in this place. And we have friends here who are gay, and lots that aren’t…

**Paul:** There’s an acceptance in Rye. I mean, there's never been a time where I felt uncomfortable as a gay man here. And you're interviewing other gay people so maybe they have, I don't know, but I’ve never felt a threat or anyone's been rude or called you out. It's just, it's not felt a problem at all. Not just that it’s not a problem, it's very easy to live here as a gay person.

The gay community isn't a place necessarily; it’s a connection with individual people that may, or not be in the same place, I guess. For me, anyway. Having lived in a very gay neighbourhood in Chicago before I met Larry was great. I was much younger and it was very exciting. I don't mean just going to bars but it was just being around a lot of gay people was… You felt like: this is normal. It's lovely to feel you can be accepted and normal. You know, as I've gone on in life, friendships I think have been more important than necessarily sexual orientation, with the people that I know. So our community is a community of, I think, more like-minded people—not in a rigid way. And some of those people are gay.

**Diarmuid:** Now we're going to continue up Mermaid Street, heading to its end where it meets West Street. At West Street, you are going to turn right where you'll find Lamb House, which is the next stop on the trail.

I mean, looking around, it's no wonder everybody comes here whenever they visit Rye, it's really a beautiful street. And up ahead of us is the famous Mermaid Inn. Since I've been here, people have told me all kinds of stories about the Mermaid—where it was the base for a number of smuggling rings. Smugglers didn't want to pay the taxes on wine and fabric so they created tunnels from the cliffs to the cellars underneath some of these houses. And they also put holes in the walls of terraced houses so they could move unobserved, out of the view of the authorities. I'd like to think that’s maybe what we're doing here: smuggling queer history into the official histories of Rye!

Lamb House - Henry James

We're coming up on Lamb House now, which is most famously the home of Henry James, who arrived here in 1897. He was really enchanted by what he called ‘the sleepy, red rooved, medievally solid, little old world Rye’. And really, what he was looking for was solidity.

He was born in New York in 1843 but he was part of one of those families that spent a lot of time travelling between Europe and the United States. And when he was a young man, he was also very rootless. But by the age of 54, he figured he needed to settle down and Rye seemed like a great place to do it. In an essay he wrote a couple of years after he came here, he wrote, that ‘Rye takes the form of a huge floating boat’—left high and dry, I suppose, like those boats that line the river at low tide. James, it seems, was happy to have run aground here also.

I'm going to head into Lamb House now. If it's open, feel free to follow me. If not, you can always just hang out underneath the oval commemorative plaque to Henry James, and I'll explore it for you. We will be standing here for six or seven minutes.

So here we are in the hallway of Lamb House. Over to my left is the breakfast room, breakfast set for the Master who will be here imminently. And over on the right hand side we've got a telephone room. Entire space is very bright and airy, thick carpets on the stairs there.

*James bought Lamb House in 1899. It became what he referred to as his ‘modest hermitage’. He’d live here for most of the last 17 years of his life. James had always been a prolific writer. But his arrival in Rye brought on a new, even more productive phase. Here he wrote nine novels including masterpieces like The Wings of the Dove and The Golden Bowl, and more than three dozen stories, essays, and memoirs. Lamb House was, he wrote, ‘a quite adorable corner of the wicked earth… Only Lamb House is mild; only Lamb House is sane; only Lamb House is true.’*

Let's have a look upstairs, shall we? Okay, and we'll just ascend the last few steps to Henry James's bedroom. Here we see a large oak-panelled room with a four poster bed, which looks out onto the street there. You can see the church—he would have woken up and looked straight at the church. In front of it there's that wobbly chimney, which, if you've read Mapp and Lucia, you'll be familiar with. The iconic cobbled streets of Rye below us and, over on the right there, whatever remains of Henry James's Garden Room, which is famously where he got a lot of his inspiration, and he did a huge amount of his writing, but was bombed during the war. And, you know, it's one of those iconic spaces that has been lost to time and to history.

