

Book lifts lid on growing up as a gay man in 60s and 70s

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A NOTTINGHAM author has written a book on growing up in St. Ann's during the 1960s and 1970s.

Simon Smalley has published his memoir about what life was like in the close-knit community and growing up as a gay man in the city.

Simon was born in 1962 and lived in St. Ann's with his brothers and father. The memoir, 'That boy of yours wants looking at' shares fascinating descriptions of life in the area before the demolition happened in the 1970s.

It highlights the changes that have taken place in the city, along with attitudes towards the LGBT+ community. Prior to this, areas of St. Ann's were known for poverty, with many still living in poor housing conditions.

It is estimated that around 30,000 people lived in just half a square mile - three times the population density of the city. Eight out of ten homes had no indoor bathroom, and over half had no hot water.

Despite this, the area was known for having a strong sense of community spirit with many local shops and pubs.

"I was born into a very close-knit community where there was a lot of support," he said. "It was a hard-working area with a shop or pub on every corner, so you really didn't need to go anywhere to get things in."

"There was a definite sense of community which was exemplified when my mother died when I was young. Neighbours came round with pies or casseroles because my dad was there with young sons. They helped us in that way and there was a very caring structure to the area."

"It was a real tragedy when the whole area was demolished in the 1970s as it fractured everything. People were scattered across the city of Nottingham with some in Broxtowe or Clifton. It mentally devastated a lot of people in terms of depression. There was definitely a magic that would be hard to recapture in this century."

The demolition and redevelopment meant a lot of changes, including the loss of architecture and the community pubs that St. Ann's was renowned for.

Simon said: "I never thought I would see the day that St. Ann's didn't have any pubs in it. Probably one of the most emblematic things is that it no longer has the boozers that it was renowned for, as well as a lot of the old architecture, including the Fothergill buildings."



MEMOIRS ALSO LOOK AT CHANGES TO CLOSE-KNIT COMMUNITY

"The fact that they were razed to the ground is absolutely criminal."

The 1960s were a period of great change in England, especially where the gay community was concerned.

Homosexuality had only been decriminalised in 1967, and Nottingham only had a handful of gay places for the community to go.

Most of the pubs had backrooms, such as the Dog and Partridge bar, or hung 'private party' signs on the doors, such as The Hearty Goodfellow on Maid Marian Way. The New Foresters pub, which opened in 1953, was also known as a gay venue.

Simon said: "It was kept quiet then. My parents befriended a pair of gay men who actually lived together at that time. It was unheard of for two men who weren't family to do that."

"There was a lot of aggression around then and the stereotypes on the telly didn't do much to help gay visibility. These programmes would

certainly horrify people these days, but I think it reflected the times."

By the 1980s, Nottingham had a thriving LGBT+ scene with multiple bars or clubs which had begun to pop up on the high street.

Despite this, it took a while for attitudes to change along with the law.

Simon remembers the police entering gay spaces, taking details, or trying to spot those under the age of 21 which was the legal age of consent at the time.

"When I was 20, someone tried to break into one of the clubs. The police were called and when they attended they didn't seem bothered about the blokes they had apprehended. They asked all the patrons their names,

addresses, phone number and employer's name. That was only 40 years ago in 1982," Simon recalled.

He began recording his experiences as part of a writing project in connection with the Museum of Justice and Nottingham-based literary consultancy, Global Wordsmiths. The editors,

Victoria Villasenor and Nicci Robinson, encouraged Simon to keep writing and helped him to shape his words into the book.

"The project encouraged local people to record their words, their experiences of being a local gay person, so I went along and in the end we made a book which was a collection of stories," he said.

"I realised I had thousands of

words on my laptop as I've always written everything down, so I spoke to Nicci and Victoria who said, you need to keep writing as you are a born writer."

The result is 'That boy of yours wants looking at', and Simon is working on a sequel that will pick up where the original finishes. The memoir covers a lot of deeply emotional experiences in Simon's life and he feels it has been cathartic writing it all down.

"My mind often goes back to those times and it felt a bit like unburdening me while I was writing it," he said. "It was very easy to go back into it and comforting in some ways to be able to let the mind go back there."

"When I was a kid or a teenager, some of the challenging things were hard to deal with, and then there is also a realisation that you survived it. The horrors don't diminish in their severity over the years, but it was a very interesting process."

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