BROKEN FUTURES

# Walking Tour of Reading's Queer Past

Support U

HERITAGE FUND

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University of Reading

THE MUSEUM OF ENGLISH RURAL LIFE

READING MUSEUM

This is a text version of the Broken Futures project walking tour of Reading's queer past

An audio tour and a large print version is available from: www.brokenfutures.co.uk/tour

The tour is also available using the Geotourist app, which allows you play the tour audio according to your location

You can access the tour map online: www.brokenfutures.co.uk/tour-map or at the end of this document.

## 1. Reading Assizes Court (Reading Crown Court Building)

Welcome to the Broken Futures project walking tour of central Reading's queer history. This tour combines the work of several projects run by the Thames Valley's LGBT+ charity, Support U. A number of people have lent their voices to this tour, either by reading documents aloud for the audio version or through oral testimony. In a number of instances these oral testimonies have been edited and cut, but these changes are limited.

Before 1967, sex between men was a criminal offence, dating back to a law enacted by Henry VIII. Further changes to the law were made, but the most significant was the introduction of the offence of gross indecency in 1885, which some have argued, made any sexual act between men (however minor) illegal. This was the offence for which Oscar Wilde was imprisoned in Reading Gaol, which we'll visit on the next step of our tour.

You're now standing near the site of Reading's Assizes Court, where travelling judges from London would come to conduct the trials relating to offences that occurred in Berkshire since the last court session. This is where trials for buggery, gross indecency, and indecent assault were held, all of which were used to prosecute sex between men.

Let's turn now to some transcripts of trials held in this very court. In the audio tour, these have been read aloud by our project volunteers.

This is a transcript from Harold's trial for buggery, in which Harold's father tries to secure a lighter sentence from the judge. This extract is taken from the Buckinghamshire Examiner on Friday 4th February 1910.

> Mr. †, the father of the prisoner, said his son was 19 years of age. He had never been in trouble before, and he had had no reason to suspect him of such conduct.
>
> His Lordship said the offence was an abominable one, and he could do no less than sentence the prisoner to twelve months' hard labour.
>
> Mr. † asked if he could give notice of appeal on behalf of his boy?
>
> His Lordship—Oh, yes.
>
> Mr †—I should like to call your attention to the fact that the boy has been in prison almost four months.
>
> His Lordship—I did not know that. When was he committed for trial?
>
> Mr Raffety – In October.
>
> His Lordship then altered the sentence to nine months' imprisonment.
>
> Mr † made a further application that the boy should not be committed to hard labour, as he was physically weak.
>
> His Lordship – You must not think we do not sympathise with you Mr †; but it is in the boy's interest, and he will receive the attention of the prison doctor.

The criminal nature of sex between men meant that it was important that people were discreet and only met in private places so as not to attract the attention of potential witnesses. This was not necessarily as straight-forward as you might think. This is a newspaper extract from the Berkshire Chronicle on 20th September 1905 that tells Francis and John's story:

> Suspicion being aroused by the frequency of [John]'s visits, Ridgers said he went to [Francis]' bedroom, and so arranged two of the laths of the Venetian blind that he could see into the room from the outside. A ladder was in readiness in order to reach the window, but when [Francis] went in the bedroom the laths were put straight. On another occasion he kept

observation upon the curate by looking through a hole which he had bored in the bedroom ceiling. There was an unfurnished attic above the bedroom. On May 3rd [Francis] and [John] returned from a dance at Ascot and went to the bedroom. Witness described to the court what he saw. In order that there should be no mistake he made another hole in the ceiling and kept observation three days later.

Moving forward in time to the 1970s and 80s, secrecy and clandestine meetings were also a key aspect of gay life. In a time before the internet and apps made meeting other like-minded individuals simple, some people found creative ways of meeting other men, as Steve Masters describes in an interview with Bobby Smith for the Hidden Voices project, run by Support U:

BS: Pre- the internet, where it's so easy now to be able to make contact with individuals with the same sexuality nowadays, how do you feel you managed to find individuals similar to yourself in the gay community, when it wasn't so open, and there was fear of persecutions? Were there groups? How easy was it to find other individuals?

SM: Not too hard, actually – there are always places where you could go, known as cruising places, where you could meet other gay men.

BS: How would you find out about them?

SM: Word of mouth. Or sometimes you read about it in the paper because the police are cracking down, and of course that's fantastic publicity! (laughs)

BS: (laughs) Had a bit of the opposite effect!

SM: Which is how, when I lived in Bournemouth, in the mid 70s and throughout the 80s, I found out about Studland Beach because there was a front page newspaper headline about mounted police riding through the dunes trying to find blokes at it

BS: Probably the worst headline you could put up – *mounted* police!

Of course, Steve's experiences here took place after sex between men was partially decriminalised, but before 1967 those who were found guilty at the Assizes faced a number of years in prison. Our next stop is Berkshire's county prison, the now infamous Reading Gaol. Make your way through the town centre past the Abbey ruins until you can see the prison walls.