*James’ time in Rye also coincided with a new phase in his emotional life. Here he started to come to terms with his unconventional desires and realised his capacity to love other men. He would love them in his own, chaste and profoundly literary way. The same year as he purchased Lamb House, he met Henrik Andersen, a fair boyish-looking Norwegian sculptor, with whom he’d fall madly in love.*

So out of the bedroom and a few steps to the Green Room, a beautiful, airy room with sage-coloured walls. The first thing that strikes you about it is just how light it is. From the window over here, on the right hand side, you can see the red roofed houses of Winchelsea. From the other window, James's beloved garden, all of the flowers and trees coming into bloom.

And this would have been the room in which James wrote the letters to young men. He bought the house in 1899 when he was in his 50s, which I suppose you could say was a little late to get on the property ladder, but I don't know if I'm going to be any younger when I buy my first house!

*Henry James's homosexuality is a touchy subject. For many years it wasn't even discussed. After he died in 1916, his family were eager to avoid any scandal that might impact his reputation. They tried to curtail speculation about his sexuality by tightly controlling access to his archive. The family's approved biographer popularised the idea that James was simply a celibate bachelor. Besides, there was no evidence that James had ever had sex with men, so he couldn't possibly be queer. His letters to Hendrick Anderson, however, tell a very different story.*

*‘Dearest, dearest Boy, more tenderly embraced than I can say’, James writes in one letter. ‘I put…my arm around you and feel the pulsation thereby as it were of your excellent future and your admirable endowment, and I am yours just so.’ His correspondence with Andersen is full with this kind of sensual, erotic language. He imagines putting his hands on Hendrik; he wants to talk to him, to touch him, to ‘hold [him] close and long’. While living in Rye, James seems to have unlocked something queer inside himself. Into his many missives to this artist, who was twenty-nine years younger than him, he pours all his love and affection.*

I'm just going to pop into what they suspect is James's dressing room, where his suit is kept. If you know Singer Sargent's famous portrait of James, it was the suit, they believe, which he wore in that famous portrait. But also in this room is the bust of James that Hendrick Anderson made for him. He looks very stately—certainly not maybe the more corpulent version that we know of James.

*Over the course of their sixteen-year relationship, James and Andersen actually met fewer than a dozen times. This seemed to suit James, for whom a physical relationship was totally out of the question. The author’s 1903 novella, ‘The Beast in the Jungle’ gives us a glimpse into his complex sexuality.*

*The story’s protagonist, John Marcher, has what seems to be a strange psychosis. For as long as he can remember, he’s been haunted by the feeling that one day, without warning, something terrible will happen to him. This terrible event, which has never arrived, has nonetheless shaped his life. He’s been forever vigilant in case it should happen. He has avoided relationships in case others would be affected by it. He has kept the knowledge of it secret from everyone—especially women. James writes: ‘[Marcher’s] conviction, his apprehension, his obsession in short, was not a condition he could invite a woman to share… Something or other lay in wait for him, amid the twists and the turns of the months and the years, like a crouching beast in the jungle.’*

*Marcher’s terror of the thing that might come, which he must keep secret at all costs, gives us a way of looking at James’ own closeted sexuality and the impediments he felt about desiring other men. Ultimately, he’d much rather gaze out of the windows of Lamb House and daydream about them, than take them to his bed. As he wrote in 1899, there is nothing ‘so indelicate as a bed’.*

The next stop on the trail is going to be the top of Lion Street, which is a short walk from here. Head toward the church, which should be right in front of you now, and take a left down the snicket. You can you can start now and stop when you get to the door of the church.

Something that occurred to me just now actually is how the writers we're looking at today were all ghost hunters. Or well maybe they're spiritualists, at least *interested* in the paranormal. James's brother William was a member of the Society for Psychical Research, which was a Victorian paranormal society and this fed into Henry James's late ghost stories. Radclyffe Hall, who we'll meet later, spent a lot of time in the home of Mrs. Osborne Leonard, a medium that Hall employed in order to contact the spirit of her dead ex-girlfriend, Mabel Batten. EF Benson, although he ridiculed those gullible enough to believe charlatans and mediums, himself participated in more than a few séances. And I was thinking about what Larry said earlier on, how he came to Rye chasing shadows and ghosts, and I wonder if that's what we're doing here: looking for ghosts in in the corners of Rye. Trying to communicate with them, maybe.

