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June 8 2015

**Royal Vauxhall Tavern, 372 Kennington Lane, London SE11 5HY (ref: 1424488)**

Dear Ms Trevor,

Thank you very much for your consultation report, dated May 19 2015, subsequent to my application to have the Royal Vauxhall Tavern (RVT) considered for listing by English Heritage (now Historic England).

Thank you too for your accommodation in extending the deadline for my response following the failure of the report to reach my email inbox on the date you initially sent it, May 7 2015. I'd be grateful if you could also contact me by phone on 07719 790261, or by post at the above address, with news of further developments in case of further problems with email.

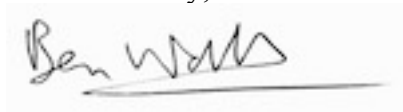
I am grateful for your consultation report, which lays out many of the case's key considerations. There are certain aspects of the building's significance that are mentioned only briefly or not at all in the report and I hope in this response to offer some more detail around them in the hope they will be given due consideration.

This response draws on archival research carried out since my original application; events relevant to the urgency of this application that have taken place since my original application; and the contents of letters written in support of a listing from a range of stakeholders since my original application. I hope the breadth of this support, which includes testimony from architects, historians, local residents, charities, artists, performers, academics, politicians and public figures, demonstrates the considerable significance of the RVT to the heritage of English culture and society.

I believe you've also received responses from local borough councillors and the GLA.

Thank you again for your consideration of this application. I hope this response will be useful and ask you to keep me informed of the progress of the case.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ben Walters". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above a horizontal line.

Ben Walters

## Letters of support for the application to list the Royal Vauxhall Tavern

These letters are included as appendices to this response in alphabetical order by surname. All quotations are from these letters unless otherwise stated.

**Penny Arcade**, New York writer, performer, community activist, RVT performer  
**Professor Simon Atkinson**, PH.D., RIBA, MRTPI, FRSA, Mike Hogg Centennial Professor, School of Architecture, University of Texas at Austin

**Neil Bartlett**, OBE, author, playwright, director, RVT performer

**Nicholas Boles**, MP, Minister of State for Skills, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills & Department for Education

**Sarah Brown**, Founder and President, children's charity Theirworld

**Chris Bryant**, MP, Shadow Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport

**Professor Gavin Butt**, Professor of Visual Cultures and Performance, Head of Department of Visual Cultures, Goldsmiths, University of London

**Dr Ben Campkin**, FRSA, Director, UCL Urban Laboratory, Senior Lecturer in Architectural History & Theory UCL Bartlett Faculty of the Built Environment

**Baron Cashman of Limehouse**, CBE, Labour Party worldwide LGBT special envoy

**Professor Nigel Coates**, Royal College of Art Emeritus Professor of Architecture

**Professor Matt Cook**, Director, Raphael Samuel History Centre, Professor of Modern History, Birkbeck, University of London, author of *London and the Culture of Homosexuality, 1885-1914* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), editor of *A Gay History of Britain* (Greenwood, 2007), co-editor of *Queer 1950s: Rethinking Sexuality in the Post-war Years* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012)

**David Coke**, FSA, co-author, *Vauxhall Gardens, A History* (Yale Press, 2011)

**Dr Ross Davies**, Chairman of Vauxhall Society

**Kate Hoey**, MP, Member for Vauxhall since 1989

**Professor Matt Houlbrook**, Chair in Cultural History, School of History and Cultures, University of Birmingham, author of *Queer London: Perils and Pleasures in the Sexual Metropolis, 1918-57* (University of Chicago Press, 2005)

**James Hughes**, Conservation Adviser, Victorian Society

**Ruth Hunt**, Chief Executive, Stonewall

**Dr Dominic Johnson**, Fellow of the Arts and Humanities Research Council, Senior Lecturer in Drama, Department of Drama, Queen Mary University of London, Live Art Development Agency board member, RVT performer

**Alexis Kalli**, MA RCA, Architectural Assistant

**Lois Keidan**, Director, Live Art Development Agency

**Revd. Alison Kennedy**, Team Vicar, St Peter's Vauxhall

**Sir Ian McKellen**, CH, CBE, actor, activist and co-owner of Grade II Listed pub

**Dr Fernando Rihl**, BArch, GradDiplAA, PhDAA, ILTHE CLTAD, Vice Chair Wyvil Estate Residents Association, Club Coordinator Wyvil Estate Gardening

**Valerie Shawcross**, AM, London Assembly Member for Lambeth & Southwark

**Tim Sigsworth**, Chief Executive, The Albert Kennedy Trust

**Dr Catherine Silverstone**, Senior Lecturer in Drama, Theatre and Performance Studies, Department of Drama, Queen Mary University of London

**James Soane**, Director, Project Orange, MA (Cantab) Dip Arch (UCL) RIBA

**Jay Stewart**, Director, Gendered Intelligence

**Fiona Twycross**, AM, Londonwide Assembly Member, Chair of GLA Economy Committee

### **Points of further consideration**

I believe the following aspects of this application warrant further consideration.

1. The historic and continuing significance of the Royal Vauxhall Tavern (RVT) as a site of safety and socialising central to the vitality of the LGBTQ community locally, nationally and internationally.
2. The historic and continuing significance of the RVT as a site of campaigning and activism.
3. The historic and continuing significance of the RVT in the life of the wider local, national and international community (beyond the LGBTQ community).
4. The historic and continuing significance of the RVT as a site of major cultural importance in the creation of experimental and avant-garde art with significant mainstream influence.
5. The architectural significance of the RVT as a building with iconic status.
6. The architectural significance of the current interior.
7. The increasing rarity and therefore significance of buildings with more than half a century of continuous LGBTQ community and cultural use.
8. The urgency of the threat to the RVT.
9. The significance of Historic England setting the precedent of recognising a building' for its contribution to England's LGBTQ heritage.

## **1. The historic and continuing significance of the Royal Vauxhall Tavern (RVT) as a site of safety and socialising central to the vitality of the LGBTQ community locally, nationally and internationally**

The consultation report's recognition of the RVT as a "key LGBTQ venue and symbol of the gay community, with a national and international reputation" is very welcome. I would like to offer some further evidence to reaffirm that assessment as I believe it to be central to the building's claim to have the rarity, national significance, and historical, aesthetic and communal value that the listing process aims to recognise. I'm thinking, for instance, of the acknowledgement given in DCMS's *Principles of Selection for Listing Buildings* (March 2010) to the importance of buildings that "reflect some of the most distinctive and creative aspects of English history" and illustrate "particular aspects of social or economic history".

As noted in the consultation report, the need for discretion makes it difficult to identify exactly when the RVT became associated with an LGBTQ clientele. We know that the area had a queer constituency from the days of the pleasure gardens onwards (see the supporting statement to my original application). According to Clifford Skinner's memoirs, published in *Gay News* in 1978, by the 1920s and 1930s certain saunas on Vauxhall Bridge Road were known to be popular with gay men in addition to the area's longstanding reputation for cruising – for centuries one of the few forms of public interaction available to homosexuals, however illicit.<sup>1</sup>

This is the local context in which the RVT operated, and where it began to offer opportunities for a somewhat less furtive form of interpersonal contact. Professor Matt Houlbrook singles the pub out for its "unique historical significance as a site of queer culture, sociability, and political activism. It is clear from my research for *Queer London: Perils and Pleasures in the Sexual Metropolis, 1918-57* (2005), and from the work of other historians, that there is nowhere else like this in the United Kingdom – a queer venue that has existed continuously since the 1950s at the latest."

In the words of Chris Bryant, shadow secretary of state for culture, media and sport, the Tavern is "a unique living monument to a community for almost all its existence had to hide itself. Much of LGBTQ history is unknown to us – written out of history or deliberately hidden away by LGBTQ people themselves. However in this building we have a living history – a space that has been home to a community ever since it began to step into the light".

We know the RVT's queer reputation was confirmed by the 1950s from, for instance, the personal testimony of the acclaimed writer and performer Bette Bourne (Bloodlips, Royal Shakespeare Company et al), included in the supporting statement of my original application (see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B26ymlr6JF0>). This alone confirms it as the country's oldest extant space of continuous LGBTQ socialising, even if its queer lineage might in fact stretch back considerably further.

Houlbrook continues: "It remained in existence throughout the period in which male homosexuality was illegal until 1967 and in which queer venues were subject to

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<sup>1</sup> 'Cocktails in the Bath', *Gay News* 135, pp.21-4, 'The Spittoon Waltz', *Gay News* 140, pp.17-20

repressive measures from the Metropolitan Police and local councils and frequently shut down until as recently as the 1980s. In this context, the Royal Vauxhall Tavern has historic and continuing significance as a site of safety, sociability, and political activism crucial to the vitality of the successive generations who make-up the LGBTQ communities. Its queer histories are woven into the fabric of the building – the bar, the stage, the columns – as well as the memories of those who have used it over the years.”

The period following decriminalisation saw something of a drag boom in UK popular culture, and the RVT was at its forefront, its reputation for dynamic and popular drag performance already well entrenched. An article entitled ‘Please excuse him while he puts on his bra’ by Russell Miller, which appeared on pages 62-65 of the August 1968 issue of *Nova*, treated a night at the RVT as representative of this form of entertainment suddenly endowed with mainstream appeal. According to the article, “on a Sunday night you will be lucky if you can get into the saloon bar. It’s squashing room only for Pussy and Bo, quite the prettiest drag act in town.”

