

## NOWT SO QUEER LANCASTER AND GAY LIBERATION, 1965-2007

*Peter Wade*

The archives of Lancaster Gay Switchboard (later Lancaster Gay and Lesbian Switchboard), upon which this account is largely based, open a window on a sub-culture during a critical period of changing attitudes, allowing the recovery of what might otherwise have been a lost history. Lancaster is revealed as having a central role in gay liberation not just locally, as might be expected, but regionally and, to an extent, nationally as well.

### **Introduction**

The consequences of the Swinging Sixties and its cultural, social and sexual revolution were to ripple across the following decades and touch almost every home in the land. While the leading edge of change was inevitably focused on London and other large urban centres, regional centres sometimes had a role too. In the case of Lancaster, its MP helped sow the seeds of change in 1965 by introducing the last unsuccessful attempt to de-criminalise homosexuality in England and Wales, while in the 1970s it became home to the first gay telephone helpline in the North West, ahead even of a similar one in Manchester.

Lancaster was not, of course, always home to such liberal attitudes. In August 1806 at Lancaster Assizes, five men (Thomas Fox, Isaac Holden, Joseph Holland, John Powell and James Stockton) were found guilty of 'sodomy', Holland, Powell and Stockton being subsequently hanged for their crime at Lancaster Castle.

For much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, homosexual men could still be imprisoned for up to two years and, as a result, often inhabited a twilight world of double identities, secret signs and clandestine meetings around the edges of which stalked the perils of exposure,

blackmail or worse. Even with the new freedoms offered under the 1967 Sexual Offences Act, old prejudices and attitudes remained largely unchallenged and, for some, there would have seemed little prospect of real change. Yet, not only has homosexuality been further progressively de-criminalised, same-sex partners now enjoy a legal status that would once have been unimaginable. The pace of change has been such that even within their own lifetimes, some homosexual men have gone from being outlaws to having in-laws.

### **Coming out**

The 1967 Act embodied the main recommendation of the 1957 Wolfenden Report but was only one of several attempts to introduce reform. The last of the unsuccessful attempts was a Private Member's Bill introduced to the House of Commons in 1965 by the MP for Lancaster, Humphry Berkeley. Berkeley, a Conservative, was first elected in 1959 with a 5,528 majority over his Labour rival.

Humphry Berkeley was on the liberal wing of the Conservative Party. In 1965 he spoke in favour of the abolition of the death penalty and then, on 8 December of that year, introduced his Sexual Offences Act. This was supported by, among others, Jo Grimond (Liberal Party leader), Christopher Chataway (Conservative member for Lewisham North) and Sir Geoffrey de Freitas (Labour member for Kettering).

The Bill was given a second reading on 11 February 1966 with 164 votes to 107 but was then overtaken by events as Prime Minister Harold Wilson called a General Election. In this, Berkeley lost his seat to the Labour candidate, Stanley Henig. Berkeley partly blamed his defeat on the personal unpopularity his Bill had attracted (the swing against him of a little over 6 per cent compares with a national swing to Labour of almost 4 per cent and away from the Conservatives of 1.5 per cent).

Despite this, Humphry Berkeley continued campaigning. In November 1966 he was one of the speakers at a public meeting in Manchester, *Society and its Homosexuals: Why the Law must be Changed*, alongside Alan Fitch MP (member for Wigan) and Antony Grey of

the Homosexual Law Reform Society. Berkeley was also to become Vice-President of the Campaign for Homosexual Equality (CHE).

Following the passing of the 1967 Act there seems to have been a pause in proceedings. This is perhaps understandable as individuals came to terms with the new possibilities the Act offered as well as its restrictions. There might even have been those who agreed with Lord Arran's call for no triumphalism on the passing of the Act:

I ask those who have, as it were, been in bondage and for whom the prison doors are now open, to show their thanks by comporting themselves quietly with dignity. This is no occasion for jubilation; certainly not for celebration. Any form of ostentatious behaviour now, or in the future, would be utterly distasteful ...<sup>1</sup>

This interval also saw the rise of the term 'gay', imported from the USA. Identifiable gay magazines began to appear in the late 1960s, with *Gay News* following in 1972. The Gay Liberation Front published its manifesto in 1971 and badges with mottos such as 'Glad to be Gay' appeared around the same time (such badges were worn by a member of the Lancaster University team on *University Challenge*). The first London Pride march also took place in 1971 while a CHE rally in November 1973 called for an equal age of consent (a goal still to be achieved).

