'GALHA - Why, When and Where?'

Subtitle: 'An aspect of Humanism and human progress'

A talk given by Tony Thorne at the Harrow Humanists meeting on 8th March 2017.

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the Sexual Offences Act 1967. It seems, therefore, timely to talk about GALHA, the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association, now known as LGBT Humanists.

After this brief introduction I will cover the three main points of the title: Why, When and Where? Then I will conclude with a summary.

The Subtitle: 'An aspect of Humanism and human progress' will be covered in general and it will be, ultimately, up to you to decide if it is.

Personally, it also marks something of my own progress.

Firstly - WHY?

Why was GALHA founded? So some history:

“If homosexuality was ‘natural’, you would see it in animals!” This seems a conclusive enough argument until you realise that it does! In many thousands of species in fact. Its detractors have never allowed the facts to get in the way of the argument. I wonder what shepherds thought. They knew all too well that setting a couple of rams to work inseminating the ewes would not always work. Shepherds would put dye on the bellies of their rams which would transfer to the backs of the ewes when mounted. Sometimes only the backs of other rams ended up stained!

Many religions have a problem with sex or “carnal knowledge” as they disingenuously refer to it, not least Christianity. Over the last millennium or so, it has tried to make it go away. To replace it with religious ecstasy which, in extremis, comes across as overtly sexual. In the 19th century, Christianity so dominated moral life in Britain that sexually went underground altogether. It also flourished there in a crude way.

The criminalisation of homosexuality in the UK did not end until 2013. So don’t be fooled, write Peter Tatchell, by the celebrations this July to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the Sexual Offences Act 1967. It was just a start; being the first gay law reform since anal sex was made a crime in 1533, during the reign of King Henry VIII, and since all other sexual acts between men were outlawed in the Victorian era, in 1885.

There were also arrests under ancient legislation against indecency, such as the Town Police Clauses Act 1847 and the Ecclesiastical Courts Jurisdiction Act 1860.

1885 was a low point in Victorian religious prudery. Section 11 of the Criminal Law Amendment Act of that year, commonly known as the Labouchere Amendment, made "gross indecency" a crime in the United Kingdom. In practice, this law was used to prosecute male homosexuals where sodomy could not be proven. The penalty for sodomy was life imprisonment. Up until 1861 it had been the death penalty. But that was so harsh that successful prosecutions were rare. The new law was much more easily enforced. It remained on the Statute Book until 1967 and untold thousands, perhaps millions, of lives were blighted by it. It incited blackmail for one thing. One MP described it as a “bugger’s charter”.

Two of its most famous victims were:

Oscar Wilde who was convicted under section 11 and sentenced to two years' hard labour, and

Alan Turing, one of the great minds of his generation who, whilst working at Bletchley Park during WW2, helped break German coded messages and said to have helped shortened the war by two years, saving countless lives. Often called “the father of the computer”, he was convicted under the Act and sentenced to oestrogen injections (chemical castration) as an alternative to prison. He committed suicide.

Why only men? It is claimed, anecdotally, that when the bill was discussed with Queen Victoria that she could in no way imagine that women were capable of such goings on. No further discussion.

1947 - I was born! After the end of the war and into the 1950’s, there was an upturn in the number of cases of people caught by Section 11 - not least prominent persons as well as the then virtually unknown Alan Turing. The Russians were also using it to recruit spies.

1954 - The Home Secretary at the time, David Maxwell-Fyfe, called for the establishment of a Departmental Committee to review the law on Homosexual Offences etc. It was conducted by Sir John Wolfenden. It was revealed some years later that Wolfenden’s son was gay but it not known if this had any influence on the proceedings.

1957 – The Wolfenden Report, as it became known, was published - and shelved! It is said that the same Home Secretary didn’t want to go down in history as the person who legalised buggery!

1964 – The North Western Committee for Homosexual Law Reform was founded by Allan Horsfall and others. It played a key part in the campaigns leading up to the decriminalisation of male homosexual activities in 1967.

1967 - Sexual Offences Act 1967 was passed into law by Parliament leading to the decriminalisation of homosexual acts in private between consenting males, both of whom had to be over 21.

It applied only to England and Wales and did not cover the Merchant Navy or the Armed Forces.

Homosexual acts were decriminalised in Scotland by the Criminal Justice (Scotland) Act 1980 and in Northern Ireland by the Homosexual Offences (Northern Ireland) Order 1982.

1968 - I was 21. I hardly noticed the law that had gone some way to liberating me. To suppress my sexuality, in part, I had turned to religion since I was 16.

1969 - The North Western Committee for Homosexual Law Reform was renamed the Committee for Homosexual Equality (CHE) which, in turn, became the Campaign for Homosexual Equality.

