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## Somewhere to go: the fight for London's queer spaces

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The disappearing city

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It's Tuesday night at South London's [Royal Vauxhall Tavern](https://www.vauxhalltavern.com/) (<https://www.vauxhalltavern.com/>), and that means [Bar Wotever](https://www.facebook.com/BarWotever/) (<https://www.facebook.com/BarWotever/>) – queer cabaret spectacular. It's just gone 7 pm as we step inside the rounded walls of the classic Victorian pub, and T. Rex is already blasting from the speakers. Performers mill about the tight space – looking only slightly more fancy than some of the guests – wearing dramatic outfits, clouds of big hair, and striking makeup.



Bar Whatever has been running for 15 years, and it's a talent show as well as a community group. One drag king gives us a rousing lesson for Gay History Month, before a glitter-dripping boylesque spectacular makes the audience whoop and squeal as Sebastian Angelique ([https://www.instagram.com/seb\\_angelique/?hl=en](https://www.instagram.com/seb_angelique/?hl=en)) strips down to their butt tassels. The performance pauses here and there as people share updates on transitions and sing birthday songs.

"This is a safe space," says the show's presenter, Shakona Fire (<https://www.instagram.com/shakonafire/?hl=en>). "if you're feeling unsafe come talk to one of us, this place is for everyone."

The Royal Vauxhall Tavern (RVT) is an LGBTQ+ institution: its [Grade II-listed](https://historicengland.org.uk/whats-new/news/royal-vauxhall-tavern-listed/) status isn't actually for the building, but to recognise how this has always been a vital and enduring venue to support queer life in the capital. Right now, the RVT is safe again following a major community effort, but this wasn't the first campaign necessary to save the venue – and it probably won't be the last.

Not all LGBTQ+ venues are as lucky. Campaigners for the now-closed [Black Cap](http://www.weareblackcap.com/) in Camden are still fighting to save the legendary pub and performance venue, and the [Friends of the Joiners Arms](https://thejoinersliveson.wordpress.com/) are trying to secure the site of the former Hackney standard. All of London's nightlife is under pressure (<https://mashable.com/2016/09/06/talking-about-london-nightlife/?europa=true>), but queer venues are closing (<https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2017/apr/21/lgbt-london-venue-closures-capital-future-night-tsar>) at a faster rate than mainstream bars and clubs: a [study](https://www.ucl.ac.uk/urban-lab/sites/urban-lab/files/LGBTQ_cultural_infrastructure_in_London_nightlife_venues_2006_to_the_present.pdf) from University College London (UCL) found that London has lost 58 per cent of its LGBTQ+ venues in the past decade. These spaces are vital – the recent [rise in hate crime](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/hate-crimes-england-wales-lgbt-rise-anti-gay-transgender-attacks-a9156291.html) makes this painfully clear – but as is obvious the moment you step into the RVT, this is just as much about thriving as it is about safety. There's nothing quite like the feeling of being safe in the majority, or surrounded by like-minded people.

The G-word – gentrification – plays a large part in queer space loss according to UCL's 2017 [study](https://www.ucl.ac.uk/urban-lab/news/2017/jul/london-lgbtq-venues-have-more-halved-past-decade-urban-lab-report-shows), which was conducted by Ben Campkin and Lo Marshall. "But it's very difficult to say that a space has closed because of one factor, or make a direct connection," says Campkin, Director of UCL Urban Laboratory. "Some become affected by big infrastructure developments like those in King's Cross, Islington, and Crossrail in Tottenham Court Road."

Others are affected by rent increases, steep business rates, and licencing issues. "These types of venues are often a re-working of precarious buildings or in a slightly precarious area when they first open," says Campkin, adding there's a long history of gay and lesbian businesses being pioneer gentrifiers. "In London we're seeing an accelerated, scaled-up form of gentrification, driven by global finance, and it's causing pressure on all kinds of small-scale cultural spaces."

Clubs and bars come and go all the time, but when over half the city's queer venues are gone, it begs the question: what exactly are we losing? And how can we stop it?

The Royal Vauxhall Tavern – London's oldest surviving gay bar – was first built in 1863 on what was the old [Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens](https://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/discover/vauxhall-pleasure-gardens), a debauched Victorian fairground that was the place to dress up to see the latest in arts and culture, but also, where the shady groves and alleys were perfect for a discreet assignation. In the 2015 film [Save the Tavern](http://www.light-factory.co.uk/save-the-tavern/), writer and historian Rupert Smith says the pub likely became a gay bar in the post-war period, when cabaret was common pub entertainment and drag performers likely brought in the gay crowd. But, adds Smith: "It may equally have been that the market traders and lorry drivers [who frequented the pub] attracted gay customers, because they liked a bit of trade."