## 2. Reading Gaol

Reading Prison is a commanding presence over the town centre and would have been even more of a local landmark before today's high-rise buildings were built. The prison was designed by George Gilbert Scott and William Boynthon Moffatt and was built in 1844.

Even with the harsh conditions in the gaol, some individuals in our research have several convictions, which leads us to believe that their same-sex desire was a deeper part of their identity. Here's a reconstructed biography of Arthur, who was incarcerated in Reading Prison.

1871 - born in Martock, Somerset, son of Sarah, a spinster

1881 - living with his family in Martock. In the census return, his mother is given as Elizabeth, who is the head of the family and recorded as the mother of Sarah. This could indicate that the family is trying to cover up the fact that Sarah was the mother of Arthur.

1890 - tried at the Old Bailey in London for gross indecency at the age of nineteen. The other man charged, William, was aged 39. At this trial William was found guilty and sentenced to six months' imprisonment, and Arthur 'entered into recognizances'

1891 - living in Southwark and working as a barman

1901 - living in Martock with his mother/grandmother and working as an insurance agent

1906 - tried for 'an offence' with a man named Herman. Arthur gave evidence on his own behalf, but he was found guilty and sentenced to six weeks' hard labour

1911 - boarding in Wokingham, Berkshire and working as an insurance agent

1913 - indicted to Berkshire Assizes on counts of gross indecency and attempting to procure the commission of gross indecency. Found guilty and sentenced to nine months' hard labour. None of those who were mentioned in the indictment alongside Arthur were indicted themselves

1914 - indicted to Berkshire Assizes on counts of gross indecency and indecent assault. Here, Arthur was tried before the Lord Chief Justice, and found not guilty. The other individual mentioned on Arthur's indictment was not indicted himself

1920 - died in Taunton

Reading Prison no longer holds prisoners, and there is now an ongoing debate about its future. Some believe it should be reclaimed as a site of LGBT heritage, and others say that the misery inflicted on individuals accused of same-sex sex should not be dwelled upon.

Walk around the prison towards the Banksy painted on the prison's high walls near to the roundabout, while you listen to these different views on the future of Reading Gaol and its place within LGBT+ history. What do you think?

And I think things like gaols, I mean things like gaols are sort of difficult. You know, it's a difficult history, it's history that can be upsetting to a lot of people, people may have very mixed feelings about this place. And I guess what you, I guess what you need to do is you need to, you need to try and preserve things that are important. So I would say the jail is important, it's important, because it's a predominant county, it's a very dominant county building, it was open for 170 odd years, and a lot of local people will have passed through it. But what you have to do, I guess, is just make sure you're not been exploiting what might be people's painful memories of the place and just being sensitive about the fact that people will probably have very different views about it. And I think for whoever does take on the site and do something with it, these are the challenges they're going to have to deal with, they're going to have to think that - that people will probably come to this site, having quite different and a wide range of emotions about it, and making sure that they – that they at least appreciate that in whatever they do to it. I mean, it's the same challenge for - for archives, you know, I mean, I think, you know, there's a lot of talk about sort of, you know, contested histories and different sort of feelings of exclusion at the moment, you know, certain groups may not be represented in certain ways. And the challenge for us really, is to try and gain people's trust, first, I think.

I wonder what Oscar Wilde would have wanted done with that building, I suspect he would want it to be razed to the ground. I think he would want it to be demolished. But I think it's important that we do remember our social history. And I think buildings are a wonderful way of doing that. I think there can be a kind of a voyeurism, in visiting places of misery as you put it, and I think, you know, you, I think that's what you were angling at there. And I definitely agree with you. And I went around the prison a couple of times

when it was still a young offenders institute. And I've been around a few times since. And it's a very powerful experience, I myself think that we want to remember things in a transformational way. So that it may be that you decide that something is of such historical importance that it has to be preserved intact with nothing being changed. That moment has passed with this building, because it has been changed a lot over the years. But still, there are elements of it that I just would hate to see destroyed. But I can imagine, and a lot of people in Reading have been imagining ways of transforming that building so it is still an authentic historical site but it's also reinvented in a way that preserves and also moves beyond what used to happen there.

And I think these artefacts, these spaces, are really powerful reminders of, of what it was like, what the ultimate penalty was, and, and how much it would have caused a lot of pain to Oscar Wilde in this place as well. And it's not necessarily to go there in order to kind of, you know, experience it as a touristic way but to actually go there and and, and just completely be in the shoes of Oscar Wilde for just a moment, I think is what I would like to kind of be able to do. And I think that's why the space – I'd love it to be turned into a space like, you know, an artistic space where we can have things that allow us to explore these, these ideas and concepts of why exactly do we place people in, in places like Reading?

## 3. Oscar Wilde Memorial Walk

Of all the inmates of Reading Gaol, Oscar Wilde is the most famous. His imprisonment here after being convicted of gross indecency has been discussed extensively, and Wilde himself has been claimed as part of Reading's queer heritage.

