

Galop and Stonewall Housing Oral History Project

Interviewee: Matthew Chell

Interviewer: Ben Smith

Place of Interview: City Hall, near Tower Bridge

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Key

MC: = Interviewee, Matthew Chell

BS: = Interviewer, Ben Smith

[time e.g. 5:22] = inaudible word at this time

[5:22 IA] = inaudible section at this time

Word 5:22 = best guess at word

Into the second area, which is looking at your involvement with Galop? So you're a management consultancy living in London; how did you find out about Galop or get involved in it? Had it even started when you found out about it?

MC: I was living in North London, in Haringey, and I joined the Islington and Haringey Gay Group (or was Islington and Haringey CHE (Campaign for Homosexual Equality)), which met weekly in a pub called the Hemingford Arms in Islington, so it was quite an active group of people and we had meetings every week. Sometimes there would be a speaker on a political or social topic. Sometimes just social evenings. But mostly speaker evenings, organised mostly by a guy called Phil who lived in Primrose Hill. And one of the other ... in fact Phil's flatmate, Brian, it also had a monthly newsletter and in that monthly newsletter he wrote an article about policing and it was a big issue in the gay community really, policing, or seemed to be at that time, for a whole range of reasons. There'd been arrests of people cottaging, which included a Conservative MP. And I suppose I was quite concerned about the way policing was being done, and I suppose the concerns were to some extent about gay men being a soft target for the police, in that if they wanted to boost their crime statistics it was an easy way to do it because gay men at that time would often plead guilty and therefore get off with a caution and that was the easy way out for them, and that would look good for the police's statistics.

BS: Why would people plead guilty?

MC: Because they wouldn't have ... they'd be told they then wouldn't have to go to court, they could get off with a caution, and that they wouldn't be any publicity, wouldn't go into the newspapers. But of course they would then have a criminal record. But that's the bit that they might not get told about. But it wasn't just about gay men. There was also a lot of concern about policing from ethnic minority groups as well at the time. And then you've got to remember that the police were also involved. There was a lot of anger at the police around things like the miners' strike and other strikes. The way that strikes and demonstrations were being policed. And this is the first few years of Margaret Thatcher's period as Prime Minister. There was a lot of change going on and a lot of anger about unemployment and so on, a lot of demonstrations. It was politically a very active time and there was a lot of concern about nuclear weapons and CND was a major force there, and it seems to me, at least from my perspective, that there seemed to be a much more politically active period than any period since. So policing was a big issue and there are a lot of police monitoring groups being set up, and on the other side the government was over this period introducing the Police and Criminal Evidence Bill, which extended police powers, and there

was a lot of concern around that. So there was a whole lot of issues around policing.

Anyway, Brian had written this article in the Islington and Haringey Gay Group's newsletter, about policing, and I think he must have organised the first meeting about doing something about policing for gay men, and a small group of us then started meeting to talk about what we might do around that. So that's how I got involved.

BS: So it grew out of the Haringey ...

MC: The Islington and Haringey Gay Group. Well of course that's how I saw it, but not everyone who got involved was from the Islington and Haringey Gay Group. But Brian, who was the leading figure really, was involved in that group and so was I, and also Martin. There was a number of people from the Islington Group.

BS: Were there people that you knew who had been directly affected by the police behaviour or the way that policing was conducted?

MC: No. I suppose that seems a bit strange. My concern wasn't about anything I knew about in personal terms. It was an almost academic interest in the fact that the system seemed wrong and needed changing. <Laughs> It seemed unjust, in a general sense, not from personal experience.

BS: What particularly seemed unjust about it? I know that's perhaps an obvious question but I think it's worth exploring.

MC: I think it's just this idea that gay men were soft targets and were being targeted by the police, and you must also remember that police were actually using entrapment. They were sending in young, attractive police officers into public lavatories and cruising grounds to entice people to commit offences and then arresting them, which seemed wrong, and apart from anything else seemed a wrong use of police resources. There were lots of serious criminal activity going on and that just didn't seem right – it needed to be put right! <Laughs> But I'm sure other people had different motivation. I only came out in '81 or '82 so at that stage I was not at all an experienced gay man, and I certainly hadn't ever been to a ... cruising ground or anything like that. I lived quite a sheltered existence, so I'm sure other people who've got involved in Galop know that that wouldn't necessarily be the case, but for me it was, so yes.

