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about the exhibition**

Storytellers: 200 People Shared Their Stories





King's Cross: From Edgy Youth to All Grown Up

Over the past 100 years, King's Cross and the surrounding area has changed from a flourishing industrial heartland, through decline and dereliction, to reinvention as a high end place to live, work and socialise. While many former residents have left as a result of the ongoing transformation, others remain on the area's established housing estates. The changes that have taken place create new opportunities, but are they open to everyone?

▶ Listen to our storytellers using the audio players available.

Or use your phone at www.storypalace.org

About the Project

King's Cross Story Palace is a project celebrating and sharing the history of the King's Cross area over the past 100 years. The two-year project has been made possible by National Lottery players through a grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund. It has been delivered by Historypin and The Building Exploratory.



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This exhibition was created by the King's Cross Story Palace Team: Aimée Taylor, Katie Russell, Michael Hall, Nicole Crockett, Polly Rodgers, and Sophie Dayman

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Arrivals



King's Cross Station, 1983. Photo by Jane Penton

‘Smoke belching out and soot falling... the noise was incredible... the clank of the wheels... as the train was getting ready to go.’ Jean Hart

When you arrive at King’s Cross, you step into a rush of sights, sounds, and smells. The platforms of the station, and the streets outside, are alive with voices from the past. Join us on a journey through time as we share what the area has meant to people over the past 100 years.

The history of the station, designed by Lewis Cubitt and opened in 1852, is intertwined with the story of the wider King’s Cross area. It has long been the first destination for those looking for somewhere new to call home.

King’s Cross has offered freedom and acceptance for many including Séamus Rae, a gay man from Northern Ireland, who arrived in 1980:

‘For the first time I was legal, I wasn’t a criminal...It was an amazing, liberating experience to move to King’s Cross.’

However, Mark Cawson’s first impressions were more bleak when he moved onto the Hillview Estate in 1982:

‘When I first moved into King’s Cross it was a kind of a J.G. Ballard dystopian, crumbling, futurist city, that was on its last legs.’



Children on wartime evacuation bus saying goodbyes, 1939. © London Metropolitan Archives



Séamus Rae, 2018. Photo by Michael Hall



Midland-Scottish train arriving at original King's Cross Station, pre-WW2. Photo courtesy Brian Hardy Collection

A Roof Over Your Head



Barbara Hughes, 2018. Photo by Michael Hall

‘[They] weren’t interested in maintaining the place and things went downhill. Rubbish became a particular problem... one day we collected all of it and dumped it on the steps of the Town Hall.’

Barbara Hughes

At the end of the 19th century, the area around King’s Cross had some of the worst slums in London. During the 20th century, councils and philanthropists tackled the problem by building ‘model’ estates in areas including Somers Town, Pentonville Road and Cromer Street.

The post-war optimism that drove the creation of these new housing estates was undermined by a lack of government funding, which left housing stock under resourced and badly maintained. Barbara Hughes lived on the Hillview Estate in the 1980s. Her experience during this time led her to become a councillor for 22 years, and subsequently Mayor of Camden.

In the 1980s, housing shortages compelled Camden Council to house families in temporary accommodation. Poorly maintained and overcrowded, it was an accident waiting to happen. In 1984, three Bangladeshi residents lost their lives in a house fire. Local people mobilised to bring about change:

‘We marched to the Town Hall...to find out what action they were going to take. A husband had lost his wife, lost his children – families living in these B&B hotels were now fearful for their own safety.’ Errol Lawrence



Night demonstration, 1984. Photo by Sabes Sugunasabesan



Camden Council meeting, 1984. Photo by Sabes Sugunasabesan



Errol Lawrence, 1984. Photo by Sabes Sugunasabesan

Finding a Home



Seamus, 1981. Photo by Mark Cawson

‘As a single man I had no chance of getting a council flat.’

John Mason

Run down housing presented opportunities for people of different backgrounds to squat whole estates.

Some of these residents wanted to invest in their communities and improve their estates from the bottom up: repairing buildings, forming tenants’ associations and resisting corporate development. Squatters on Tolmers Square staged a carnival in 1974, Patrick Allen remembers:

‘It was a very big event, on a sunny Saturday. We put up bunting in all the streets; we had a jumble sale, live music in the square and food stalls. It was incredibly successful.’