Performers would dance on the bar in the '60s and '70s, the bar staff serving beers through their legs, but by the '80s that had to go for health and safety reasons. Freddie Mercury once reportedly took Princess Diana (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstoppers/di>)

health and safety reasons. Freddie Mercury once reportedly took [Princess Diana](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstopping/diana/9963557/Freddie-Mercury-smuggled-Princess-Diana-into-gay-bar-disguised-as-a-man.html) there, dressed up as a man. The Tavern was also used to hold wakes during the AIDs crisis, and was home to Paul O’Grady’s alter ego [Lily Savage](http://www.nottelevision.net/po-lice-wore-rubber-gloves-part-1-of-3/) for eight years – she was performing on stage on the infamous night when police raided the place, arresting 11 people while wearing rubber gloves.

The RVT’s legacy, combined with its Grade II-listed status, is how the most recent campaigners were able to save the pub from yet another threat, this time from Immovate, the Austrian property developers which bought it in 2014.

“We’ve had success in throwing different things in their way,” says Alice Beverton-Palmer, a director of [RVT Future](http://www.rvt.community/), the campaign group. “The first thing we did was apply for [Grade II listing](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2015/sep/09/london-gay-pub-royal-vauxhall-tavern-given-grade-ii-listing). This means there are features of the pub that you cannot change, like the pillars inside. That makes it really difficult to turn it into flats or a hotel.”

The RVT is also an [Asset of Community Value](https://www.pinknews.co.uk/2014/10/15/iconic-vauxhall-gay-bar-awarded-community-asset-status/), and the [Lambeth Conservation Area](https://www.lambeth.gov.uk/sites/default/files/pl-Vauxhall-Draft-CA-Statement-FINAL.pdf) has been extended to include the building. “We also have a planning status called [sui generis](https://love.lambeth.gov.uk/rvt-feb-2017-update/), which means it has to remain a club and a pub and a performance space. So even if it was sold to someone else, you couldn’t turn it into a Wetherspoon’s or a Tesco’s,” says Beverton-Palmer. “It’s not one thing, but we hope that this creates a soup that makes it much more difficult to change the Tavern.”

The campaigners succeeded: the RVT is now one year into a 20-year lease, owned by James Lindsay who runs the pub. But the fight isn’t over. “We don’t trust Immovate with The Vauxhall Tavern,” says Beverton-Palmer. “They wanted to demolish it... We strongly believe that the Tavern isn’t saved until it’s owned by the community.”

But Immovate [won’t engage](https://mailchi.mp/rvt/sprint-2019-update-1585265?e=4da97758ee) with the campaign, meaning they don’t know how much money it would take. It’s already taken volunteers [endless hours](http://www.rvt.community/read-our-application-to-make-the-tavern-a-listed-building/) to get this far, but the next step – a multi-million-pound fundraising campaign – might be the greatest challenge yet.

If hard work was enough, the Joiners Arms in Shoreditch wouldn’t have stood empty since 2015. Part of a row of shut-down retail fronts, it was first destined for redevelopment into offices and flats, later a hotel. Established as an LGBTQ+ venue in 1997, the Joiners was a legend in its own time: a bit aggressive, decidedly un-charming, anarchic but somehow welcoming due to its complete lack of snootiness.

“I first started going to the Joiners around 2008. It was pretty grungy, and not shiny and clean. It had a weird smell of cleaning fluids and cigarettes and jizz,” says Peter Cragg, a member of the [Friends of the Joiners Arms](https://thejoinersliveson.wordpress.com/) campaign. “It was like being in a different place, kind of like when you go on holiday and find a bar that feels like home. It had a really comforting vibe.”

Located on a then-abandoned stretch of Hackney Road, across the road from a now-gone car wash, the place had a reputation for being rough. But it was open late, and Turner Prize winners and fashion designers would end up there alongside the local clientele. The latter was forever amused by their un-cool boozier being [written up in \*The New York Times\*](https://www.nytimes.com/2007/05/20/travel/20surfacing.html), alongside the [George and Dragon](https://www.pinknews.co.uk/2015/08/12/gay-london-pub-the-george-and-dragon-to-close-down/), the Nelson’s Head and the [Chariots](https://www.hackneygazette.co.uk/news/chariots-closing-popular-shoreditch-gay-sauna-was-much-needed-safe-space-for-gay-men-1-4407211) sauna (now all gone too).

