

# Remembering and reclaiming Dr Brian Kennedy 1953-1990

(DPhil, Biochemistry, 1979, University of York)

Dr Adam Dawkins  
University Secretary  
University of York  
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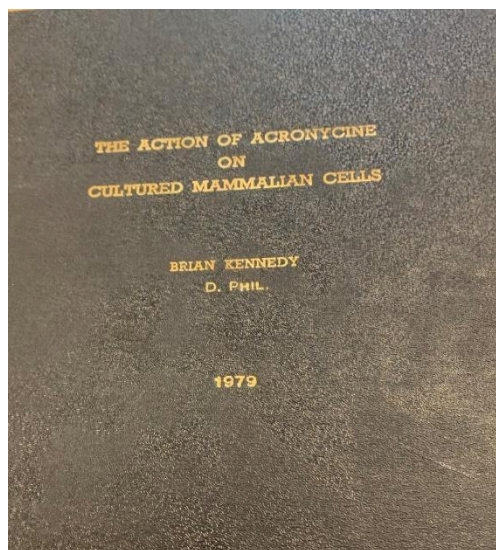


(Credits: The Rose Collis Collection)

Shining a rainbow-infused light on University of York alumnus Dr Brian Kennedy (DPhil, Biochemistry, 1979) has been on my 'must do' list since recognising his name on the roll call of high-profile graduates. There's more than one Dr Brian Kennedy, including in the fields of music and academia. The name is not exceptional, unlike the subject of this piece, who undoubtedly was. The alumni entry describes Brian as a 'journalist and LGBT<sup>1</sup> rights activist' and sparked a personal recollection of his name from my own past. In addition to this shorthand for Brian's successes, he was a researcher, scientist, entrepreneur and community development leader.

<sup>1</sup> In writing this article, the 'LGBT+' initialism is sometimes used where organisations referred to apply it to capture their inclusive missions. However, 'gay' is used most frequently in this article as a shorthand to denote gay male and lesbian representation as the predominant focus of activism and rights advancement during the 1970s and 1980, when Brian was most active.

How did I know of Brian, and what links us, beyond being gay? First is our association with the University of York. Our connection might be four decades apart, but finds me sitting in the reading room of the University's [Borthwick Institute for Archives](#) with fleeting access to Brian's DPhil thesis, bound and couched on its very own book pillow.

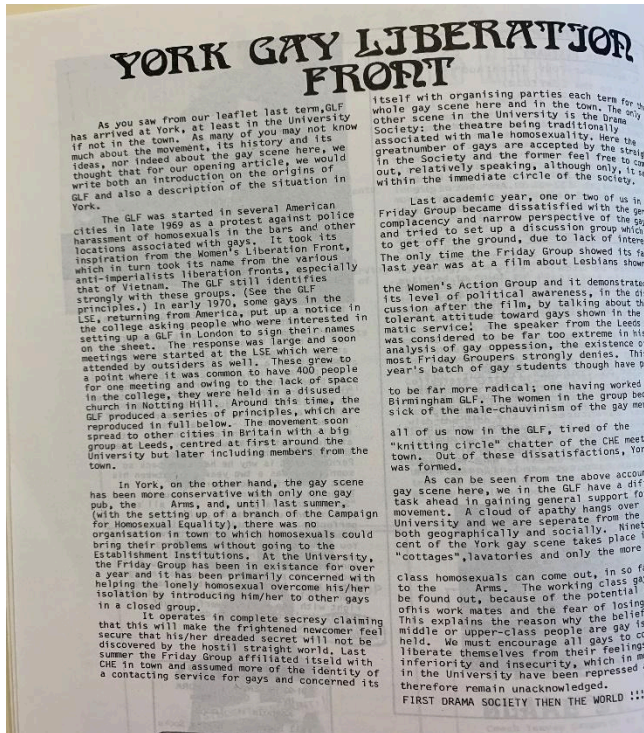


(Credit: Borthwick Institute for Archives, University of York)

Brian and I never met. Both of us 'came out' in our own ways in the heat of 1976; Brian as gay, and me being born that Summer. His untimely death at the age of 37 in the final days of 1990, in the care of his partner Robin, sealed a solemn guarantee that we would never meet. The second and main association Brian and I have is the [Pink Singers](#), the LGBT+ choir which Brian and composer, writer and performer [Mark Bunyan](#) co-founded in 1983. Two years into my time in London as a young graduate, and with the cloud of the homophobic bombing of the Admiral Duncan pub hanging heavy, in 2000 I discovered and joined the choir. This was a New Year's and New Millennium resolution which stuck. We'll come back to the significance of the Pink Singers, after charting Brian's time at the University of York.