Access to affordable housing offered stability to a generation of young people. Mark Cawson was one of them, moving onto the Hillview Estate in 1982:

‘I’d never had a set of keys... it was a huge mix, a lot of creative people, circus people, musicians, the Pogues came from there.’

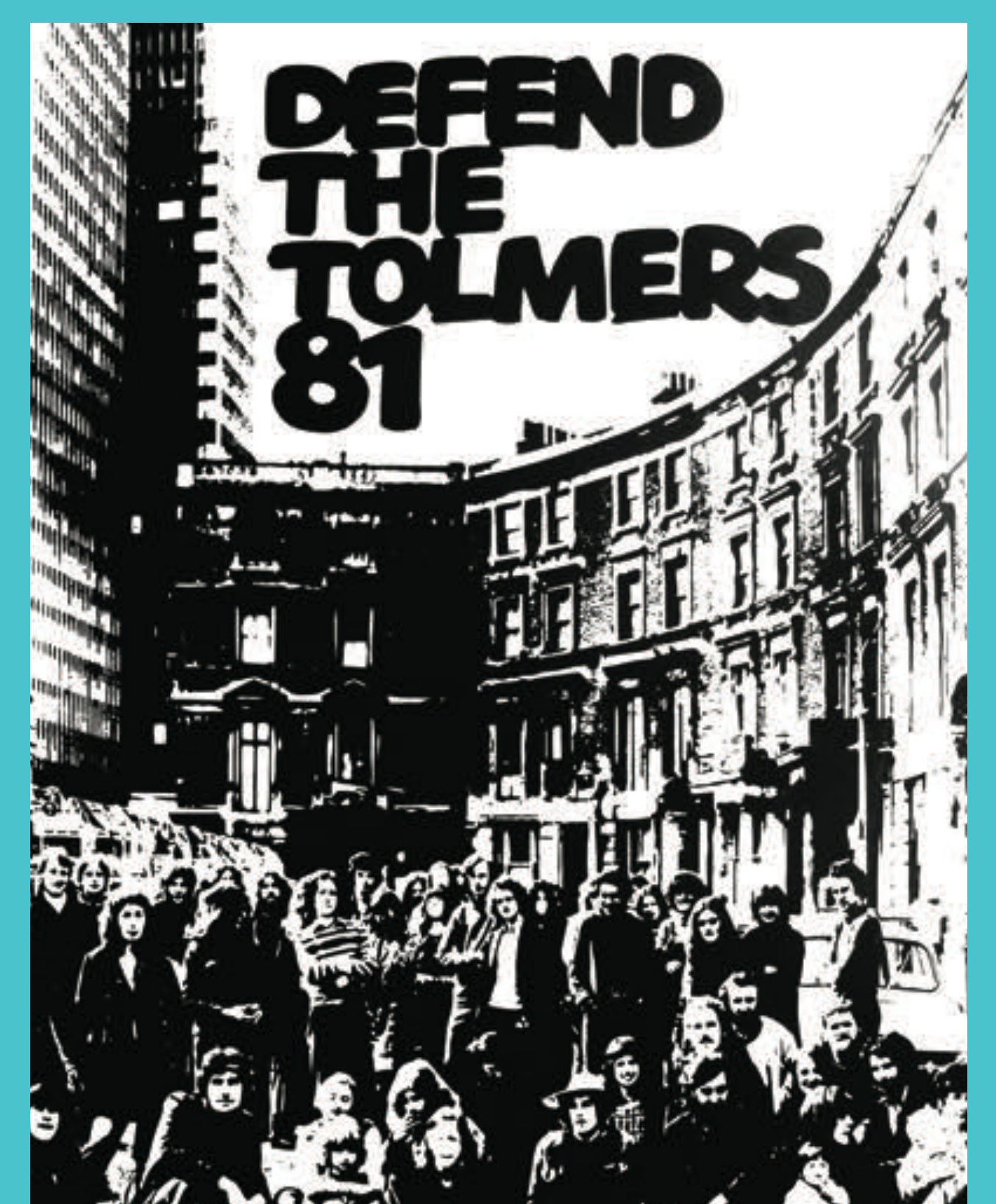
Today, housing conditions in the area have vastly improved. However, the lack of affordable housing is a key issue for King’s Cross as elsewhere.



