

We were born in the 80s:

A history of the Joyce Layland LGBT Centre, on Sidney Street.

A heritage walking trail mapping the political, economic and social background of how Manchester built Europe's first Gay Centre.

This 1 hour walking tour will follow the story of how Manchester became the first place to have an entirely publicly funded, purpose built centre for the gay community. We will follow the money, as it were, from the Town Hall to Canal Street and then to Sidney Street and one of the city's most diverse urban blocks, home to an evangelical church and conference centre, a plethora of fast-food takeaways and a pub, Manchester's Islamic Centre, a vegan wholefoods cooperative as well as the LGBT Centre!

The story is one of unlikely success in the face of the public funding cuts, some hostile political foes and an infamous 147 signature petition. It is also one which perfectly shows the change in public sector funding from the 80s to the present day. Above all, it is a heartening story of community spirit and perseverance. We will also look forward to the future of the LGBT Centre.

Start Location: Manchester Town Hall main entrance, Albert Square

Length: This tour will take around 2 hours at an average walking pace.

Finish Location: Sidney Street Café (for tea and cake!)

Map: <https://www.google.com/maps/d/edit?mid=zmKUaSG5k0hk.kHq1hszAzdgE>

More information: If you have any queries or want to know more, please contact Emily Crompton, at URBED on 0161 200 5500 or on twitter @emilyonabike. Emily is planning to run this tour annually on 27th November, the centre's birthday.

I want to thank some important people and note the sources I used to create this tour:

- Central Library's Archives+ staff for helping me locate relevant material including collections of Manchester Gay, Gay Life, Scene Out and archives of Manchester Parents Groups, other educational sources, Council meeting minutes and sub-committee minutes
- I also used the Guardian online archive, and Manchester Library's City Life and Manchester Evening News archive.
- Thank you to Paul Fairweather for talking with me and sharing his personal archive
- A huge thanks as well to Hannah Berry for sharing her chapter, Centre to the Gay Centre of the Universe, with me, along with Amelia Lee's typed up transcript of the memories day held by LGBT Youth North West. The chapter forms part of the Prejudice and Pride book about LGBT history.

You can take a look at photocopies of the sources when you reach the end of the tour; it is looked after at the centre by LGBT Youth North West.

1. Town Hall, Albert Square – the first gay centre?

Our story really begins on Oxford Road, in the 1970s, in the heart of what would have been known as Victoria University of Manchester. There were various activist groups campaigning for gay rights at the time who had close links with the student gay society. This led to the Students Union giving the groups a dedicated space when a grassroots bookshop moved out of the basement at 178 Waterloo Place. These groups set up the Manchester Gay Alliance (consisting of Manchester Lesbians Group, the TV/TS [Transvestites / Transsexuals] group, the University gay soc [the Homophile Society], the Campaign for Homosexual Equality (CHE) group, and Friend.) So I guess that damp, 700 sq. ft. basement on Oxford Road, could be described as Manchester's first gay centre.

In 1978 an Urban Aid grant application was made to the city council for £5,000 (that's £36,630 in today's money) by one of the group's volunteers. The Urban Fund was a pot of money given by the Conservative government to all councils in urban areas. The decisions about spending it though, were thankfully for the Gay Centre, made locally. The grant application would pay for a full-time worker, phone lines, rent, publications, adverts etc. Manchester City council also awarded the group £1600 from the rates fund. This was directly from money collected from rate-payers (what we now call council tax.) *This is important –LGBT people paid rates too, and at the time there was a lack of service directed for gay men and lesbians, this shows Manchester's early commitment to gay rights.*

During this period services included counselling and information phone services run by volunteers, befriending groups for gay men and lesbians as well as general information services. In 1978/79 the total number of calls to all services was 16,103. A large proportion of calls were made by young people and in response, a youth group was set up and ran by Paul Fairweather with the help of Joyce Layland, who came along to the group with her son. More about Joyce later.