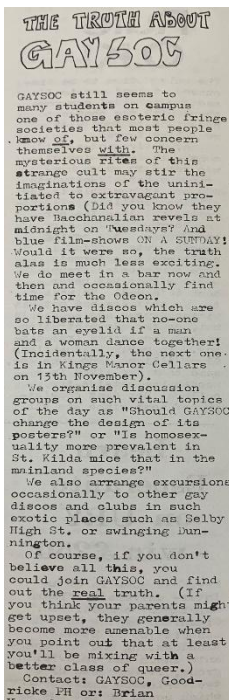
The detailed sequence of Brian's pathway into higher education is patchy. From an early life in Durham, Brian joined Professor Roger Warr's laboratory at the University of York in the mid-1970s to pursue postgraduate research into the anti-tumour properties of acronycine - a plant compound - on the cultured ovary cells of Chinese hamsters and pig lymphocytes (right hand whooshing over my head whilst writing this). What is clear is that Brian's scientific knowledge of immune systems and responses would influence his later landmark writing on HIV/AIDS. Indeed, he was one of the first journalists in Europe to write about the epidemic with a plea that those holding influence draw on scant but emerging evidence and facts, and do so with empathy in the way Brian did. Such a stance was desperately needed at a time of a prejudiced mainstream media, stoking the fires of public fear and panic, and presenting HIV/AIDS as the 'gay cancer'. A shape-shifting disease, HIV/AIDS evaded the care or attention of governments globally, with the gay community's existence and survival literally

under threat from it. As a consequence of government inertia, anti-viral medicines to fight, if not cure, the devastating impact of HIV/AIDS came too late for so many, including Brian.




(Credit: Borthwick Institute for Archives: Nouse, Issue 85, 1 February 1973)

Brian's identity as a gay man began to flourish on campus at York. Gay liberation movements on university campuses were forming. In 1970, the first UK branch of the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) held its first meeting in a classroom at the London School of Economics (LSE). The 1970s began to see 'gaysocs' appearing, with varying purposes, membership and degrees of activism across UK university campuses. This was no doubt bolstered by the [National Union of Students](#) (NUS), which in 1973 became the first national UK organisation to vote in support of gay rights (Malcolm, 2017). Records show that the York contingent at the NUS Conference that year argued that gay liberation could only be achieved through the dismantling of capitalism. Melding the causes of workers, class and gay rights was a source of debate, with those arguing against this position pointing to those socialist states in Europe which hardly represented models of tolerance and emancipation of gay communities. Brian's later student and national journalism show that he was also skeptical of such explicitly ideological and early 'intersectional' takes on gay rights in these emerging student liberation movements. This is evident in a 1977 article in the student newspaper, [Nouse](#) (pronounced 'News' as a nod to York's River Ouse) entitled 'Gays Still United' about the proceedings of a heated GaySoc meeting. The writer quotes Brian referring to politically left-leaning gaysocs being 'one of only several ways' to advance gay rights, and that overtly politicised student societies might deter those mustering up the confidence to join them or come out.



(Credit: Borthwick Institute for Archives, Nouse, Issue 129, 29 October 1976)

In 1974, York's Students' Union provided a £100 grant to help set up the GaySoc. Brian became a leading figure in it, holding the roles of Secretary and Chair at different stages. Positive portrayals of gay life did feature in editions of Nouse during this period, but included a reader's article espousing anti-gay sentiment, presenting 'homosexuals' as pitiful figures in need of psychiatric and clinical intervention. Several Nouse articles bear Brian's light but firm footprint, whereby he made calm and factual retorts to homophobic sentiments expressed in the column inches of the newspaper, or on campus more generally. In one 1976 article, Brian deftly debunks sensationalist myths about the GaySoc's indulgence in 'Bacchanalian revels at midnight on Tuesdays' and 'blue films ON A Sunday' (Brian's emphases!). Brian's approach in these early articles show his early ability to deflate prejudice by placing flawed assumptions under the microscope of evidence and scrutiny, in a witty non-confrontational way. This remained a trait in his later journalism, activism and community development. A deep sense of compassion and community is evident in Brian's response to an anonymous 1977 student article in Nouse, 'A day in the Life of a Homosexual at York', a heartfelt insight into the isolation and frustration of a gay student who felt 'paranoid, threatened, deceitful and weak', with no option but to remain firmly locked in the closet.