While these activities were mostly London-based, there is some evidence of regional activity too. An un-dated magazine, *Coming Out*, described itself as 'The North's only gay magazine' and featured local news, contacts and fiction. *Gay News* in particular reached out to a wider gay nation or at least to those parts of it whose newsagents were prepared to stock or distribute copies.

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<sup>1</sup> As quoted in James Gardiner, *Who's a Pretty Boy Then?: One Hundred & Fifty Years of Gay Life in Pictures* (London, Serpent's Tail, 1996), p. 145.

Some idea of the importance of publications such as *Gay News* in the regions is given by the experience of David Smith, editor of *Gay Times* (*Gay News*' successor), as recalled in *Gay Times*' 250<sup>th</sup> issue:

One day in the summer of 1973 ... I found myself in a tiny little newsagent's on Grainger Street in Newcastle-upon-Tyne ... something ... caught my eye. The word 'gay' ... on the masthead of a thin, dull, dusty newspaper, and I knew in an instant that my life was about to change.

... Growing up in the austerity of the 1950s in rural, mining Durham, where the Sixties only happened if you listened to John Peel ... I had ached for a new horizon ... And now this - the key to understanding the mysteries and the vague longings of my lost and wasted adolescence. The key to everything I needed to know.

Looking back now at old copies of *Gay News* from the early 1970s ... it seems so painfully thin. A disco here. A CHE meeting there. An obscure quotation about bisexuality from the impossibly gorgeous David Cassidy. But it did begin to answer some painfully basic questions. Was I sick? Was it a choice? Why did it seem now that I had always known? And most of all, could God possibly approve?<sup>2</sup>

There was still a gap though between such individual gay men and the growing number of gay pubs and clubs as well as community and campaign groups. To provide that connection as well as the opportunity to discuss personal issues, London Gay Switchboard was set up in March 1974. Its volunteers advised callers from across the country on a range of subjects including where to meet others and coming out. Other, more local switchboards, followed in its wake. In the North West, a pioneering role was taken by Lancaster Gay Switchboard which began operating in August 1976 and for over

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<sup>2</sup> David Smith, 'Reflecting the changing times', *Gay Times*, July 1999, p. 14.

thirty years was to provide an advice and information service to gay men and others across North Lancashire and Cumbria.

By the time of its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 1996, Switchboard's log had recorded over 5,000 calls and by the time it closed in 2007 this number had risen to over 7,000. The annual number of calls initially climbed to a peak of 443 in 1979/80 but then varied somewhat erratically, peaking again at 428 in 1982/83 before falling back to 212 in 1987/88. Numbers rallied in the first half of the 1990s but then began a prolonged decline, falling below 200 in 1998/99, the first time the number of calls had been so low since Switchboard's first year of operation.

A majority of callers were from the immediate Lancaster area, followed by Cumbria and the North West more generally. The small number of calls from further afield were often from people planning to visit the area. Up to 40 per cent of callers were women. Most callers were in their 20s or 30s with the numbers tailing off among older callers. A small number of calls were received from younger people, some of whom would have been below the legal age of consent. A majority of callers were seeking information, especially about where to meet others, but other types of call might have involved advice, transgender issues or sexual health. A minority involved the caller hanging up or not actually saying anything at all.

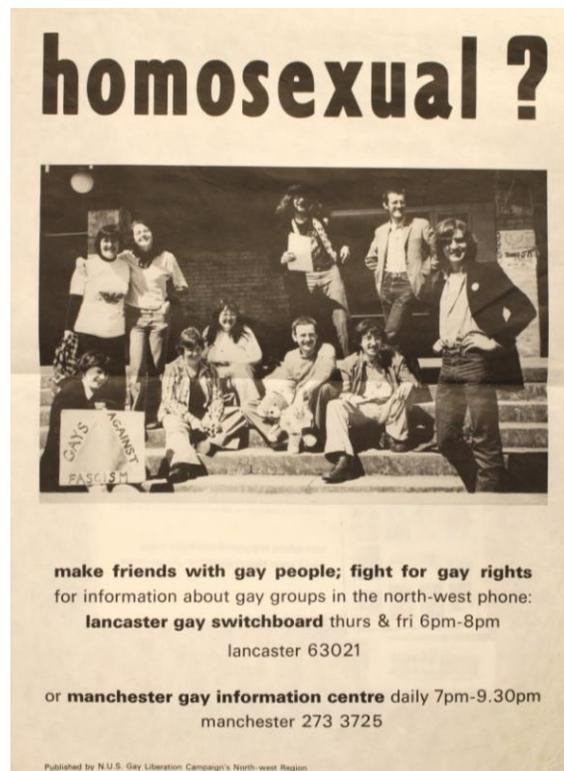
### **Origins and growth of Lancaster Gay Switchboard**