The article is perhaps most striking for the continuities between the atmosphere it describes and that familiar to patrons of the Tavern 57 years later. This includes the performance context. “On the stage, in the far corner of the bar, the resident singer (who has been a little heavy with his mascara tonight) is bawling into a microphone” – a description that might be applied to occasional nights at the RVT in 2015. “After a quick adoring look in the mirror, Pussy and Bo clatter down the stairs in their high heels and willing (almost too willing) hands push them through the crowd and up on to the stage,” the article says. “That could have been me last week!” one current performer told me.

There’s also a sense of experimentation with the form of drag performance that resonates with today’s RVT artists. “We like to keep up with the fashion because all the other drag acts are covered in diamonds and they always wear evening gowns and big picture hats,” the performer tells the reporter. “They usually have big wigs with piled-up hair, but we can wear long straight wigs and short minis. We try to look young and bouncy.”

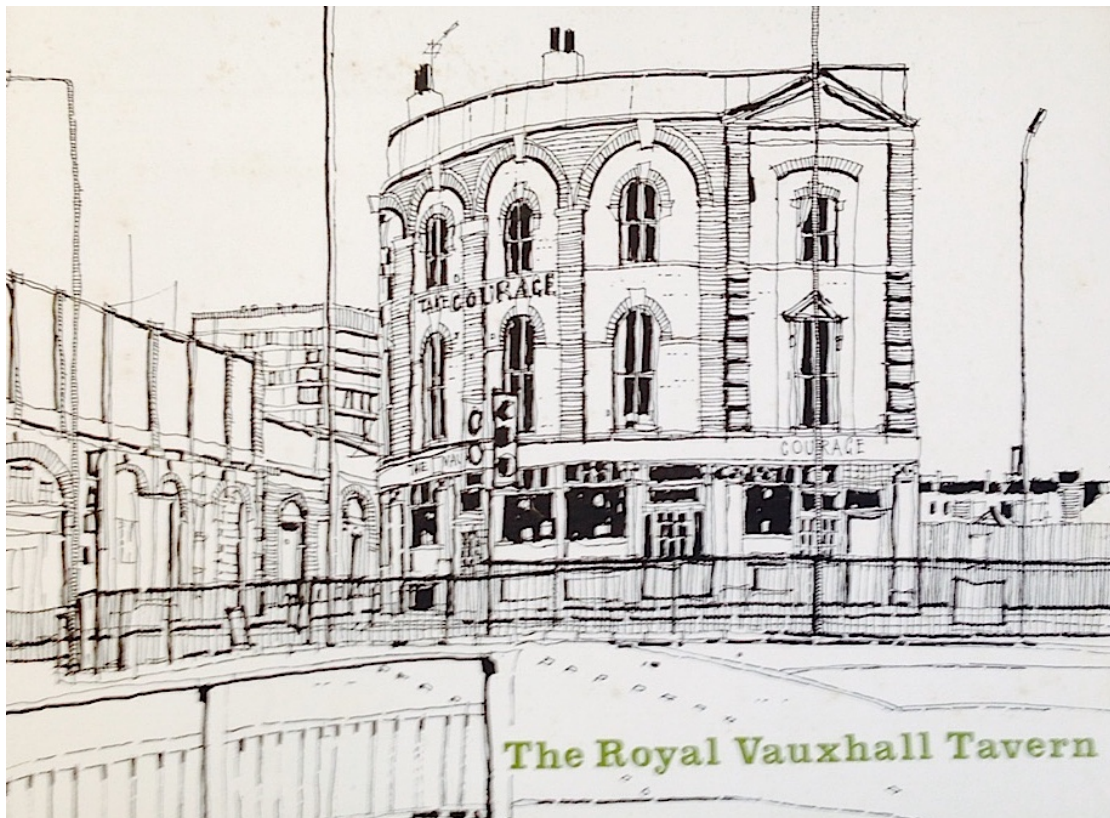
Such continuity also applies to the clientele, described in the article as a mixture of “Vauxhall mums”, their husbands, “a number of effete young men...chatting earnestly with unlikely-looking companions” and “young lesbians nearly dressed as men with Italian suits and winklepickers...drinking lagers and lime” – a mix still familiar today. And there’s clear evidence of how, then as now, the RVT stage was a place where otherwise marginalised people could find themselves. The performers interviewed for the article, Pussy and Bo, are otherwise known as former wigmaker Alan Amesby and former fishmonger Geoff Claridge, both 21. Amesby reports that “we both wanted to go on the stage, but we didn’t know what field we wanted to go into. Now we finally seem to have found our vocation”.

It’s a sentiment echoed by Lord Cashman with reference to the RVT of later decades. “As a former actor,” he writes, “I understand the importance of venues which encourage those making their first steps into the arts in an atmosphere which fosters experimentation and celebrates our differences”.

Other evidence from the same period reinforces this impression. An 1969 ITV documentary, *What's a Girl Like You?*, directed by Charlie Squires, also examines the new drag boom, and also uses the RVT as a representative venue. In fact it is the only venue from southern England shown, while several northern venues are featured. In contrast to them, the sections featuring the RVT are notable for showing drag that takes place in a site of obviously mixed sexualities rather than the straight clubs of the north. As is the case today, we are told that shows take place "five nights a week and Sunday lunchtime". And as in the *Nova* article, there's evidence of an experimental approach to performance, including the use of performers' own hair and sophisticated sound editing of multiple songs into a single soundtrack with a new narrative arc.

(NB these impressions are further reinforced by footage from the RVT shot as part of the feature film *Goodbye Gemini*, referred to in the supporting statement accompanying my original application.)

The RVT's reputation remained consistent into the 1970s. It was consistently listed in the *Gay News* entertainment section and from issue 20 onward, took pride of place as the first venue listed, under the tagline "the London Palladium of drag". Notably, of the 16 drag and cabaret venues mentioned in the first issue in 1972, only the RVT survives – further evidence of its unique significance as an ongoing LGBTQ venue serving a consistent set of community functions. Its sole-survivor status is further reiterated by a set of postcards from the 1970s, held at the LSE's Hall Carpenter Archives, featuring drawings by Talbot Hicks depicting London gay pubs. Of the six featured, only the Tavern is still operating as a gay pub. (See postcard below.)



The Tavern's significance, popularity and renown since the 1980s are covered in more detail in the supporting statement accompanying my original application, with its prominence and consistent legacy most recently celebrated in front of a global audience in the 2014 feature film *Pride*. It's highly significant that in this film, the Tavern was able to 'play itself': the film tells the story of the 1980s alliance between London lesbian and gay activists and striking miners in a Welsh village. When the latter come to visit London, they speak from the RVT's stage in a scene both set and shot at the Tavern – then as now a site of activism as well as performance.

The supporting statement accompanying my original application made clear the vital role played by the RVT for many decades as a site of safety and socialising central to the vitality as the fight for gay and lesbian equality continued. It's also worth emphasising the Tavern's comparable role today, as in years past, for the trans community. In some respects, trans people today face levels of mainstream prejudice and misunderstanding comparable to those faced by lesbians and gay men in years past, and the value of the RVT offers a similar sanctuary.

Today there are few "effective, vibrant and safe spaces for trans people to be themselves," notes Jay Stewart, Director of Gendered Intelligence, a group that works predominantly with trans people aged 11 to 25. "The RVT is one such space" in which young people over 18 "feel safe to socialise, to sustain their friendships and networks, to reduce their isolation" and to have a place to go after leaving Gendered Intelligence's services at 25. Performances and social connections at the Tavern, Stewart says, "sustain our political investment in challenging social norms around gender and standing up against transphobia, homophobia, biphobia and sexism. Spending time at the RVT invigorates us and gives us the strength to continue our aims to achieve better lives and real equality for our community".

*Pride* will have introduced the RVT to many mainstream cinemagoers around the world, but its international reputation has been considerable for many years. The pioneering New York performance artist Penny Arcade is a veteran of Andy Warhol's Factory and John Vaccaro's Playhouse of the Ridiculous, and has collaborated with the seminal queer performance artists Jack Smith, Jackie Curtis and Charles Ludlum, as well as performing throughout the world at venues including PS122 and Dixon Place in New York, the Royal Festival Hall, Sydney Opera House and Edinburgh's Assembly Rooms. To Arcade, the RVT was "a venue I knew about through its global reputation for artistic excellence and community organising long before I got the chance to perform there myself in 2011" as part of *Duckie*. She also appeared on stage alongside David Hoyle, with whom she has collaborated several times since.

"Internationally, in terms of performance art and queer culture – two separate categories – everyone knows the RVT," she writes. "It's also a place where a lot of people from New York have performed for years and years. It's very, very special... It has earned the right to call itself a cultural landmark. It is a city treasure built on the sacrifice and commitment of generations".

The RVT's ongoing importance to the London LGBTQ community has been made clear by the support garnered for RVT Future, a group (of which I am a member) that was set up to ensure a thriving future for the Tavern following its purchase by the international property development company Immovate in 2014. Since its launch in

April, the campaign has attracted nearly 1,000 people to its mailing list and more than 3,300 followers on social media. A campaign launch event held at the Cinema Museum in Kennington was oversubscribed, as was a screening at the British Film Institute's BFI Southbank site of *Save the Tavern*, Tim Brunsdon's documentary about the RVT and its uncertain future. Coverage in mainstream media outlets, including the *Evening Standard*, *Independent*, *VICE* and BBC London radio has noted the historic and cultural significance of the venue.