BS: So the sense of this being around, do you think this police attitude was the obvious face of society's view of gay life? A visible demonstration of society prejudice, in a way? Did this, at the forefront of people's minds, create a bit of a climate of fear, in general terms – in terms of living your whole life? If the police demonstrate this prejudice ...

MC: It's difficult to look back on that now from where we are now, because where we are now there's a certain amount of fear of policing because of the way that certain demonstrations quite recently have been policed, which seems like a throwback, and also the surveillance society, the fact that the government, the police, the intelligence services, have so much more data about all of us now (as indeed do lots of other people, through things like Facebook or any activity on blogs and stuff like that) and of course that didn't exist then. I don't remember a general climate of fear about the police, but our attitudes to the police then were ... things have changed such a lot. For example you get police marching on Gay Pride's marches now and being applauded, and that certainly was quite the opposite in those days. It would have been very difficult to be a gay police officer and to be open about it in those days. I'm not sure if it would have been possible at all. That's changed

enormously since then.

But I don't know. That time wasn't so long after Dixon of Dock Green and this attitude that the police are there to help us, good old British Bobby. <Pause> But equally there'd been a whole range of issues like Blair Peach dying in a demonstration – goodness, I think that was the early eighties too, and the policing of strikes and protests over unemployment and so on.

BS: Did gay rights go along with a generalised (for want of a better word) left wing agenda, with the CND and ... was it part of a bundle of views that groups of people held?

MC: Well ... from where I was it probably was, because I was living in North London and Islington, an area which was quite active in all sorts of areas of politics. Gay rights and CHE had its head quarters in Upper Street at that time, but I think possibly if you'd lived somewhere else – for example there was another CHE group in Paddington and Marylebone Group which didn't seem anything like as left wing, seemed quite right wing from my perspective ... there were other gay groups that weren't necessarily left wing, but the group of politically active gay men I was around were all pretty left wing and involved in a whole range of organisations campaigning on gay rights across the board, on housing and employment as well as... the police was one particular strand of activity. We were doing some campaigning with Haringey council on a whole range of service provision back in those days. And then there was a bit of polarisation simply because you had Central Government with Margaret Thatcher in charge and the GLC with Ken Livingstone, and very polarised, in a way that's again very different to now, when the two parties in Central Government are nothing like as clearly defined. There's much less difference between the two main parties than there was then. This is the time of the '83 Labour manifesto which was described as the longest suicide note in history, which was full of quite radical left wing ideas as it was seen at the time, even though some of those are now, a bit like the Ecology Party manifesto from that time, things that were thought of at the time as being ludicrous but are, if you look at it now you think this is now accepted policy across the board.

So it's very difficult to look at a different perspective, from where we are now to think about how things were then; it's a long time ago. Things were very different.

BS: Would you say that in general gay social life was more politicised, because when you're describing going to the social group it also seems like most of the time there were speakers and ...

MC: Well it was for me, but you've got remember that gay life was a lot less then, there were fewer people involved in gay life than now, there was much less of a commercial scene than there is now, and that's also reflected in Newspapers. In those days we had Gay News, which if you look back on it was a pretty academic and literary newspaper, and what we have now are things like QX, which is basically advertising for bars and discothèques, and it's mostly trying to persuade you to go out and spend money on thing. Gay News was completely the opposite. It was quite heavy going trying to read about all these concepts and ideas and books, artwork, and politics, and things you won't find in most of the magazines in the gay world now. In terms of my social world in those days ... the other difference of course, I'm a lot older now. Then I was a young gay man about London, so I was going out rather more than I do now, but my social world was Islington and Haringey Gay Group on a Tuesday night; Friday night was going to the discothèque at the Bell, which was run by Ice Breakers and Gay CND, so there was Gay CND and Ice Breakers was a group for befriending people who'd just come out and just helping them establish themselves on the gay scene, and that was run out of Gay's The Word Bookshop to some extent, as well as having this discothèque on a Friday night. There were things like Consenting Adults, which was a theatre group run by Eric Presland, and Gay Sweatshop,

another theatre group. There seemed to be a constant stream of workshops and demonstrations and marches to go on about various things, in a way that I'm not aware of now. I just don't think they happen.