The year Lancaster Gay Switchboard began was also the year that Jeremy Thorpe resigned as Liberal leader following allegations of a homosexual relationship with male model, Norman Scott; *Gay News* published James Kirkup's poem *The Love that Dares to Speak its Name* as a result of which Mary Whitehouse launched a private prosecution for blasphemous libel against the publication and its editor, Denis Lemon; Tom Robinson sang his song *Glad to be Gay* at London Pride and Derek Jarman made his film *Sebastiane*.

The idea for a gay switchboard in Lancaster had begun after an exchange of letters between the Lancaster Branch of CHE and

Lancaster Samaritans. The Samaritans' response that they were a listening and support service only, and would not refer callers to other organisations unless asked to do so, suggested to Lancaster CHE that there was a need for a separate organisation 'to advise and counsel homosexual men and women, some of whom may be isolated and suicidal' (as the Gay Rights Organiser of the National Council for Civil Liberties described Lancaster Gay Switchboard in a letter to the General Manager of the *Lancashire Evening Post* in June 1977).

Apart from the Lancaster Branch of CHE, other local groups included CHE branches in Preston and Cumbria & The Borders as well as Lancaster Lesbian Group and Lancaster University Gay Society. Lancaster Gay Switchboard extended its geographical coverage by



**Figure 1: National Union of Students Gay Liberation Campaign poster, 1978. The photograph was taken on the steps of Alexandra Square at Lancaster University. (Archive, Lancaster Gay Switchboard)**

encouraging individuals (some from these groups) to act as local contacts in outlying places such as Penrith, Kendal, Blackpool and Windermere.

Lancaster Gay Switchboard also sought to form contacts with other local organisations. Already difficult after the earlier encounter, relations with Lancaster Samaritans became further strained when a caller to Switchboard reported his experience of again not being referred. Letters to the Samaritans went unanswered while a test call showed that the Samaritan answering was quite willing to refer the caller to a doctor (even to make an appointment on their behalf) yet seemed unaware of any local gay organisation. This response raised questions about how individual Samaritan's responses compared with the organisation's stated general policy. However, by late 1979 relations had been sufficiently restored for the first caller to be referred to Switchboard by the Samaritans.

Also in 1979, Lancaster Gay Switchboard became part of Lancaster District Council for Voluntary Service and the National Association of Gay Switchboards (NAGS). Almost from the outset, Switchboard had reservations about NAGS, especially about the extent to which it might interfere on a local level and act as a self-appointed watchdog. Switchboard saw its role instead as encouraging local activity. These doubts, expressed many times, meant that Switchboard's membership record of NAGS was chequered, although it did in 1982/3 act as NAGS secretariat.

### **Press**

Apart from stickering and flyposting (done by teams of people sent to cover particular areas such as Lancaster's housing estates or surrounding villages) or mentions in friendly publications such as a local newsletter or *Scan* (the newspaper of Lancaster University's Students Union), Lancaster Gay Switchboard's main form of publicity was an advertisement placed in the personal column of the *Lancaster Guardian*. It read 'Homosexual women and men - for advice and information - phone Lancaster Gay Switchboard 63021 Thurs & Fri 6-8 pm only'.

However, the same advertisement was not thought suitable for publication in either of the Lancaster area's other local newspapers, the *Visitor* in Morecambe and the *Lancashire Evening Post*. The former (then family-owned) would give no reason for its refusal, while the latter indicated that it objected to the use of the words 'homosexual' and 'gay' in an advertisement.