Wilde was involved in an affair with Lord Alfred Douglas (known as Bosie), whose father was the infamous Marquess of Queensberry. Queensberry sent a note to Wilde which accused him of being a sodomite, prompting Wilde to sue Queensberry for libel. When Queensberry was able to produce evidence that proved Wilde did regularly have romantic and sexual relationships with other men, the charges were dropped. This evidence was later used against Wilde in his famous trial for gross indecency.

Wilde was held at a number of prisons, before his transfer to HM Prison Reading. It was here that he wrote *The Ballad of Reading Gaol.* After his release, he self-exiled in France. He became a passionate advocate for prison reform.

Oscar Wilde has long been seen as an archetypal homosexual and appears in many histories of homosexuality. The Broken Futures project has sought to contextualise Wilde's experiences within the experience of ordinary men who were accused of sex with other men.

The next stop brings us closer to the present day. Rejoin the tour when you reach the Wynford Arms.

## 4. The Wynford Arms


The Wynford Arms, or Wynnie, as it was affectionately known, was the first and longest serving gay pub in Reading. it opened its doors in 1992 and served the local LGBT community for 22 years before being forced to close following a rent rise. Its opening coincided with a period of mass hostility towards LGBT people, with Conservative government having introduced section 28 of the Local Government Act 4 years previously. At the height of the AIDS epidemic, it was an important meeting place for the local community.

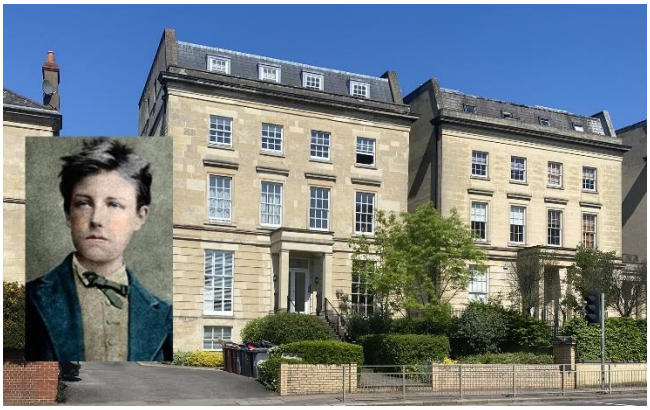
Move onto the next step, and when you get there, you'll reach the site of the Huntley and Palmers factory.

## 5. Huntley and Palmers


Huntley and Palmers, as well as being a place of work for some of the men included in the Broken Futures project research, is linked to the town's queer history in a more unexpected way.

The Home Office Committee that reported on homosexual offences and prostitution in 1957 used the factory name as a euphemism for a brief time. Homosexuals were to be known as Huntleys and prostitutes as Palmers. Unsurprisingly, given the subject matter of the committee, this genteel atmosphere did not last for long, and the convention was dropped.

## 6. Arthur Rimbaud's Home



This is the former home of the French surrealist poet Arthur Rimbaud. Rimbaud lived here for the latter half of 1874 while touring England after a breakup with fellow poet Paul Verlaine. During his stay in Reading, he wrote much of *Les Illuminations*, arguably his greatest work. Rimbaud had a scandalous stance on homosexuality, which did little to endear him to polite society at the time. He had been rebellious from a young age, having a difficult relationship with his devoutly Christian mother, and he associated her with many of the values that he rejected: conventional religious belief and practice, the principles of hard work and scholarly endeavour, patriotism, and social snobbery.

Follow up the next path to reach the University of Reading's London Rd Campus.

## 7. The University of Reading, London Rd Campus

This is the London Rd campus of the University of Reading, which was gifted by the Palmer family of biscuit fame.

The University deserves a mention on this tour for a number of reasons, possibly the most important of which being the link to the Wolfenden Committee. Here's an excerpt from a documentary produced by the Wolfenden Project, led by Support U and narrated by Daniel Holley

In 1957, Sir John Wolfenden concluded his highly anticipated Report of the Committee on Homosexual Offences and Prostitution, and presented it to the then Home Secretary, RAB Butler MP. This contentious document became known as The Wolfenden Report, which took three years of deliberation and debate before a conclusion was made. The announcement of the report followed the trials of a number of prominent well-respected men in the public sphere, who were caught by police engaging in sexual acts with other men. Amongst the punishments handed out were heavy fines and prison sentences, in some cases life.

Prior to 1967, it was forbidden in UK law for two men to engage in any form of sexual intimacy, even in private. This caused men who engaged in homosexual activities to seek clandestine meetings in secret, often rundown places, always knowing that if they were caught, the shame and punishment that would follow them would damage their lives and reputations forever. Peter Wildeblood said to the committee:

*I believe that the great majority of homosexuals of this kind desire to lead their lives with discretion and decency, neither corrupting others nor publicly flaunting their condition.*

The selected committee comprised of mostly gentlemen, but some ladies, all from wealthy educated backgrounds. Amongst the two-hundred testimonies taken, only three of those belonged to homosexual men. At the time, the attitudes towards homosexuality were extremely negative, and homosexual

men were even described as a cancer in modern society. There were anxieties that if this cancer was not treated, it would undermine the legal and moral principles of heterosexuality.