Meanwhile, within the walls of the RVT, community engagement, artistic experimentation and knowing engagement with the unique history of the site itself continue apace. Throughout May 2015 at Bar Wotever, the regular Tuesday night event, the audience was treated to scenes from a work-in-progress production of *Royal Vauxhall*, a new musical by the cabaret performer Desmond O'Connor about the night, mentioned in the supporting statement accompanying my original application, that Princess Diana visited the RVT with Freddie Mercury and Kenny Everett. As well as being hugely entertaining, the performance managed to identify the reason that story has proven so evocative: its suggestion that everyone, no matter what their background, needs a place they can go to feel free, open and themselves.



*The cast of Royal Vauxhall: Stuart Saint, Claire Benjamin & Clive Selwyn*



## **2. The historic and continuing significance of the RVT as a site of campaigning and activism**

It is very welcome that the consultation report recognises the RVT's significance as "a site of resistance to homophobia during the HIV/AIDS crisis" in the 1980s. But its importance as a site of campaigning and activism reaches far beyond that.

The chief executive of Stonewall, Ruth Hunt, singles the Tavern out as a key site of community and campaigning. "The Royal Vauxhall Tavern is the oldest LGBT venue of its kind in the UK and is steeped in political and cultural history," she says. "This history is extremely important to many members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans community." Nor is the venue's activist lineage only a matter of history: "over the years it has continued to campaign for equal rights and speak up for and support those who need it most".

Tim Sigsworth, chief executive of LGBT youth homelessness charity the Albert Kennedy Trust, affirms this view, noting the special part played by the pub's diversity. "The RVT has played an integral role in bringing gay and straight people together for cultural enjoyment and in doing so challenged homophobia and preconceived ideas about LGBT people."

Sigsworth further emphasises the link between the progressive sensibility of the venue's performances and wider pressure for social change. "The human and equal rights now offered LGBT people were in no small part won through the activism which was born and developed within the RVT through its performance. It is thanks to this that many of the young LGBT people the Albert Kennedy Trust now works with are safe and free from homophobia, bi-phobia and transphobia".

Those who can attest personally to the venue's importance in this regard include Chris Bryant, MP, who has "spent countless Sundays at the RVT" as part of a group of people learning to "explore their identity, become part of a community and express themselves"; and minister of state Nick Boles, MP. In offering his "strong support" for this application, he notes that that the RVT "has played a crucial role in the lives of many gay men and women", including his own. "As a young man coming to terms with my sexuality, I spent many happy hours in the RVT and witnessed and astonishing variety of performances that were by turns challenging, uplifting and hilarious".

Like Sigsworth and Boles, Dr Dominic Johnson, senior lecturer in drama at Queen Mary University of London, sees links between the RVT's performance and its campaigning spirit. "The venue also has historic and continuing significance as a site of sustained political activism: groups have been drawn to this venue above and beyond other nominally similar or otherwise accessible spaces for its longstanding cultural identity as a politically progressive and socially inclusive space.

Contemporary political gatherings at the RVT take the shape of club nights (e.g. Club Wotever), or performances involving discussion, debate, and conversation (the weekly performances of David Hoyle), among other forms, unlike any other venue in London, or the country. The viability of such politically advantageous events are dependent on the long-running political identity of the RVT as a venue, and it is

recognised as such by the people and communities who use it or attend it for such purposes.”

The charity executive Sarah Brown – who appeared on stage at the Royal Vauxhall Tavern while her husband Gordon Brown was prime minister – points out the continued need for spaces in which social inclusion and political consciousness go hand in hand. “With the progress we have achieved in the last decade on LGBTQ rights, it is even more essential to recognise that prejudice still exists and that this progress needs to be protected. It is clear that certain special locations effectively become islands of freedom for both individual and community safety in an often-challenging environment for minority groups”. The use of the metaphor of an island vividly evokes the RVT's distinctively isolated structure.

Brown explains how her visit to the venue illustrated these functions in operation, as well as how important it was that they took place within a building that had a recognised history of activism. “I had the privilege to witness first hand the RVT's importance as a place of community and entertainment. I will always cherish the conversations I had with many of the event guests sharing their personal stories of the relevance and importance to each of them of the RVT as a social haven,” she writes. “It was clear to me that it would be difficult to replicate this atmosphere which is built upon 50 years of LGBT heritage, and [the ability] to symbolically just turn to the walls themselves as a reminder of a strong and shared history”.



*It's Vauxhall Question Time, Royal Vauxhall Tavern, April 23 2015*

This history continues to the present day. Since my original application was filed, the RVT has hosted a pre-election hustings called *It's Vauxhall Question Time*, at which parliamentary candidates from five major parties responded to a questions from a packed audience about LGBTQ issues. And Bar Wotever, the Tuesday night residency, is engaged with ongoing fundraising to help pay for a safe house in Uganda for LGBTQ people threatened with social exclusion, violence or even death.

### **3. The historic and continuing significance of the RVT in the life of the wider local, national and international community (beyond the LGBTQ community)**

As important as the RVT has been to LGBTQ history and community, it's important as well to remember its vital and ongoing significance to the wider community in an area of the country with considerable historic importance. As Vauxhall's MP, Kate Hoey, puts it, the Tavern is "a landmark meeting and socialising place for London's LGBT + community, and a valued asset for the wider local population."

Such support was shared by Hoey and her fellow candidates at the parliamentary hustings event *It's Vauxhall Question Time*, held at the RVT on April 23 2015 before the general election. At that event, Hoey noted that "the Vauxhall Tavern, as many of you know, is not just for...the LGBT community but lots and lots of people come in here who just love being here and the atmosphere in here".

At the same event, Conservative candidate James Bellis said, "I live in the area locally, I use the LGBT venues in Vauxhall myself... I think it is important that everyone works together to make sure the RVT stays a vibrant venue". And the Liberal Democrat candidate, Adrian Hyyryläinen-Trett, said he recognised the RVT as "a historic LGBTQ and straight-ally venue and we all want to ensure it remains here and remains prosperous and looking after the community, a place for people come to to feel safe and secure in their lives... It's imperative that we keep this venue open".

On May 7 2015 there was also a by-election for one of the council seats in Prince's Ward, the Lambeth ward in which the RVT stands. A hustings event held at St Anselm's Church on Kennington Road near the Tavern on April 30 2015 demonstrated similar cross-party support for the preservation of the RVT. The eventual winner of the council seat, Labour's Vaila McClure, who was born and grew up in the area called the Tavern "a fantastic community venue" that "we need to protect" She added, "it always looked like this amazing place and I always, always, always wanted to go the Royal Vauxhall Tavern when I grew up...and it lives up to expectations, which is very reassuring."

"It's a really key place for the LGBT community and somewhere where I have experienced a number of great times," said Liberal Democrat Adrian Hyyryläinen-Trett (who stood in both council and parliamentary elections). And Gareth Wallace said "the Conservative Party would want to support the RVT in its current form. It's been listed as an asset of community value. I think we would want to look into whether we can further reinforce that... We think that it remains viable as a venue and, as I said, it's a cultural asset, it's not just a piece of land to be sold." Marie James of the Green Party referred to it as "a landmark".

Notably, at the same event, both St Anselm's vicars – Rev Angus Aagaard, Team Rector of North Lambeth Parish, and associate priest David Longe – also supported the RVT's continued use as a community-oriented venue. "I've heard about the RVT basically all my life, even before I moved to Vauxhall and became a priest," Longe told me after the hustings. In 2010, "I had the great privilege of working three nights behind the bar" as part of getting to know the area. "I was somewhat apprehensive, being a straight man, as to what it could be like, but I thought it was fantastic. Boy

George sang, the bar staff were incredibly kind... It was just a really friendly atmosphere... The thing that really struck me was that there were no inhibitions. People could just be who they are. As a priest, that's really important: the Christian message in a sense is about helping people become fully who they are before God and I saw people being who they were in the RVT... That will live with me for the rest of my ministry, I'm sure."

Longe also values the RVT's relationship with its neighbours in Vauxhall, such as the Vauxhall City Farm, fostered over decades. "The RVT does a huge amount of good in the community," he says. "Once at harvest festival they produced a scarecrow for us which was extremely exciting. It was a transvestite scarecrow and it certainly had everyone speaking about it for months afterwards." What did it look like? He pauses and grimaces. "Leotard. Leotard and a very bushy blonde wig."

Appreciation for the Tavern is echoed by Revd. Alison Kennedy, Team Vicar at St Peter's Vauxhall, the Grade II\* Listed church near the RVT which constructed as part of the same Victorian streetscape and completed in 1864 making it, in Kennedy's words, "the Tavern's younger sister by a year". It's notable that the sibling relationship between a house of God and a gay pub is enthusiastically embraced by both institutions, with Kennedy noting that "the RVT has a unique and special place [in the neighbourhood] as a very inclusive club, with little or no record of trouble" but instead a reputation for diverse and welcoming socialising, as well as artistic and political dynamism.