Switchboard sought help from the National Council for Civil Liberties (now known simply as Liberty), as indicated earlier, who added their support by writing letters between June 1977 and May 1978. The exchange resulted in little progress. The *Lancashire Evening Post* claimed that its policy rules were 'regularly reconsidered in order that, as a newspaper, we may keep up to date with the social, business and moral attitudes of our community', while its owners (United Newspapers Publications Limited) said that it left decisions about the acceptance of advertisements to its individual publications.

Wider approaches to regional newspapers added only the *Barrow News & Mail* and *Preston Weekly News* that would accept an advertisement. Refusals were sometimes accompanied by justifications in terms of what was acceptable to the local community such as the General Manager of the *Cumberland Gazette* saying, 'Unfortunately I will not accept this type of advertisement as I feel Cumbria is not quite ready for it'. Newspapers belonging to the Cumbrian Newspapers Group based in Carlisle didn't even have the autonomy to make local decisions because of a group policy on the acceptability of advertisements.

The positive response from the *Preston Weekly News* led to an advert being placed and a response to callers being organised by the Preston Branch of CHE. The following year (1979) Preston CHE began its own Preston Gay Information Service which opened on 9 July in the town's Gay Centre on Corporation Street.

In later years, Lancaster Switchboard was able to place adverts in the *Visitor* as it became part of the *Lancaster Guardian* series, the *Lakeland*

*Echo* and the *Citizen*. Only *Westmorland Gazette* publications still refused to print Switchboard adverts.

On 15 July 1979, Lancaster Gay Switchboard found itself the target of comments by John Junor in the *Sunday Express*:

Lancaster and Morecambe district have produced a useful little booklet called *When and Where*, which tells the visitor to the area everything he needs to know.

On Page 4 key telephone numbers are listed including police, hospital, citizen's advice bureau and water board.

Also listed is the telephone number of the Lancaster gay switchboard presumably so that homosexuals will be able to know where to get in touch with each other and surely not just to make daisy chains.

What goes on in Lancaster and Morecambe? Why this discrimination in favour of queers?

Can you imagine the scandal there would be if the guide were to list for heterosexuals the telephone number of the local whorehouse?

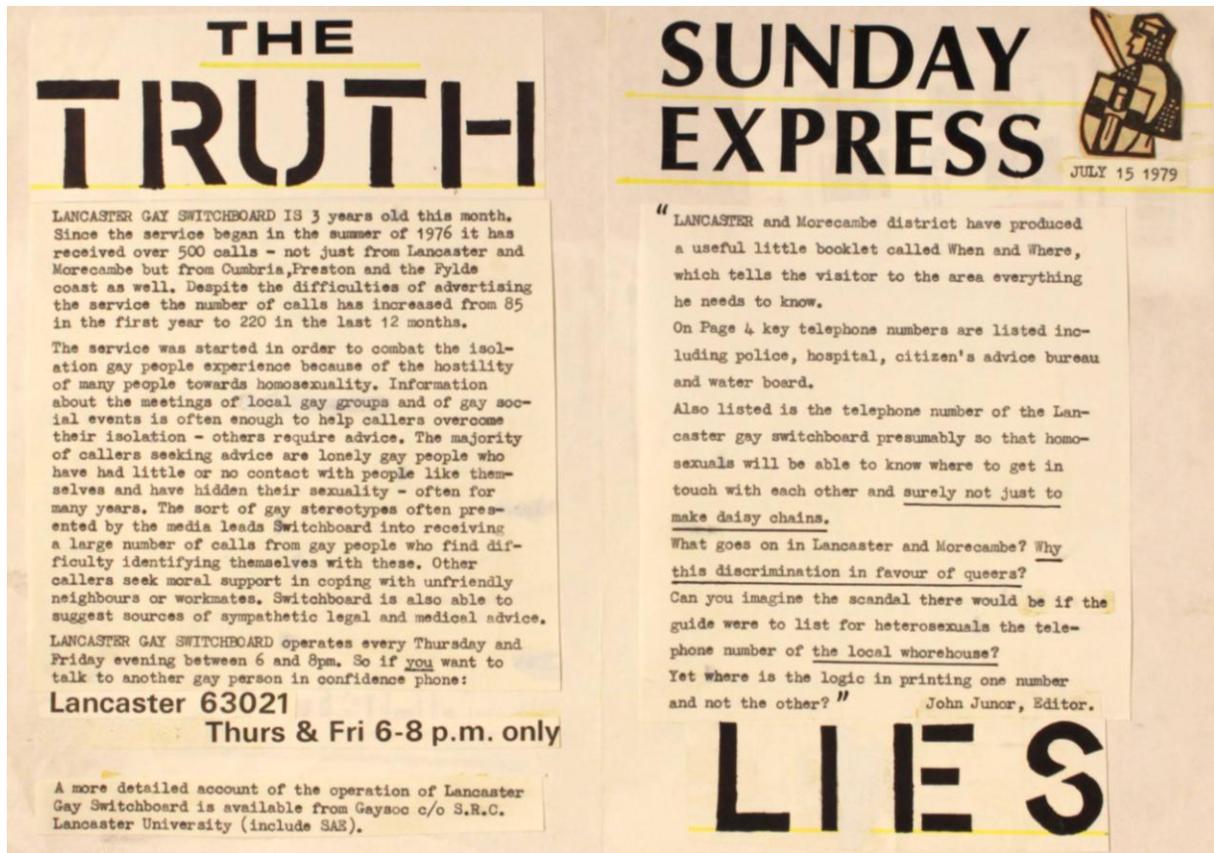
Yet where is the logic in printing one number and not the other?<sup>3</sup>