Of course, the late landlord Dave Pollard didn’t care [about any of that](https://i-d.vice.com/en_uk/article/7xv8pq/remembering-the-joiners-arms): “If you want to enjoy yourself, come in. But we don’t want to know how important you are. Are you interesting to talk to? Are you a good shag? Can you dance? These are the questions we’re interested in as a pub.”

The Joiners has stood empty since 2015, but the Friends of the Joiners Arms (FOTJA) campaign is still working to bring it back. “[My friend] gave me a big lecture about how this is a line in the sand, gentrification, queer rights, socialism,” says Cragg, remembering when the FOTJA started. “Seeing so many venues be closed, and then to see the Joiners – probably the crappiest, cheapest one, even that to be turned into luxury flats! It’s a bit like, ‘Alright, that’s enough. You can take everything else, but come on. This is ridiculous’”.

FOTJA secured the Joiners as an [Asset of Community Value](https://www.eastlondonlines.co.uk/2015/03/tower-hamlets-council-upholds-joiners-arms-community-asset-status/), and support from the council meant the planning application from owner Regal Homes was an

Joiners Arms Community Asset Status/), and support from the council meant the planning application from owner Regal Homes was approved only on the condition that a queer venue with a 25-year lease, late-night licencing and economic concessions for the leaseholder, would be included in the new development. FOTJA isn't guaranteed to win this lease (and may look elsewhere to set up if they don't), meaning the space could become anything from a "gay Starbucks" to a community-run queer venue.

The next generation Joiners won't be the same ([https://www.vice.com/en\\_uk/article/gy5aqq/east-londons-most-loved-gay-bar-has-been-saved-from-developers](https://www.vice.com/en_uk/article/gy5aqq/east-londons-most-loved-gay-bar-has-been-saved-from-developers)) no matter who runs it, but FOTJA doesn't want to freeze time. "The point was never to get the Joiners to reopen exactly as it was. There was always a bigger plan to it," says Cragg, pointing to how the old Joiners was predominately for white gay men. "For the last year and a half we've been putting on a regular night [in other venues] called Lèse-majesté (<https://thejoinersliveson.wordpress.com/portfolio/press-release-friends-of-the-joiners-arms-presents-lese-majeste/>), which platforms female, non-binary, queer people of colour, and particularly, drag king performers. It's a way for us to explore what [the future Joiners] can look like."

LGBTQ+ venues have always been vital for providing a place not just for a drink, but also to take refuge from a hostile world. The Bell (<https://www.gayinthe80s.com/2017/09/pub-bell-kings-cross-london/>) was legendary in King's Cross during its heyday in the '80s (the Big Chill sits in its place now) – this was the time of Section 28 (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/bbcthree/article/cacc0b40-c3a4-473b-86cc-11863c0b3f30>), the legislation prohibiting the "promotion" of homosexuality in schools. Introduced during the peak of anti-gay sentiment, the law contributed to an atmosphere of fear and suspicion that meant gay people were regularly fired from their jobs, and one in eight (<https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=8cAeDgAAQBAJ&pg=PT29&dq=gay+violence+one+in+eight+attacks+death+or+disablement&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjit6iPg9LoAhUdUBUIHR47AUUQ6AEIKjAA#v=onepage&q=gay%20violence%20one%20in%20eight%20attacks%20death%20or%20disablement&f=false>) of the frequent attacks led to death or disablement with little hope of justice.

As a result, The Bell was a sanctuary. "Most gay places were men only, and it tended to be drag pubs. Most of the people who went to The Bell weren't terribly into drag, because it was seen as being sort of misogynistic, a bit old hat and not very modern and interesting," says Rob Pateman, a Bell regular who worked the door for five years in the late '80s.

The windows of the 160-plus-year-old Victorian pub had been blacked out, but The Bell was a proper old boozier – a bit run down and seedy, but that was part of its charm. "There was a real political edge to everything that happened at The Bell," says Pateman, explaining how it started as a women-only pub on a Saturday night because the management figured it would be better than the usual football crowds trashing the place – King's Cross was pretty rough ([https://www.huckmag.com/shorthand\\_story/raves-and-rebellion-the-hidden-history-of-kings-cross/](https://www.huckmag.com/shorthand_story/raves-and-rebellion-the-hidden-history-of-kings-cross/)) back then.

The Bell's unofficial dress code was the same for women as for men: 50ls, oxblood Doc Martens, a white t-shirt or checked shirt under an army surplus vest, or a bomber with badges for the Anti-Nazi League and Support the Miners. The "Bell Dyke" was apparently a type: "Because of how they looked and how they behaved – they didn't take any shit from anyone," Pateman says, with a laugh.