Sarah Brown also attests to the venue's beneficial impact on the community even for those who don't patronise it. "The first home that I purchased was just walking distance from the RVT, and I remember walking past a friendly crowd on my way home on many evenings." Two current Lambeth councillors, Joanne Simpson and Jack Hopkins, had their first date at the RVT and are now to be married. London Assembly member for Lambeth and Southwark Valerie Shawcross describes the pub as "a reflection of the vibrant community it has both grown up in and helped to create".

The Tavern is cherished by the Vauxhall Society, which unanimously supports this listing application. Its chairman, Dr Ross Davies, testifies that the "RVT holds a special place in the history, townscape, and social geography of Vauxhall". He hails its "long-established role as a base for, as well as generator and sustainer of fairs, 'expos' and other community events on and around the Vauxhall Gardens site" – functions that hark back to the days of the pleasure gardens themselves. "That has been RVT's function for decades: not just a tavern but also a village hall, a centre for fund-raising, community events and protest, a dance hall, and a stage for performance".

In historic terms, a large part of the significance of the RVT to its Vauxhall neighbourhood lies in its connections to the pleasure gardens that stood on the site between 1661 and 1859. As mentioned in the supporting statement accompanying my original application, there is reason to believe some material from the gardens remains bound up in the fabric of the Tavern. "I believe it contains actual elements of original Vauxhall buildings, notably several cast-iron columns, in its structure," attests David Coke FSA, co-author with Dr Alan Borg (retired Director of the V&A) of *Vauxhall*

*Gardens, a History* (Yale University Press, 2011). Professor Simon Atkinson of the School of Architecture, University of Texas at Austin, who has overseen substantial research projects into Vauxhall as a site of art and culture, also believes the pub “was very likely built using part of [the] original structure from the former Pleasure Gardens”.

Whether or not these columns are currently demonstrably salvaged from the gardens, their inclusion in the Tavern's architecture, in tandem with its name, clearly suggests a conscious effort to establish continuity in the minds of customers between the new pub and the Royal Gardens, Vauxhall, which were closely associated with columns (as argued in the supporting statement accompanying my original application).

Professor Nigel Coates, Royal College of Art Emeritus Professor of Architecture, describes the continuity thus: “Although the Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens had already closed by 1859, the RVT building, which was built in 1863, reflects some of its unique combination of frivolity and classical sobriety. Its curved façade and recessed arcading have a touch of the grandeur that must have stood out against the backdrop of much of the low cost housing that spread over much of the land originally occupied by the Pleasure Gardens”.

The pleasure gardens remain very much alive in the Vauxhall imaginary. Atkinson notes that when the Royal Institute of British Architects recently held a competition conceived to promote accessibility and placemaking in Vauxhall, the winning professional entry developed “rain gardens” and “cabinet of curiosities” ideas “clearly reflecting a reference to the former Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens”. Another project he oversaw for the Vauxhall One business development group involved extensive surveys of the area in anticipation of developing an “arts and culture district”, also set to draw on the history of the pleasure gardens. In this context, he suggests, and given the rapid and conspicuously modern redevelopment taking place north of the railway line, “the relationship of the Victorian [railway] arches to the Royal Vauxhall Tavern, and with a passageway in between, is a unique moment to capture the spirit of London, understand its heritage, and enter the re-emergent gardens.”

Writing in support of this application, Lambeth Council Cabinet Member for Jobs and Growth Jack Hopkins has argued that “the Royal Vauxhall Tavern is the very embodiment of providing a welcoming space for people to be themselves, and...is now the sole reminder of the site's longstanding cultural heritage” as “a place which has a long history of giving previously marginalised groups a sense of place and identity” – a history he connects to the pleasure gardens. Indeed, Lambeth council intends to promote a renewed focus on the site of the pleasure gardens as a locus of socialising, community and civic engagement to balance the large-scale development of the area north of the railway. Historically, architecturally, geographically and socially, the RVT is the obvious lynchpin of any such project given its status as the single strongest remaining direct link with the historic pleasure gardens era and its legacy of experimental and democratic leisure culture.

Professor Simon Atkinson has undertaken a project for the Vauxhall One business improvement district investigating the possibilities of an arts and culture district “stretching from the Old Vic tunnels to the north at Waterloo Station, to the small arts colony of Lambeth Gardens, to the new Damien Hirst Gallery and Beaconsfield

Gallery, the Teahouse Theatre, the new Cabinet Gallery, revitalized Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens, Arts in the Rail Arches, and all 'greeted' from Vauxhall Cross by the Royal Vauxhall Tavern... As such, the location, prestige, and renown of the Tavern for 150 years of artistic improvisation, and incubator of the arts, is of central significance".

Atkinson came to see the Tavern's unique history as both deeply rooted and nationally and internationally significant. He argues that "social commentary, humour, and a sense of joy and freedom [spread] from this small stage in the Royal Vauxhall Tavern right across Britain and beyond. Without the Royal Vauxhall Tavern, its courageous patrons and performers, we would not have Britain as we know it today, a land of inclusion, diversity, tolerance, bringing out the best qualities in all society, and thus forming a truly democratic, open and public opportunity for an authentic London, but also one that has taken well over 150 years to "ferment"."

The Vauxhall Society's Dr Ross Davies affirms that "through place-making [the RVT] is a driver of Vauxhall's regeneration". Pleasure gardens historian David Coke also reiterates this, observing that, "as the area around Vauxhall Gardens has recently become a magnet for cultural businesses of all sorts, from Damien Hirst's studio and the Tea-House Theatre, to the Cabinet Gallery for contemporary art, currently being built by Charles Asprey, the link with the past that the RVT represents becomes more and more important and irreplaceable. This ephemeral link hangs by the most fragile of threads; so the listing of the building would be an invaluable tool in helping to protect this almost miraculous survival for the future, so that residents and visitors to the area can experience at least something of the genuine atmosphere of transgression, of risk, and of the avant-garde that were all vital ingredients of Vauxhall Gardens."

Even leaving the pleasure gardens aside, Vauxhall's Victorian built heritage is becoming increasingly rare. The architect Dr Fernando Rihl is also co-founder and vice chair of the residents' association at Wyvil Estate, nearby the RVT. His views, he says, are broadly representative of local residents'. "In the urban context of Vauxhall, there is not a vast amount of historical precedents compared with other areas of London," he notes. "It is essential, therefore, to retain such historical examples. The RVT building represents the lost link to the estate that was once there. It figures in people's collective memory of a past Vauxhall that should be retained and celebrated." He argues its loss would be a detriment to the area, not only because it is "a community venue that is highly active in the local area" but because in terms of built surroundings, "there is no assurance that its replacement will result in an improvement either by typology or by architectural interest."

As Dr Ross Davies puts it, "To people throughout this country and beyond, the Royal Vauxhall Tavern is an essential feature of the capital's history and culture". By virtue of both its unique sensibility and its architectural iconicity, the RVT has played and continues to play a crucial and irreplaceable role in enhancing the richness of Vauxhall as a place to live, work and socialise.

#### **4. The historic and continuing significance of the RVT as a site of major cultural importance in the creation of experimental and avant-garde art with significant mainstream influence**

The consultation report's recognition of the RVT as "an important drag venue" at which many "well-known drag artists have started their career or performed" is accurate and welcome. But that is just the beginning of its considerable and unique contribution to the history and culture of performance in England and beyond.

As the historian David Coke observes, this contribution springs from deep roots. "The RVT's significant role in the modern entertainment industry has, for many years, been the only direct continuation and development of the entertainments that formed such an integral part of the Vauxhall Gardens experience. Vauxhall Gardens itself exerted an unduly heavy influence on the development of London's very particular culture, an influence that is still felt today."

Chris Bryant, MP, also notes the RVT's links "to music hall, 'molly culture' and the Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens... These cultures helped shape London, the UK and the wider world. The RVT carries on this vibrant, ribald, life-affirming tradition". And Baron Cashman testifies to "its rich history of introducing new artists to the world. Many have gone on from the Royal Vauxhall Tavern to win Perrier Awards or even BAFTAs."

Jay Stewart of Gendered Intelligence highly values the RVT's arts and performance heritage and ongoing practice for their capacity to offer representation, generate debate, locate experiences historically and enable self-esteem and self-determination. "At the RVT LGBTQ people are not only encouraged to come and watch performances but to be a part of the programmes and entertaining too," Stewart says. RVT shows "offer a sense of belonging, they offer contemporary and historical references to LGBT lives. They validate and cement our identities in a way that mainstream media, arts and cultural sites do not."

As the supporting statement accompanying my original application argued at length, the drag performed at the Tavern has long had an experimental bent. The 1969 ITV documentary *What's a Girl Like You?* shows performers using their own hair rather than wigs – still a relatively radical approach in drag culture – and creating their own technically sophisticated 'cut-up' soundtracks from a variety of sources to fit an original narrative arc.

Neil Bartlett, OBE, is an Olivier-nominated theatre director, performer, author and playwright who considers drag a vital form in its own right but also – when practiced with imagination and historical consciousness – a bridge to other expressive modes. Bartlett has been visiting the RVT since 1979 and has created work there on several occasions. "The particular significance of the Tavern lies in the close, active and highly visible connections between its historic function as a centre of popular, 'traditional' LGBT culture – notably drag and cabaret – and its current incarnation as a London-wide, nationally and even internationally recognised home of radical LGBT culture".