Legal advice suggested that the complaint procedure through the Press Council would be complicated and would rule out seeking redress through the courts.

By August a letter had been drafted to the Press Council and correspondence followed. In the meantime, evidence was collected from Switchboard's calls log, a leaflet produced (see Figure 2), local

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<sup>3</sup> John Junor, 'Current events', *Sunday Express*, 15 July 1979.



**Figure 2: Leaflet produced by Lancaster Gay Switchboard in response to comments by John Junor in the *Sunday Express*, 1979. (Archive, Lancaster Gay Switchboard)**

groups approached for donations, and letters and articles written. The case was taken up independently by CHE and aired at the 1980 NAGS conference in Nottingham. In May of that year the Press Council found in favour of Lancaster Gay Switchboard but, in printing the Council's findings against John Junor, the *Sunday Express* repeated its original suggestion for which it was again condemned.

Also in 1980, Lancaster joined with switchboards in Liverpool, Manchester and Preston to advertise in the northern edition of the *Daily Mirror*. This resulted in 82 calls to the Manchester number given.

Lancaster Switchboard's problems with the press were not unique, as a member of Manchester Switchboard recalled: 'You'd think it would be easy to launch a helpline for gay people. But it wasn't. The mainstream press refused to take advertisements. Volunteers had to skulk around Manchester's streets leaving stickers with the telephone number in places where they hoped gay people would spot them.'

In 1990 difficulties began to be experienced over the placing of adverts in the *Citizen* in Lancaster when one was refused for Lancaster Lesbian and Gay Youth Group. In 1992 the *Citizen* refused an advert for Switchboard itself, objecting to the word 'lesbian', so the form 'gay men and women' had to be used instead. In the autumn of that year the *Citizen* refused Switchboard's advert completely, despite having printed it previously and having accepted Switchboard adverts since 1987. A letter was sent to the *Citizen's* advertising editor and, after further exchange of correspondence, Switchboard's advert was again accepted the following year.

Switchboard's difficulties with newspaper adverts were largely solved in 1991 when it acquired its own phone line and was able to put details of its times of operation in the telephone directory. This possibility had been discussed several times but in 1990 the discussion became more serious because one of the other users of the shared line also needed access in the evenings. Following extra fundraising, Switchboard's new telephone line opened for business on 4 July 1991.

## **Women**

Though a woman was one of the founders of Lancaster Gay Switchboard and women were actively involved in supporting its early operation, it wasn't until 1990 that women became regularly involved in taking calls. Until the late 1980s, women callers never represented more than 12 per cent of people using Switchboard. In 1988/9 this rose to 15 per cent and, from 1991/2, when Switchboard became Lancaster Lesbian and Gay Switchboard, this figure rose to between 20 and 30 per cent.