For months, Wolfenden wrestled with the extremities of the responses he received from the witnesses who came before him. Jeremy, Wolfenden's son, was homosexual, so it is understandable why Wolfenden felt he had to tread his path very carefully.

*I am queer; so much is physically evident, but I have a lot more important things to do than waste my time hunting young men. I may end up with an undemanding and unsensational menage with a single boyfriend. I may end up unsatisfied except for an occasional Sloane Street tart. I may, I suppose, turn to heterosexuality, but if by a pretty mature eighteen, I am not attracted by girls either physically or emotionally or aesthetically, it seems unlikely.*

With that in mind, the committee agreed that morality and criminality should be kept separate in law and that homosexuality, whilst morally unacceptable to many, should not be a criminal offence. The finished report was long and exhaustive. All members of the committee accepted its findings, with the exception of one, Mr James Adair, a former procurator general in Glasgow.

The committee eventually reached the conclusion that whilst the law should exist to prevent exploitation and abuse, and must continue to protect the young and other vulnerable individuals, it should not intrude into matters of personal morality. The Wolfenden Report drew many comparisons between homosexual acts and heterosexual ones. This led them to conclude that if an act would be illegal for heterosexuals, it should be also illegal for homosexuals, though it did recommend a higher age of consent for men.

This report eventually recommended that homosexual offences were decriminalised in certain specific circumstances. There is some debate surrounding the impact of the report, but its place in Reading's queer history is assured.

## 8. 21 South St

And now you're at 21 South St. In the 1980s, at the height of Margaret Thatcher's ban on local authorities promoting homosexuality as a 'pretend family relationship', there was a regular unofficial gay night held at this local authority run centre called "Awareness" which attracted people from miles around. In 1989, Awareness relocated to the more central Old Town Hall at the top of Market Place.

Here's Mark Healey talking about his work there:

> I set up 'awareness', which was a disco at 21 South Street. There's a guy who was managing the place Tim Bennett – Goodman at the time, and I didn't know initially but he was an openly gay man and we connected and got on well with each other, and he was really keen to help and support what I was doing, so we set these discos up and you had a capacity of 300 people, and we were charging, I think it was £3 a head, so it was a good, good, good, a good amount of money was coming in, and it was quite a mixed disco. I didn't know anything about disco music, so I always had to go, sort of trust the DJs that we brought in and over the period of time had 3 DJs, we, there was a guy called Rick who used to DJ at the Greyhound, who's sadly not with us. He's he one of the people who got HIV and unfortunately died a few years later, but anyway he was a really fun popular guy at the time, yeah sort of thinking back to it.

## 9. London Road Base

This venue provided a safe place to meet and to get information about sexual health and advice on either coming out or how to keep your sexuality a secret. Here's Mark Healey talking about his work there.

> The centre was, it took, I started campaigning for it when I was about, well just shortly after I came out 'cos I always had this belief that there was a need for places for gay people to go which weren't part bars and clubs where they could come out, chat through some of the issues, and obviously HIV was a big issue at the time so I wanted to make sure people got the safe sex information. I used to have pile of leaflets that I would give to people as they were coming out, so I'd be like there's your map of Reading, this is where the gay bars are, yeah there's a little bit about coming out, and I had to talk them through yeah ideas helping them to come out, and also if they didn't want to come out, ideas on how they could hide things. For example, if they had gay magazines if they put into an envelope and sealed the envelope and then address it to a friend or to some other person's address, if ever their parents were going through their room and were inspected, then the parents were unlikely to open an envelope addressed to somebody else. The biggest risk would be if they actually posted it on your behalf, but, yeah, y'know.

## 10. RISC


Leslee Hopper, who worked for RISC, set up 'Women only Wednesdays' as a space for both queer and straight women to be able to meet, Although it was the lesbian community which really appreciated this space. The Wynford Arms was open at the time but was generally perceived as a primarily male-focused bar.

Here's Leslee Hopper talking about what Reading was like for its lesbian community:

> I'm going to go back 22 years ago now – and that's well before internet, social media, anything like that – and because I hadn't found a gay bar in the place in Reading. I thought, well, where else can I hunt down these lesbians, that's got to be here somewhere. And so, I knew that the Women's Information Centre in Sunderland was a place that some women went to for social life, and I got out the Yellow Pages, the thick yellow book that you don't see any more, and I looked for the Women's Information Centre in Reading.
>
> I rang up and pretended I was interested in volunteering – I wasn't because I didn't have any time – but I did say that and I went along and they said "come along on a Tuesday afternoon." So I went along and this lovely young woman answered the door with the most beautiful smile, and I thought, yes, if they're all gonna be like this, great! She showed me around and I started going there regularly, just for a coffee, just hanging out. That soon developed

friendships, in particular with Ruth Ware and Jill Potter. And, of course, it was Karen that opened the door and here we are, 23 years later – we've had our civil partnership, and we're still together.