For Bartlett, conventional drama practice has much to learn from that undertaken at the RVT. "I have in recent years made a point of taking theatre colleagues from very different kinds of theatre to the Tavern, to show them both its unique interior and its unique furtherance and development of LGBT culture within that historic LGBT setting. A visit there with Basil Jones and Adrian Kohler of Handspring – the creators of *War Horse* – had a significant effect on the staging of our subsequent collaboration at the National Theatre, *Or You Could Kiss Me*, which re-configured the Cottesloe at the National with a raised promenade stage that attempted to reproduce the intimacy between audience and performer found at the Tavern. Again, I think, it is the fact that the material reality – the built heritage – of the Tavern's interior is so *actively imbued* with its performance history that is significant."

Bartlett argues that "the ground-breaking work of the Tavern in blurring the boundaries between queer culture and mainstream culture – launching Lily Savage into the national consciousness [since when Savage's alter ego, Paul O'Grady, has expounded Savage's sensibility under his own name with longterm positions on ITV and BBC Radio], taking gay cabaret to the Barbican and the Sydney Opera House courtesy of Duckie – has had a significant effect in widening the possibilities for LGBT artists in the wider culture. I doubt if Nick Hytner at the National would have been quite so confident about commissioning a radical gay love story from Handspring and I if the stable of artists working at the Tavern had not demonstrated so conclusively how forward-looking the traditions of LGBT performance have now become".



*Images from A Live Art Gala held by the Live Art Development Agency at the RVT, October 2 2014. Neil Bartlett (top left), Harold Offeh (bottom left), David Hoyle (bottom right). Photos by Holly Revell.*

In 2014, Bartlett took part in *A Live Art Gala*, an evening held at the Tavern to mark 15 years of the Live Art Development Agency (LADA), a professional advocacy and

support service for artists working in live art and performance art, funded by the Arts Council England. Bartlett's fellow performers that night included Richard Wilson (twice nominated for the Turner Prize), George Chakravarthi (whose recent other commissions include work for Artangel, Tate Modern and the Royal Shakespeare Company) and Olivier Award-winner Ursula Martinez. "We could think of no better location in London to celebrate our anniversary than a venue that brings worlds together, that is about histories and futures, that is welcoming and non exclusive, and that has an extraordinary generosity of spirit," writes Lois Keidan, LADA's director.

LADA's association with the RVT is as old as the agency itself: within its first year, it worked with Duckie on a promenade project themed around the pleasure gardens. "The RVT has been a vital venue in the development of Live Art and experimental performance practice in the UK over the past 30 years," Keidan reports. "It has played host to some of the UK's most influential and inspirational artists, many at the earliest stages of their careers and who have gone on to achieve recognition and make their mark in wider cultural circles, such as Neil Bartlett, David Hoyle, Marisa Carnesky, and of course Lily Savage. Lily Savage is now a household name but also recognised as a pivotal figure in the sub cultures of UK in the 1980s. Neil Bartlett is an award winning director of opera and theatre productions in the UK and internationally, and an acclaimed novelist. David Hoyle is the subject of numerous documentaries and academic studies and a revered artist throughout the UK and beyond. Marisa Carnesky is a reknowned world expert on circus and carnival".

Others from the worlds of experiment and research value the RVT's lineage of boundary-testing as well. This year, UCL Urban Laboratory Director and Senior Lecturer in Architectural History & Theory Dr Ben Campkin co-curated what he describes as "an exhibition and evening of performances which exploited the on-going function of the Tavern as a safe space for the creation of experimental artworks". Established and emerging artists involved included Oreet Ashery (lecturer in Fine Art at Goldsmiths College and RCA visiting professor), Owen Parry (Central Saint Martins School of Art and Design), Sharon Morris (Slade School of Fine Art), TJ Juntae Huang and Ginger Farbrother (Slade Queer Club), some of whose work drew directly the history of the pub and pleasure gardens. "This event underscored to me the importance of the venue not only for older LGBTQ people but for a new generation of artists more generally," Campkin says. "I cannot think of another venue that would have easily accommodated the diverse work presented, or attracted such an intergenerational range of artists and audience members."

The significance of the RVT to contemporary performance history is widely acknowledged in the academy. Professor Gavin Butt, head of the department of visual cultures and performance at Goldsmiths University of London, has written scholarly article about David Hoyle, Dickie Beau, Marisa Carnesky and other performers who have appeared on the RVT stage. He calls it "a fertile site for the development of some of the greatest popular performers and experimental artists in recent years" and hails "the truly remarkable and unique role it has played, and continues to play, as a platform for starting up, and sustaining, the careers of a wide variety of queer and non-queer artists and performers. Performers have ranged from traditional drag and pub performers (Lee and Jimmy, Adrella, the D.E. Experience) to experimental artists working with performance and Live Art (Dickie Beau, Jet Moon, David Hoyle, Marisa Carnesky, Neil Bartlett and others). Many of these artists have gone on to

accrue wider cultural recognition: Hoyle had his own TV show on Channel 4, Beau and Carnesky have had Arts Council funded projects, and Bartlett went on to be director of the Lyric Theatre in Hammersmith and a respected novelist and theatre-maker. Others still, like Paul O'Grady and Amy Lamé, have had major crossover success on mainstream television and radio."

Butt points out that the "cultural value of the art and performance work that the RVT makes possible is now being recognized within a growing body of work by academic researchers. From the Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded research project Performance Matters, to the work of Dr Catherine Silverstone and PhD students at Queen Mary University of London, the work is now – some may say belatedly – being given the serious scrutiny it so richly deserves."

I am myself hoping to contribute to this growing field: I am currently studying for a PhD at Queen Mary University of London (QMUL) Drama Department, researching the work of RVT stalwarts Duckie as they undertake projects that engage directly with marginalised groups such as isolated older people, young queer performers, and people living with homelessness and drug and alcohol use. The project is fully funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and supervised by QMUL Senior Lecturer in Drama, Theatre and Performance Studies Dr Catherine Silverstone, who has published research on Duckie and teaches seminars on the RVT's performance culture and value to LGBTQ histories and communities. As part of her undergraduate module 'Performance, Sexuality, Identity', students are invited to research links between club cultures and community formation, focusing on RVT nights such as Duckie and Bar Wotever."

To Silverstone, the RVT is "a site of major cultural importance in the creation of experimental and avant garde art" and also "a dynamic force in nurturing the careers of emerging artists. For example, a number of our current students and graduates at BA, MA and PhD levels have performed at the RVT, including the Arts Council England-funded collectives Sh!t Theatre and Figs in Wigs. Our students, among others, have also performed as part of the Duckie's queer youth summer school performance that celebrated the RVT's 150th birthday in July 2014, developing their performance-making skills and networks, and facilitating their connection with a rich LGBTQ and performance history at the RVT".

Silverstone's colleague Dr Dominic Johnson, Senior Lecturer in Drama in the same department, is a historian of experimental performance and sexual cultures, serves on LADA's board. He too values the RVT highly. "Its profile as a venue for experimental performance reaches at least to the 1970s, and through to the present day, in terms of its regular presentation of challenging and experimental modes of performance, including drag, as well as less recognisable forms," he notes. He has performed on the RVT stage himself, at Duckie and in public debates. "Therefore, I have firsthand experience of the venue's liveliness and vitality, and of the way its history of supportive, inclusive, and experimental community-building actively enhances individual artists' and audience members' lives."

## 5. The architectural significance of the RVT as a building with iconic status

The Tavern's potent presence is a recurring theme among those who favour its listing on architectural grounds. Professor Simon Atkinson calls it "an important historic landmark of London architecture. It has a defined corner presence [and] pride... presenting a rich example of public house architecture, but also one distinguishing 'placemaking' in south London working class culture". Atkinson also notes the pub's place within a genealogy of architectural significance, linking its architect James Edmeston to George Gilbert Scott and William Moffat, whom Edmeston articulated. "This places Edmeston's work and practice in a position of national significance."

James Hughes, conservation adviser for the Victorian Society, supports the listing of the RVT as "an imposing, well-proportioned and handsomely detailed historic public house". He continues: "The building's strong Italianate design, its striking bowed façade and its prominent situation make it a conspicuous component in the streetscape and an overwhelmingly positive contributor to the appearance and character of the area. It also possesses group value with the adjacent railway viaduct."

Once, there were far more neighbouring structures with which it possessed street value. As mentioned in the supporting statement accompanying my original application, following the demolition of the rest of the estate of which it was a flagship component, the Royal Vauxhall Tavern is the only remaining example of the Victorian architecture that once covered the entire site formerly occupied by the Pleasure Gardens – a period of the area's architectural life now in danger of erasure.

The Vauxhall Society's Dr Ross Davies argues that the site's "layered histories are invaluable to Vauxhall's residents, and encourage other people to move to and feel welcome here". He notes that while the RVT was built as part of a streetscape, "now, it stands alone. The entire area north of the gyratory system is given over to modern riverside developments that tend to turn their back on Vauxhall, while RVT remains a defiant reminder of community and of locality." The distinctive wedge-shaped formation of the Royal Vauxhall Tavern now complements its status as a sole survivor contributing to its significant iconicity. Words like 'proud', 'defiant' and 'isolated' are often used to describe it.