With their funding secure for 5 years, the first annual report of the Gay Centre was written in 1978/1979. The introduction is written defiantly, I'll quote a section "*Why have a Gay Centre? As long as gay people find it necessary because of pressure from all sides, to conceal part of their personality because of social, emotional and financial consequences there will always be a need for agencies which serve to reassure us that we are complete human beings who are entitled, and duty-bound, to play full parts as members of the communities we live in.*" "*There have been suggestions that 'gay people should pay for their own Gay Centre'. We don't accept this. When the whole of society is involved in discrimination against one section, it has a moral duty to do something to combat that discrimination.*"

Particularly interesting in that first report is that the need for a new home was identified. They wrote about the difficulties they were facing in finding alternative premises, coming up against prejudice from estate agents and landlords. But in 1981 they did, eventually find a new home: unfortunately another dingy basement. We will take a short walk over there but first, as we are aptly standing below the Town Hall, a few words about the role Manchester City Council played.

MANCHESTER CITY COUNCIL'S ROLE

Manchester, along with Ken Livingstone's Greater London Council, was one of a small number of local authorities pioneering equal opportunities. Graham Stringer, leader of the council from 1984-1996 was a supporter of the Gay Centre, eventually attending the opening ceremony of the existing centre in 1988. Under his leadership the council set up an equal opportunities committee and in August 1984 their first meeting was held. In minutes of that meeting it is stated that there would be the establishment of 4 sub-committees for women, ethnic minorities, lesbians and gay men and people with disabilities. That committee was responsible for the appointment of 2 equal opportunity officers for lesbians and 2 for gay men. These were paid roles in the council who would specifically work to represent and improve services for lesbians and gay men. Manchester was the first council in the UK to appoint such officers, showing its commitment to the advancement of gay people's civil rights. Manchester continues to be a pioneer and was also the first UK council to support civil partnerships in the early noughties, the legalisation for which was a stepping stone to the legalisation of marriage between gay and lesbian couples.

Early minutes of the equal opportunities committees are mostly missing, but from speaking with Paul Fairweather, one of the first gay men's officers, lesbians were very separate to the gay men, each working in their own sub-committee. (In the minutes it is clear that the original aim was to have a gay men's centre and a lesbian's centre). One of the key things on the gay men's sub-committee agenda right from the start was having a much better gay centre, because Bloom Street was cramped and dingy. Literally, underground. The sub-committee wanted the council to fund and build a gay centre so that the groups and services would have more security in the long term.

Now, let's head over to the Gay Centre's second home on Bloom Street. Facing the town hall turn left and head down Princess Street. You will pass the relocated Cenotaph in St. Peter's Square on your right and then cross over Lower Mosely Street, cross over Portland Street at the traffic lights. Then after 2 blocks take a left turning on Major Street, you should start seeing bars and rainbows. Take the first right on Abingdon Street (you'll see the back of the New York pub, which was there when Bloom St Gay Centre opened) and stop on the crossroads of Bloom Street – get a little closer to no 61 - the door with the Musicians Union sign next to it.

2. 61A Bloom Street – another basement home.

This door leads to the basement of the building, which became the new home of the Gay Centre in 1981. From 1981 – 1988 it accommodated a huge host of services including several phone lines including Lesbian Link, Manchester Gay Switchboard, and Friend as well as having meeting rooms. It ran a youth club and launched a light night café called SNAX to bring in much needed revenue. Mancunian Gay, a magazine, (later Gay Life) where much of my information comes from was also launched in this basement, as was Lesbian express (but that only lasted for 3 issues!).