E. F. Benson – Allan and Bill

So now we're at the top of Lion Street. The next section is about E. F. Benson, but we're going to listen to it on the move. With the church at your back, head down the hill toward the High Street, turn right, take a short walk to East Street, take a right and come back up the hill. So we're going into kind of a square: down to the High Street, right, East Street, right, up the hill—and wait at the town hall until we come to the end of our discussion. When you get there, there'll be a further four or five minutes listening time.

Along the way, we're going to be talking to Allan and Bill. Okay, off we go!

*E. F. Benson is one of Rye’s most beloved blow-ins. Born in Berkshire in 1867, he first came here in 1900, to visit his friend and mentor Henry James. After the Master died he took on the lease of Lamb House. Benson adapted brilliantly to small-town life, and was embraced by the community of Rye. He served as Mayor for three terms, and 1938 he was granted Freedom of the Town.*

*Like James, Benson’s homosexuality wasn’t acknowledged during his lifetime—and for many years after his death. Oscar Wilde’s prosecution for gross indecency in 1895 meant that same-sex love between men was a risky proposition from that point on. It couldn’t be expressed so freely. Benson also seemed to subscribe to a vision of homosexuality without the actual sex. While studying classics at King’s College Cambridge, Fred was immersed in ancient Greek culture; their idea of homosexuality, he learned, favoured lofty spiritual connections between men; sex was a no-no.*

*There’s no evidence of Benson ever having a physical relationship with another man. He burned stacks of his letters and his diaries have pages torn out of them, which might have offered us some clue. In any case, Benson couldn’t hide the queerness in his writing.*

Oh, here come the Benson Boys with their dogs. Allan and Bill, hello!

**Bill:** How are Diarmuid? Yes, meet our dogs: there’s Bramble, there’s Bertie, and there’s Lucas. Okay, well, my name is Bill Taylor. I'm 68, and I was a professional librarian, a public librarian. I've lived in Rye for nearly 25 years, and this is my partner.

**Allan:** Yes, I'm Allan Downend and I'm 74. I was a professional librarian for most of my time, but then ended up as a kind of curator. I came here first before I knew Bill in about 1973/74, having read the E. F. Benson books, which I first read in 1970 and wanted to see the place. Came down, and when I was living with Bill we came down here, usually for a couple of days out a year. Then in about the late 80s-90s, we thought: perhaps we could retire here! It might be a nice place to eventually leave London and retire to. And also I have to say it reminded me of a small town. It's slightly bigger than where I had all my childhood holidays with my grandparents. My aunt and uncle lived out on Anglesey. And it had the same buzz I felt. There was always little things going on. Perhaps it’s an early sign of being gay, but I always picked up on the gossip!

Bill's been in with the E. F. Benson Society since…

**Bill:** --Which just involves sticking address labels on the letters basically!

**Allan:** No no! You come and do the books and all the rest of it. Even before we came down here there was a woman here who ran a little paper, and we know she used to refer to us as—‘Oh, I think the Benson Boys are coming down on such and such a day’. So we've had that Benson presence (for good or ill).

I’ve been doing the walks for over 20 years, but I do remember one French woman… I just chuckled, because we're going across and I said to her: ‘Oh it’s always really nice to see everybody here. I think we have a Spanish couple as well, because we think of E. F. Benson as something very British, if not very *English*. And the way he writes.’ And she just stopped me, looked at me, and just said: ‘You, monsieur, have never lived in a small French town!’.

**Bill:** I think we also maybe mentioned to you Cynthia Reavell who used to run the Tilling Society. Now Cynthia was very suspicious of the E. F. Benson Society for whatever reason, but she used to go around saying: ‘Oh, well the E. F. Benson Society is just full of six foot blonde young men’. So we thought: ‘Is it really? We'd love to meet them whoever they are!’

**Allan:** Yes, our chairman said: ‘Oh, I wish you put that in prints somewhere. That would be a wonderful recruitment drive for us!’