What we used to do then is there used to be a WOW disco, which was the acronym, I suppose, was 'Women of Wonga' – I don't know why! That was Brenda Sward and Jess – a full crew of people who used to put on these monthly women-only discos up on the Park Hall at Palmer Park. And so, we used to take our own booze in a carrier bag, pay a pound or two to get in towards the hire of the room, and we used to have a brilliant night. Although there were groups of people, there was never that cliquey feeling, and it wasn't all lesbians, it was also women who just wanted to be in a women-only space, and that was great. We had a great time, and after that finished, I started working with RISC. We had the café downstairs - we started 'Women Only Wednesdays', so that was WOW as well. The guy – the licensee at the time, John, allowed it to happen – I approached him asking, "Can we do this?" and he says, "Yeah, yeah, that'd be great." But he could not get his head around the concept of why women would want women-only space, and at the end of the night he would come in with all his entourage of mates, drunk, and spoil the atmosphere. So that didn't work, but I was working with Reach Out at the time, and before that, going back to the Women's Information Centre, I remember going there one day and ringing the bell. Ruth opened the door and said, "Are you a friend of Dorothy's?" – and that used to be something people used to say as a sort of a code – and I said, "Yes, I am, actually," and she said, "I knew you would know what that meant!"

Attitudes towards the LGBT+ community have certainly not been a one-way journey towards a more liberal society. The notorious section 28, for example was enacted in 1988 and had a wide-reaching impact on the support available to the community.

Here's Tony Page talking about the impact of the legislation:

We predicted that it would have a bad impact, not so much immediately in schools but of course the signal it sent and that - the awful press campaign

> that, that was associated with it, that we remember the sort of the stories the Mail and other right-wing papers were running to support this climate that something had to be done with all these perverted teachers looking to seduce every child that came through the school gates - it was an absolute travesty.

And here's Steve Masters' view:

> That phrase "promoting homosexuality" was always a joke. That's not what it was about. I was well out of school by that time and I've never been a teacher, but it was never about promoting homosexuality as an alternative sexuality, because if you went into any class full of… however old kids are when they're given sex education these days, say 13, 14, 15, whatever – start mentioning it, they'll all either giggle or run out of the room with embarrassment. You are not going to make recruits to homosexuality by taking a class full of kids and saying "hey kids it's alright to do this", but what you are doing is telling the odd 5% or whatever it is who are gay or bisexual that there's nothing for them to feel guilty about, and that's what the Conservative government in those days really missed, big time. If they thought they were gonna convert gay or bisexual school kids into being straight by not mentioning it – obviously that's not going to happen.

Against this backdrop, efforts were being made in Reading to oppose this legislation. Here's Leslee Hopper again in an interview that has been edited:

> Around about 2000/2001, there was a letter in the Chronicle that appeared on the front page of the Chronicle. It was a letter against the repeal of Section 28, and it was signed by 39 church leaders. At the time, Reading Chronicle was like a broadsheet, do you remember? It was quite a big paper. I read that letter, and I responded to it in the letters page and then there was just more people responding to it: the ones that were for the repeal/people

that were against the repeal, and it was getting two full pages in the Chronicle – these letters about Section 28, and I decided that, because I worked for RISC, and their ethos is of social justice and human rights, I asked them if I could go ahead and organise like a Question Time-type debate. They were very supportive, and I organised for it to happen in RISC's main hall, which is quite a big hall. I prepared some photocopies outlining what Section 28 was plus the original letter that featured on the front page of the paper, some other letters, key letters that I thought were interesting, and the agenda. My colleague, Dave Richards, chaired the meeting. I'd prepared about 40 lots of the photocopies and before long there was another 20 – I was saying to my colleague, "Go photocopy another 20!" We did that about three times, so there were well over 120 people. It soon packed out the hall, and they were spilling out into the hallway and I thought, "we've hit a nerve here" … It was a great debate and at the end, this one guy – I was just quietly stood at the back – and this one guy stood up and he said, "My name is so-and-so, I was one of the church leaders that signed that letter. After I've heard what I've heard tonight, I'm taking my name away from that letter", and I just felt like punching the air, you know!

## 11. Support U

And now you're at Support U. Support U is the LGBT support and wellbeing charity in the Thames Valley, which opened in 2011 and celebrates its ten-year anniversary in 2021. The charity provides frontline, counselling and group support to the LGBT community and is made up of a fantastic group of 30 staff and volunteers who support over 5000 enquiries every year. Throughout its history, Support U has remained passionate towards understanding Berkshire's place in queer history and has ran two successful projects with the National Lottery Heritage Fund: firstly, Hidden Voices in 2015 which recollected the hidden voices of Reading's queer subculture in the 70s, 80s and 90s; and the Wolfenden 60 (www.thewolfendenreport.com) project in 2018, which investigated the impact of the Report. Check out our website at www.supportu.org.uk to know more about the services that we provide. If you'd like to discuss any of the material mentioned within this walking tour, please get in touch at 0118 321 9111 and a frontline officer will be able to support you further.