YOUTH WORK

As mentioned previously youth work was a key service accommodated at the gay centre and in 1986 Nigel Leach became the centre's first sessional youth worker, employed by the Community Education Service. In fact, it may have been the first LGBT youth work post in the country. Manchester it appears was a pioneer of LGBT youth services, at a time when no other local authority was providing any kind of support groups for young people coming out, or trying to understand their sexuality as part of their identity. Another important group for the development of youth services, was Manchester Parents Group, which was also set up in 1986 (May) by four mums of young people who attended the youth group - Joyce Layland, Kath Hall, Bernadette Cookson and Joan Cotterill. That group eventually metamorphasized into Family Pride and then FFLAG, a national organisation dedicated to supports Friends and Families of lesbians and Gays. At the time Joyce was quoted as saying "By setting up this group we hope to learn from each other's experience how best to provide positive love and support for our gay sons and lesbian daughters." Joyce and Kath became powerful voices in the movement against Section 28 when that erupted in 1988. In March that year 20,500 people took to the streets in the biggest rally Manchester has ever seen, marking the start of the national campaign against Section 28, which was headquartered here at the Gay Centre on Bloom St.

FUNDING

The centre enjoyed the yearly Urban Aid grant of £5,000 for five years, which was also supplemented by additional grants from Manchester City Council. But in March 1983 the centre's grant was due to run out. It was given a brief reprieve of 3 months and sent the matter back to the Social Services Committee. It was here where things turned sour, in May, the committee voted 9 – 8 recommending that the council should not continue to support the gay centre. It was the only voluntary project out of 28 denied funds. Although this was a huge blow, it motivated the enthusiastic volunteers and staff, notably Paul Fairweather challenged one member of the committee to a debate on Radio Manchester and crushed him. The only chance the gay centre had was to lobby the councillors to reverse that decision. The Gay Centre's staff worked tirelessly throughout this period lobbying councillors and asking supporters to write to the leader of the council, Cllr Egerton urging the council to continue supporting the centre. Thankfully the Council decided by 43 votes to 29 to provide a 100% grant of more than £10,000 until March 1984.

The gay centre continued to rally for funding, launching SNAX café to make money as well as set up Friends of the Gay Centre Group, asking people to donate £10 a year to support the centre. And when March 1984 came around the Council did refund the centre, but cut the grant by 25%. Cllr Graham Stringer tabled a motion to award the centre the full grant, but was defeated 19 votes to 6.

When the equal opportunities committee was set up, in August 1984, it was made responsible for decisions regarding funding and grant applications for the Gay Centre. A clear aspiration for the gay men's sub-committee and officers was to find new premises for the Gay Centre. A steering group was set up and they started looking for suitable development sites.

Now let's take a short walk to what could have been the site for the next Gay Centre. Walk down the cut through to Canal Street. Turn left down the pedestrianized road of Canal Street, stop at the first bar with a balcony on the left - called Manto (it may have been renamed) - it's only round the corner.

3. Manto Café/Bar, 46 Canal Street – a new home?

There had been much debate about where the centre should be located – within the presumed safety of the gay area of Canal Street, or outside the area, to somewhere more neutral to potentially anonymise the building. But this was the site chosen by Manchester Gay Centre for their new home. Plans were drawn up by the City Architects Department to demolish the existing structure and erect new premises with full disabled access, more rooms for meetings, counselling and social occasions.

Once the plans were drawn a grant application for the funding was made by the Equal opportunities Sub-committee to the Policy and Resources sub-committee in October 1986. The Policy and Resources sub-committee recommended it for approval to the council and in December 1986 the Council approved the necessary funding of £118,000 (£301,985 today) for a purpose-built centre right on Canal Street. This was the second largest grant ever given to a Gay Community Centre, apart from the £1.2 million that was paid out by the GLC for the London Lesbian and Gay Centre. This decision was not without a small battle though. Joyce Hill, the conservative MP for Didsbury led a fight to disapprove the Committee's recommendation for funding, but her motion was outvoted 57 against and 7 for. She then tabled a motion to change the type of funding from a grant to a loan, which the Gay Centre would have had to pay back. This was lost as well, 54 voting against and 14 in favour. *I'm sure you'll agree; these votes show the strength of support for the Gay Centre from the City's councillors.*

Now with the capital funding approved, Manchester City Council were in a position to make an offer on the land. They offered the owner £12,000 (£87,913 in today's money), but as you can see, the scheme did not go ahead as the land owner did not want to sell the building and land for it to be used for a gay centre. It was actually reported by the MEN in the months ahead of the council's vote, that the owner had no intention of selling the property. The gay centre would have to be built elsewhere.