Alex Smith and partner Chiara, Tolmers Square squatters, 1970s. Photo courtesy Nick Wates



Patrick Allen (centre), mid-1970s. Photo courtesy Nick Wates



Tolmers Square poster, 1981. Image courtesy Nick Wates

Settling In



Group leader Sofina Razzaque (left) with KXBNA Bangladeshi group members, 2018. Photo by Michael Hall

‘People came from all over. They had a really arduous journey, and yet still made a life for themselves... just like a lot of people are doing now.’ Edward Margiotta

Discrimination and struggle are constant reminders that making a new life is hard; but by working together, communities found ways to support each other and build resilience.

In 1957, George Eugeniou founded theatre company Theatro Technis in an empty warehouse gifted by the council. During the 1970s George, originally from Cyprus himself, helped thousands of Cypriot refugees to settle. That same decade, the theatre was threatened with closure:

‘Week after week, month after month, to build something for the people. The Greeks, the Turks, the blacks, the whites, and you want to demolish it?’

The proclamation of Bangladeshi Independance in 1971 and Britain’s need for workers led to an increase in migrants to the UK. Nassar Ali moved to the area in the 1970s and recalls his struggles with being accepted by other boys on the Regent’s Park Estate:

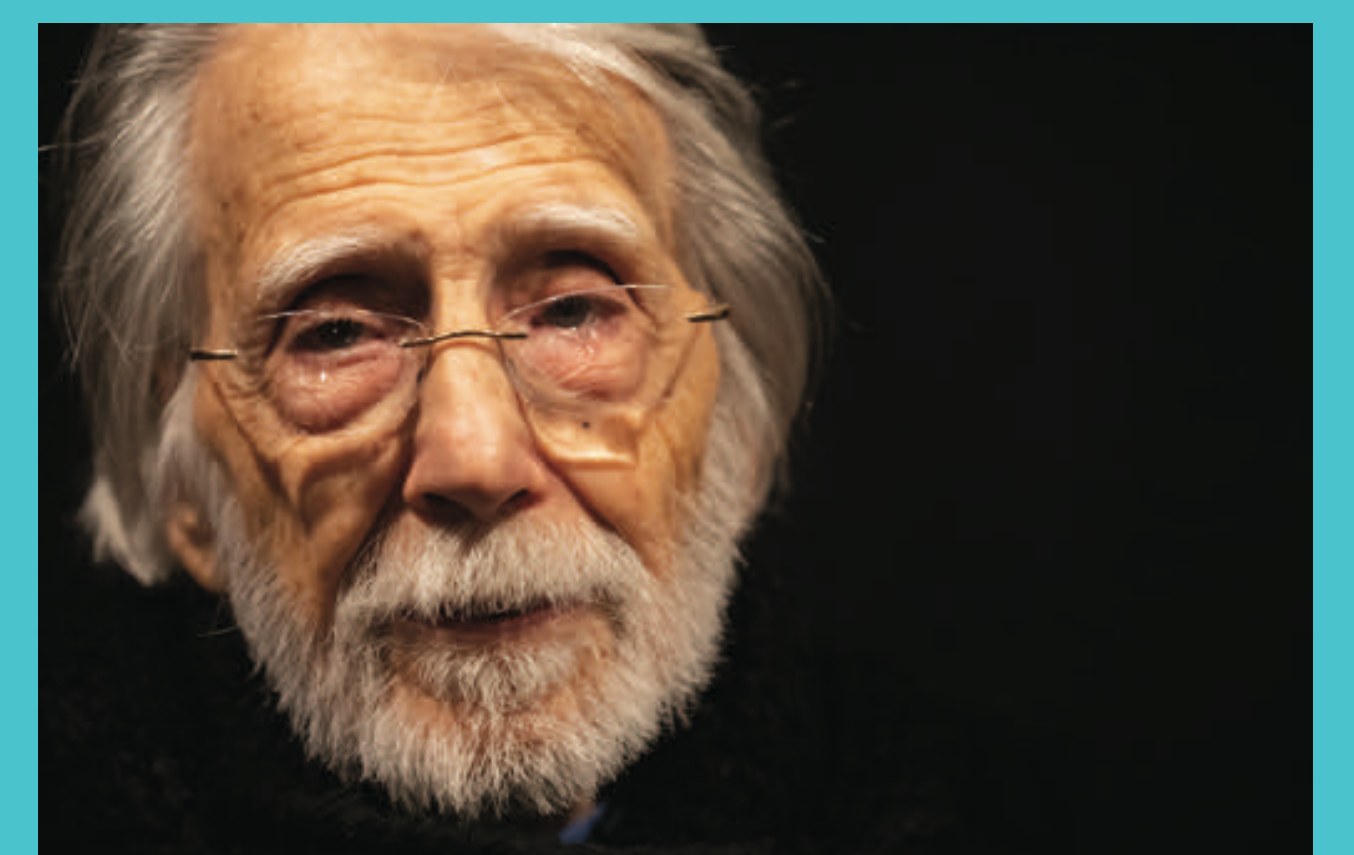
‘Coming home from school was a bit difficult... I’d have a dog set on me, someone would throw an egg at me or call me a Paki.’