## 12. Cooper's Arms


The Coopers Arms ran a gay night on a Tuesday evening, though it was owned and managed by a straight couple. Here's Mark Healey's recollection of his experiences at the pub.

Reading when I first came out was: The Tudor Arms had closed down, the helpline used to run a monthly disco, there was a, I think it was a nightclub called The Owl opposite Reading train station - sort of, you go in and go down some steps. I never actually went there but that hadn't worked towards - that had stopped happening as well, and so people had moved to the Cooper's Winebar, and the Cooper's Winebar was run by a straight couple, the guy was only really interested in getting the money from, you know, that pink pound, and his wife was a really horrible nasty piece of work who would be abusive to people across the bar. She'd sort of stand there looking down her nose and just being really hostile and unnecessarily unpleasant all the time, but it was the only place to go. And the first time I went in, I went in, in the middle of the afternoon 'cos I mean, y'know I'd found out this gay - this pub was supposed to be gay and again I sort of went along nervously walked up and down outside and I think a lot of people do that in the sense when you go to places you haven't been for the first time, you sort of check it out, you have to overcome that fear factor, plucked up the courage, went in, and the pub was empty, there was like probably two people in there, so I got a coke and sat in the corner and thought 'this is really kicking - obviously I've got the wrong time and place or maybe it's not a gay pub'. It was only a little bit later that I went back and I realised it was only gay on a Tuesday night, and they only had about 30 people to come out every Tuesday, and that's I think that's where the tradition of Tuesday night being a popular night to go out in Reading stems from, is because Tuesday night was the gay night for people to go out with, for a long time in Reading, Now that was all happening and so making do with Cooper's, but then the council was updating the town hall so they were - the 'Three B's Bar' was just about to open, they'd redone the whole of the museum, there was the big space upstairs, so I was having these 'awareness discos' at 21 South Street but thinking ah the town hall is perfect, it's much bigger venue than there so I can increase the capacity and stuff', and then I thought ah, hang on, we've got a new bar opening in Reading. It won't have any customers so it's got no-one who can kick up a fuss if suddenly the gay community move in there, so I put leaflet round and I said, you know: 'new bar opening - come across and see what it's like'.

## 13. The 3Bs Bar

The 3Bs Bar, named for the three Bs for which Reading was renowned (Beer, Biscuits and Bulbs) was opened in the Old Town Hall in December 1989. It very quickly became the 'go to' place for the local LGBT community. Even in the midst of the prohibition on local authorities promoting homosexuality as a so-called 'pretend family relationship', this council-owned site was open to the queer community. Mark Healey remembers the opening of this new and exciting venue.

> In the first week, sort of everyone from Cooper's just went across - there were thirty of us in this bar. The following week, there were sixty people. The week after that, next, there were at least 200 to 300 people that had come out 'cos word just spread, and we just took over this bar and the council were really happy because there was lots of money going over the bar, and it made it a huge success for them and, and in the climate of section 28 when the council couldn't promote anything to do y'know it's just, no one really knew where they stood but we knew that they couldn't promote homosexuality or, or pretend family relationships but here we were using council facilities and gaining advertising as well so the 'awareness' disco at 21 South Street was advertised in the council brochure, events brochure every month and to me that was just y'know one of those little wins, where it was like 'yes' y'know there maybe the law in place but we're beating it and we're y'know sort of keeping

that fight going and that was really important. Again small p's, not the big p's in the sense of the politics. Three B's Bar was brilliant in the sense of we got on really well with the staff, and what they started doing was 'right y'know do want to to use this for New Years' Eve?', and so y'know for a good three, four years I was organising the New Years' Eve party down at the Three B's bar and it just, it y'know, it was the place to be really in Reading … gay life in those days all the bars had blacked out windows or boarded up windows because pubs used to get bricks through the windows so why, y'know why, yeah people didn't want to be seen as out and about, everything was secretive and private. So there was that in the sense everything was sort of hidden away. The Three B'S Bar interestingly enough has quite open windows, so that was, y'know by being there we were being more visible.

## 14. The Malthouse


Located at the junction between Greyfriars Road and Tudor Road, the pub was named The Tudor Arms until 2006. It was then renamed The Malthouse, and by 2007, it was a well-known gay pub. It closed its doors in 2011 and remained boarded up for 3 years when it was reborn as The Greyfriar of Reading.

Here's a conversation between Tony Page and Bobby Smith about how the gay scene in Reading has changed, recorded originally for the Hidden Voices Project.

TP: The Tudor was, I'm not too sure whether it predates the Wynford in terms of having had an informal gay clientele, but I really can't remember the dates that well, but certainly it fought for a number of years. And having worked in London for many years and commuted up, the Tudor was somewhat more accessible than trekking all the way down the King's Road. But, I can't think of anywhere other than those two.