Regarding this site though, if we fast forward 5 years to 1991 when gay property developer Carol Ainscow alongside her business partner Peter Dalton purchased the run-down building. They demolished the ramshakled Unity House and developed the building here today to create Manto (standing for Manchester Tomorrow). The bar was the first to have a floor to ceiling glass façade on Canal Street, and is regarded as the catalyst for the modern development of Canal Street. Carol was quoted as saying she was sick of having to hide her social activity behind closed doors and in dingy basements. The bar closed in 2013, but looks to be re-opening soon.

The development or regeneration of Canal Street as the "gay village" in the heart of Manchester could easily lend itself to an entire tour, it is likely that gay pubs and clubs have been located here since the industrial revolution, when the canal would have been heavily used for transporting goods, but we must continue and find out where the gay centre finally found its home.

[We'll walk down a little further and turn right on Sackville Street at the bridge and take a stroll through Sackville Gardens.](#)

3a) Sackville Gardens

Canal Street has always been a focus of annual Pride festivals. The festival has humble beginnings. The first event which could be regarded as the first pride was held close by on Canal Street in 1984 - a jumble sale was held to raise funds for HIV and AIDS causes. In 1985 a little market was held here in Sackville Gardens, and in 1991 an expanded event included a full hose of activities over the August bank holiday. This was known as 'Carnival of Fun', then it became Gayfest, then Mardi Gras, then EuroPride and finally Manchester Pride.

Manchester City Council purchased this garden in 1990, another move which helped solidify Canal Street's status as a gay village in the city. When the annual Pride festivals today are held it becomes a hub of community activity with an acoustic stage, in an otherwise heavily commercialised festival. The garden is home to the UK's only permanent memorial for people who have, or have suffered from HIV/ AIDS, known as the Beacon of Hope, along with a memorial to trans people who are no longer with us, as well as the sombre memorial for Alan Turing, a mathematician who decoded the enigma machine and is regarded as the father of the computer. He committed suicide two years after being convicted of gross indecency (i.e. homosexual acts) in 1954. The memorial was unveiled in 2001; Turing was granted a posthumous pardon in 2013.

We will now walk down Sackville Street past the old UMIST campus. Keep walking down, you will reach a shared pedestrian walkway/ cycleway. Follow this round under the Mancunian Way and carefully cross over the big busy Brook Street (A34). Walk down Grosvenor Street; the Sugden Sports Centre should be on your right. Turn right down Sidney Street after Sandbar and before the Pub Zoo. Stop when you reach King's Church.

4. King's Church, Sidney Street – the last battle.

Once the Canal Street site had fallen through, it almost decided for the centre that it would need to be located further away from the bars of Canal Street. In the early months of 1987 the group looked at other sites around the city, especially at sites owned by the council, as it was much simpler to obtain the land on which to build a community centre if the council already had ownership. Sidney Street has been a hotel, and a synagogue at one stage, but was now an empty site; perfect for the gay centre.

From May 1987, the group held open meetings to discuss the new premises, which were held at Bloom St. It is thought that the city Architect and representatives of the gay men's sub-committee would have attended these meetings in order to understand the brief from the community members and existing users of the centre. Once the Sidney street site was identified, the City Architect drew up plans and submitted a planning application to the Local Planning Authority.

