

## GAY'S THE WORD

Gay's the Word is the oldest LGBTQIA+ bookstore in the UK. It was founded by members the gay socialist group, Gay Icebreakers and inspired by one member, Ernest Hole's, encounter with The Oscar Wilde Memorial Bookshop in New York's Greenwich Village in 1968. Looking back at this period, Ernest Hole reflects:

in the late 1970s, with the financial input of Peter Dorey, I put together a small portable collection and moved around gay venues selling books... We were looking for somewhere central but cheap and I found out that Camden Council had some empty shops in Marchmont Street due to the cancellation of the second phase of the Brunswick Centre. I applied for the lease of one with no response. I discovered, through a gay friend who worked for the council, that the officers were not taking it seriously – my surname, Hole, being the reason for that. I was advised to get in touch with one Ken Livingstone, not famous at that time, who was a councillor there. A word from him and they hurriedly changed their tune and offered me No 66.

In 1979, Gay's the Word opened. The name was inspired by the 1951 musical by composer and actor Ivor Novello, whose homosexuality had been an open secret in theatre circles. The shop originally had a piano, on which sat the score for Novello's musical.

During the 1970s, publications with themes applicable to lives of LGBT people weren't generally available, and Gay's the Word's became an important resource for people seeking publications that represented their experiences. This included literature imported from the US, as well as UK-based newspapers like *Gay News*, which was founded in 1972 by members of the Gay Liberation Front and the Campaign for Homosexual Equality.

In 1984, Her Majesty's Customs and Excise, the government department responsible for collecting customs and excise duties, launched a large-scale raid on Gay's the Word, known as 'Operation Tiger'. Assuming it to be porn shop rather than serious bookstore, texts by Tennessee Williams, Gore Vidal, Jean Genet, Oscar Wilde and Kate Millett were among works deemed 'indecent'. Police also raided the homes of the shop's directors, who were charged with 'conspiracy to import indecent or obscene material'. 'Operation Tiger' was justified on the premise that, as overseas imports, these texts couldn't be defended on their literary or artistic merits—a defence which only applied to documents published in UK.

After vigorous campaigning, including benefit gigs at nightclub Heaven by The Communards, a legal defence was mounted, and charges were dropped. Notably, no apology has ever been received from the British Government for this orchestrated attack and attempt to censor LGBTQ+ communities.

From the outset, Gay's the Word, also operated as community centre and information resource. Organisations that used the premises over years include the Gay Disabled Group, Gay Black Group, various trans support groups, and the Lesbian Discussion Group, which still meets here. If you look today at contributions to the Queering the Map project, it is clear that Gay's the Word remains widely treasured and has been part of formative moments for countless LGBTQIA+ people.

As featured in the 2014 film *Pride*, in 1984-1985 the shop also served as London HQ for Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners. The group was set up in solidarity with striking Welsh miners and raised funds through various activities, included the famous *Pits and Perverts* gig. *Pits and Perverts* t-shirts and posters can still be bought here today. In reciprocity, Welsh miners groups began supporting Pride events, and led London's Lesbian and Gay Pride march in 1985. Miners' groups were also allies of LGBT communities during campaigns against Section 28 in the late 1980s. In 2017, a blue plaque was unveiled above the bookshop, in honour of Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners founder, Mark Ashton.

Across the street, at no. 57 comic actor Kenneth Williams (1926–88) lived with his parents in the flat above his father's barber's shop between 1935 and 1956. Williams is best known as the star of 26 *Carry On* films; as Sandy, one of the camp, Polari-speaking couple Julian and Sandy in BBC radio show *Round the Horne*; and as the voice of cartoon series *Willo the Wisp*. Williams was known for his risqué banter, double entendres and distinctive nasal voice. Since his death in 1988, he's acquired a reputation as a repressed gay man who led a mostly celibate existence, but recent biographies suggest that he was more relaxed among close gay friends. In one letter, dated December 1975, Williams wrote: 'Here I am, nearly fifty, tottering around St Pancras Gardens looking for the odd bit of furtive pleasure and getting nothing. Not even a touch up.'