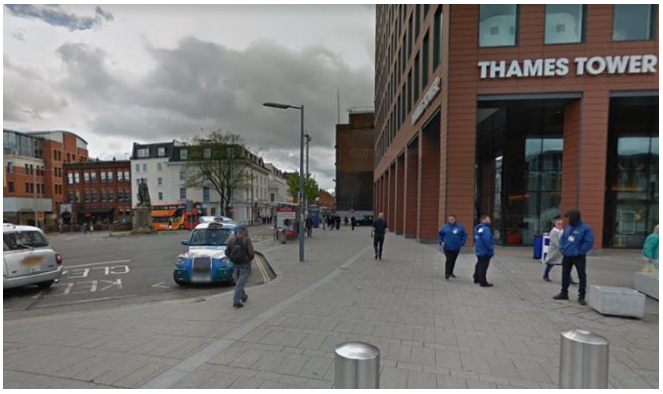
BS: The scene round then, the gay scene then, would have been more underground as well, because people didn't want to come out.

TP: Yeah, that's right, yeah.

BS: And one of the reasons why we're doing this as well is because it's not reported as openly because people weren't open, and another part of this is to let the younger generation, although it's still difficult for them to come out, is to see how the gay community back then fought for rights to be recognised and things like that, and how difficult it was. So since they've been pushing forwards for gay rights and you've got civil rights come out and equal marriage, have you seen the scene in Reading change in your time since that. Do you think it's changed any?

TP: Well, it certainly has to the extent that we've now got a much more, I mean, the public recognition and so things like gay pride, well Reading Pride, and the fact that you've got a relatively relaxed public environment for marches associated with that. I mean, it would have been inconceivable in those years. Ok, London had its own gay pride many many years in advance. But even that was, that wasn't always the easiest. I went on a number those in London rather than in Reading because I was up there a lot of the time.

## 15. The Owls




Where the Thames Tower now stands and opposite the main entrance to the station, there used to be a secret underground club called 'The Owls'. This club required passwords and introductions to gain entry. Unfortunately, because of the clandestine nature of the club we have not been able to find any pictures of the building as it existed at the time and even some of the details remain sketchy.

We can tell it started up sometime before the law change in 1967 and continued through the 1970s.

## 16. The Rising Sun

The Rising Sun was a gay pub between 2010 and 2014. It was opened and run by Andrew Stonehill-Brooks and Lynden Kingston, who both later worked with Support U. Andrew remains an invaluable part of the team as chair of trustees.

It was once a thriving hub of the local queer community, operating a range of themed nights such as Thursgays.

## 17. Forbury Gardens

In June 2020, the lives of three members and friends of the local Reading LGBTQ+ community, James, David, and Joe, were taken in Forbury Gardens in an incident that shook the community. In their legacy, this stop of the walking tour is dedicated to them, their families and all that knew them, to show that as a community we will, always, remember them. #ReadingTogether

If you'd like to take a moment of silence and reflection, the recording will now pause for a minute before resuming the tour.

## 18. Reading Assizes Court

We've reached the end of our tour and are standing once again on the site of the old Assizes Court. Now that you've spent some time following in the footsteps of Reading's queer population, take some time to reflect on the situation for queer people then and now. In some respects, we've come a long way, but in others there is still so much work to be done.

We hope you've enjoyed your time immersed in Reading's queer history, and we really value your feedback. If you have the time, please leave us a comment on www.brokenfutures.co.uk/feedback