PLANNING OBJECTIONS

The church we are standing in front of was then known as the Covenant Community Church. Unfortunately they launched a campaign against the proposals when they reached planning. They were quite late with their attack, but did manage to galvanise support and sent around 20 members of the Gospel Outreach Team to oppose the application armed with a 147 signed petition and opposition letters from businesses. It would seem that the Gay Centre had no idea they would face opposition as the steering group only sent 2 volunteers to attend the planning committee. Fortunately this opposition did not affect the decision and the planning committee approved the proposals on 24th August 1987.

The church did not let that stop them and made an official complaint against Manchester City Council. This complaint was issued to the local Ombudsman by a councillor. It was the role of the Ombudsman to ensure all the correct processes had been adhered to by the local authority with regards to the planning application, and to decide if the complaint held up. In an 8-page report, local ombudsman, Patricia Thomas dismisses every single point raised by the church including;

- *That the application was not sufficiently advertised* (The ombudsman uses two examples of planning applications one by this church and another for a different church where the advertisement requirement was exactly the same)
- *That objectors were not given a chance to speak against the application at committee.* (If many people come from the same group, they must nominate 1 or 2 speakers to voice the opinions of the group otherwise planning committees could go on forever!)
- *That the proposed use of the centre was not made publicly clear in the application* (that is because who is using the centre is not a material consideration of the Town and Country Planning Act, the ombudsman also notes a number of local press articles making clear the stated purpose of a Gay Men's Centre)

This is all, thankfully, in the past. Today relations are much better and representatives of the centre and church have already met to discuss the potential refurbishment of the centre. The church have indicated that they are happy for their car park to be used for storing any building materials or plant that might need to be stored. The centre's workers have also made contact with representatives of the neighbouring Islamic Centre. Hopefully any proposals drawn up and submitted to planning will not receive so much opposition.

Now keep walking in the same direction round the corner to the left and take a look at where the Gay centre was eventually built! It is a yellow brick building, and has signs saying LGBT Centre and Sidney Street Café.

5. The LGBT Centre, Sidney Street - 'Not just a building for problems'

RE-FUNDING

Funding had already been given approval late in 1986 for the initial proposal on Canal Street, but with the change of site, the Architect wrote a report to the Policy and Reports Committee, asking for approval of an additional £44,060, which it agreed with and recommended approval. The city at this time was facing financial struggle, and many in the council argued that no increase in funding should be approved during the city's financial crisis. Thankfully, the additional funding was approved in August 1987 after a move by a tory group and right-wing labour rebels was defeated 50-39.

Along with the additional funding, planning permission was also granted in August 1987. The group continued to hold open meetings to report back on progress, plan how the new centre would be managed and operate as well as discussing the interior design and décor.

NATIONAL CONTEXT

It is important to place the funding and building of the centre in a national context: in June 1987, Gay Life reported that a little publicised bill had passed through the House of Lords and continued on its way to be passed by the House of Commons. Section 28 of the Act inserted a new section into the (amended) Local Government Act 1986: 2A - (1) A local authority shall not - (a) intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality; (b) promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship;

The amendment was introduced by a Conservative government, at a time when it was alleged that some Labour local authorities were spending money on actively promoting homosexuality over heterosexuality (Manchester is likely to have been one of those Labour Local Authorities). The Bill was intended to prevent a local authority from giving financial or other assistance to any person for the purpose of publishing or promoting homosexuality as an acceptable family relationship, or for the purpose of teaching such acceptability in any school. This became law in May 1988, which incredibly continued until 2003, when it was successfully repealed by the Labour government.

I believe this national context makes the decisions of Manchester's Local Authority all the more fantastic, at a time where gay rights were actively threatened by central government, Manchester continued to fund a purpose-designed building for the gay community.

BUILDING IT

Construction work finally started sometime in 1988. It must have been around the same time that Section 28 became law (May 1988). We know from a report in Gay Life that the roof was installed in August that year. In September that same year an application to increase the centre's core funding from the Urban Fund was lost. Having approved grants to build a new gay centre, the council were now refusing to increase the funding to provide the services occupied inside. Sadly this may have been a consequence from the pressures of Section 28, along with economic situation.