# A FRIGHTENED LESBIAN

Dear Nouse,

Thanks for publishing 'A Day in the life of a homosexual' in last week's edition of 'Nouse'; it reminded me that I'm not alone after all, though sometimes I feel crestfallen by loneliness. The writer's description of his day writer's friends by the throwaway remark, 'I don't wish to sound soppy, but I'd just like to say to whoever it was that wrote that article that I'm really sorry there's no one to hold his hand - if I were a man, I'd gladly oblige. I long for a female lover, but how? How the hell, thick before opening their ugly mouths, there'd be no need of my unhappiness. The most depressing thing of all is that I can't even call my boyfriend: there's love for you.

**COME OUT!**

Come Out Come Out wherever you are to begin, I would like to present I am a first year undergraduate, an active sportsman, and even occasionally a York City fan. In fact, a seemingly ordinary person.

You may ask who I am - I am "Anonymous" No. 2. Like "Anonymous 1, I am Gay, I too am afraid to print my name, because I am scared of being rejected by people who have accepted me without knowing that I am Gay. The point is, being Gay does not alter my personality, I am still the person that they accepted.

My reason for writing this letter is to reassure other "Anons" who read this that it is worth making the effort of "coming out" - admitting to yourself that you are Gay, a little over a month ago, I confided my Gayness to another Gay person. I can assure you that it was held in strictest confidence. My thanks assure anyone in a similar position that they too can confide in another Gay person, and as a result of doing so will once again feel part of society.

My point is, therefore, that since 'coming out' I once again feel

and abandoning the world because I, too, felt like that before I came-out. And let's pretend no longer: I didn't really expect everyone to open up their arms and make a place for me in the world. Of course I realise there are those around whose heads won't change overnight and who mindlessly resent "queers" - that I am often defined by my sexuality as though no other part of me was important. I realise, also, that even some of my friends regard me as something of a curiosity behind my back and have to prove they are "just good friends" by the throwaway remark, 'If only some of the men on campus realised how unattractive they are to male Gays, either physically or personally-wise, they could stop worrying (and start getting offended instead, no doubt!)

But things are getting better and can improve even more. That a woman would tell the "queer-bashers" to stop is an innovation in itself. That GAYSOC even exists, that its members identify themselves, that the administration facilitates our events, all are signs that some change is taking place. Soon the "queer-bashers" will be a minority group and I hope we can try to understand them to a greater extent than we have been understood.

But even if this were not true, there is something that makes all the ignorant and pitiful grunting less painful, negates all the bigotry and intolerance being spewed out and makes the fear and hiding unnecessary. Having the physical love, friendship and support of another human being, that makes you right and the rest of the world wrong. You'll know that when it happens, as I did. Then, maybe, you won't want to be anonymous any more. Until then there are others apart from GAYSOC whom you can contact. Like Mrs. Pattie, the student counsellor, Father Fabian in Nouse Nouse or Gay organisations elsewhere than York. But don't forget, we are here.

BRIAN KENNEDY  
(Secretary GAYSOC)

# A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A HOMOSEXUAL AT YORK

I have written this article as a way of expressing my frustration and loneliness, for the first time to tell people about myself. I would like to be anonymous; to be anonymous was the only way that people as possible to be anonymous. I shall describe a typical day of my life, a day which not even my closest friends know about.

**Woke up at 8am.** From this moment I am on the defensive - no-one as far as I am aware knows that I am homosexual - for, they've got myself ready for a lecture. For most people a quite ordinary experience. But he is a man, and I am homosexual - I am attracted to him, and that fact I can never mention. He tells me everything about himself: he says that I am one of his closest friends, we play football together, drink, congregate, often eat together. I see his "house", who must, I tell him 'I'm homosexual?' because he finds homosexual people slightly pathetic, almost sick an object of scorn, a "poor". Obviously he doesn't think of me like that; but if he found out, then how would he react?

**Lunch at 12.30pm.** In one of the college snack-bars, some people from the Gay Society were eating a magazine. I was sitting eating with some friends. One of the people came up to the table and offered me a copy. There were a lot of half-smoking, half-grinning looks: "he thanks" the bloke asked me if we weren't interested in gay rights; my friends just said no. I felt really uneasy. I admired this person smiling the magazine. He was brave enough to say "yes, I'm gay" - but my friend a slight think so; as soon as the "nick" moved on, they took the mick of him about the way he spoke, the way he walked, even the clothes he was wearing; yet the really awkward thing was that they would never have commented on these things, had he not said that he was homosexual. They made all kinds of jokes about "poofs", they laughed; I smiled as well. If only they realized they were mocking me, and forcing me to mock myself.