Mohammed Salique had a similar experience:

‘You had to be on guard all of the time. It was so difficult, but we never gave up.’



Nassar Ali, 2018. Photo by Michael Hall



George Eugeniou, 2018. Photo by Michael Hall



Performance of *The Appelants*, 1983. Photo courtesy Theatro Technis

Building a Life



Mohammed Salique, 2018. Photo by Michael Hall

‘Diwana means mad, when you’re madly in love with something; and I tell you, it lives up lives up to its name.’

Mohammed Salique, owner of Diwana Bhel Poori House

Food from home was one way to a better life. Initially filling a need within the community, traditional dishes from other countries soon became mainstream. Making and sharing food has long been part of the migrant way of life. The Bengali restaurants on Drummond Street are now famous across the capital, and further afield.

Italian immigrants moving to King’s Cross, built their lives by sharing a passion for food and dishes now considered household favourites.

‘Italians love food. They don’t eat to live, they live to eat.’

Zena and Mary Donatantonio

Cheap rent made it possible for Melina D’Amico from Sicily to open the Il Gattopardo restaurant on Pentonville Road in 1985:

‘At the beginning I got it at a very low rent... they wouldn’t issue leases because they were going to redevelop.’

The restaurant is credited with introducing cappuccino coffee into the area. After 10 years in business, the restaurant closed owing to rising rents and redevelopment.



Sisters Zena and Mary Donatantonio, 2018. Photo by Lainy Milkani



Maria D’Inverno’s family cafe on Cally Road. Photo courtesy Maria D’Inverno



Buffet at Diwana Bhel Poori House, 2018. Photo by Michael Hall

Heavy Duty Parties



The Scala, 2018. Photo by Michael Hall

‘When he was in drag [he] quite resembled Lily Savage... He used to wear long flowing dresses... he went from being Norman, to being Norma.’

Christopher Watson

In the 1960s and ‘70s, gay venues were few and far between: the Prince Albert, now Central Station, ran a gay night at the weekend. Christopher Watson used to frequent this bar with his friend Norman.

Eileen Fry spent much of the 1970s moving between her office job, the area’s many pubs, and house parties round the back of King’s Cross Station:

‘They were heavy duty parties that would go on for days... The music was... black music from America. Heavy duty American Soul.’

With the decline in the use of coal, the site behind King’s Cross Station became a wasteland, full of disused and abandoned warehouse buildings. This former industrial area provided empty space for a semi-legal rave scene to grow. Later, clubs such as Bagley’s, The Cross and The Keys became hugely popular.

Dee Cutts, Manager of Priory Green’s Secret Café, remembers nights out in Bagley’s during the ‘90s rave scene:

‘It was a nightclub that was quite dark, quite a derelict area... It was filled with white gloves and whistle crew people with stripy trousers, bandanas on their heads... it was ecstasy days...’



Eileen Fry (far left), 1970s. Photo courtesy Eileen Fry



Christopher Watson (top, second from left), 1970s. Photo courtesy Christopher Watson



DJ Ariel night at Bagley’s Studios, 1997. Photo courtesy wikipedia Detech_02

Out in the Cross



Huw Williams, 2018. Photo by Polly Rodgers

‘I used to love Friday and Saturday nights downstairs at Traffic; because the ceiling was so low – the sweat would hit the ceiling and just rain on you. Unbelievable. So sexy.’