Because Rye had always been bohemian, because it had been a port. People were close together. I have this feeling, provided you got on with your life and led it reasonably outwardly all right, what went on behind the closed doors was nobody's business but yours. As Mrs Patrick Campbell would say, ’they didn't disturb the horses’ so there we are—it didn’t matter. And now there are an awful lot of gay couples in Rye.

Like the previous resident of Lamb House, Benson was also a prolific writer and wrote more than a hundred books. Most of them are now long forgotten. But his Mapp and Lucia books have entertained generations of readers since they were published in the 1920s and 30s.

*The books are comic, gently satirical stories about social rivalry. Television comedies like Keeping Up Appearances are their descendants. Mapp and Lucia, the third in the series, was published in 1931. It’s based in and around a town called Tilling—which stands in for Rye. Mrs Emmeline Lucas, a pretentious socialite who goes by ‘Lucia’, comes to town with her confidant Georgie, looking for somewhere to vacation. They fall in love with the place immediately. As we can see from the following passage, which Larry was kind enough to read for us…*

***Larry:*** *‘They arrived in Tilling in the middle of the afternoon, entering it from the long level road that ran across the reclaimed marshland to the west. Blue was the sky overhead, complete with larks and small white clouds; the town lay basking in the hot June sunshine, and its narrow streets abounded in red-brick houses with tiled roofs that shouted Queen Anne and George I in Lucia’s enraptured ears, and made Georgie’s fingers itch for his sketching tools…’*

*Lucia rents out a beautiful Georgian house called Mallards, based on Lamb House. It belongs to one Elizabeth Mapp, a large woman with big teeth, who presides over the social life of Tilling like a tin-pot Bismarck. A war for social supremacy between the two women ensues. The spoils include the recipe for a lobster dinner and praise at the town’s annual art show.*

*The Mapp and Lucia books were praised by gay taste-makers like Noel Coward and W. H. Auden. What is it about these books that’s so beloved by gay readers? They’re not about gay characters; it is, rather, in the style of the books, that Benson’s queerness comes across.*

*Mapp and Lucia is a send-up of social convention in the enclosed world of small-town England. But look again, and it’s actually about two worlds. On the surface there’s the world of social convention and barbed niceties that are traded by Elizabeth and Lucia. But underneath is the true battlefield. The world of roiling emotions—of passions and fears and jealousies and hatreds all intermingled, which come to the surface only in tight-lipped smiles and cordialities.*

*Elizabeth hates Lucia with a passion—and the feeling is mutual. But we’re also told that she is fascinated by the sight of her. Watching Lucia doing aerobics in her garden dressed in a swimsuit, we’re told that for Elizabeth, the view ‘had been so entrancing… that she had lost all count of time.’ Clearly there’s much more going on in their relationship to one another than straight contempt.*

*Benson was a gay man who was forced to keep his true feelings in check and bury his desires under a veneer of social respectability or risk imprisonment. As a result, he had a unique perspective on the double world of life in interwar England—a subject that deeply influenced the subjects of his books.*

Okay, here we are at the Town Hall, and we're going to retrace our steps about less than 20 yards. With the Town Hall in front of you, turn to the left and you'll see a white clapboard house with ‘Church Square’ on it. Head down that way and follow the directions for Ypres Tower, but stop when you come to the signposts in front of the Methodist church.

As we walk, I'm struck by how many people I've spoken to here were fans of E. F. Benson. I don't know, I mean, you might be a fan of Benson. Maybe you've come here and you're going to head to Dungeness to see Derek Jarman's Prospect Cottage, which is a site for a lot of pilgrims, a lot of fans. You know, fandom really underpins so much doesn't it? Books we love, the art we love, the music we love.

I mean, I have no problem saying that I'm a fan. But there are people who don't want to be called fans—academics in particular. If you're a fan, you're not objective. You've let your emotions override your reason. Some might say, ‘Why in heaven's name are you wandering around Lamb House looking for Henry James? Or indeed, why are you on an audio trail?’ You know, when you should be reading the books, I suppose, or looking at the art. I suppose my answer to that is, well, fandom gives you a community. What one of my heroes, the queer theorist José Muñoz would have called ‘a sense of plurality; a being in common’ with other fans. That's certainly what Allan and Bill found.