**College Bar 9.30pm** Most decent for a drink with the friend I spoke of earlier. I joined a group of people. One of them was a known homosexual, but no-one seemed to mind; he seemed really relaxed, he even joked about the bloke he fancied in the bar. After a few minutes he left and one of the others asked one of his closer friends if he didn't fancy him being so friendly with a "queer". "Of course not", "but what if he tried anything on?" "Oh no, - wouldn't do that, he's a really nice guy. He knows that if he did anything like that he'd break up the friendship. Anyway" he said, putting on an effeminate voice, "we're just good friends" everybody laughed. I wondered if this homosexual person who had just left, realized that while everybody treated him like an ordinary person, when he turned his back, he was treated as an object of fun, which presumably they would never have dared to do to his face.

**10.30pm** In my room now again I trust me like they treat all other homosexual people at worst they'll reject me outright, at best become wary of me. Even those people who tell others they're homosexual, and are apparently accepted as such, seem to realize what's said behind their backs. Yes, I feel lonely, threatened, unconfident, weak, but there what other people have forced me to be! I'm not strong enough to be isolated, to stand up and be counted as a person; least of all by my supposed friends, but then you may say: why be honest and tell people? And I'll say because I've seen the double standards with which people treat homosexuals, even their friends. I had a friend at home who was homosexual; his answer was to kill himself; I couldn't help feeling that it wasn't suicide, but rather murder. What frightens me is that maybe I'll get to that stage one day; and that even my friends had a hand in it.

So will I ask of you, readers, is that when you make your jokes about "queers", when you're too-faced about your friends that you know are homosexual, behind their backs, talking about THEM, or ONE OF THOSE as second-class people, people you would rather not know, in a football field, at a meal, in a bar; I may be standing in front of you, I may even be your friend, and that you might as well be kicking my head in. And I'm not the only one, for at least 1 in 20 of the people you know is homosexual. I only hope that they don't go through the hell I have to but the tragedy is that they probably do, and you the reader, possibly unintentionally contribute to making this world an utterly miserable place for many of the people that you know, and would even call your friends.

**YES, I FEEL PARANOID, THREATENED, INSECURE, WEAK, BUT THAT'S HOW OTHER PEOPLE HAVE FORCED ME TO BE.....**

(Credit: Borthwick Institute for Archives, Nouse, Issue 140, 22 February 1977)

Brian's response to this article points to practical help for the individual in pointing to the GaySoc switchboard, signals optimism in the wake of despair and tolerance and forgiveness for the most ardent of homophobes:

*"But things are getting better and can improve even more. That GaySoc even exists, that its members identify themselves, that the administration facilitates our events, all are signs that change is taking place. Soon the "queer-bashers" will be a minority group and I hope we can understand them to a greater extent than we have been understood".*

Successfully defending his York DPhil thesis in 1979, Dr Brian made the move to Brighton - with its burgeoning gay rights movement and community - at some time in the late 1970s to pursue a research fellowship at the University of Sussex. After this, London beckoned. Following a stint in cancer research at Guy's Hospital, Brian moved from the lab into community development work. He continued to advocate, as he had done at York, for conciliation over conflict as the most effective means to bring about positive change, whether this be in response to tensions between different parts of the gay community or society as large. Brian's approach played out in his journalism, including as founding editor of the gay section of *Out in the City* in the co-operatively run *City Limits* magazine. In 1985 Brian was joined by [Rose Collis](#), a fellow polymath and an award-winning playwright, film-maker, musician, producer, historian and activist, who became the section's first lesbian co-editor.

Brian also founded *Kennedy's Gay Guide to London*, which ran for 12 editions, and made history in securing national distribution through WH Smith and John Menzies outlets. The Guide offered more than a listing of venues for gay bars, clubs, saunas and cafes and events (although this was of itself significant in literally putting the gay community on the map). Rose Collis's important private archive includes extracts from the *Guide* and the introductions Brian wrote to each edition. They speak powerfully and persuasively of the importance of visibility and pride, criticism of mainstream media's depiction of gay people, and treatment of the gay community, and governmental strategies to divide, distance and silence that community through political inertia in the wake of HIV/AIDS, and its introduction of [Clause 28 of the Local Government Act 1988](#).