Huw Williams

East of York Way in the 1980s and ‘90s, LGBTQ venues including Traffic, Central Station and The Bell were buzzing:

‘Young gay men come in and create their own identity, their own institutions, their own places, and with it they bring their own politics, their own music. And it’s all a ferment, and it’s a wonderful, exciting place to be.’ Huw Williams

The Bell, now the site of the Big Chill on Pentonville Road, is remembered with particular fondness by those who frequented the pub in its ‘80s heyday:

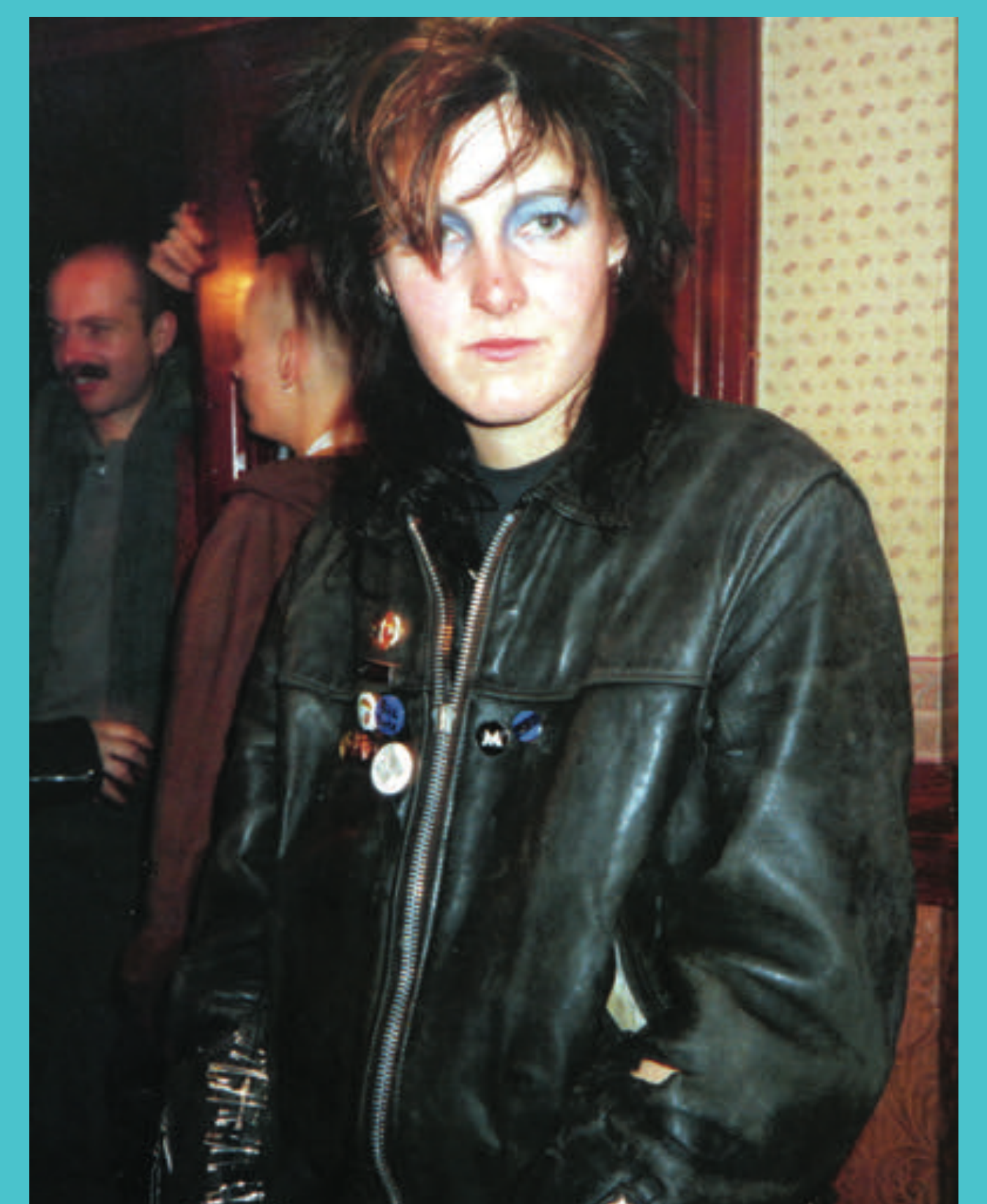
‘If anything was going on in the lesbian scene, sat in The Bell toilets for 10, 15 minutes, you’d hear everything... you’d see gossip and dramas being made in front of your eyes...’