The idea of a Lesbian Line is first mentioned in Switchboard's minutes in October 1979 though it wasn't until 6 January 1982 that Women's Line finally began. It shared Switchboard's number and operated initially from 2-9 pm on Wednesdays, though by October had trimmed its hours to 6-9 pm. Women's Line was funded through fortnightly discos but during 1983 it struggled financially and is believed to have closed by the end of the year.

Although occasional moves were made to re-start Women's Line or individual women came forward offering to take calls referred from Switchboard, women callers were generally passed on to Preston Lesbian Line for the rest of the 1980s.

In 1990 a woman came forward offering to sit in on Switchboard to take calls from women. This led to discussion about including women in Switchboard's team of operators. Other women began to come forward and so, when Switchboard acquired its own phone in 1991, it was decided to re-launch with a new name - Lancaster Lesbian and Gay Switchboard.

### **HIV and AIDS**

Reports of a mysterious disease in the USA resulting in deaths from a type of pneumonia and Kaposi's sarcoma first appeared in Lancaster Gay Group's newsletter in late 1981.

In November 1986, Lancaster Gay Switchboard lent its disco equipment (discos were a way of raising funds) for a benefit in support of London Lighthouse (a support centre run by the Terrence Higgins Trust for people affected by HIV/AIDS) organised by Libra Café. At the same time, Lancaster Area Health Authority approached Switchboard in relation to their action plan for awareness of and avoidance of AIDS. Their plan had been for Switchboard to become an AIDS counselling service and contact point for the gay community. Switchboard preferred instead a separate AIDSLINE.

On 14 January 1987 AIDSLINE began operations, initially nightly from 7-10 pm and then on Monday nights only with a recorded

message at other times. Its support group, AidsAction, produced stickers which included Switchboard's number, and arranged a training event in which Switchboard members took part.

In May 1989 AIDSLINE stopped operating in Lancaster due to staffing problems and callers were referred to Preston. AidsAction was re-launched in 1991 as Positive Action for HIV but, by 1993, had become inactive. Attempts were made to revive it but, in 1995, it was formally wound up.

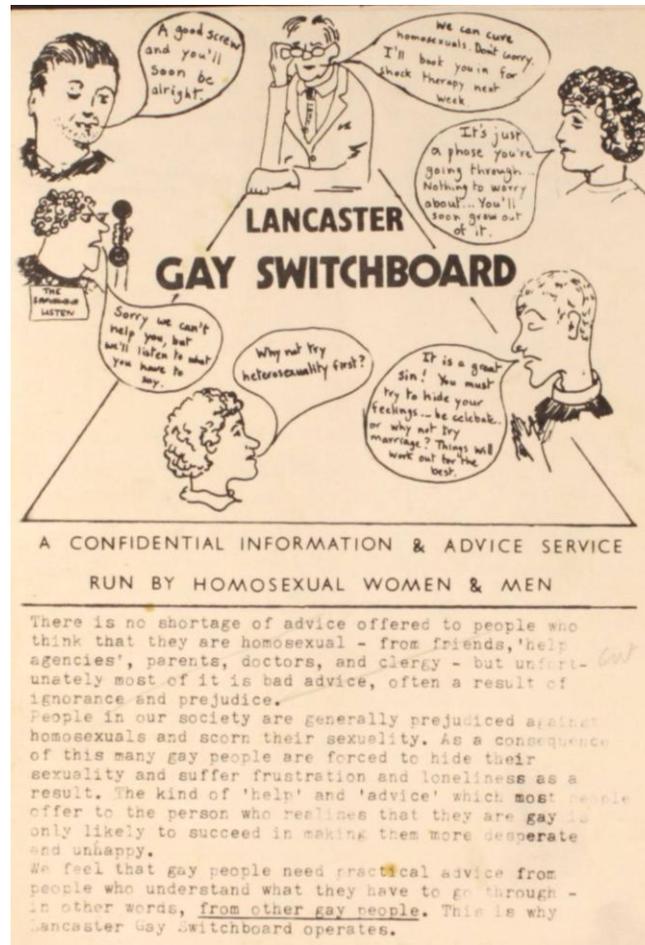
A 1993 meeting of a group addressed by a doctor from the Genito-Urinary Medicine Clinic highlighted a lack of co-operation between voluntary and other agencies over sexual health issues. Subsequently, Switchboard members welcomed HIV/AIDS prevention workers and nursing staff to meetings to explain roles and explore ways of co-operating. This resulted in a closer working relation with HIV workers and Signposts (a multi-agency resource centre in Morecambe) and some financial support for Switchboard's work.