And you've got to remember even Gay Pride was ... those were quite serious, small but quite serious marches in those days, and not the festival, carnival, party atmosphere that it is now. It's changed over the years. It's been a gradual change and it's grown and it's become more fun and it's also become more commercialised with floats for discothèques and bars and all that as well. So it's become bigger but it's not so political in many ways as things were in those days. So yes, life has changed in that regard. Part of that is success, part of that is the fact that we've moved on, that a lot of things we were campaigning for in those days in terms of equality, we don't need to complain about anymore because we have equality in many regards. So maybe we don't need to protest as much as we did then.

BS: So there was the interest group around policing – can you remember the first meeting – who was involved and what happened?

MC: <Laughs> Oh dear! I'm not sure my memory's quite up to that! I can remember, have a general memory about meetings in small rooms, either upstairs at pubs or in people's homes. There was a kernel of people involved in the meetings.... Which included as I say Brian and Martin and some legal people ... and we had two lawyers called Paul involved in the group. People from CHE National Committee. I can't remember any specific meeting, but what I can remember is that a lot of what we did in the early days was around the idea of a bust card, and I don't know if you've ever seen an original Galop Bust Card but this was parallel to an organisation called Release which campaigned for the rights of people, to help people who'd been arrested for drug use, and I think ... my memory, and it could be wrong, but I seem to remember they had this Bust Card, which was a little card to tell people if they got raided by the police this is what they needed to do. And we came up with the idea that that would be a good thing for gay men to have, so that if they got arrested by the police they'd have this little card that says, 'Don't do this. Do do this.' And that's the thing I can remember us working on. And the lawyers in the group worked on the wording of it, and then there was the work around getting quotes for printing it and the issue about laminating it, 'cause this was a big idea at the time, you had to get it laminated so that it would last, so that somebody could put it in their back pocket of their jeans and it would last so that it was still there when they actually came to need it. And I can remember it as a pale blue card with a pink triangle across it and then the wording in black with quite a few 'Do not's in large letters. So it was about if you were arrested by the police what to say, what not to say, what your rights were. And we got those printed and laminated and they were distributed through groups and through pubs, and it would have been several thousand of them. How effective they turned out to be I have absolutely no idea. But of course the other thing it did was it publicised the existence of the group.

Somewhere along the line we started calling ourselves Galop, Gay and Lesbian Police Monitoring Group, and my memory is that was Martin's idea, but I could be wrong about that.

And we also applied for a GLC grant at some point. There was a GLC Police Committee and Police Support Group and that was beginning to fund various police monitoring groups around London. Also happening at the local authority level, so Haringey set up a police committee as well. But anyway we applied for a grant from the GLC, and to get this grant we had to have a constitution, so we had some very exciting meetings trying to work out a constitution for the group and we had to set up a bank account, and that's something I did. I can remember that was at the Co-Op, it was very important that it was with the Co-Op bank

and nobody else, because their attitude to equalities was considerably better than most of the other banks, or so the group felt. And I can remember I was working in the City at the time and so I seem to remember that was somewhere in the City, could have been King William Street, where we set up the bank account. And of course in those days bank accounts were with a particular branch of a bank and if you wanted to pay in money and take out money at other branches you had to have agreed this. This was long before electronic banking and things like that. So I had to go into that branch to pay money in.

BS: What are the key points you remember then, from being involved with Galop in that period?

MC: I think it was getting the group off the ground and producing the bust card, and that's as far as I got before I moved on. I must have left the group in '84 or early '85. We'd only just got off the ground.