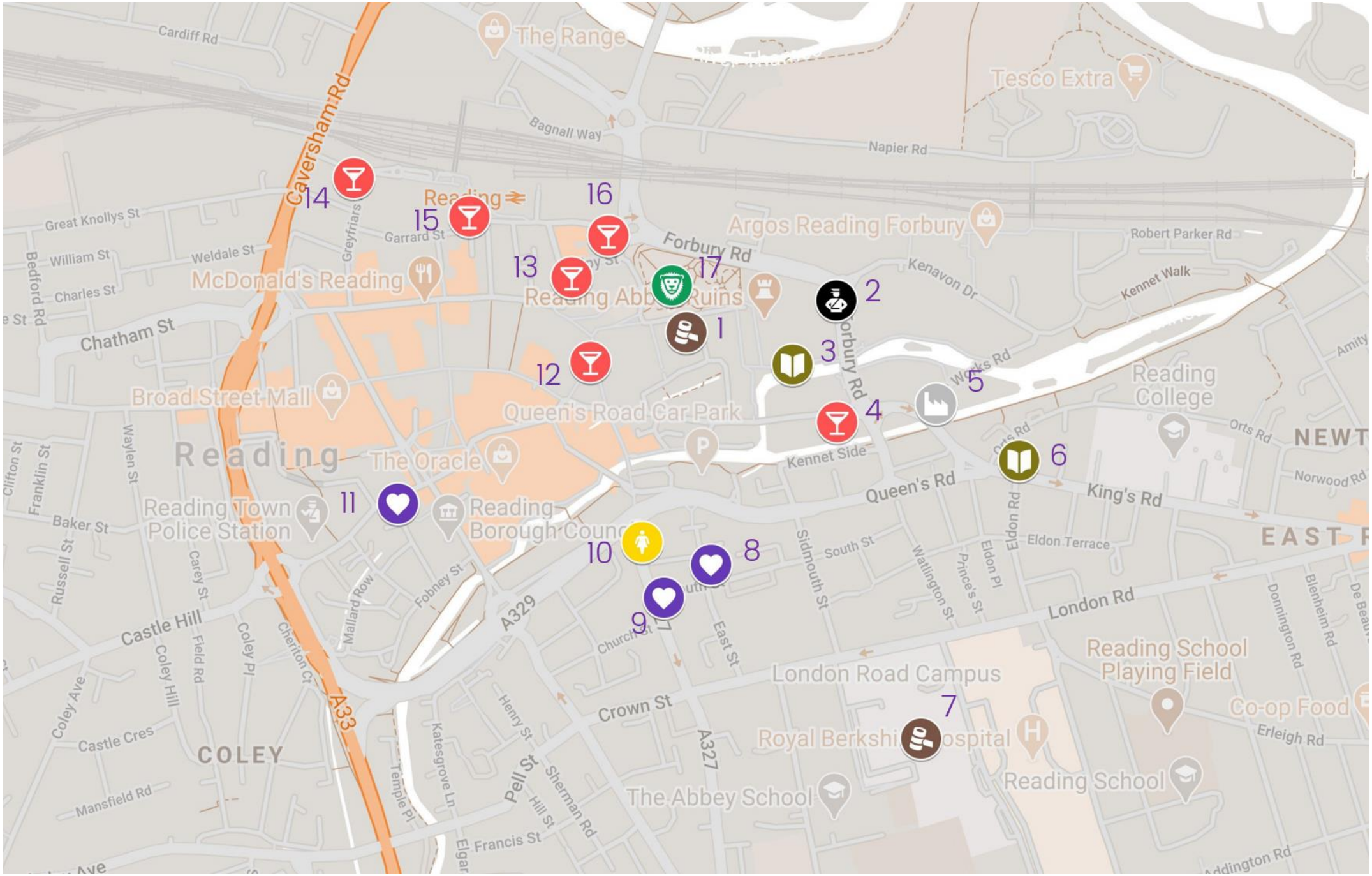
If you've not seen the other elements of the Broken Futures project, head to www.brokenfutures.co.uk to access our podcasts, museum exhibitions and toolkit.

This tour was produced by the Broken Futures project, run by Support U and funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund.

We are grateful to everyone who has provided their voice for this tour including: Mikhail Franklin, Jamie Dewson, Bobby Smith, Steve Masters, Juliet England, Mark Stevens, Prof Peter Stoneley, Dan Vo, Daniel Holley, Mark Healey, Leslee Hopper, and Tony Page

The Broken Futures project would also like to recognise the work of the previous heritage projects run by Support U. Hidden Voices and Wolfenden 60 provided a wealth of information upon which this project has drawn.

*Image of Reading Assizes Court reproduced with permission of the Berkshire Record Office. Catalogue Number: D/EZ112/1/6.*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Reading
Broad Street Mall
The Oracle
Queen's Road Car Park
Reading Abbey Ruins
McDonald's Reading
Argos Reading Forbury
Reading Town Police Station
Reading Borough Council
Reading College
London Road Campus
Reading School Playing Field
Reading School
The Abbey School
Royal Berkshire Hospital
Tesco Extra
The Range
COLEY
Caversham Rd
Forbury Rd
Queen's Rd
Kennet Side
London Rd
Castle Hill
Chatham St
Crown St
Pell St
A329
A327
A33
Bagnall Way
Napier Rd
Cardiff Rd
Great Knollys St
William St
Weldale St
Charles St
Garrard St
Greyfriars
Bedford Rd
Robert Parker Rd
Kenavon Dr
Kennet Walk
Works Rd
Orts Rd
Eldon Rd
Eldon Terrace
Eldon Pl
Prince's St
Watlington St
Sidmouth St
South St
East St
Church St
Fobney St
Mallard Row
Carey St
Russell St
Baker St
Franklin St
Clifton St
Waylen St
Coley Ave
Coley Hill
Field Rd
Coley Pl
Cheriton Ct
Castle Cres
Mansfield Rd
Temple Pl
Katesgrove Ln
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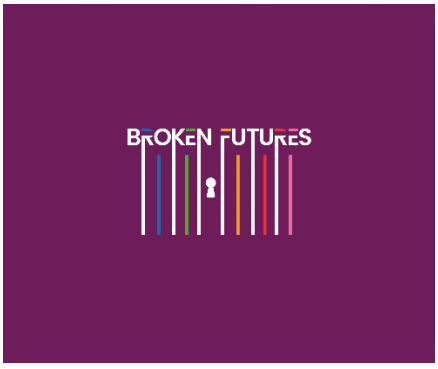
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