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Gay old time: inside the UK's first LGBT+ retirement home

In a Norman Foster-designed tower in Vauxhall, a group of older queer people have found safe harbour — and a lot of fun

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At 5.30pm precisely, Bob Green pulls up the shutters of the bar at Tonic, the UK's first LGBT+ retirement community. He switches on the disco lights and empties a multi-pack of Mini Cheddars out behind the counter. They'll all be gone by the time the party's over.

Green is not a resident retiree but rather Tonic's head of operations. He's 57, with tightly cropped grey hair revealing geometric tattoos that wind around both sides of his head, his ears laden with both silver earrings and subtle hearing aids. The residents' drinks evening runs every Thursday from 6pm-8pm in a communal area that resembles the function room of a mid-range hotel, with cheerful lighting, a fish tank and, outside the windows, a view of the grey London riverside across to the Tate Britain gallery.

I've arrived early and settle down at the bar alongside John Reidford, 69, and Kevin Fuller, 42, who are Tonic's newest couple. They are both big guys with impressive beards. John's sturdy black boots and thick scarlet socks give off a slightly kinky vibe, while Kevin is wearing a black T-shirt with the word "FURRY" emblazoned in block capitals. They've been together since 2009, and both identify with the gay sub-community known as "bears". When I ask what that means to them, John says, "It usually starts with being hairy, but it's more a personality thing. It's about being comfortable with who you are." Though he doesn't look his age, his voice quavers sometimes when he speaks, betraying the almost 30-year gap between them. Kevin watches John attentively when he talks, and helps him along when he loses the thread of conversation. I ask if they're both bears. "I'm a bear," says John. "He's still a cub." Kevin smiles sweetly.

John and Kevin © Jesse Glazzard

At 6pm, the other Tonic residents begin to arrive. First, a floppy, caramel-coloured dog bounds in. This is Alfie, I learn, and he's desperate for love. He's followed by Steve Busby, 74, who calls over as I pet the dog: "Careful! He'll lick you to death!" Behind him comes another John, who winks at me and says, in a stage whisper worthy of pantomime: "So will Steve!"

Perfectly bald with electric-blue eyes, wreathed in sparkly bracelets and a pale yellow hoodie, this John (who I internally dub "Canadian John") is visiting another Tonic resident, and he's in love with the place. "I wish we had something like this in Canada," he says. "I have not heard a single dickie bird of anything similar in Ontario."

I'd come to visit this gaggle of fabulous queers to learn more about the UK's first retirement home dedicated to the country's elderly LGBT+ community. Though it feels like a party during the weekly drinks event, there are serious reasons why Tonic exists. Last October, a UN report highlighted "the alarming situations faced by many LGBT older persons", who, in the UK, are more likely than the general population to live alone, be single, face physical and mental health issues, and meanwhile are less likely to have the support of children and grandchildren.

In addition, care services for the elderly cisgender, straight population are often not safe places for LGBT+ people because of homophobic behaviour from residents or staff. One of Tonic's founders, Geoff Pine, experienced this when his partner of 30 years, who was terminally ill, became particularly depressed. Eventually, Pine discovered why: his partner's carer was kneeling by his bedside every day, praying for his homosexual soul. This is not an isolated incident. In a recent case, LGBT+ activist Ted Brown alleged that his partner, Noel Glynn, was homophobically abused by staff at a nursing home in south London, leaving him with bruises and a cigarette burn on his body. The local council agreed to pay them £30,000 in compensation.

The radical trailblazers who fought hard for LGBT+ equality and rights, who paved the way for a younger queer generation, including myself, to be able to live as our authentic selves in public are now forced to spend their final days in fear, often forced back into the closet. Research conducted by Tonic found that of 624 LGBT+ Londoners over the age of 50, only 1 per cent would be happy with a general retirement scheme but 56 per cent would like an option that catered specifically to the queer community. "Our older generations want a place that will celebrate their identities, where they can feel safe," says Bob Green. "Where they don't have to explain themselves to anyone."

I visited Tonic on two blustery grey days in spring. It's located in Vauxhall, one of London's historically queer neighbourhoods, home to institutions such as drag hotspot the Royal Vauxhall Tavern, nightclub Fire and, until it closed in 2020, legendary sauna Chariots. Walking from the station along the Thames, you pass a gauntlet of angular high-rises before reaching Tonic, whose Norman Foster-designed building is all supple curves, with a view across the river to the Houses of Parliament. Far from sweeping our older generations out of the way, this location keeps them right in the heart of the city.

Alfie the dog © Jesse Glazzard

It took a decade for Tonic to go from conception to realisation, finally opening in 2021 with the help of a £5.7mn loan from the Mayor of London (Tonic's CEO, Anna Kear, is keen to point out that they have already paid back almost all of this, proving the idea's viability and, hopefully, replicability). Tonic owns 19 flats across the top four floors of the building. The lower floors are home to a separate assisted living facility, whose carers are shared with Tonic and whose residents are welcome to attend Tonic's events and communal spaces. The apartments are not large but they are comfortable and modern, with balconies and river views. Each is named after a queer London hotspot: Dalston, Soho, Hampstead, Brixton.