BS: I think we have talked about this, but what life was like living in London during the time you were involved with Galop – have you any other points? We've talked a bit about the gay world, the social side and the campaigning side. Any other points that you want to mention?

MC: Well I suppose the other thing around that time is most of that was pre-AIDS and then AIDS arrived on the scene in a very sudden way in '83/'84; it had probably been a bigger issue in North America before that, and then the Terrance Higgins Trust was set up around that time and suddenly gay life changed a lot as well, so I think that's a factor in all of this.

BS: It's impossible for me to comprehend life before AIDS because everything ... nowadays, maybe people who are a bit younger than me don't, but when I was growing up you'd get this massive totally overwhelming stuff about AIDS, so when I came to [1:45 IA] my sexuality, it was like absolutely obsessed with AIDS. So how was it different before this whole thing happened, about coming to terms with your sexuality and that sort of thing? Was it just that bit more relaxed – didn't have that to worry about?

MC: No. The emphasis was different because it was being gay wasn't as accepted and it wasn't seen as part of normal life in the way that perhaps it is now. What TV soap now doesn't have a gay character or two in it? But in those days they didn't. We had Brookside on Channel 4 and there was a lesbian kiss and that was just a massive moment, and so on. So the difficulty about being gay was that it was unusual and for a lot of people unacceptable. There wasn't all this stuff about it being a passway to death, which it became in the mid eighties when there was that disease that had no cure, and no treatments either. There were people who had AIDS, there seemed no hope at all at that time. And then things changed again and there became treatments. At that time there was a period for which we didn't even know what the cause of AIDS was, we didn't know what HIV was, so we didn't know what was causing it and therefore you didn't know how to prevent it, apart from avoiding sex altogether, which is never going to work for terribly long. So everyone was very scared.

But before that ... I suppose it was easier, once you accepted your sexuality it was easier to have sex, without worrying about it, whereas of course then it became well you could accept your sexuality but then you started to worry about actually having sex because of the health risks. Obviously there were other health ... there always have been other health risks and probably there was hepatitis and so on, and probably there was ... I don't know

what the rates of hepatitis were but I can remember friends getting hepatitis very badly in the early eighties and most people would not have thought of using a condom for sex in the early eighties at all, because condoms were for preventing pregnancy and used by straight people. The bizarre thing is that it's almost the other way round now. So in that respect things were different.

BS: Just thinking about the impact of Galop, what do you think the impact of Galop's work has been on you? Either throughout the time period or reflecting back on it. Well I should ask one question at a time – what was the impact of Galop on you at the time?

MC: Well I suppose it was an eye-opener and it was part of me learning a lot about political activity and a different perspective on life. I'd come from a fairly sheltered middle-class background and the people I was working with on Galop and lots of these other groups were from all sorts of different places around the country. They'd come to London, they were from different backgrounds, so just that was interesting in itself and a sort of political education, because a lot of political debate going on and again I'm very wishy-washy Liberal by and large, with a sort of green tinge, and you were having to deal with lots of different attitudes. For example ... some people in the group would have come from quite radical Gay Liberation Front background and be much more hard left wing I suppose, and even in Islington at the time there was this big fight going on in terms of the local council between the labour councillors who'd broken away, 'cause Islington almost all the councillors were Labour, and some of them had broken away and joined the SDP and actually taken over, because so many of them had joined the SDP, the SDP was now running the council without having fought an election on that basis, and the remaining Labour councillors were furious to have been ousted from power without ... you know, so there was a whole struggle between different factions of left of centre politics going on in Islington, as well as all the miners' strike stuff and so on. So I was learning a lot about politics, both theoretical and the practical stuff, and about the way other people saw the police, because again coming from my comfortable suburban background I had quite a ... I'd come from a very Dixon of Dock Green attitude to the police, to face up to some very hard issues about how the police deal with people in certain situations outside my experience. So there was a lot to learn.

BS: Was it a shock?

MC: Yes. Yes it was. I say shock, but this is all learning by talking to people in meetings, not by actually having these experiences of being arrested or being hit over the head by a truncheon or whatever. It was listening to people's experiences. So while it's a shock, it's a theoretical shock, at a remove from the real experience.