The venue was the kind of place that felt like anything could happen: "Even the bad stuff was good. The sex in the toilets, the vomit on the floor. I mean, god, I lived a life there that I couldn't tell my daughter about," remembers Denise Spence, in a podcast (<https://story-palace.org/stories/the-bell-ghosts-on-the-dancefloor/>) from King's Cross Story Palace. "I used to say to people, when I die, please scatter my ashes on the floor of The Bell. I thought I was gonna die young anyway."

The Bell closed in 1995 in part due to gentrification pressure, in part because the gay scene had drifted to Soho where changing times meant bars didn't need to black-out their windows anymore. "The protest was going more mainstream, and people were taking it into Westminster rather than underground," says Pateman. "The Bell wasn't needed as much."

While much of this is positive, Pateman thinks progress has come at a cost of cohesion: "There's no focus. There is no gay scene. There's no London Lesbian and Gay Centre ([https://www.vice.com/en\\_uk/article/dpk7xj/london-lesbian-gay-centre-30-years](https://www.vice.com/en_uk/article/dpk7xj/london-lesbian-gay-centre-30-years)) anymore. It's just a bit fractured," he says. "For all the crap the gay community had to take in the '80s with Thatcher and AIDs and everything, it was also a really vibrant time. We were out there creating our own clubs and our own space."

How do you measure the worth of having a place to go? With so many closures, Cragg from FOTJA wonders where young queer people

will go to find out “who they are and what they like”: “There’s this patronising tone of, ‘Oh everyone’s queer, we can walk around holding hands with whoever we want’. But it’s not true. If it was, we wouldn’t be seeing rising hate crime.”

A safe space is more than just being around like-minded people. “LGBTQ venues provide an important space for lesbian, gay, bi and trans people who may face discrimination or feel alienated in other pubs, bars and clubs,” says Sarah Hagger-Holt, head of campaigns at Stonewall (<https://www.stonewall.org.uk/>), the advocacy group. “The closures are increasing and this can be devastating for local communities.”

Dan Glass (<https://www.theglassishalffull.co.uk/about/>), FOTJA-member and LGBTQ+ campaigner who runs Queer Tours of London (<https://queertoursoflondon.com/>) (which started as a conversation outside the Joiners), says the “repression and homophobia” means you need a place to let loose. “The Joiners wasn’t too restrictive, it wasn’t too controlled,” says Glass, who doesn’t mince words when asked why he thinks LGBTQ+ spaces are more vulnerable than mainstream venues: “It’s because they’re orientated around the community, and therefore not orientated around selling expensive drinks to rich people.”

You can of course be gay and capitalist, but Glass says the term “queer” often signifies a different economic value system: “Queer spaces are getting slaughtered because they don’t prioritise the capitalist mentality. Many queer spaces provide community services like HIV and sexual health awareness, for example, and The Glory (<http://dalstonsuperstore.com/>) and Dalston Superstore (<http://dalstonsuperstore.com/>) are doing some great work with Galop (<https://www.galop.org.uk/>) around LGBTQ hate crime.”

Glass is one of the people behind Queer Night Pride (<https://www.facebook.com/pages/category/Community/Queer-Night-Pride-101627731427625/>), which has seen people take to the streets in protest over the fact that hate crime saw a 10 per cent rise in 2019, but LGBTQ+ attacks rose the most (<https://www.stonewall.org.uk/about-us/media-statements/stonewall-response-increase-anti-lgbt-hate-crime-figures>): there was a 25 per cent rise in gay-related attacks, and a 37 per cent rise in attacks on trans people. Organiser Jack Ash said during February’s march (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a4dczM6-dFg&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwARliUoJPvHdebPiC74aYyae3Uy-hh55gFPLmzayvqctmtn60iO4VzONDPDi4>): “This is a demonstration to say we’re not accepting hate crime. It’s not an ask for tolerance, for acceptance, but we’re here and we’re not going anywhere.”

There are signs that the tide may be turning. Campaigners for both the RVT and the Joiners said the councils have been supportive. In response to the UCL report, Mayor of London Sadiq Khan gave Night Czar (<https://www.london.gov.uk/what-we-do/arts-and-culture/24-hour-london/night-czar>) (and host of ‘Duckie’ at RVT) Amy Lamé a mandate to offer help to struggling venues, and to act as a mediator between venue owners, developers and pub companies. The Mayor has also added safeguarding measures to the planning process, and created a LGBTQ+ Venues Charter (<https://www.london.gov.uk/what-we-do/arts-and-culture/lgbtq-nightlife-venues>).

“With all these campaigns happening at the same time, there’s a recognition of the pressure this is putting people under, and the important community and historical value of these spaces,” says Ben Campkin, the UCL researcher. “The activism has made people reflect on what those spaces have offered, and how important they have been to a sense of a network across the city, and to people’s individual lives.”