Church Square – Edward Burra

Now, we're at the signpost at the corner of Church Square, and from here, if you look over to the left, you'll see The Rectory. That's actually where Edward Burra lived, although it was called Chapel House in his time. During this next segment, you should feel free to wander around. It's about five minutes, so you might like to go down to the gun garden and look out across the marshes and the River Brede—a sight that greeted Burra when he woke up in the morning. Just make sure you're back here to start the following segment in five minutes.

*The painter Edward Burra came to live in one of these red brick houses overlooking Rye’s famous Ypres Tower in 1953, aged 48. Unlike the other figures we’ve encountered, Burra was what they call a true Ryer. He was born and raised in a large country estate called Springfield just outside the town. Which isn’t to say that he was madly in love with the place. In letters to his friends written from this house, he called Rye ‘TinkerBell town’ and, less ambiguously, ‘Fort Dung Box’.*

*In his life and art, Burra took an unconventional path. He travelled widely, seeking new places and experiences, returning to Rye only to recuperate. His paintings depict the roaring 20s in Paris, Harlem’s jazz age nightclubs, Spain’s civil war, and the rolling landscapes of the west of Ireland.*

*From early in his childhood, Burra suffered with health problems. He had severe arthritis and a blood disease called spherocytosis, both of which meant he tired easily; his joints also swelled up terribly and he was constantly in pain. This experience of chronic illness shaped his life and work in a number of important ways.*

*He couldn’t be sent away to public school because he needed constant care, which only his family home could provide. This meant he managed to avoid a traditional education. Instead of being indoctrinated into a rigid, conservative way of thinking, he was allowed to take a more free-range approach. With his parents’ support, he learned French from a tutor and painting from a woman in Rye, and could read whatever took his fancy from the family’s large library. You could say that his illness liberated him from pursuing a conformist life course that would otherwise have been expected of him.*

*His arthritis also shaped the kind of artist he would become. His principal medium was watercolour, which was an unusual choice. Painters tend to work with oil, which is much more durable. But Burra’s hands, which were swollen and sore most of the time, weren’t well adapted to working with oils, and he found they required far too much physical effort. So he turned to watercolours—instead of sitting at an easel, he would put paper down on a flat surface like a table and bend over it to paint.*

*His sexuality was also affected by his condition. Not much is known about his sex life—he didn’t even discuss it with his best friends. Burra was an extremely reticent, withholding kind of person. Given the frailty of his condition, we can conclude that sex would have been difficult if not impossible for him. He was happy to be thought of as asexual. All his friends were gay or bisexual, but according to one, ‘Ed wasn’t anything’. Someone asked him if he’d ever had an erection; yes, he said, a slight one, while watching Mae West.*

*Nonetheless, he seems to have had infatuations with other men, and especially enjoyed cuddling with the glamorous ballet dancers who drifted into his friendship group. No matter how he expressed himself physically, Burra’s queerness is vividly, fabulously in evidence in all his letters, which are full of camp witticisms.*

*‘Dear B’, begins one letter from the summer of 1925: ‘Today one swoons with the heat, crocodiles languorously move their speckled bodies through the odorously intertwined oleanders – I hope it will go on all through the summer. Rye is hateful now full of abominations with raw necks and sports nets you can’t imagine such gawping oafish lumps of raw beefy FLESH and butchers meat oh how I hate people’. From the south of France he writes: ‘Well my whoringest, if you could see the jolly men bathing at the bathing beach, everyone skilfully undresses on the plage in full view of everyone, prizes are given those who manage to undress and not show the organs…’ Back home again in Rye: ‘Dear old Tarty’ ‘I’m reading a book by DH Lawrence which is so full of guts and maleness and femaleness it gives me the fidgets’.*

Radclyffe Hall -- Mel

Now, with the Methodist church on your left and St. Mary's Church, on your right, head down the long cobbled street, to the entrance to Hucksteps Row. It's a little alleyway on the left in-between two of those black-and-white, half-timber houses that are ubiquitous in Rye. Keep an eye out for it, because it's a small one, you might miss it. And you can head there now. Just stop if you get there before we do.