BS: I see that, but I suppose it's still going from what you describe, middle-class safe background, [4:32 1A] politics and people discussing this kind of stuff, and I suppose ... I see it's removed but still it must have been quite a big change... would you have said you were politically interested when you were at school or when you were at university?

MC: Not at school at all. University yes to some extent. I listened to, went along to various political and environment groups at university, but mostly as a spectator, not as a participant.

BS: Do you think looking back now, has your involvement with Galop and interest in politics shaped your attitude today, the work that you've done or the interests you've had over the period following?

MC: I think all the different activities I did at that time, so Galop was one of those but the work was campaigning with Haringey Council in particular had a lasting impact, 'cause that's how I got involved in local government issues and when I came back from Australia, a year after that I started working for an organisation that works for local authorities and to some extent that's how I've ended up where I am now. I've been working supporting local authorities and then regional government for most of the time since then. So all that activity not just around Galop but around campaigning for gay rights at local government level more, but also I was doing some work around environmental issues as well at the time, so that's all fed into where I am now in terms of my career, in the end. So yes, it has had an impact on me.

BS: For lesbians and gay people, bisexuals, the trans community, what impact has Galop had, do you think, on the life of the people in the community?

MC: I don't think I'm qualified to say. When I left Galop at that stage all we'd done as an organisation was produce this bust card and set up an organisation, and I left and I haven't really revisited it since, except every so often I've noticed that it's still existed, which was always a bit of a surprise. I never expected it ... I suppose I never expected it to last terribly long. I suppose in my head I was thinking once that first GLC grant runs out, we'll be hard pushed to keep going. So it's quite a surprise to find that it still exists and it's grown and become a <laughs> all these years later it's become a significant organisation. And I hadn't really been actively following what it's been getting up to and I wouldn't know how to evaluate how successful it's been and what it's achieved.

BS: What's it like looking back and thinking that you were around at the start of an organisation that's grown this big and has prominence, and also the fact that it was the very key point in the development of gay rights?

MC: Well, I suppose I'm quite pleased to have been a tiny part of getting it off the ground, but as I say I had no idea it would go on! <Laughs> At all! I think there must be lots of other organisations ... there were lots of organisations founded in that period, and I'm sure that the majority of them will have ceased to exist quite soon afterwards. They wouldn't have perpetuated. But I'm sure equally it's had to adapt and change over the years and take on a whole lot of new issues and change in the way it's constituted and the way it's funded and all sorts of things to adapt to changing circumstances, like any organisation. But I'm glad it wasn't ... it was obviously doing something for which there was a requirement, a need. I hope that's the reason it's still going.

BS: What changes in terms of policing do you think there have been between the time in 1984 and the present day, policing with regard to the LGBT community?

MC: Well the overall picture I think is enormous change in just the perception of how accountable the police should be to the community, because back in the early eighties there was very little idea that the police should be accountable to the community, particularly in London. In London the police were headed up by the Home Secretary and had been until quite recently. In fact even very, very recently we've got this position where we're not quite sure whether it's the Home Secretary or the mayor who's finally in charge. But there was no idea that the police should be accountable to the community and they had to police in a fair way, and the police were really in those days quite outraged that these committees, so called Police Committees, were set up to scrutinise their activity. They didn't see that they had, the committees had, any legitimacy whatsoever to start questioning how they were spending their resources, which is of course completely different to say what happens in the

United States of America for example. But it's completely different now here. We do expect the police to be responsive. We don't have democratic accountability of the police in a direct way, but we do now expect them to respond to concerns of the community.

So that's for the general community, but as I said earlier, in those days it would have been virtually impossible to be an out gay policeman, whereas now there's an association and the police and the other emergency services march on Gay Pride and Mardi Gras and are welcomed for doing that, and would have policies about equalities and would expect to be not just within the law but actually to be leaders on gay rights issues. So that's changed enormously. It doesn't mean that they police perfectly all the time by any means, but ... so it's big change.