There are staff on hand 24/7 and residents have emergency buttons in their apartments to call a carer. Staff are trained in LGBT+ issues such as supporting those with HIV. Since isolation is a big problem for older queer people — Bob Green calls it "an actual killer" — there are many communal areas, including two roof gardens and the events space where the drinks evening takes place, which also hosts afternoon teas with guests such as the activists Peter Tatchell and Michael Cashman, as well as photography, art and exercise classes. Green tells me they're looking into belly dancing, which is appealing because it can be performed seated.

Residents can buy up to a 75 per cent share of a flat, while the remaining 25 per cent is owned by Tonic. They can also buy a smaller share and pay a proportional amount of rent each month. The lowest current entry point is £125,000 for a 25 per cent share, which not everyone would consider affordable, but Tonic is hoping to offer some of the unsold apartments for rent in the future. (The building is part of a group of private apartment towers of which the council stipulated a certain portion must be "affordable" housing. That portion became Bankhouse, the home of Tonic. It is classed as affordable because of its shared ownership model; Tonic offers its 25 per cent to residents rent-free.) At the time of writing, 14 of their 19 flats are occupied by 19 residents, one dog and two cats. If a resident dies or wants to sell their flat, Tonic has the priority to suggest the next buyer, ensuring the building stays dedicated to the LGBT+ community in the long term.

While Tonic is the first LGBT+ retirement community in the UK, similar initiatives have existed in other countries including Spain, Sweden and Germany for years. Kear thinks that the UK's slowness to follow suit may be related to Section 28, the Thatcher-era legislation that prohibited the "promotion of homosexuality". She says the law hamstrung any initiatives to support the LGBT+ community, and that even after it was repealed in 2003, they were slow to grind into motion.

Tonic's slogan is: "This is how we live our lives out." As well as an affirming message about living out of the closet, it's also a plainspoken acknowledgment that, for many residents, this will be their final home. Chek-Min Ong, known as Min, has direct experience of this. He was one of the first people to move into Tonic and is a lynchpin of the community. When we meet, he's smartly turned out in beige chinos, a black gilet and a silver watch. He speaks with a deep, soothing voice. Min was born in Malaysia and moved to the UK when he was 16. "I always wanted to get away from there because I was uncomfortably gay," he tells me. He arrived in London in 1970, three years after homosexuality was decriminalised.

Min met his partner, Tim Dalton, a decade later at a performance of Verdi's *Simon Boccanegra* at the Royal Opera House. "We caught each other's eyes just as the last interval was about to end, so I knew it was then or never," he says. "We scribbled our numbers on each other's ticket stubs at the last moment." Through the 43 years of their relationship, the Opera House remained their second home. Tim had a stroke in 2020, leaving Min, who had worked as a nurse, struggling with the demands of being a full-time carer while looking after the large house in Ealing where they had lived for 20 years. "We promised each other never to put the other in a nursing home," Min says. "We'd be together, whatever."

> **Here I don't have to explain myself. We've all lived through similar experiences. We all marched for equality**
>
> **Nicole Fenton, Tonic resident**

They had both discussed the possibility of finding an old-age community that centred LGBT+ people, but never heard of anything like it. "We talked about it like it was a dream, our utopia in a way," says Min. When he found out about Tonic, he wanted to move in immediately. He arrived with Tim in 2021, with the sad knowledge that at some point he, Min, would be living there alone. "That was the whole reason," he explains, "to find a community where, if one of us passed away, the other would have friends. We wouldn't have to worry about coming out, or face discrimination, or ever have to explain who we are."

Tim died of Covid-19 in July 2022 at 80 years old. "Ah golly, I never stop missing him," Min says, his voice cracking. "I still feel really horrible. We were so close for 43 years. It was almost like half of me died when he died." Recently, he has started to feel comfortable socialising again and has even returned to the Opera House. When he goes there, he tries to sit in their usual seats. "It's nice to feel that he's there with me," he says.

Min © Jess Glazzard

Tim isn't the only Tonic resident to have passed away. The first person to move in, Lydia Arnold (who I hear one resident refer to as "the mighty Lydia"), died in March 2023. When she learnt she was dying, she asked to return to Tonic rather than stay in hospital. "She wanted to die surrounded by people that she loved," Bob Green told me.

"It's been a powerful experience, to support a person through their end of life, and also to support each other," he continued. "Because if you don't have family then this community is your family. We remember the people who have died and we will always be thinking of them and celebrating their lives. Because Tonic is a place where everyone should live well, but also a place where we die well."

