

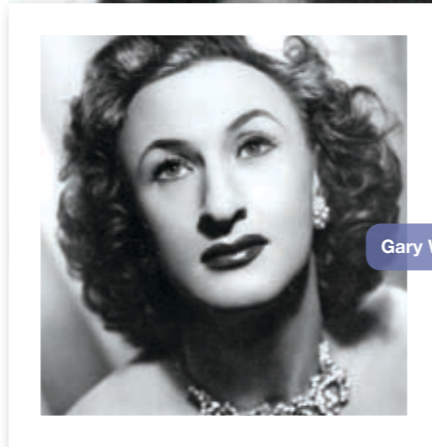
# TALES FROM THE ARCHIVE

Gary Webb, born 1932, remembers his career as a drag artist, starting shortly after the Second World War. From an interview carried out in 2004.

**W**hen I was sixteen, a friend of mine, Tommy Osbourne, a great little drag artist was going into this show called *This Was the Army* which was supposed to be all ex-Army, Navy, Air Force personnel. It had a line up of dancing girls, it had the comedienne (your leading lady) and speciality acts - it was exactly the same as you would see at an ordinary revue except that it was all men. Tommy kept saying to me, "Go on! We'll have a laugh. Oh, you must come." So of course, I signed.

It was the most horrendous thing I can ever remember in my life because I had no idea how to make-up as a woman. Hazel, who ran the show, left me in the hands of a couple of the "old hands", who'd been in the drag business for a very long while. I said to Tommy, "I don't really like these others, they keep giving us awful looks," so he said, "Oh! Take no notice of that," he said, "they're jealous." Dear Reg, bless his heart, made my face up. He gave me little cupid bow lips, hot penny rouge cheeks and he put my eyelashes on the wrong eyes. All the chorus girls - eight or ten of us - had to open in a ballet scene. This arm came out from the side of the stage and yanked me off - it was Hazel and she said, "What have you done to your bloody face?" I said, "I didn't do anything, Reg made me up." She said, "I'll kill him." That was my start in drag and I thought, this is never going to work...

I stayed in the chorus about a year, two years and then later on I took over one of the leading roles. I was over the moon and dear Sonny Dawkes, who I had to partner, we just fitted - we almost knew exactly what the other one was going to do. "Oh," he said, "I feel so wonderful with you, darling." It was a fantastic success. We went round with the show, I can't remember how many years now, so many years. I think that we did about every theatre in the country, including the Brighton Hippodrome. It was so beautifully done that people used to sit there and they could not believe they were looking at men. In those days you didn't only have one drag show going round, you had about three or four - they were all following each other, so the



Gary Webb (above) and Sonny Dawkes

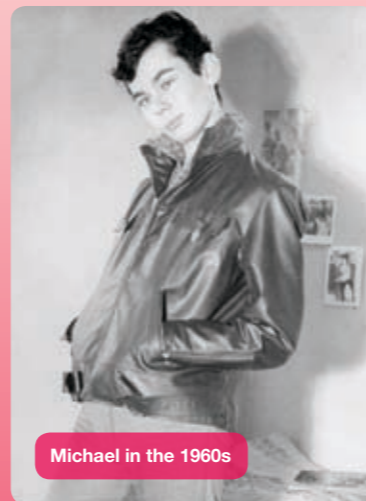
audiences got used to drag and the show was almost sold out before you arrived.

In those days, nobody thought about the gay side of it - it wouldn't have occurred to them. That was what the gay world was all about - it was never mentioned but it was always there. I never, ever liked to play gay clubs - I never felt right in a gay club. I can't understand why, I just didn't, I preferred to play to my straight audiences, the ordinary wives and husbands - alright, there were gays out there as well, but it wasn't fully gay. I played the West Pier in Brighton for seven years. You got all the ordinary public in but you got all the pros as well - everybody that ever lived down here: Jack Tinker, Larry Olivier, all the lot used to come in there because that was their big night to let their hair down - they could do what the bloody hell they liked in there. It was wonderful."

● We're sad to report that Sonny Dawkes died in June of this year.

## NEW IN THE ARCHIVE...

● We are thrilled to receive from Michael James, thirteen albums of photographs spanning his life as a gay man, including AIDS activism and glamour shots from the '60s.. Following the sad demise of the Disabled Dykes group earlier this year, their photograph album and six books about sexuality and disability have been donated to the archive as well as a laptop computer, which is helping us out in the office. Very many thanks to them all.