And with us, walking, is Mel. Hi, Mel, would you like to introduce yourself?

**Mel:** Mel Cohen (Mel short for Melanie), I'm 44 and I'm a shoe designer. Always been outdoorsy. Where I grew up is very rural and even within that my parents lived in a house that was in the middle of a field, so there was no road. I was kind of feral as a child. My mum used to open the back door and just be like, ‘off you go’. I was the little girl tomboy that used to come home with frogs in my pockets. So that part of me is always been there and I think that's probably, apart of my career, one of the reasons that I wanted to be in London because at that age, you reject the stuff that you've been brought up with and you want something different. Then perhaps, sooner or later, as you get older, you gravitate back towards the things that feel more natural to you.

When I moved to Rye I was dating somebody and we used to go to the pub all the time, and I never felt that… I never felt any strangeness. I think of Rye is quite a queer place. I mean, it's maybe not… I feel like there's a lot of gay boys, men, here; maybe not so many gay women. That's kind of one of the reasons that it appealed to me I guess because it's got this creative vibe and a kind of liberal vibe. I think where you get that you often get queer people.

I live by the tides these days. So if the tide’s in but I fancy going and seeing the sea then I might walk through Rye Harbour Nature Reserve and get to the beach, and then you can do like a loop. It doesn't matter if the tide’s in or out.

I always think I was always queer, but I didn't… You know, when I was younger, I was a bit like free spirited, and I used to sort of mess around with girls and then mess around with boys and it wasn't really until I met somebody that I fell in love with that I was like: ‘Oh right, that's my road’. Before that I took any road. (Quite a lot of them as well, I didn't really mind!) I guess that was when I was about 26, I met somebody and we were together for a very long time. And then we broke up for one reason or another. But obviously, I've kind of always been with women, it’s just how it is, I guess. It's hard to explain, isn't it sometimes? When you actually think about it.

**Diarmuid:** And we've now arrived at Hucksteps Row. Mel, what if I told you that Radclyffe Hall lived in Rye, and actually, she had a house on Hucksteps Row? What would you say to that?

**Mel:** That sort of makes me love Rye even more! An androgynous icon. There's something about the image of her as well that I think, if you are somebody that identifies as androgynous or boyish, we sort of look for those kinds of women. Like where do you fit in? Because you're not a boy, you don't necessarily want to be a boy but you don't necessarily want to be a girl either. But you are a girl and you have to be… You know what I mean? There's this weird land in the middle! I feel like women like that paved the way for the generation of people like me. So I think that's amazing and I'm shocked that I didn't know that she lived in Rye. Like perhaps that it should be like, the Mecca—loads of lesbians moved to Whitstable because of Tipping the Velvet. Which is fiction!

**Diarmuid:** Radclyffe Hall first came to Rye in 1928, and stayed in a house on Hucksteps Row with her partner Una, Lady Troubridge. Hall is one of the most celebrated queer writers of the twentieth century—possibly of all time. Her novel, *The Well of Loneliness*, which has been called ‘the bible of lesbianism’, caused a sensation when it was published. The book etched the image of the lesbian into the minds of the British public for the first time.

From here, we're going to continue on down this road that we're on as far as the Catholic church, which is called St. Anthony of Padua, which has got an interesting Radclyffe Hall connection. Right, let's head there now. And again, if you get there before us, just stop.