To architect James Soane, "the building is something of a beacon in the surrounding area and can be understood both as a gateway and as a destination". Professor Nigel Coates calls it an "island of dignity in the whirling indifferent interchange that is Vauxhall" noting that redevelopment work of recent years "has consolidated the alienating effect of the 19th century railway viaducts". He favours a listing not only because of the building's "own architectural merit... but also for the cohesion it offers to its blitzed urban setting... The Royal Vauxhall Tavern now stands as an unintentionally isolated set piece that, together with the open space to the rear of it, battles against the tide of commerce and heavy duty infrastructure surrounding it... For London to retain its unique success, the drive for renewal needs to be offset with cultural anchors, for which the Royal Vauxhall Tavern is an obvious example. The place means a lot to many people as part of an endangered urban landscape."

London Assembly member Valerie Shawcross speaks for many when she identifies the pub as "a physical symbol of the journey of the...LGBTQ community through

previous decades and centuries” – even as “the building itself is also being overshadowed by more and more new architecture. The RVT has character in spades, and provides an attractive and interesting contrast to the array of glass and concrete springing up around it”.

To many local residents, the pub is, in the words of local ward councillor and lifelong Lambeth resident Vaila McClure, “the stuff of legends,” as she told me after the council by-election hustings on April 30 2015. “When I was growing up, we would marvel at the RVT as teenagers and it lived up to expectations when visiting it when older... Because of where it is and the shape of the building – the fact it's an iconic building – it seemed a bit edgy and dangerous but in a good way. It's such an important part of me growing up in Lambeth.”

The Tavern, then, is a totemic site of mythic appeal for children growing up nearby, whose worlds are made that bit broader, richer and more exciting by the tantalising prospect of a venue that is at once revered and sensational – a place renowned across the world that happens to be on their very own doorstep. For those far away, the Tavern's shape adds to its appeal as something of an international beacon, of both community and performance. Notably, this iconicity has played a part in public-facing events around the Tavern's identity. Logos developed for both the 2014 *Happy Birthday RVT* season of events and RVT Future – the new campaign that hopes to ensure the venue's future as an LGBTQ community and performance venue following its purchase by a property development company – place the material form of the Royal Vauxhall Tavern at the core of their image-making.



## 6. The architectural significance of the current interior

When Pat and Breda McConnon took over the running of the Tavern in 1979, drag and other performance events were well established as the lifeblood of the venue – but there were still taking place on the large curved bar that had been installed in 1896 as part of the refurbishment designed by RA Lewcock. This situation, Breda McConnon says in the documentary *Save the Tavern*, constituted an intolerable health-and-safety risk as far as the new management was concerned and they set about a comprehensive remodeling of the interior involving the wholesale removal of the late Victorian interior and installation of a new bespoke design. Completed c.1980-81, it appears in videos from January 1984 recorded after the notorious ‘rubber gloves raid’ (excerpts can be seen in *Save the Tavern*).

It's worth noting that at no point do the McConnons seem to have seriously considered the alternative path of stopping the performances for the sake of maintaining the interior – a circumstance that, I would argue, testifies to both the economic and cultural centrality of performance to the Tavern's operation. This is borne out by the form the new remodeling took, in which the venue's capacity to host performance becomes paramount. As Alexis Kallis notes in his analysis of the current interior, “using the traditional vernacular of small Music Halls, a raised platform against the internal face of the front facade provides an elevated position to view performances taking place on the stage with a clear standing area in-between”. The position of the bar – formerly the centerpiece of the whole pub – is shunted to the internal face of eastern wall. Whereas before performance and the purchase of drinks literally competed for the same space, the new set-up ensured that neither activity would present an obstacle to the other.

This refurbishment, as Kalli notes, reflects a number of intersecting phenomena. It reflects the RVT's ongoing success as a hub of dynamic performance culture with considerable commercial potential – this, after all, was the presumption underlying the financial investment required for a wholesale renovation, and it proved well-founded. But taking place barely a decade after decriminalisation, it also reflected a newfound institutional and community confidence: not many years before, the very idea of establishing a venue as a platform for queer performance aimed at queer audiences would have been tempting fate, to put it mildly. Indeed, one of the benefits of mounting drag shows on the pub bar was the ease with which such performance could be denied in the event of a police raid. Now – arguably for the first time in the UK – the capacity for such performance was to be written into the material fabric of the building itself. The remodeling, Kalli notes, “harmoniously extends the site's deep history of experimental and transgressive socialising, entertainment and performance – purposes for which it has been continuously used since its construction.”

It was a move that reflected the transition, laid out in Historic England's own advisory materials, by which the cultural demands initially served by the entertainment facilities of “inns and taverns” eventually found more sophisticated expression through bespoke theatres, assembly rooms and other “halls for concerts, meeting and dancing” (*Designating Heritage Assets: Culture and Entertainment*, English Heritage, April 2011). This shift began in the early eighteenth century in mainstream culture; in the remodeled interior of the RVT we see its emergence centuries later in the context of the newly decriminalised LGBTQ community. As such, it represents one of the

earliest examples of a public interior space explicitly conceived and built with an LGBTQ public in mind. As Kalli puts it, “the 1980s refurbishment is the manifestation of society’s beginnings of acceptance of the LGBT community and the LGBT community's growing confidence... From here, a collective culture could begin to be nurtured. A minority group was now able to begin a history that could be recorded, expressed and shared through the performances on the stage. Without the removal of the central bar and divisions it is difficult to see how within such a subdivided space with no purposely built platform such proliferation of an ‘alternative’ art of a largely discriminated minority could occur.”

It couldn't have been predicted at the time of the refurbishment but within very few years the beneficial capacity of such a set-up would be needed acutely. As the HIV/AIDS crisis began to unfold, the Tavern's longstanding function as a village hall and community centre, as well as a site of entertainment, would be more valuable than ever. From the new stage, drag queens like Adrella and Lily Savage were able to catalyse desperately needed solidarity, entertainment, comfort and defiance more easily than would have been possible under the pub's former circumstances. (These performers' activities as “the Vera Lynns of south London” are described in detail in the supporting statement accompanying my original application.)

With a bespoke stage, more sophisticated technical apparatus and split-level amphitheatre-style seating came the potential for a far broader range of performances. At the same time, the thrust stage maintained the all-important direct connection with the audience. As Kalli notes, “a wider variety of drag and avant-garde performances were able to take place and the RVT soon became a venue of national and international significance for the LGBT community”. Neil Bartlett notes the significance of the current RVT interior as a distinct architectural form created to serve a specific subcultural purpose. It is, he says, “a significant material survival in its own right, with its own dynamic performance traditions, being neither a reconstruction nor a diminished relic of a Victorian interior”.

Dr Dominic Johnson also argues for the significance of the Tavern's interior as “an outstanding example of cabaret theatre architecture” and reports that it remains an instructive environment for students of drama. “I regularly send students to the RVT to study the interior architecture of the venue, and to learn from the uses of its features – the lozenge-shaped stage, the distribution and setup of audience seating and standing areas, the manner in which this configuration enables and engineers movement of audiences through the venue, the means by which a (usually lone) performer is required to engage with audience members in a theatrically non-traditional manner, and so on. There are few similar examples of cabaret-style architectural design in this country, and none that are still used for the sole purpose of cabaret performance.”

Professor Nigel Coates highlights the Tavern's refurbishment as an early example of a shift from pub to pub-club – the kind of mixed-use space that would become prevalent over the course of the 1980s and 1990s on the LGBTQ scene and in mainstream nightlife. According to Coates, “the present interior is a prototype of the many multi-various leisure venues that came to imitate it... [the layout] typifies the kind of hybrid needs of the night economy that have become the norm for venues ever since.”

Importantly, the 1980s refurbishment did not bring to an end the tradition of bar-top performance at the RVT – a distinctive site-specific mode of performance documented in the 1969 ITV documentary *What's a Girl Like You* and feature film *Goodbye Gemini* that cannot be separated from the venue's material fabric. "The columns originally placed to support the main stair above were then appropriated to form leaning posts and island tables" as part of the 1980s remodeling, notes Kalli – typical features of the pub-club hybrid design the refurbishment anticipates. "Through the ingenuity of various acts and artists these continue to be incorporated into various performances and are a feature unique to the RVT." These days, the LipSinkers tend to finish their monthly shows with a barnstorming turn delivered from the bar-islands.

"The current bar islands which are used (along with the stage) for performance preserve both the supporting pillars and the unique function of the pre-1980s bar, used as it was for drag and cabaret performance from at least the 1950s onwards," writes Neil Bartlett. "The other significant London survivals of early cabaret and vaudeville performance space – Wilton's Music Hall and Hoxton Hall, both Grade 11\* listed – preserve important early popular theatre relationships between a stage and a seated audience, but only the Tavern, so far as I am aware, preserves the equally important architectural tradition of a bar or bar island which can and does function as an impromptu stage area." To Bartlett, there is a stronger claim for authenticity and continuity of use here than in instances such as Wilton's Music Hall or Hoxton Hall (both listed), whose use as performance venues has been intermittent. "I have performed on the bar islands myself," Bartlett reports, "and can testify to what a unique and powerful performance space they constitute."



