**Norman Penny - Extracts**

Living with the gay Afro-Caribbean community in the 1950s. Involvement with CHE and being threatened for wearing its badges. Being on the phone for Switchboard.

**Extract 1**

N: So, I went from Earls Court and lived really amongst the gay Afro-Caribbean community.

C: And that would be 19…?

N: 1957. So, it was, in many ways, a surprisingly open community, and I lived with a guy from Monserrat in Graham Road in Dalston, and his cousins lived nearby and they just accepted me completely, that he was my boyfriend, and I became one of their family. It was great. The people from Barbados were a bit more closety and Trinidadians had a reputation for being more bisexual rather than completely gay, but it was a totally different world. It was very strange. I loved it, because I found where I lived in Boston Manor which was really snobby and provincial, and these were completely open and natural people who either they liked you or they didn’t, and they accepted you. I went to their parties, they had very nice weekend parties. Straight parties, and I used to dance with boyfriends at straight parties.

C: Really?

N: Really, yes, ’57. And so I was trying this but then Black Power arrived and suddenly black people were not ‘homosexual’. That was white decadence and they’d been infected by the white community so yes...

**Extract 2**

And tell me how you came across CHE and your involvement with that.

N: Er…

C: Was that around the same time, or was that later?

N: No, that was later. I didn’t come into contact with CHE until ’75, I think. I’d been a music teacher in night school, and I’d stopped. I’d done enough in twelve years. And I was looking for other things to do, and I just happened to notice that the local CHE group met in my street a few doors up on a Sunday in a Social Services building. And I thought ‘OK, I’ll go and have a look’. And I went there and I thought ‘Yes, this’ll do. This is nice.’ So, I went along, and it was Islington and Haringey CHE, and they were always short of people on the committee so they shoved me on the committee straight away, and I thought ‘This is ridiculous, you know, really, being on the committee straight away’ and I was with them for, oh I don’t know, four or five years I must have been one way or another, doing almost everything on the committee. It was a very active group. It was a very busy group indeed.

C: What did you do? What did they do?

N: Well the thing about the CHE was that they had a double function. First of all, they were supposed to try and provide a community for local gay people. So, you went there not to cruise but to make friends. It was a social … And also, to raise money for the Head Office for gay rights and also to push gay rights in the local area. So they had plenty of things to do. And I must say that Islington and Haringey did all of it. And they were very… they were very active and so on, and I… while I was with them I was also working for Switchboard and so on, and that got a bit hectic and my life got very hectic because after I went to the big gay conference in Sheffield, I started wearing badges, in Sheffield you see, fair enough and then I went to work in the Manchester head office for a week and that was interesting, and I came back to London and I thought ‘Well I’ll take the badges off’ but then I thought ‘I cannot take the badges off!’ Otherwise it proves to everyone I’m a liar and a hypocrite. Either you’re wearing a badge saying ‘You are glad to be gay’, you either are glad, or you’re lying. So I had to leave them on.

So, I was walking around where I live and I had a job in a record shop in Holloway Road, only 200 yards from where I worked, from where I lived, so everyone knew who I was, where I was, and that I was gay, and just up from the police court, which interested the police quite a bit - and a local gang decided they wanted to kill me, to get rid of me. Seven of them. And it was the usual thing that they’d been failed by the education service, they were late teens, they’d been failed by the education service, they’d been failed by the community. They were the bottom of the heap and they desperately needed to feel superior to someone, and at least two if not three of them were actually closet gay as well, which is why they decided to be so violent.

They tried to smash the shop where I was working. We threw them out. And the threats continued for months and months, but the mad thing was that one of the gang would come in before it happened to tell me to try and get me to say something that me being gay was smart and clever and they could all come out, and I said ‘It doesn’t work like that. That’s not the way life is.’ And …

C: They’d want you to say what?

N: Well, they, you see they were the bottom of the heap so that if I could prove that being gay was clever and superior, then suddenly they weren’t at the bottom of the heap anymore, they’d be somebody special. And I’d say ‘There is no magic formula.’ You know? ‘You’ve just go to…’

C: So, the gay ones would come and warn you?