### **Community**

In the course of compiling information to give out to callers (see Figure 3), Lancaster Gay Switchboard wrote to local doctors, solicitors and, later, clergy to find their reaction to having callers referred to them.

The letter to doctors explained the nature of Switchboard and then asked whether the doctors would allow themselves to be recommended as being of help in matters relating to sexuality. It also asked whether they would inform patients seeking advice on matters relating to sexuality of Switchboard's existence. The responses ranged from very positive to a terse 'no' written on the original letter. Others were mostly polite acknowledgements, though one did say that all patients were treated equally but that one doctor could not see another's patients.

The letter to solicitors asked whether they would be favourably disposed towards gay people and whether they would be able to



**Figure 3: Cover of folded leaflet produced by Lancaster Gay Switchboard, January 1979 (Archive, Lancaster Gay Switchboard)**

fight their cases earnestly. Here the replies were much more uniform saying, essentially, that they had a policy of treating all clients equally.

The letter to clergy asked whether they would be willing to accept referrals of people who had difficulty reconciling their sexuality and religious (specifically Christian) belief. Mention was made of the Gay Christian Movement and Quest, an organisation for gay Roman Catholics. A variety of often thoughtful responses resulted, from which the following quotations are taken:

I don't feel that I would be in a position to do what you ask - effectively. I have found that people's prejudice against homosexuality is raised by the word 'gay'. That's just my experience, and I offer it in a constructive way.

I'm glad you're writing to the local clergy - their replies will be 'interesting', I'm sure! It looks like becoming a major issue in the Church of England, with the Gloucester Report up for discussion; feelings are running high.

The straight answer to your question is 'Yes'. Indeed, I have been rather worried for a few months now about someone who rang me anonymously about his homosexuality and his marriage. I felt completely at a loss ...

All I can promise is sympathy and I hope a little understanding, not having any experience of counselling in this particular area.

I would be prepared to accept referrals from your organisation, if I can be of any help. As you know the Catholic Church in this country produced guidelines for the pastoral care of homosexual people in Dec '79.

... I find it somewhat difficult to know precisely how to respond. Let me say first, that I have had, in the past, colleagues who have been homosexual, and I have been aware of those within the church who are homosexual. My attitude to them has been no different to that to anyone else. Secondly, I am open-minded about the comments made in the Report on Human Sexuality, presented to the Methodist Conferences of 1979 and 1980. I am unsure, however, like a lot of others, about the cause of homosexuality, and the conflicting evidence is such that it would be inadvisable to say whether it should be regarded

as compatible or incompatible with being a Christian. I am aware of the conflict that some Christian homosexuals have and would wish to support them, but would be unable to accede to the request 'to show them that the two are not incompatible'. I feel unable to do that at a time when the theological and medical evidence is inconclusive and in dispute.

### **The Lancaster gay scene**

The majority of callers to Lancaster Switchboard sought information, the most common question being, 'Where do gay people meet?' As a result, Switchboard kept lists of gay-friendly pubs, bars, clubs and other meeting places, providing a unique record of the changing pattern of gay meeting places in and around Lancaster.

In the early years gay men would congregate on a particular night of the week, usually a Thursday, in one of the pubs west of the city centre along King Street, China Street or nearby. These were chosen on the basis of where people felt comfortable but few were used over long periods of time and might fall out of favour if changes in staff or licensees meant that they became less tolerant. Pubs and bars elsewhere might become part of the gay scene if they had gay licensees or bar staff who wanted to build up a gay clientele. Lesbians would similarly favour particular pubs, usually different from those used by gay men.

The opening of what was effectively Lancaster's first exclusively gay bar in 1992, the short-lived City Bar, brought gay men and lesbians together in a single venue and this sharing became more common over the following years.

Other gay-friendly businesses included cafés and restaurants and early stockists of *Gay News*. These would probably not have existed without the transformation brought about by Lancaster University and St Martin's College (latterly the University of Cumbria). Before they became established, Lancaster in the 1960s (the Lancaster of

Humphry Berkeley's day) was a very inward looking, dour industrial town.