I spent New Year’s Eve 2008 at the Joiners Arms. I was living in that huge estate behind the carwash at the time so I decided to join my friends for a bit—I’d just recovered from a brutal bout of flu and was still feeling a little delicate. I remember leaning over the bar, excited to order my first alcoholic drink in weeks, and the details get a little hazy after that but I remember dancing by the mural (<https://www.qx-magazine.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Screen-Shot-2017-08-08-at-10.50.19.png>) proclaiming ‘Love, Life and Liberty’, making out with someone tall, beautiful and ginger. I was so happy that night, out in the world again for the first time after having been cooped up for weeks, surrounded lovely people. It’s a long time ago now, but I’ll never forget how great it felt.

**At the time of publication, all UK social spaces are closed due to the coronavirus quarantine – all outings mentioned took place before this time. While the full impact of the lockdown remains unclear, the loss of revenue is likely to be a blow ([https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/coronavirus-lgbtq-businesses-lockdown\\_uk\\_5e7cc881c5b6256a7a262ffd?fbclid=IwAR3V5PUa2iZmGHgY-Wf4Oa00CbUnjSbbo73GxB\\_TPAwLCaZaxFZCumAm0qn4](https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/coronavirus-lgbtq-businesses-lockdown_uk_5e7cc881c5b6256a7a262ffd?fbclid=IwAR3V5PUa2iZmGHgY-Wf4Oa00CbUnjSbbo73GxB_TPAwLCaZaxFZCumAm0qn4)) for London’s already vulnerable queer nightlife. While the government has pledged some support for salaries, many venues have steep rents; Jeremy Joseph, owner of G-A-Y, has expressed concern about being able to re-open (<https://metro.co.uk/2020/03/27/london-landlords-refuse-rent-discounts-despite-knowing-businesses-may-go-12466431/>) unless landlords provide discounts.**

**During the lockdown, the Royal Vauxhall Tavern (<https://www.facebook.com/TheRVT>), The Glory (<https://www.facebook.com/TheGloryLondon>), and the Admiral Duncan (<https://www.facebook.com/1AdmiralDuncan>) are all streaming performances. Consider supporting your favourite bars by buying a virtual round of drinks at an online performance, a gift card for future use, or chip in to the Dalston Superstore (**

[Bhm7n6pme\\_8lmgV3ub8SStkwoJAOm7y28](#))’s fundraising effort for performers and others in the queer ecosystem whose income has been impacted. The [Friends of the Joiners Arms](https://www.facebook.com/friendsofthejoinersarms/) (<https://www.facebook.com/friendsofthejoinersarms/>) has a newsletter of online events, workshops, resources and fundraising campaigns that will run during the quarantine—sign up [here](https://facebook.us9.list-manage.com/subscribe?u=0244a914acab8e50cb290594b&id=cd017fba03) (<https://facebook.us9.list-manage.com/subscribe?u=0244a914acab8e50cb290594b&id=cd017fba03>).

‘The Disappearing City’ is a series about the changing urban landscapes of London. Previously: [The battle to save London’s green spaces](https://www.huckmag.com/perspectives/reportage-2/force-of-nature-the-battle-to-save-londons-green-spaces/) (<https://www.huckmag.com/perspectives/reportage-2/force-of-nature-the-battle-to-save-londons-green-spaces/>).

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## Joining the Dots with photographer Guy Martin

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In the latest episode of *Joining the Dots*, Don Letts meets surf-cum-war photographer Guy Martin.

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## 'The coronavirus is like a nightmare within a nightmare'

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A view from Palestine (<https://www.huckmag.com/perspectives/opinion-perspectives/the-coronavirus-is-like-a-nightmare-within-a-nightmare/>)

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## Anti-prostitution 'feminism' has no place in a pandemic

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People are in danger (<https://www.huckmag.com/perspectives/opinion-perspectives/anti-prostitution-feminism-has-no-place-in-a-pandemic/>)

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With no protection or support to deal with the coronavirus crisis, sex workers are more vulnerable than ever. It's time to put aside your personal politics, argues Molly Smith.

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## Park life: photos of London in lockdown (<https://www.huckmag.com/art-and-culture/photography-2/park-life-coronavirus-photos-of-london-pandemic-lockdown/>)

Taking the air (<https://www.huckmag.com/art-and-culture/photography-2/park-life-coronavirus-photos-of-london-pandemic-lockdown/>)

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As the coronavirus crisis gears up, photographer Theo McInnes documents how the city's outdoor spaces are changing.

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