Debbie Smith

The Bell closed its doors in 1995 and since then nearly all the music venues in King’s Cross have closed:

‘My daughter has turned out to be gay as well... she is really jealous, because they don’t have a gay scene anymore. We had The Bell.’ Denise Spence

Today, the Scala is one of the few iconic venues that remains.



Pom at The Bell, early 1990s. Photo by Bernard Hodson



Photo for Movements club night at The Bell, 1980s. Image courtesy Bernard Hodson

Another Side



Angela, 1982. Photo by Mark Cawson

‘Women turn to sex work because it is often better than the other things offered to us.’

Sarah Walker, English Collective of Prostitutes

King’s Cross was well known as a red light district in the 1980s and ‘90s, and as a major transport hub, prostitution has long been present in the area. Maisie Heather grew up locally and recalls scenes from the 1940s:

‘You’d see all the Yanks and the soldiers and they’d all be laughing with these pretty ladies... It was only later in life that I found out what these lovely ladies were.’

By the late 1970s prostitution was common place in the area. In 1982, the English Collective of Prostitutes (ECP) occupied the Church of the Holy Cross on Cromer Street for 12 days, calling attention to the victimisation of sex workers.

Sioned Churchill supported the occupation as a student. Ten years later, working with the community, she saw another side. She helped to establish the King’s Cross Community Partnership after an encounter with a young mother:

‘[She] came in to see me... she was distraught because her son had picked up a used condom... and thought it was a sweet.’

Prostitutes were forced from the area in the late ‘90s with the introduction of ‘zero tolerance’ zones around the station.



Occupation of the Church of the Holy Cross, 1982. Photo courtesy ECP



Sarah Walker, 2018. Photo by Polly Rodgers



Sioned Churchill, 2018. Photo by Polly Rodgers

The King's Cross Fire



Chris Western, c. 1970. Photo courtesy Chris Western

‘The paper money had all disappeared but the coins had solidified into a molten blob of metal. Just shows you how hot it was.’ Chris Western, Duty Manager the night of the fire

On 18 November 1987, a fire broke out on the escalator, and filled the ticket hall with thick black smoke. The likely cause was a dropped match or cigarette. Thirty one people lost their lives, the biggest peacetime disaster ever on the London Underground.