1969 - The Gay Liberation Front (GLF) was the shared name of a number of gay liberation groups in the USA, starting in New York immediately after the Stonewall riots, when police clashed with demonstrators.

1970 - Because of the effect of GLF in the United States, the UK GLF held its first meeting in the basement of the London School of Economics on 13 October.

1971 - The GLF became recognized as a political movement, holding weekly meetings of 200 to 300 people. It carried out a series of high-profile direct actions, not least the disruption of the launch of the moral campaign, the Festival of Light, led by Mary Whitehouse. By that time, helped by the Festival of Light, my Christian beliefs were crumbling. I was on my way to Humanism.

1972 – The newspaper Gay News was first published in the United Kingdom, a collaboration between former members of the Gay Liberation Front and members of the Campaign for Homosexual Equality. The newspaper's circulation reached 19,000. Its editor was Denis Lemon.

1973 - The Law Lords ruled in that gay lonely heart ads in IT magazine were a “conspiracy to corrupt public morals.” Despite the reform of 1967, homosexuality was declared by their lordships to be only partly legal, not moral and contrary to the public good.

1974- I started working at the Land Registry in Harrow; thus my association with the town.

1975 - I met Roger at his home in Twickenham. We moved in together in February 1976. One of the first thing we did was start subscribing to Gay News.

1976 - I recall reading a poem in Gay News that I dismissed at the time as poor. A few weeks later I was startled to discover that Mary Whitehouse had brought a private prosecution of blasphemy against both Gay News and its editor, Denis Lemon, over the publication of Professor James Kirkup's poem The Love that Dares to Speak its Name.

1977 – Denis Lemon was found guilty of blasphemy when the case came to court. He was sentenced to a suspended nine-month in prison and fined ₤1,000. When totalled up, the fines and court costs awarded against Lemon and Gay News amounted to nearly ₤10,000.

The case drew enormous media coverage at the time.

1979 - Gay Humanist Group founded (GHG)

1980 - Homosexual acts were decriminalised in Scotland by the Criminal Justice (Scotland) Act 1980.

1982 - Homosexual acts were decriminalised in Northern Ireland by the Homosexual Offences (Northern Ireland) Order 1982.

1987 - At the Conservative Party conference, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher used her keynote speech to attack the notion that people had a right to be gay. In the 1980s, the Conservative government’s “family values” and “Victorian values” campaigns whipped up hysterical levels of homophobia; aided by the moral panic over AIDS, which was dubbed the “gay plague.”

2003 - The gross indecency law of 1885 had been used to convict the computer genius Alan Turing in 1952 and, before him, to jail the playwright Oscar Wilde in 1895. Together with the criminalisation of anal sex, it was finally repealed by the Sexual Offences Act 2003. As a result, for the first time in 470 years England and Wales had a criminal code that did not penalise gay sexuality.

2004 - Civil partnership became legal in the United Kingdom allowing same-sex couples and couples of whom one spouse had changed gender to live in legally recognised intimate partnerships similar to marriage, but without permitting them to marry, or describe themselves as married. It also compelled couples to end their marriage if one or both spouses underwent gender change surgery, or if the couple were not recognised in law as having male and female gender.

2008 - In Northern Ireland, the ban on anal sex was finally repealed.

2009 - Scotland’s anti-gay laws were abolished in but, in the case of sodomy, did not take effect until 2013

2011 - Following the 2010 General Election, in September 2011, Liberal Democrat Parliamentary Under-Secretary for Equalities, Lynne Featherstone, announced that the Government of the United Kingdom would launch a consultation in March 2012 on how to introduce civil marriage for same sex couples in England and Wales.[

2013 - Gay sex ceased to be a crime in the UK.

2013 - Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013.

2016 – My partner Roger and I married after 41 years together!

Secondly - WHEN?

The formation of GALHA and what it has done since.

It was the prosecution of Gay News by Mary Whitehouse in 1977 which led to the birth of the Gay Humanist Group (GHG). Whitehouse became the target of vociferous protest, not least from the National Secular Society which had been campaigning for years for the repeal of the blasphemy laws. She began declaring in public that "everything good and true" that "every decent person believes in" was being undermined by "the humanist gay lobby". Although any such lobby was a figment of Mary Whitehouse's imagination, it seemed a good idea and a few gay men in the Humanist movement started thinking about forming one. Thanks Mary.