The *Guide* was pathbreaking in launching the first Gay Business Directory. As well as promoting 'lesgay' businesses, Brian espoused the importance of collaboration between the gay community and mainstream business sectors. In the *Guide* Brian charts the exploitation of the 'pink pound', as a mode of cynical commercialism which Brian never lived to see intensify. However, he was also ahead of his time in setting out the business case for promoting diversity and inclusion. Brian charts the 'win win' from gay community interaction with mainstream businesses. The outcome being both enriched social capital afforded by business catering for gay needs, and the financial rewards reaped by those businesses. Brian became Secretary of the Gay Business Association (GBA), which was founded in 1983 and continues to operate. One obituary for Brian tells us that in this capacity, he worked to forge positive relations between the police and the gay community. It is fitting that the GBA posthumously created awards in Brian's name to honour leading figures at the interface of the gay community and business, politics, the public and third sectors, including [Angela Mason](#) CBE (former Stonewall Director and Chair of the Fawcett Society), [Chris Smith](#) (now Baron Smith of Finsbury, cited as the first openly gay male British MP) and [Ken Livingstone](#) Greater London Council (GLC) leader and former London Mayor.

The GLC was instrumental in developing the '*Changing the World – London Charter for Lesbian and Gay Rights*' (1983) which worked with Brian and other community leaders to launch the biggest single LGBT community project funded by a public body: the [London Lesbian and Gay Centre](#) (LLGC) in 1985. Brian became the first paid development worker at the Centre. LLGC was the first non-commercial venue for gay businesses, and provided office, rehearsal, performance and socialising space and focal group for many gay groups and networks. Sadly, financial losses, including grant cuts and community in-fighting around LLGC's purpose and use, culminated in its closure in 1992.

Whilst LLGC was not the long-lasting success for which Brian and its founders had hoped, the [Pink Singers](#) remains a *tour de force* on the LGBT+ landscape of London. As Europe's longest-running LGBT+ choir, 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations are taking place across 2023. From the start, the choir was proudly gay and lesbian, and being non-auditioning meant that community inclusion was at its core. The choir's first performance was at London Pride in 1983, with the

march and parade that year processing from Hyde Park to the University of London Union (ULU) in Bloomsbury. Singing as a subtle, but no less persuasive and powerful medium to transmit a positive image and message of gay life, was likely central to Brian's and Mark Bunyan's mission. This is where my connection to Brian crystallises, as a member of the Pink Singers from 2000-2009. The attraction of an LGBT+ choir was obvious to me. This was both for the extended repertoire and harmonic potential a mixed voice choir brings, and a genuinely diverse community of members. The choir became more than a hobby, but an additional family (I say 'additional' as one of the lucky ones who never faced the rejection of my birth family). It was a source of fun and friendship. I fondly recall trips to, and exchanges with, our family of LGBT+ choirs across Europe, from Birmingham to Berlin and Paris and Helsinki to Copenhagen. In 2015, I was part of an inaugural group of individuals across the national LGBT+ choir network to receive a bronze [Brian Kennedy Award](#) for having served more than 10 years in LGBT+ choirs. This was hardly a chore, and the awards remain a fitting testament to how Brian's efforts have impacted and improved the lives of so many, including myself.

Without doubt, Brian was a pioneer, from his research at York through to the many ways in which he advocated for gay rights in a disarming, poised and most of all pragmatic way, always keeping the endgame of equality for LGBT+ communities in sight. Brian should never be an 'unsung' hero, ringing and reverberating through every Pink Singers performance. Those I have been fortunate enough to make contact with in researching this piece, unreservedly remember Brian with love and affection. The light shone on Brian's life and legacy might be refracted through the trials faced by being gay in the decades traced in this article, and the tragedy of his own untimely passing. Brian's is a light with a subtle, but sparkling hue. Burning bright, but never blinding.

#### References:

Malcolm, David (2017). 'A curious courage: the origins of gay rights campaigning in the National Union of Students'. *History of Education*, Vol 47, No 1 73-86.

Thanks to:

- Rose Collis, for her generosity of time and access to her private archive 'The Rose Collis Collection'. 'Archivist' should be added to Rose's many skills and accomplishments!
- Mark Bunyan, co-founder of the Pink Singers
- Professor Roger Warr, Brian's DPhil supervisor at the University of York
- Dr James Moir, Head of the Department of Biology, University of York
- Dr Jim Hoggett, Honorary Fellow and former Head of the Department of Biology, University of York
- Philip Rescorla, long-standing member of The Pink Singers, and Brian Kennedy Long Service Award (Silver)
- Borthwick Institute for Archives, University of York