Michael in the 1960s

# brighton ourstory..

## BAGS OF BONA BOOKS

**N**ow we're nicely settled in our new home, along Western Road in Brighton, we thought we'd get a lovely new look to go with it. We hope you like this format for the newsletter and will look out for our freshly-hatched logo at events around town. Speaking of our new office, we're preparing to invite more of you to visit us there, to take a look at the thousand or more books we have in our collections. Thanks to a donation of some shelves and some serious cataloguing activity, we hope to open our library to readers early next year. Before then, you can get a taste of what's in store by stopping by our tent in Preston Park on Pride day, Saturday August 5th - we shall be showing off a small selection of our books in an exhibition similar to 2005's wildly successful, Meet Our Ancestors. Hundreds came to see us last year, some of whom have since joined our band of volunteers and are already thinking up bright ideas for next year's Pride! Why not call in, we'd love to see you.

## REALLY LIVING

Please also put in your diaries 7pm on the evening of Wednesday, 2nd August, when we shall be performing our show Really Living at the Friends Centre in Meeting House Lane in Brighton.

We put on this show at a small venue for Winter Pride and LGBT History Month in February and the audience was very enthusiastic - "Breathtaking, poignant, stirring", "It conjured up my own gay history", "very difficult to



Images from Really Living show



better", were just some of the comments. Join us for an hour of memories, music and film about lesbian and gay life in Brighton as recalled by three generations, who lived here between the 1940s and the 1990s.

## SUSSEX ARTS BALL

Also celebrating Winter Pride and LGBT History Month, we had a marvellous time at the re-creation of the Sussex Arts Ball organised by the LGBT Workers' Forum of Brighton & Hove City Council. Held at the Hanbury Arms ballroom, it was chock-a-block with gorgeous queer folk of today imitating the gorgeous queer folk of sixty years ago - inspired by memories of the event in Oursstory's book, *Daring*

*Hearts*. Lots of dressing up went on, music was provided by a very fine jazz band fronted by Nicky Mitchell and projected onto the wall were images from the original Arts Balls (from the Oursstory archive). There was talk

of repeating the event at a larger venue, so look out for that - it was a brilliant night out.

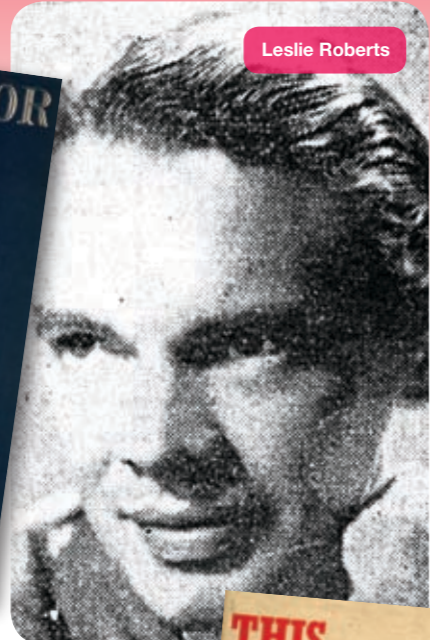
## MOVING ON

On a slightly more sober note, we have been sad to lose two members of our Management Group recently. Benedict is travelling (now in South-East Asia) and Chris is upping sticks and moving to London. Congratulations to Chris and his partner, Tom, who recently tied the knot in a civil partnership. Ben and Chris have both been on the Management Group for four years and we thank them for their invaluable contributions to Oursstory's continuing success. We are now recruiting...

Linda

## NEW IN THE ARCHIVE...

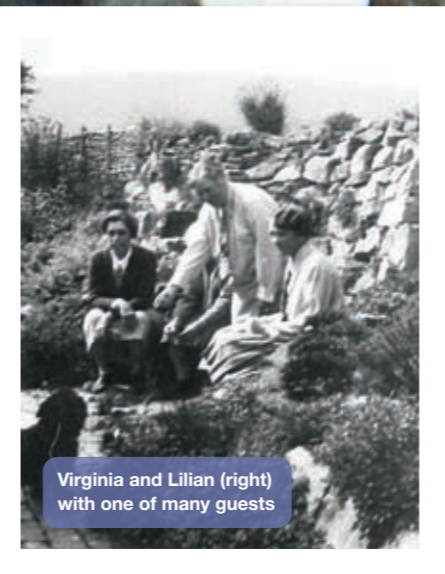
● Just before Ben went away on his travels, he excavated his drawers and brought his finds into the archive - a set of *Fresh Fruit* Guides to Brighton produced by Sussex University Students Union and the *Essential Guide to Running an LGB Society*, produced by the National Union of Students in conjunction with Stonewall.