1979 - I attended a Civil Service staff association conference in Brighton at which I spoke. For this I stayed in the Beacon Royal Hotel. In the same year, within a few weeks of my visit, in August, six gay humanists met and launched the Gay Humanist Group (GHG) in the same Beacon Royal Hotel. They would be unknown to me for a few years. They were: George Broadhead (long time secretary of GALHA), Roy Saich, Jim Herrick (long time editor of New Humanist), Chris Findlay, Barry Duke (even now editor of The Freethinker) and Brian Parry. They were in Brighton for the annual conference of the Campaign for Homosexual Equality - an event which attracted 600 people. A speaker at the meeting sounded a warning that the small gains the gay movement had made within the previous ten years could quite easily be wiped out as a result of the growing influence of evangelical Christians in the corridors of power. George Broadhead wrote in 1999 that, “No doubt he had in mind the Nationwide Festival of Light - later to become Christian Action Research and Education (CARE) which, together with the Christian Institute, is still active today in lobbying against gay rights. It is this sort of malign Christian influence which succeeded in getting Section 28 included in the 1988 Local Government Act, (that) strenuously opposed attempts to get it repealed, and did its utmost to thwart attempts to lower the male gay age of consent to 16.”

GALHA rejoiced that it was, “Born of Mary!”

But if you had CHE, why GHG?

Reason 1: To get the message of Humanism across to the gay community; many of the problems gay people suffered were the result of futilely embedded religious guilt;

Reason 2: To inform the Humanist community of same sex values.

The latter has always been easier than the former.

The Gay Humanist Association soon changed its name to the Gay and Lesbian Humanist association, a tautological attempt to ensure that “Gay” very much included woman.

From soon after its inception, helped by the Conway Hall’s generous discounting of its hire fees, GAHLA held monthly meeting there. It still does, 35 years on.

These meetings, good thought they were, attracted only a few at first but it was thought they should continue. Nowadays they are attended by 60 – 80 + people - many of them women. They’ve had to move from the library into the Brockway Room to accommodate the numbers.

Being London-centric, GALHA soon started a monthly magazine as its members were all over the country and even abroad. The magazine has been eclipsed by the internet supported by an occasional bulletin. It was a high quality means of communication. Excellent for a small organisation.

There are social getaways like the annual weekend event which have proved popular although these have lapsed of late but the annual festive lunch still takes place in London in December. Last year’s speaker was Shappi Khorsandi, the present president of the Humanists UK. The year before last it was the turn of Mark Gatiss the quite brilliant actor, comedian, screenwriter and novelist. His work includes writing for and acting in the TV series Doctor Who and Sherlock. The monthly meeting have also attracted well know speakers like Stephen Fry; Peter Tatchell (a regular contributor), our own Clair Rayner, Tony Banks MP, David Starkey to mention but a few, sometimes, controversial figures.

1990’s – After the bowing out of George Broadhead after about 25 years as sectary, GALHA needed members to take on more and they did. One of it Chairs in the 90’s was Mike Savage. After his stint ended, he threw in his lot with Harrow Humanist – the rest you know. After him, in the noughties, came a certain Andrew Copson…

With the help of the Humanists UK celebrants’ network, GALHA started coordinating “public affirmation ceremonies” in the early nineties for gay couples. This was at a time when legally recognised civil partnerships were inconceivable, let alone the full marriage rights enjoyed today. Perhaps these wonderful ceremonies helped to pave the way. Last year, as you know, Roger and I took advantage of these changes and married.

2012 - GALHA became the LGBT section of the British Humanist Association (now Humanists UK). As a result, support has grown immeasurably well with over a 1,000 people associating themselves with it today.

Could the Gang of Six, back in 1979, have ever envisaged this?

Thirdly - WHERE?

This divides neatly into two parts:

(1) Where has its influence been felt and

Firstly, Gay people and others from all over have been helped in ways we will never fully known. The Humanist community, broadly tolerant anyway, has been ever more magnificent it its support.

(2) Where does its future lie?

Its future is within the mainstream of the Humanist movement where, like the humanist movement itself, it is growing from strength to strength as people renounce centuries of superstition and acquiescence and, consequently, become more tolerant and accepting.

Summary:

Best of all, for its members and supporters, GALHA (now LGBT Humanists) has been and fully remains a place where people can meet and resonate with kindred spirits and advance.

What is significant is that although none of its surviving founder members are still active, young people are still coming through and willing to take over the reins suggesting that LGTB Humanists is as relevant today as ever.

In the latest edition of the LGTB Humanists bulletin, the recent talk by Peter Tatchell is covered. This actually induced the infamous Steven Green of Christian Voice to attend and try, unsuccessfully, to take Peter to task. Reporting on the meeting, the bulletin goes on to say, “Long-time Humanist Tony Thorne commented, ‘If we thought our meetings were just for us, that they went unheeded by the world at large, I took it as a compliment - albeit a back-handed one - that one of our worst detractors felt sufficiently motivated to attend and explain why we’d got it so wrong! Does it mean anything? Perhaps only that the ripples we make do not only reach his shores…”