

John Robb: I'm John Robb and you're listening to hearmanchester.com, a series of 10 audio portraits exploring the rich and varied history of Manchester from the towpath of the Rochdale Canal that cuts through the heart of one of the greatest cities in the world.

Pride is a word which is well used when it comes to Manchester, particularly so when it comes to this part of the city. This is Canal Street, the heart of the gay village, and symbol of Manchester's vitality and its rich and diverse population.

John Robb: Yeah, so now we're just walking down the back end of Canal Street. Things are just starting to wake up now, people are starting to put the tables and chairs out. Think in about ten minutes the bars are going to start to open up. Just walked past Taurus, and people are just setting everything up for the day.

Mike Pollard: My name's Mike Pollard, but everyone knows me as Polly, and I'm the proprietor of Taurus, number one Canal Street.

JR: *So what's life in a bar like here? Is it a good spot to have a bar?*

MP: There's nowhere like it. The sun comes out and we now have pedestrianisation after six o'clock and all weekend from midday, and you can, you know, as you can see there's like a

hundred people outside each bar, there's about eleven bars, there's thousands of people outside here, it's a great café society serving food and drink and it's a really vibrant society.

JR: *When it started off it was like a gay orientated street, is it still quite strongly like that?*

MP: Yeah it's called the 'gay village', that's what it...

JR: *Yeah, yeah for a long time it was called that, but to me it seemed like it got more mixed over the years?*

MP: Yes. Well it's about...well its not about sexual orientation, it's about mentality. So as long as people aren't here to stare and aren't here to ogle at other people, then I don't have an issue with that as long as they don't take over and gay people feel uncomfortable in their own surroundings.

Paul Fairweather: My name is Paul Fairweather and I am one of the tour guides on the lesbian and gay heritage tour. We are outside the offices of the Campaign for Homosexual Equality on Kennedy Street and Kennedy Street is behind the Town Hall, right in the centre of Manchester and the site of a very historic public meeting and the first time began to talk about changes in the law in the 1950s, so in the 1950s, the North West Campaign for Homosexual Law Reform

was based in Manchester and had a very active campaign led by Alan Horsfall and Ray Gosling, and a number of notable gay campaigners from the 1950s.

What was significant in Manchester was that openly gay people led the campaign, when it was illegal to be gay. The campaign in London was led by the great and the good, lords and judges, none of whom were openly gay and some were heterosexual. The key thing about Alan Horsfall was that he was openly gay, and that was hugely significant at a time when few public figures were open about their sexuality

JR: So er, we were down here this morning, of course it was very quiet this morning, but now it's the evening, its coming to about ten o'clock and its starting to really buzz down all the bars down Canal Street, everywhere's looking quite busy, if you come down here later on it gets really busy, very, very chaotic.

VOX: Well it's like, um, my aunts used to come here in the sixties and I think the New Union was the only like gay bar/club/pub to be, and obviously in those days it was illegal. But now obviously its, like, great, because I used to live in fear of being gay but, like, you come here and, like, its so open and most people are gay or half-and-half and it's, it's just the place to be.

JR: We're standing outside Vanilla, just on the back of Canal Street on Richmond Street. I guess it's a lesbian bar.

Merry: Well yes majority lesbian bar yes.

JR: And you own the bar do you?

M: Yeah I'm Merry, I'm general manager of Vanilla.

JR: So what's the lesbian scene like in Manchester, cos we hear a lot about the male gay community, but we don't hear much about the female gay community?

M: Oh, it's fantastic. Vanilla's been open now for nearly ten years and every year we're getting better, with more and more lesbians coming out in Manchester from all around the north west, and this is sort of the little Mecca, like a little community centre for them all, almost you know, we're busy every night of the week.

JR: And what do you think of Canal Street as a place, as an area.

M: Sometimes you don't realise how lucky you are to have all this in such a small area, until you go somewhere else and you see what other people have got. We're so lucky, we've got forty-odd bars in the space of a square mile. I don't think anywhere in the UK has got this, and, you

know, you don't realise how lucky you are until you go somewhere else, to be honest with you.

JR: Why Manchester? Why is this not in Birmingham or London?

M: I don't know I think it's just developed in Manchester. I think it all started with the sort of Madchester era, when you had the, sort of, Hacienda going, and then Manto was the first sort of trendy cultural bar to open, with the glass windows, like, you know, and obviously you had the Union, but they were saying, you know, this is Manchester, we're moving on, glass windows in the front so you could see all the queers and the rest of it and then it just sort of snowballed from there down Canal Street. I think it was since the, sort of, *Queer As Folk* was on Channel Four and everything, that sort of opened it up to other people and it's just become a massive thing in Manchester and obviously you know it's gay pride soon, and that's getting a bigger and bigger event every year.

JR: So tonight you've got, like, an Elvis night on, what's that about cos Elvis isn't a gay icon, is he?

M: He's not really, we've just started doing a series of 'drag king' nights to be honest, which we did one last month to get dressed up.

JR: There's an absolutely fantastic Elvis here in a rhinestone suit, and it almost looks like a rubber forehead. So do you actually sing any Elvis songs, Elvis, do I call you Elvis?

VOX: I can do (sings) with suspicious minds.

JR: So now we're just leaving Canal Street, it's really vibrant, it's a really great night, every bar's open, the lights are on, it reminds me a lot of being in Europe, you're just standing here, like Las Ramblas in Barcelona, it's got that kind of vibe to it, but not as poncey as that as well. There's something very northern and down to earth about it all, and the fact that it's the biggest gay area in the whole of the UK makes me feel proud, as a straight person it makes me feel proud that Manchester can have this in the north. It's not London, London hasn't got it, Brighton doesn't have it, but we've got it. We've got it in Manchester and it's a really cool area, it's a great area and it's a fantastic place to come and hang out for the evening whether you are straight or gay, whatever your sexuality it's a really great place to hang out

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