Recent RVT bar-top performances by Miss Cairo (top left), Steve Nice (top right) and Blanche Dubois



## **7. The increasing rarity and therefore significance of buildings with more than half a century of continuous LGBTQ community and cultural use**

For reasons touched on above, historically few London LGBTQ venues last for very many decades. On the face of it, this tendency could have been expected to change in the years following decriminalisation and further moves towards legal equality, as the need for discretion and the avoidance of homophobia declined. To an extent, this has indeed been the case. Over the past two years, however, as the London property values have continued to rise, a considerable proportion of the capital's LGBTQ venues – which are rarely owned by the community they serve – have closed their doors.

At least 12 such pubs and bars have shut, representing almost a third of the total. These include Candy Bar, Escape, the Green (Angel), the Green Carnation, the Joiners Arms, Kudos, Lo Profile, Manbar and the Nelson's Head; others, such as the Yard, have fought off repeated attempts at redevelopment yet remain under threat; still others, such as the venerable William IV and the White Swan, remain open but have been commercially repositioned in ways that diminish or erase their historic LGBTQ significance.

The trend has heavily impacted Vauxhall, an area characterised by both a history of thriving LGBTQ venues and business, especially since the 1990s, and a burst of intensive high-end redevelopment in recent years, especially since the announcement in 2008 of plans for the new US embassy at Nine Elms and subsequent designation of the area as Vauxhall/Nine Elms/Battersea Opportunity Area. Nearby LGBTQ venues that have since closed include Area, Club Colosseum, Hidden and the Renaissance Rooms. Since my original application, the Paris Gym – a popular LGBTQ facility known as “London's original gay gym”<sup>2</sup> – has announced its imminent closure. Just last week, Barcode also closed its doors. Vauxhall's LGBTQ scene has developed around the RVT. As it shrinks, it's more important than ever to protect the key site that helped start it all and remains thriving on its own terms.

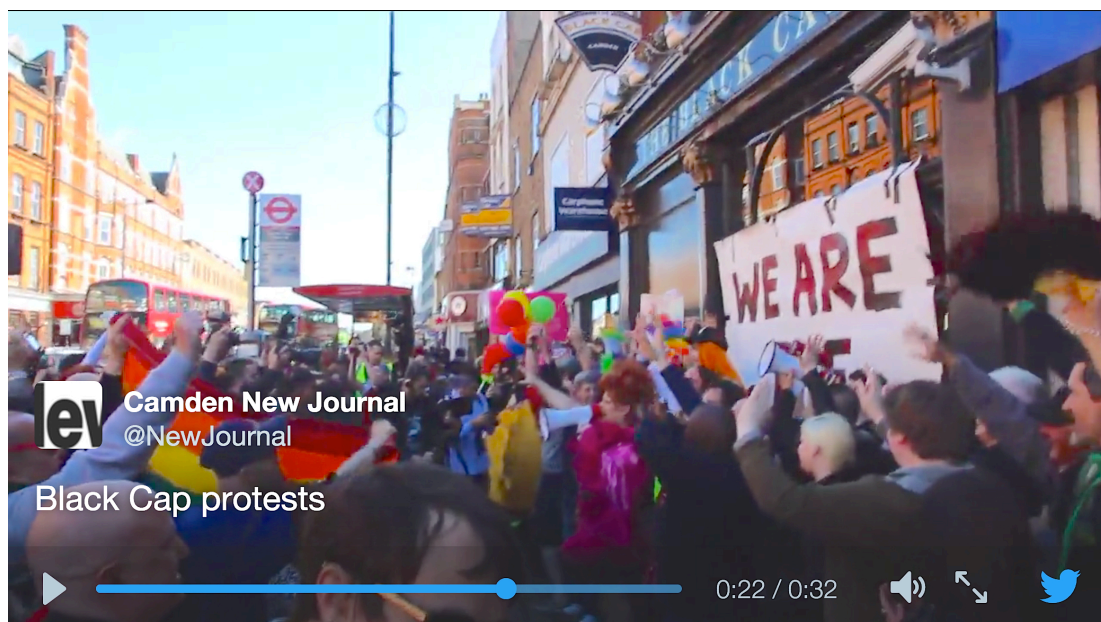
The loss of so many LGBTQ venues in such a short space of time – and, just as importantly, the dearth of new LGBTQ opening in their place – is worrying from a social and community standpoint. But it is also of acute concern from the perspective of heritage. In November, Madame Jojo's – Soho's most iconic LGBTQ cabaret venue with a queer and alternative history dating back half a century – was closed suddenly. And in April, the Black Cap – north London's most iconic LGBTQ cabaret venue with a queer and alternative history dating back half a century or more – was closed suddenly too. Both were world-famous symbols of London's progressive, transgressive, liberal and experimental history of nurturing marginalised people to create community and culture. Both were still active on a weekly basis, producing popular, dynamic and radical art, and offering opportunities for socialising with likeminded people, in ways that connect directly and indirectly to centuries of civic and national history yet are possible at fewer and fewer site in the London of today. Both closures were greeted with shock and anger, sparking creative, colourful protests, extensive media coverage and ongoing campaigns to reopen the venues.

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<sup>2</sup> 'London's original gay gym to close', *Gay Star News*, April 20 2015, <http://www.gaystarnews.com/article/londons-original-gay-gym-closes200415>



*The vigil for Madame Jojo's*



*Image from Camden New Journal video of the Black Cap protest*

To many, the RVT has taken on the status of last one standing in terms of London's queer and underground cultural heritage in a way that mirrors its architectural status as sole survivor of the pleasure-gardens era and James Edmeston's Victorian streetscape. When *Attitude*, the UK's leading gay magazine, ran a feature asking 'Is

Soho over?', which also looked at shifts in LGBTQ nightlife across the capital, it reached this conclusion: "Thank God for the Royal Vauxhall Tavern!"<sup>3</sup>

"Performance and commercial nightlife venues – LGBTQ and otherwise – are fast disappearing from our city as developers capitalise on land and property," argues the UCL Urban Laboratory's Dr Ben Campkin. "English Heritage have recently recognised the importance of the legal listing process attending to the protection of minority spaces in their call for research on this topic (LGBT Heritage Project, P/REF 00000077 December 2014). I fully concur, and in my view it is paramount that the listing process be activated to safeguard the future of the Royal Vauxhall Tavern".

"The Tavern's significance is heightened by the fact that it is now a scarce survival," argues Neil Bartlett; "indeed, so far as I am aware, there is now no comparable building in London, ie one which has a comparably *significant* and *continuous* LGBT community and cultural history reaching back to at least to the 1950's if not earlier. The recent sudden and unanticipated closure of the Black Cap in Camden for commercial redevelopment demonstrates just how urgently such a building is in need of the cultural protection that only a listing by English Heritage can effectively bestow."

"We have seen too many venues and in particular LGBTQ venues across London close recently," argues Fiona Twycross, Londonwide Assembly Member of the Greater London Authority. "Following the loss of the Black Cap in Camden and Madame JoJo's in Soho, there is a real worry the same thing could happen to the RVT... I am worried that the sale [to Immovate] followed by noises about the venue's viability will quickly escalate into the loss of another LGBTQ venue. This is the kind of venue that gives an area like Vauxhall its identity, and we simply cannot let developers making a quick buck override the needs of our community."

"The Royal Vauxhall Tavern is now one of a very small number of LGBT venues in London," notes Lord Cashman. "As the Black Cap (North London) has closed, the White Swan (East London) has been partially converted, Earl's Court no longer has a gay pub and in Soho gay bars are becoming more scarce, it is vital that this remaining bastion of gay culture should be protected from the whim of the developer". He also emphasises the vital significance of sites where marginalised communities feel safe. "As a campaigner for social justice and human rights both at home and internationally, I have seen at first hand the importance of key venues as the focal point of the community," he states. "The loss of this venue to the LGBT community, which I fear will be the consequence of a failure to list, will be a scar on London and its reputation as a tolerant City which encourages experimental arts and fosters those who seek refuge."

Tim Sigsworth of the Albert Kennedy Trust reiterates the importance of venues with demonstrable histories of community solidarity and activist. "The RVT is one of the few truly culturally and historically significant LGBT community spaces left in London and the UK. Therefore as a person working with the next generation of LGBT people, I am concerned that this piece of incredibly significant community

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<sup>3</sup> 'Is Soho over?', Calvin Ryder, April 22 2015, <http://attitude.co.uk/in-depth-is-soho-over/>

space...[might] be lost to a generation who will come to need it, as generations before them have also.”

The twin values of historical awareness and community connection are also key to Stonewall's Ruth Hunt – who calls it “crucial that the Royal Vauxhall Tavern remains untouched, both for the history it represents and the current and future generations of LGBT people it protects” – and Fiona Twycross, AM, who notes that it is “important today that London's LGBTQ community has a place like the RVT to congregate and be reminded of the struggle previous generations had to endure to overcome discrimination. For it to survive this long and now be lost to development would be a real shame for our heritage”.

## 8. The urgency of the threat to the RVT

As previously discussed, even the most iconic and enduring of London's LGBTQ community and performance venues have proven vulnerable to sudden closure and the termination of their long-valued community, cultural and political value. At the closest comparable sites to the RVT – Madame Jojo's and the Black Cap – we have seen the axe fall swiftly on iconic nightlife institutions, without notice and without consultation or communication between the building's owners and its users in advance of closure. And we have seen from the examples of Area, Barcode, the Paris Gym and others that LGBTQ venues in Vauxhall are closing at a rapid pace.

