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Reflections on The Black Cap



01 May 2012/Comments Off/in [Opinion](#)/by [Simon Watney](#)

It is frankly shocking news that a planning application has recently been lodged with Camden Council to construct new luxury flats above the Black Cap pub on Camden High Street, alongside other proposed changes which would transform the entire nature of the building, reducing the present two-floor pub facilities to the ground-floor only, and doubtless making it in turn vulnerable to 'redevelopment'. There are two big reasons why we should care about this. One has to do with the place itself, and the other concerns its wider significance.



In a very immediate sense The Black Cap matters because it is the only gay venue in this densely populated area, a situation aggravated by the recent 'de-gaying' of the William 1V in Hampstead. Sometimes dubbed 'The Palladium of Drag', since time out of mind it has been one of London's most popular gay venues. When I first visited it in the late '60s it was presided over by Mark Fleming, a big, heavily-built Jewish drag-queen who sang standards in a strong baritone voice and claimed an intimate friendship with the late Queen Mother. In those days there was a cosy bar facing the street with ancient leather sofas, and a narrow passage leading back into the then much smaller stage-bar. The great Mrs Shufflewick was a regular performer, along with countless others. Here the late, wonderful, Regina Fong reigned for seventeen glorious years, before her untimely death in 2003. Whilst Regina ruled London from her north London outpost, her great friend and rival Lily Savage also ruled from The Two Brewers in Clapham, south of the river. For over two decades they were the great twin presiding deities of the London gay scene, and Lily was herself a frequent performer at The Black Cap, where in the Seventies you could see Hinge and Bracket, and it was later practically a second home to Julian Clary, in his sublime incarnation as The Joan Collins Fanclub' complete with the ever-loyal 'Fanny The Wonder Dog'. It was and is

something of a spit-and-sawdust sort of place, utterly unpretentious, its recent upstairs bar and open Fong Terrace a great boon for Camden Town-ers and visitors alike.



People who ask why gay pubs matter in the age of Grindr remind me of people who ask why books matter in the age of the Kindle... Nobody gave us our pubs and clubs, and more than anyone gave us the rights we now enjoy. They were things we created for ourselves, against very considerable odds, and we take them for granted at our peril. As we now see, they can easily be taken away again, leaving us with what? The Black Cap has been a gay pub for at least 150 years, and it embodies something living and vital about the whole history of sexual outsiders in London, and our recent transformation into a recognised and mainly accepted modern social constituency.

But that's not all. The fate of The Black Cap also matters in wider terms, since its history goes back many centuries, like that of The Worlds End on the opposite side of the High Street, which since at least the seventeenth-century had been famous as The Old Mother Red Cap, its name only being changed most regrettably by new owners in the late 1980s. Throughout the nineteenth-century Camden High Street was famous for its popular entertainment, and only a couple of hundred yards south of The Black Cap stood the Old Bedford, the Queen of London's Music Halls, home to Marie Lloyd. Damaged in the Blitz but reopened after restoration in 1949 it struggled on as a flea-pit until it was finally tragically demolished by the Council in 1969, to be replaced by the present astonishingly joyless Jobcentre building.

If Camden Town means anything it means the history of a village where people lived for centuries to the north of the Regents Park, with its tiny ancient parish church dating back to Saxon times, evolving into its present incarnation with and its vast markets around the canal and its air of smart invigorating grunge – a gigantic pleasure-garden and spiritual home of Amy Winehouse. From the moment of its first great expansion we have today only Koko at the south end of the High Street, formerly known as The Camden Palace, which in turn stands on the site of much older Georgian pleasure-gardens at the end of Bayham Street, a stone's throw from where Charles Dickens lived as a boy, and The Black Cap at the north end. Together they represent traditions of popular culture which stem from the very roots of this city, places which give it its very identity.

Back in the '70s there was a popular lesbian and gay disco upstairs at what was then The Sols Arms, a pub just a little way up the Hampstead Road. A post-war building, the name preserved that of an ancient Inn on the site, all memory of which was lost when the site was completely developed into offices in 2007. Of course cities change, and London has always thrived through change, at least until now, when alas it seems that the entire atmosphere of places such as Soho and Camden Town are so vulnerable to ruthless speculative greed, utterly indifferent to such issues as the quality of local lives. In times of rapid change like these it is all the more important that certain landmarks remain, which in their way are quite as important as the great historic palaces and churches. If we lose The Black Cap we don't only lose a key amenity enjoyed by countless people here in Camden Town, but also a significant symbol of what London means, what London as a place is all about. Do we really want the future of London to be one vast blank grey Croydon? With so much lost, and so much at stake, surely some things have to be fought for?

Simon Watney has lived in Camden Town since 1979.

Objectors should contact Camden Council Case Officer Nicola Tulley. The planning application reference number is 2012/1444P