We believe that the first event to be held at the new Centre was the opening party, on the 27th November 1988, where Cllr Graham Stringer opened the building. The day after was the end of a huge national anti-Section 28 tour which was held in Albert Square. (A side note - on this day, 27th Nov 1978 - exactly 10 years earlier, Harvey Milk, the first openly gay man to be elected as an official in the US was assassinated.)

From then on service such as phone lines, youth clubs and social events have been held here.

THE GAY CENTRE, SIDNEY STREET

Over the last 25 years the centre has been through many managerial changes, funding cuts, nearly getting thrown out, but each time the centre was under threat it was the long term volunteers, dedicated staff and the users who loved the centre who would fight for its survival. There had been plans for a lesbian centre, but after the struggle to secure funding and a site for the gay men's centre much work was done to ensure an inclusive centre which could serve the needs of both gay men and lesbians.

In 2000 and with changes in funding the switchboard moved out of the centre and along with Health Greater Manchester formed the LGF (Lesbian and Gay Foundation). The council funded the LCP - Lesbian Community Project (previously known as Lesbian Link) as the organisation responsible for managing the service at the centre, rather than a management committee. Most of the organisations and projects based at the centre were focussed on young people.

In 2010, the centre was once again under threat, the LCP had found new premises and the groups were given a few months notice of the closing. Yet again the community galvanized support and rallied to continue using the centre. It was also in 2010 that the centre was dedicated to long-time activist Joyce Layland, who had died in 2006. This came out of a desire to have more Manchester buildings honouring local women and outweighed a few doubts about singling out one individual from such a fundamentally collective enterprise.

In 2012, the LCP lost their funding, but long-term youth workers were prepared and had set up LGBT Youth North West as an independent company which stepped in to assume the running of the centre. They reinstated a management committee to give all user groups a stake in running the centre, which helped avoid the perception that it is only a youth centre.

Just over a year ago in 2013 the LGBT Centre launched Sidney Street Café. This was primarily to bring in much needed funds, remind of you anything we have heard about previously... SNAX? – as yet again the centre's core funding was under threat. The amazing staff and volunteers are adamant that this time they will maintain the centre and are working towards becoming autonomous from the council in order to deliver the valuable and vital services for young LGBT people, which are just as needed today, as they were in the 70s/80s/90s.

THE FUTURE

A few words about the future. Last year LGBT Youth North West, the organisation who now runs the building, applied for feasibility funding to look at getting a long-term lease on the building, as well as refurbishing and extending the existing centre. That money pays for legal advice regarding the lease and if achieved would mean they would be responsible for the bills and upkeep of the building. Currently Manchester City Council pays the bills, and recharges LGBT Youth North West, but as part of austerity measures the council is looking to reduce costs of their building stock. The funding also covers architectural, structural and cost advice, from an architect an engineer and a quantity surveyor. We hope that be refurbishing or extending the existing building it will assist the group provide better and additional services to young people and the wider gay community as well as become economically sustainable as an organisation. If you have any views on what the centre should offer in the future – please let us know: [mailto:emily@urbed.coop?subject=LGBT Centre Future](mailto:emily@urbed.coop?subject=LGBT+Centre+Future)

Now get yourself inside, for a well-earned cuppa! The café should be open and serving lovely cake (the lemon drizzle is legendary) and hot tea, or thirst quenching juice!

Bibliography and References:

A huge thank you to Hannah Berry for letting me refer to her chapter “Journey to the Gay Centre of the Universe”

Another huge thank you to the Archives+ at Manchester City Library staff for assisting with my various searches and to Tommy Harrison for finding the crucial reference to the centre’s opening party.

And a massive thank you to Paul Fairweather for letting me see the annual reports and talk to me about the 80s!

Mancunian Gay/ Gay Life

Manchester Evening News

Council Proceedings – numerous committee minutes

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