The Vauxhall location bears serious consideration in this context. In 2005, the architecture practice DSDHA was commissioned by Lambeth Council to develop an Urban Framework Plan for Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens, which has since been put into action, including new park entrances, landscaping, public-realm improvements and the installation of monumental columns, all adjacent to the RVT. During the same 10 years, Vauxhall has become a site of intensive development. The Tavern stands within the Vauxhall/Nine Elms/Battersea Opportunity Area, in which high-density growth is underway at multiple sites. But it stands outside both the Vauxhall and Vauxhall Gardens conservation zones.<sup>4</sup> There have been discussions around whether to extend a zone to include the RVT but progress has been slow and no timetable for such an extension currently exists.

The threat to the Tavern is given added urgency by fact that the building has been bought by an international property development company, Immovate, with a history of converting historic buildings into commercial and residential spaces or hotels.<sup>5</sup> Immovate have made no statement about their intentions for the RVT and have not responded to multiple emails and phone calls from the RVT community asking for information. We do know, however, that they actively oppose this listing application, not only hiring heritage consultants, as is their right, but also launching a petition at the website Love the RVT (<http://www.lovetheRVT.com/>) which tells the Tavern's community: "If the building is listed by Historic England, it is highly likely the RVT will be forced to close". No evidence for this is offered. Similar messages have been sent to other local stakeholders, including councillors.

The Love the RVT petition has, at the time of writing, attracted 135 signatures. The RVT Future campaign, on the other hand – which has been encouraging people not to sign the petition but instead to challenge its questionable premises where appropriate<sup>6</sup> – suggests substantial support among the community for the Tavern's listing. More than 1,000 have subscribed to the campaign mailing list, more than 650 have followed its Twitter account and more than 2,700 have liked its Facebook page. Hundreds of emails offering support and volunteering services have been received, along with the backing of high-profile national and international figures. These include Sir Ian McKellen and Michelle Visage of US TV show *RuPaul's Drag Race*, the most popular and influential contemporary manifestation of global drag culture.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.lambeth.gov.uk/planning-and-building-control/building-conservation/conservation-area-profiles-guide>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.immovate.org/en/>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.rvt.community/an-important-update-about-the-listing/>

The loss of the RVT would adversely affect the LGBTQ community. Stonewall's Ruth Hunt notes that it provides "a much needed safe space for the LGBT community and its friends, families and allies. Homophobic hate crime in London was higher in 2014 than it was in 2013, with over 1,000 incidents recorded by Scotland Yard" – a tally that might increase further with the closure of more LGBTQ safe spaces around the city.

The loss of the RVT would adversely affect the arts and performance worlds. "Such kinds of safe spaces, where artists can test ideas and where audiences can explore the new, are increasingly rare in London," notes Lois Keidan, director of the Live Art Development Agency. They are invaluable to a healthy culture and the RVT is a shining and lasting example of how brilliantly they can work when they are at their best."

The loss of the RVT would adversely affect Vauxhall as a whole. "That would be of great detriment to the community," Revd David Longe told me after the council hustings at St Anselm's. "A place where people can go and feel uninhibited is really crucial. Some people live with multiple difficulties and it's really important to provide that environment." Ward councillor Vaila McClure told me at the same event (a week before her election) that "if the RVT went, the damage would be huge. We need to have these venues which are part of the history and the fabric of people's identities... The love and affection that local people have for the venue – we've seen what's happened in Soho and it makes me really sad to think that could happen in Vauxhall." Conservative minister Nick Boles agrees that "it would be a tragedy if we were to lose this iconic building, which stands proudly and alone in an area of London that is being redeveloped so dramatically."

"Why does the RVT matter as a building?" asks New York performer and campaigner Penny Arcade. "Why does the Tower of London matter? Why does Big Ben matter? Why does the Empire State Building matter? Why does the Arc de Triomphe matter? Because it's *it*. There is the reality of the place itself. In those bricks, in that mortar, in that ground are the energies of people who are still there. Their spirit is still there. It represents. It's my religion. It's holy for people."

As Vauxhall's MP Kate Hoey put it at the parliamentary hustings held at the RVT before the election, "to be quite honest I cannot visualise Vauxhall without the Vauxhall Tavern".

## 9. The significance of Historic England setting the precedent of recognising a building' for its contribution to England's LGBTQ heritage

The final aspect that I'd like to mention is the tremendous opportunity I believe this application represents for Historic England to demonstrate its commitment to recognising the significance of LGBTQ history as an integral part of English heritage. "A sense of place and the material world is vital to our sense of community," suggests Professor Matt Houlbrook – a sentiment with which Historic England would presumably concur. "Yet the secret and often ephemeral nature of LGBTQ histories has made queer places from the past uniquely fragile."

In London, this fragility is exacerbated by the lack of a museum or archive dedicated to LGBTQ experience of the type enjoyed by other previously marginalised communities (such as the Jewish Museum in Camden or the Black Cultural Archives in Brixton). As Houlbrook puts it: "At a moment when increasing efforts have been made to recognise and preserve the ways in which the histories of previously marginalised groups are inscribed into London's built environment, however, the heritage of LGBTQ communities remains problematically underrepresented." There is, for instance, no memorial to the victims of the HIV/AIDS crisis or a monument to the immense suffering, bravery and progress it generated – although, as we have seen, the RVT's material structure is imprinted with this community trauma.

Strides continue to be made around the world in terms of LGBTQ recognition, from the Irish public voting to legalise same-sex marriage to the Twittersphere greeting Caitlyn Jenner's gender transition with warmth and celebration (to take just two high-profile recent examples). Yet Historic England has not to date acknowledged the LGBTQ experience by listing any building on the basis of its importance to this historically marginalised community, as it has done for other such groups.

It's very welcome that Historic England and English Heritage are taking steps to address this issue. Earlier this year, English Heritage described "the relationship between LGBT individuals and communities and the places that they live, work and socialise in" as a "poorly understood part of our heritage"<sup>7</sup> – a reasonable description of a situation for which English Heritage itself, which aspires to "bring the story of England to life", must take a share of the responsibility. Meanwhile, Historic England's recent launch of an LGBTQ Heritage Project demonstrates its intention to bring greater attention and understanding to this aspect of the national story, acknowledging that "LGBTQ heritage is a fundamental and fascinating part of our national heritage".<sup>8</sup>

This welcome if belated recognition surely implies the addition to the National Heritage List for England of buildings that express the nation's LGBTQ heritage by virtue of their special architectural and historic interest, including their rarity, aesthetic merits and national significance. If the Royal Vauxhall Tavern does not fulfil these criteria, it is hard to conceive of a building that does.

<sup>7</sup> LGBTQ Heritage Project Contract, <http://www.government-online.net/lgbt-heritage-project-contract/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.historicengland.org.uk/research/inclusive-heritage/lgbtq-heritage-project/>

The appetite for such recognition is broad. In supporting the Tavern's listing, Victorian Society conservation adviser James Hughes notes its LGBTQ lineage as "an important and established part of its significance, and of a type that is under-represented in the National Heritage list. We welcome this opportunity to support the application for this building's inclusion on the statutory list". Professor Gavin Butt argues that "there is an opportunity for Historic England to take a leadership role in recognizing the RVT as a significant community asset, and important cultural institution, through listing it". And Chris Bryant, MP, suggests that the "LGBTQ community is still very much an underrepresented minority group. Having a specific heritage building listed would recognise and honour that group. Much like cafes for immigrant groups, this building has immense significance both to that group, and as a symbol of that group to wider society."

Bryant goes further: "This building is not just a building. It is a living, breathing, high-kicking, dragged up monument to a unique form of community life and cultural expression that should be protected and recognised by being listed."

Significantly, the country's two leading historians of queer experience, community and culture strongly back a listing for the RVT.

"Where countless other cafes, restaurants, or pubs have come and gone, the Royal Vauxhall Tavern has stood the test of time," writes Professor Matt Houlbrook. "The fabric of the building carries the impress of the past – linking contemporary LGBTQ communities back to those that went before them, carrying a sense of genealogy often denied to queer men and women. Like no other building in Britain, it materializes a kind of queer family history – a sense of belonging in both the city and the history of modern Britain. Historic England has the opportunity to preserve a genuine landmark in LGBTQ history. I urge you to endorse the application to make the Royal Vauxhall Tavern a listed building and, in so doing, secure the link to the past for future generations. "

And Professor Matt Cook singles out the RVT as "a key material site in a heritage too often overlooked – something I know is of concern to Historic England. I am currently an advisor on the HE project seeking to map English LGBTQ heritage and to develop policy in this area. It is in so many ways an intangible past, characterised by a necessary secrecy and evasion. Built structures that specifically relate to that heritage are rare, and are symbolically hugely important in forging a queer place in English culture and history. The architectural distinctiveness of the RVT makes it a landmark and reference point for all: a highly visible and distinctive reminder of community, activism, art and difference – and the fusion and intersection of these things. HE would be sending a strong message on its commitment to the LGBTQ past by working to preserve this site – inside and out."

To recognise its architectural beauty, power and rarity; to acknowledge its historic and ongoing significance as a site of sanctuary, cultural innovation and political agency for the LGBTQ community near and far; to guard against the renewed marginalisation of that community in the future; and to demonstrate Historic England's commitment to celebrating that community's role in the national story; for these reasons, I submit that the Royal Vauxhall Tavern be added to the National Heritage List for England.