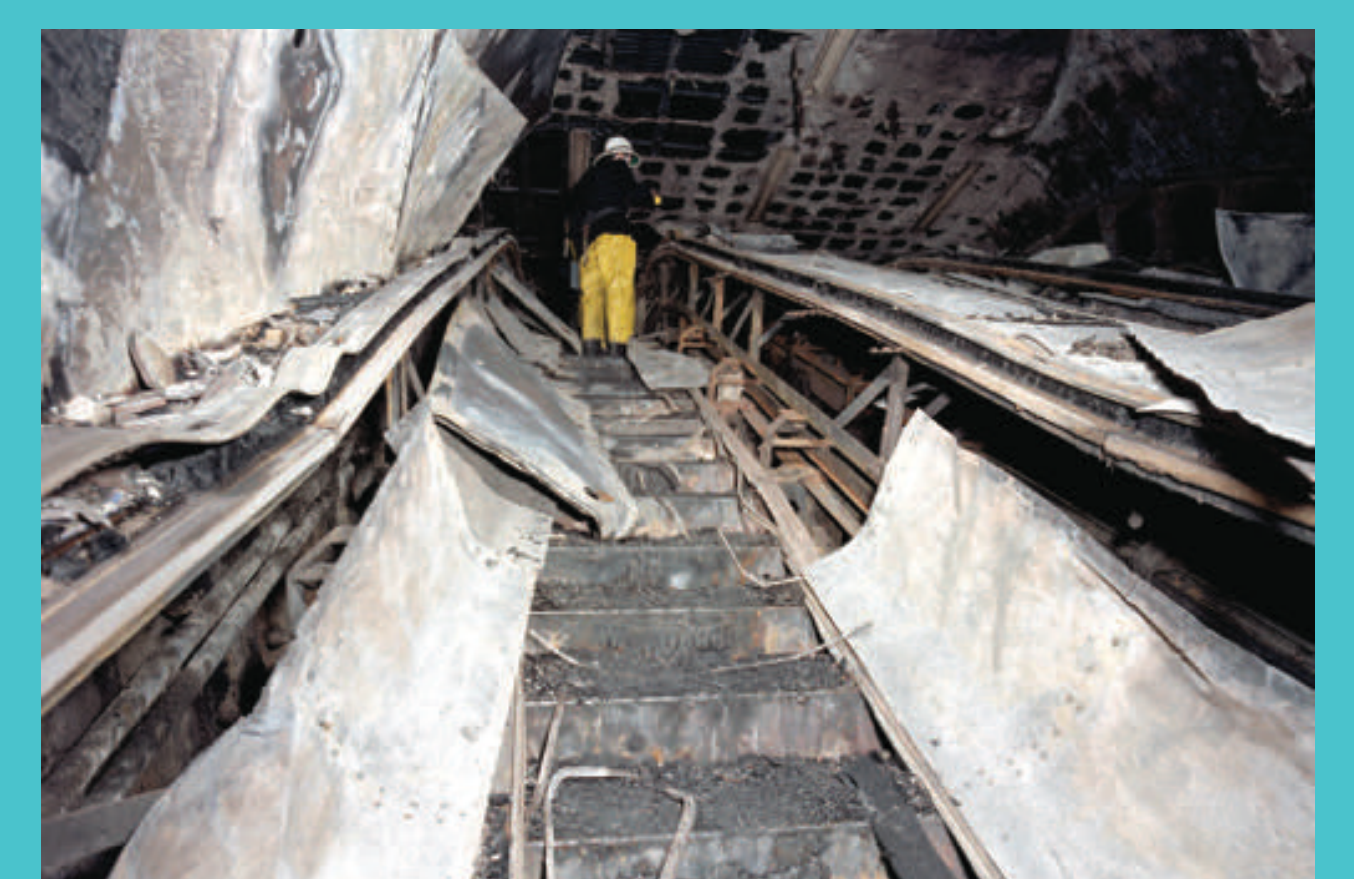
Maisie Heather’s son, Steve, was one of the first firemen on the scene. He phoned her from the station after the fire:

“Mum, I’m so hot! Mum, I’m so hot!”... he just kept saying... And I just said “Well, come now Steve, come home”, and he said “I will Mum, I will, but I’m so hot, Mum!”

In 2017, Roger ‘Dinger’ Bell, who fought the fire on the night, attended a memorial service marking thirty years since the tragedy. He took time to remember his friend and colleague, Colin, who perished in the fire:

‘The only thing I was able to do was go and stand at the top of the stairs, and stand there with Colin Townsley.’

The King’s Cross fire prompted new safety regulations for the whole of the London Underground system. Their introduction coincided with the redevelopment of the area, and a shift towards the King’s Cross that we know today.



King's Cross escalators, 18 November 1987. Photo courtesy London Fire Brigade



King's Cross fire, 18 November 1987. Photo courtesy London Fire Brigade



King's Cross fire, 18 November 1987. Photo courtesy London Fire Brigade

All Grown Up



Aron Kennedy, Granary Square, 2018. Photo by Michael Hall

‘I’m not an edgy youth anymore and neither is King’s Cross.’

Debbie Smith

In 2000, King’s Cross Central Ltd. Partnership was formed, and Argent was appointed to lead a multi-billion pound redevelopment. ‘King’s Cross Central’ includes Pancras Square; Granary Square; and a new luxury housing development, and semi-public park in the relocated Gasholders, behind the Coal Drops Yard.

‘A cocktail bar? In King’s Cross? I mean, there were crack-whores giving blowjobs for a fiver in the stairwells and the doorways. The idea that people would come out of King’s Cross Station and go for a cocktail was just ridiculous.’ Jarlath O’Connell

The development has been hailed a major success, creating thousands of new jobs, two new schools, a university, 2,000 new homes, and 26 acres of open space.

It is undeniable that the regeneration of King’s Cross has brought opportunities. But are these opportunities open to everyone?