### **Out and proud**

It took a while for events along the lines of Pride or Mardi Gras, a combination of demonstration and celebration, to reach Lancaster. In September 2000 an umbrella event, Lancashire Pride, touched Lancaster, but it wasn't until 2005 that a first proper Lancaster Pride was held.

A busy programme included a lantern-lit procession around the city centre, a performance of Fauré's *Requiem* in the Priory, a reception in the Ashton Hall complete with cabaret performers and an address by Stonewall campaigner Peter Tatchell, and an exhibition of images and words by youth group members at the Gregson. Rainbow flags were flown at the town halls in both Lancaster and Morecambe. A Pride stall was also set up in Market Square alongside the Lancashire Constabulary community policing van. The stall became the focus of a small Christian counter-demonstration.

Lancaster Pride is ongoing with a website at [www.lancasterpride.co.uk](http://www.lancasterpride.co.uk)

### **Receiver replaced**

A recurrent difficulty for Switchboard was to recruit, train and keep volunteers, especially if the number of calls was low and the potential for boredom high. The rise of the internet, especially in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, alongside ongoing legal liberalisation and some relaxation of social attitudes had a clear impact on the number of calls received by Switchboard and consequences for its team of volunteers. Websites offered an unprecedented range of information to those online, as well as new ways of making contact with others. While Switchboard set up its own website and took messages by email, the number of traditional telephone enquiries dropped away and made even a rudimentary training procedure (listening to experienced operators take calls and then answering under supervision) difficult to sustain.

As a result, the number of volunteers also fell away, eventually helping to force Switchboard's closure in 2007.

The website and email facility also made Switchboard a more visible point of contact with the gay community for a whole host of bodies and individuals whose motives ranged from being able to tick a diversity box to genuine enquiry. Gay/Lesbian Forums, a two-year study, *Violence, Sexuality and Space*, a project on homophobic violence, *Women's Safety and Sexuality*, a survey of gay men's attitudes to smoking for an NHS Stop Smoking Campaign, a student project on same-sex marriage, a volunteer centre wanting guidelines on good practice – all placed additional strain on an already beleaguered team who, in any case, questioned their presumed role as representatives of a larger gay community.

### **Conclusion**

It is remarkable that Lancaster, with a relatively small population set in a large rural area, was able to sustain a gay and lesbian switchboard for over thirty years, and great credit to its gay and lesbian community that it was able to do so largely from within its own resources. It is remarkable too that Lancaster's switchboard was a pioneer in north-west England.

It was, though, a creature of its time, spanning a period from the emergence of gay liberation, indeed being rooted in that movement, to the first same-sex civil partnerships. With an official liberalisation, at least, in attitudes to people across the LGBT (lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender) spectrum, as well as the emergence of alternative sources of information and advice, the need for Switchboard declined. Social attitudes too, to some degree relaxed, more noticeably among a younger generation, some of whom were able to be more open about their sexuality and for whom it was perhaps less of a touchstone. On an individual level though, LGBT people still faced age-old questions about acceptance of their own identity or self-image, the process of coming out, meeting others and coping with negative issues, where a sharing of experiences and

opinion was still relevant. Added to these, fresh questions surrounding older openly LGBT people are still to be addressed.

The archives of Lancaster Switchboard also open a window on a partly secret world which rarely surfaces into mainstream consciousness and still less in a positive light. The impression is one of an ephemeral, ever-changing pattern of meeting places, groups and events, though the same faces might have been seen at many of these over time.

Today's Lancaster is generally much more tolerant of LGBT people than it was in 1976 when Switchboard started, and certainly more so than in Humphry Berkeley's time. A particular night of the week at a particular pub was once the norm for gay men, whereas gay-friendly pubs are now commonly known and welcome a broad range of custom. LGBT culture has to a degree emerged from a ghetto and become more mainstream and assimilated, but this is not to say that Lancaster has entered a new stage as a post-gay city. Even as Switchboard was in decline, there were reminders of a darker, less enlightened world – a homophobic murder in Carnforth, cases of verbal abuse and, on the Switchboard answerphone, a disturbingly vitriolic message left by a Christian gentleman prompted by the effect of the 2007 Equality Act (Sexual Orientation) Regulations on a Catholic adoption society. So, while the LGBT community in Lancaster may have found a new pride, old prejudices remain.