*The Well of Loneliness is about Stephen Gordon, a boyish looking woman who harbours deep longings for other women like her family’s maid and a neighbour’s American wife. But her passions are shot through with shame. Before the 1920s, there weren’t any prominent examples of homosexual women, and Stephen has no idea why she is how she is. Over and over, she asks herself, ‘What am I?’ Searching for answers, she draws on the work of Victorian sexologists, and concludes that she is a ‘congenital invert’. For her, homosexuality is a disability, and inverts like her deserve pity, not scorn. In the final lines of the book, she makes a plea: ‘Acknowledge us, oh God, before the whole world. Give us the right to our existence.’*

*The book was published in July 1928. In August, in the Sunday Express newspaper James Douglas denounced it as ‘filth’ for depicting homosexuality. ‘I would rather give a healthy boy or a healthy girl a phial of prussic acid than this novel,’ he said, and launched a campaign to ban the book. He was joined by the Conservative government. The Home Secretary charged its publisher with obscenity, and after a long trial, all copies of the book were destroyed. The publicity only made the book more popular, however, and it went on to sell millions of copies. Stephen Gordon and Radclyffe Hall became lesbian icons.*

*Amidst all the madness of the trial, Rye became a refuge for Hall. Una called it ‘a heavenly haven of peace’. The couple were wealthy and aristocratic. Given that they were so out and loud about their sexuality, they were also surprisingly conservative in their beliefs. They disliked the modern world and the disintegration of traditional English values. For them, Rye was a place untouched by modernity; a place, Una said, ‘where you can get away from this hideous age of progress.’*

*Hall decided to move here, and in 1930, bought the house on the High Street that now carries a plaque in her honour. The two women fit in well in Rye: Hall made generous contributions to the Catholic church and they made friends with lots of local writers like EF Benson. In 1933, Hall bought the house on Hucksteps Row, where she’d first stayed. Here she wrote The Sixth Beatitude as a tribute to Rye and the surrounding countryside.*

*Like The Well of Loneliness, it’s a tragic novel about people struggling with circumstances beyond their control. Hall set the story in a fictionalised version of Hucksteps Row, located at the heart of a town called Rother—which stands in for Rye. The book’s focus is a tough cleaning woman named Hannah Bullen and the poor inhabitants of her street, which is described as ‘a small cobbled alley full of crouching, decrepit, decaying houses’.*

*The book isn’t Hall’s best—it’s badly written in parts, and attests to the author’s turbulent emotional state. She had fallen in love with a Russian nurse at the time, and was torn between her new infatuation and her loyalty to Una. Hall’s descriptions of Rye (as Rother) are nonetheless startling. They show how much she was inspired by the place, and how important it was to her.*

*‘Rother would sometimes seem more than a town of old, decaying, black and white houses huddling inside an ancient town wall—Rother would almost seem like a person. Rother could draw unto itself lovely colours: soft greys and soft browns and soft, dark purples; and at sunrise and sunset its red roofs would blaze, and so would the leaded panes of its windows; and after a storm all its cobbles would shine as though Hannah’s powerful arm had been at them, while the grass in between them would look as bright as though it had just had a coat of fresh paint. And then there were the tall, straight masts of the ships that lay at the bottom of Anchor Street where the sea had once washed against the Strand, and where now there was only a tidal river. Masts of ships among houses—that looked queer. Rother would seem to stare down at those ships with old thoughtful eyes very full of affection.’*

And here we are in front of St. Anthony of Padua Church. Hall gave quite a lot of money to the church but isn't commemorated anywhere in the building—you'll be unsurprised to learn, given the infamy of her name. But Mabel Batten, who was a partner of Hall *is* commemorated. Hall bought the church a rood which is a large, beautiful crucifix that hangs from the ceiling. She bought that in honour of Mabel Batten and in the church in front of the altar, there's a brass plaque on the ground that says: ‘Pray for the soul of Mabel Veronica Batten’. Pause the trail now and have a look inside the church yourself if you'd like.

Ah ha! And here's Tim. He's going to keep us company as we head to our final stop, which is the lookout on the left-hand side, opposite the Hope Anchor hotel. Let's start walking there now. Well, say hello Tim!

Hope Anchor Hotel - Tim

**Tim:** My name is Tim Redfern. I'm 48 years old. My occupation is currently a budding permaculturalist but I'm also a performer—have been a performer. Flâneur. Jack of all trades, master of few. Moved to Rye in 2009. I knew a couple of people who were living here already, who were queer, and it therefore invited this sense of this queer sensibility, which I really loved. Which for somewhere just beyond the commuter belt is quite a rare thing. It's referred to affectionately as 3000 alcoholics clinging to a rock—5000 if you include the outer regions, which is pretty true.