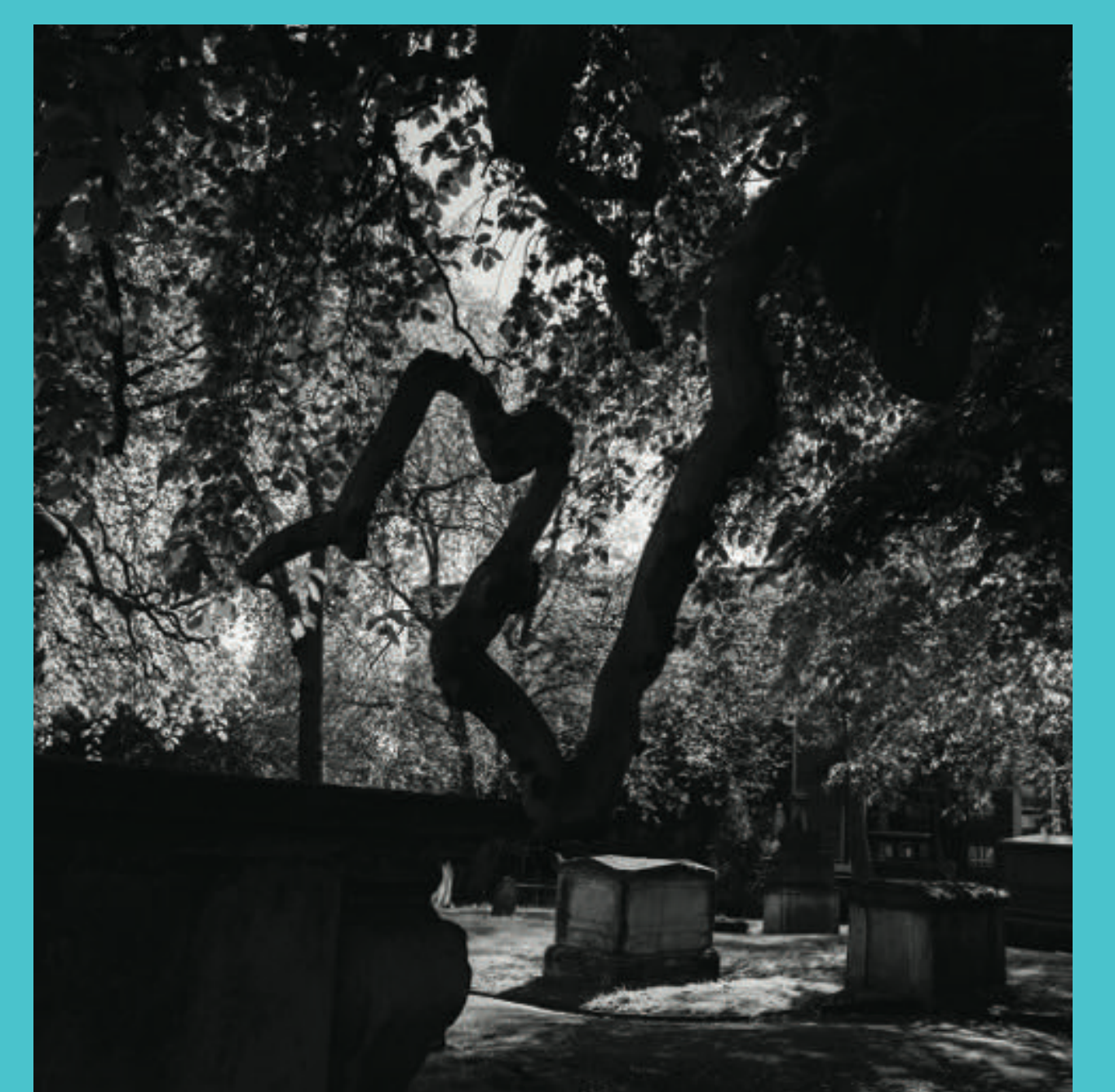
‘Some people would say it’s changed for the better... But it’s lost its edge. It’s like me, it’s got old and it’s got mellow. I’m just missing my edgy youth.’ Debbie Smith



The British Library under construction, 1982. Photo by Mark Cawson



King’s Cross Station concourse, 2018. Photo by Michael Hall



St Pancras Old Church cemetery, 2018. Photo by Michael Hall

Thank You

We would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone who has been involved in King's Cross Story Palace.

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A huge thank you to all of our storytellers whose contributions have brought the history of King's Cross to life.

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