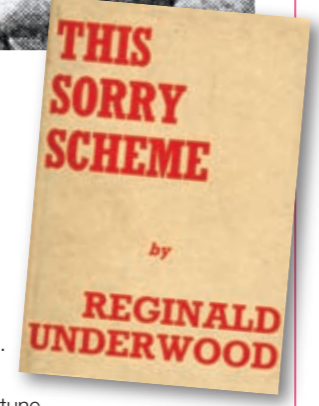
Leslie Roberts



Virginia and Caroline



Virginia and Lilian (right) with one of many guests



# 'WHY, IT'S RANK SODOMY!'

Until the Gay Men's Press was established in the 1970s, the closest thing to a gay publishing house in Britain was the Fortune Press. From the Thirties through to the Sixties, a stream of queer novels was issued in the characteristically yellow-papered wrappers which became a beacon to readers searching in shabby bookshops for the elusive sympathetic read.

The proprietor of such a press at such a time was necessarily a strong character and Reginald Ashley Caton was the most eccentric of publishers. He was also the landlord of 91 slum properties in Brighton, many of which he had bought as bomb-damaged bargains after the Second World War. Descending from the London train to inspect his holdings, it is said he would stop at the station toilet to change into a set of the tattiest clothes imaginable, and set off to plead poverty to his tenants, his possessions packed into an old Weetabix box under his arm.

Before his death in Rottingdean in 1971, Caton had published an impressive range of queer fiction from autobiographical schoolboy fantasies to the rustic Gothic extravaganzas of Reginald Underwood, whose bestselling *Bachelor's Hall* of 1934

was condemned as 'rank sodomy'. Biographical details for the Fortune Press authors are scanty but it seems that at least two also had Sussex connections. Humphrey Lancaster (1888-1973), a naval man, lived and died at the Sunnyhill Hotel at 14 Selwyn Road, Eastbourne. His historical romances *Barbarian Boy* and *True Yokefellow* show the interest in slavery, bondage and discipline which was a persistent feature of Fortune Press productions.

Leslie Roberts (1905-66), after the scandalous success of his camp novels *Shepherd Market* and *Feathers in the Bed*, became a steward in the merchant navy and had a flat in later life at 56B Church Street, Brighton. Like most of the pennypinching Caton's authors, he died a poor man and left his slender savings to the white witch Doreen Valiente, in whose coven he may have been a worshipper.

**Tom**  
● Timothy d'Arch Smith's excellent bibliography *R.A. Caton and the Fortune Press* has recently been published in a revised edition by the Elysium Press.

**These books were a beacon to readers searching in shabby bookshops...**

# LIKE DAWN IN PARADISE

These words of Kipling echoed in the mind of American academic, Virginia Gildersleeve as she walked the South Downs near Alciston in the hot summers between the two World Wars. She and her "intimate friend", Professor Caroline Spurgeon, bought a cottage in Alciston in 1925 and every year spent the summer months there and the autumn months in New York, where Virginia was Dean of Barnard College for women, part of Columbia University. Caroline was a highly respected scholar who published many books and papers about Chaucer and Shakespeare. She taught at Bedford College for Women, part of the University of London.

The pair had met just after the First World War ended and together founded the International Federation of University Women (still going strong today) as a contribution to the peace effort – they believed that the women of the world could make change by

talking to and learning from each other. Their visitors book at the cottage shows a number of IFUW women coming to stay and savour the peace and tranquillity of the Sussex countryside among them Meta Tuke, Principal of Bedford College and another "intimate friend" of Carolines.

Also living at the cottage was high-ranking civil servant Lilian Clapham, who was awarded the MBE for her services to the Ministry of Labour, mainly promoting job opportunities for women and girls. She and Caroline had met in the late 1900s, when they were both about twenty-six and Lilian was captain of the England hockey team. They stayed together all their lives. When Lilian died in 1935 Caroline erected a gravestone (pictured) with a very bold and unequivocal message to the world. Caroline died seven years later, in America, in the middle of World War Two – her dying wish was for her ashes to be buried alongside Lilian's in Alciston churchyard and this Virginia did when the war was over.

**A very bold and unequivocal message to the world...**

*This has been a perfect summer, one to remember always. We had some lovely bathing, we have been drenched in sunshine, we have been getting out Keats.*

Caroline's remarks c1927



Lilian's gravestone in Alciston

● Our grateful thanks go to Jean for spotting Lilian's gravestone and sending us a photograph of it, to staff at Hove Library, to East Sussex Records Office for scans of the old photos reproduced here (Ref AMS/6516/7) and to the present owners of the cottage – it is out of respect for their privacy that the name of the cottage has been omitted from this article.