N: Yes! They’d come to the shop and warn me! Yes, well, two of them would anyway. But then they used to drink in the pub not far from where I lived and where I worked as well, and when they got a bit drink it could get a bit hairier and then one night I… to get from Holloway to where I lived you had to go round a couple of dark corners, and there were three of them, and they were drunk and there was a skip with large bits of wood in it and they picked the wood up and said that they would do this and that to me, but they were drunk and I ignored them. And then a couple of weeks later a friend was dropping me home and he said ‘Can I just drop you in Holloway Road?’ And I said ‘Yes, OK, I’ve only got to go round a couple of corners’, and so I walked round a couple of corners, all seven of them, they were about 20 foot in front of me, and they’d just come out the pub, and they saw me and it was ‘UGH!’ And I thought ‘This is it! I’ve got no options’. So, I just took a deep breath and walked straight through them. And they parted and let me through. I was having no nonsense. I went straight through them, you know, and I just ignored them completely when I went straight past, without a big shout (?) of shock, I crossed the road into my road and walked up the road and I forced myself not to walk too fast, you know, and my ears were working overtime, ‘cos if they had wanted to kill me at that point I had no defense. Seven fairly burly teenagers, you know? And so I got to my gate and looked back and they hadn’t followed me, and I went in to the front hall and I had to lean against the wall otherwise I would have fallen over. I was shaking so much … (voice breaking a little) Sorry, it’s still so upsetting… You know, eventually I recovered, and I went upstairs to my flat and they hadn’t followed me, and that was the end of it. That was the end of it.

Extract 3

Switchboard? Interesting… Tom Robinson was a member. I didn’t know him then, I knew him later. And you never knew what was going to turn up. The first phone call I got was an American who said ‘What can you do in Rome on a Thursday night?’ So I said ‘Oh are you going to Rome?’ He said ‘I am in Rome, and I don’t know what to do tonight.’ I said ‘OK’! That was the start, and anything could happen. You got the heavy breathers, you got the abusers and… or you got the serious ones or you got the troubled ones, you got the whole lot. You got everything You never knew when you picked up the phone… and you got the suicides, of course, which I didn’t get fortunately. I know one of the members who did, and we did have a system to try and do something if we got a suicide call, to try and save them and the person we had on the phone just would not go along any of those lines and he just went quieter and quieter and just fell silent. And John was so upset he had to take months off, to recover.

But, so you got all that as well, and at that stage the far right were also attacking us. I went in for a shift one evening and there were puddles on the floor at Switchboard and papers around the place, and towels. I said ‘What on earth’s going on?’ The far right had got into the building, come up to Switchboard, robbed the people there running it and then tried to set fire to it. And I got in just as they were cleaning up afterwards. So, and the far right group, they were very inefficient, fortunately, the Switchboard phones were off for nearly an hour, but the far Right group then went onto the East End and they did set fire to a club, I was told there. I don’t know the name of the club…

C: A gay club?

N: Yup. The far right were really quite rampant in those days. And… but you’d get some very twisted people. I always remember - this didn’t happen to me, but it happened to somebody I knew there, getting phone calls saying ‘I know where Switchboard is and when you come out from your shift, I’m going to throw a bucket of acid over you…’ And he went downstairs and he opened the door and there was a guy out there with a bucket who threw the liquid contents of the bucket all over him. And it was water.

C: Oh my God!

N: Oh yeah. Yeah, so you really got some… yeah it was quite tough. So I was coping with that and coping with the gang who were trying to kill me and other things as well.

C: Very dangerous times?

N: Oh, yeah. Oh yeah, that’s right. But sometimes funny times as well, you know? And, I think, two of the calls I remember – one was perfectly trivial, a guy phoned up and said ‘What’s the time?’ So I told him and said ‘Why are you phoning me for the time?’ He said ‘Because… because I know you’re always there’. (Crying) I’m sorry, I’m not usually so emotional. And another was from fairly early, a lesbian whose partner had gone away for Christmas and left her with plenty of food, but she was on her own and she was disabled and she hadn’t spoken to anyone for three days, and had a terrible time to get through to us. She phoned up, I think, directory inquiries and asked for our number and they refused to give it to her.

C: Really? I’ve never heard …That’s terrible!

N: Yeah, they wouldn’t tell her.

C: Was that common? Did that happen…?

N: I’d never heard it, never heard it…

C: She must have got someone homophobic answering?

N: Yeah. Yup. So anyway, we had a long chat and I said ‘Look, don’t ever be lonely again. Here’s some numbers you can phone…’ (Voice breaking again) So that was good…

C: Important work.

N: Yeah. Yeah. But I wasn’t that good being on the phone. I much preferred face to face really. That was… ‘cos then you’ve got body language to work with at that point. So what with all that going on, and that group, I had a breakdown. Not surprising. Because one of the things when you join CHE, suddenly you get literature which has positive viewpoints, and suddenly I realised that I’d been diddled. All these lies had been told about me all these years and I was coming up to forty, and my youth had gone and a lot of the best years of my life that I should have had, I didn’t have, so I was extremely angry. And I tried to use that anger in a positive way, ‘cos you can use anger to generate energy, which is good, so… and at that point I had a breakdown.

And I thought ‘I know what’s caused it so now reverse it, and stop it’, so I didn’t go for medicine for doctors and tablets, I thought ‘I’ll do it myself’ which I did and that took time, and London Friend had moved into Upper Street and so I went to London Friend and because they knew me, as the local CHE group and so on, they thought I was there for CHE but I wasn’t, I was there for me, and I joined the men’s support group