I mean, you know, it has a history of non-conformism, which is great. Tick! That's a big box for me. It has a history of you know, creative peeps living here. Tick! That's good for me. And the fact that they're very much in the consciousness of the town is really great. For a small town has quite a good art gallery, which has an archive in it, and it's organized, and it's aware of that history. I think that that sort of level of macro kind of community, if you will, is, is really important and really great.

There's something so unique about the size of Rye, which means that just sort of like geologically, you cannot, you can't really expand beyond the boundaries because there's just nowhere to go. I mean, it's funny I do think about the fact that having spent life growing up in rural Essex (in the nice bit of Essex—there is one, you know), amongst flat marshland very similar to this East Sussex or the Romney marshes and wetlands… So it is quite funny that having sort of grown up there, and as a kid, I really loved it, you know, I loved growing up in this tiny village. I didn't like so much going, you know, to high school, and then inevitably, living in a small rural town, all I wanted to do as a young queer was to escape. And so that was what led me to escape. And then it sort of seems so funny, it seems strange, that sort of comes full circle. And then what you do is you retreat from the city, and you go and find something more rural.

But for me, also, was this notion of sustainability and ecology, and wanting to somehow downsize. But then also wanting to subsist more and see how that could manifest itself. It felt less possible in an urban environment. But for me, at the time, it was a real sense of wanting to commune more with nature, and actually be able to sort of disappear, be able to forage especially and again, like, yeah, be more literally purely subsistent, as subsistent as I could be. All the furniture that's in my house is secondhand or upcycled or built myself, because I just thought, well, you know: ‘There's too much stuff, so I'll do it this way’. Then I met people who would fish and so I would, you know, grow vegetables, and they would fish and then I would get fish and they would get vegetables. It just seemed that this is such a logical, fair, wonderful way of doing it. You know [inaudible]. It's sort of somehow been aspirational.

But however, it's sort of feels super fitting to discover radical fairies as a thing. To know that there were these kind of groups of predominantly men, gay men, queer men, who want to get more evolved in a more, say, pagan and ritualistic, atavistic, naturist way of a sort of sexualized being. I mean, I'm less involved in it in that respect, but certainly… Just I think the queer sensibility of being an outsider and using outsider in its kind of fullest term of literally being *outside* of everything. For me, the logical place to be outside is in the middle of nature. You can't really get more outside than that.

Conclusion

**Diarmuid:** Talking to a person like Tim brings home the connections between a queer sensibility — a radical queer attitude, really — and ecological concerns. The idea behind this audio trail was to shore up the traces of a vanishing queer past, but it also bears upon the present moment. A moment which, as we know, is marked by the threat of climate change, environmental destruction. Rising sea levels, which mean that, some day very soon, all the flatlands around Rye you can see stretched out in front of you will be submerged under the sea once more.

You may have noticed that all of the figures we’ve met today — James, Benson, Hall, Burra — they were all privileged, relatively well-off people. We’ve visited where they lived, and looked around their homes in Rye. But what about all those queer people who weren’t rich; who didn’t have homes to commemorate, or houses to mark the fact that they were here.

Homelessness is still one of the most serious problems affecting queer people across the world. In the United States, it’s estimated that around a third of all homeless youth identify as LGBTQ+. The changes we’ve seen as a result of climate change — much colder winters, heavier storms and more of them — these will only get worse in years to come. Everyone will be affected, but it’s the socially vulnerable people like the homeless, who live on the streets and in precarious lodgings are going to be hit harder than most.

Unless we act now, many more queer lives will be lost. Climate change is a queer issue; the fight against it is a fight against our vanishing.

Credits

Thanks for listening. *Against Our Vanishing* was created by Diarmuid Hester and produced by David Bramwell. It is a Climate Art commission in partnership with Bridgepoint Rye and the National Trust. If you've enjoyed the audio trail, please complete the short survey on the website. Get in touch at climateart.org.uk