Around 7pm at the drinks evening, I find myself sitting at the bar with Nicola Fenton, 60, one half of Tonic's only lesbian couple, who is wearing a black Asics T-shirt with her reddish hair pulled into an unfussy ponytail. When I ask how she ended up at Tonic, she starts speaking at a hundred miles per hour in a strong New Zealand accent. "Retirement is like a dirty word," she tells me, "our society is really ageist." At first she didn't want to move into a retirement home, but she changed her mind after having a stroke. "I realised I'm actually getting more vulnerable," she says. When she was in hospital they asked what her husband's name was, and in this moment of fear and confusion she faced the extra hurdle of having to explain her sexuality. "Here I don't have to explain myself," she says. "We've all lived through similar experiences. We all marched for equality."

I get another beer from Fern, a 25-year-old with pink hair, who is staffing the bar tonight. She is one of Tonic's rotating array of volunteers who come in to help with each event. Then I wander over to the table by the windows, where Steve and Canadian John are chatting with Rachel Harper, 80, who has gorgeous wavy silver hair and is wearing a floral mesh top. She's the one Canadian John is visiting. They're talking about dating apps. "Do you swipe left or right? I don't get it!" cackles Canadian John.

"Me, I always loved the thrill of the hunt," replies Steve. "To me, apps have taken the fun out of it. I prefer to see someone at the club, sidle up to them and try and chat them into coming home with me."

"No apps!" crows Rachel. "I look, I touch, I go up and say: 'My friend fancies you!'" She giggles gleefully. Rachel does not identify as LGBT+. She moved into one of the top-floor apartments before Tonic took over that part of the building and has subsequently found herself surrounded by queers. "It's the best thing that could possibly have happened," she tells me. "No stuffy old people." Tonic does not cater exclusively to LGBT+ people, but also those it calls "LGBT+ affirming", who might more commonly be called "allies". Another ally here is Margaret Bithell, 79, a retired teacher from Prescot, whose son is gay.

Rachel has just finished telling me how much fun she had on the double-decker bus Tonic had in the London Pride parade last year. She evidently feels totally at home with the gays. At this point, a few beers down on an empty stomach, I ask Steve if he thinks Rachel is a "fag hag". He pauses, as if I might have said something wrong. Then she turns, sensing we're talking about her. Steve goads her: "Are you a fag hag, Rachel?" She moans theatrically and waves her arms in the air as if casting a spell, before pronouncing: "With fags like these, I'm proud! Not every hag has such a selection."

I'm having a lot of fun. I can't help thinking about my own future when I talk to the Tonic residents. As my straight friends in their thirties begin to embark along the conveyor belt of mortgage, marriage, babies, I feel as if us queer people have no clear roadmap. It doesn't help that there are few opportunities for us to meet older LGBT+ people who could give us a sense of what our futures might look like. At Tonic, I witness a wonderful diversity of life experiences, as well as confirmation that, at any age, the queers know how to have a good time.

I ask the group if old gays are more fun than old straight people. Canadian John quips that straight women always get more fun after their husbands die. Rachel, whose husband died not long ago, spits out her mouthful of rosé in consternation. “Oh no, not you, you’re the exception,” says Canadian John. “You were always fun.” Rachel looks placated and takes another sip.

Across the table from us sits Clive Dellow, 80, in a neat checked shirt. He’s bald on top with ears that fold downwards, accentuating his gentle demeanour, which is occasionally shot through with a dash of acidic wit. Before he moved here from his house in the Cotswolds, Clive visited Tonic a few times and was taken out by Rachel and Min. “Min said: ‘Don’t worry about a thing. When you move in, we’ll adopt you, show you where the doctor’s is and the best restaurants.’ And they have,” Clive says happily.

Clive © Jess Glazzard

© Jess Glazzard

He tells me about his first time in a gay club in the late 1960s. “It was literally a speakeasy, so somebody opened the door and looked out at you. You had to be a member and I remember when I was getting a membership card someone said: ‘Don’t give them your real name!’

“There was a tiny dance floor and, if you got up to dance, there was a chap called Jeffrey, who was the host. He used to come around with a ruler and, if people got too close, he would whack them and say: ‘No touching!’” The bar was afraid of a police raid, which was not uncommon at the time.

Many Tonic residents tell me stories about homophobic experiences in their youth and traumatic stories of being outed at work. Several talk about losing friends to Aids during the 1980s. “I went to seven funerals of my best friends,” Steve tells me mistily over a beer. “They were the best of them, absolutely gorgeous guys.”

“You’re too young to know about this, but it was very, very tough,” Clive says. “I always say to youngsters: be careful because the pendulum can swing backwards also, in terms of acceptance.” It only takes a quick look at the recent erosion of rights around abortion and trans identities to see that this is true.

I ask whether Clive feels different from straight older people when he speaks to them. “Most other people of my age talk about their grandchildren — and they do talk about their grandchildren,” he says, raising his eyebrows impishly. “That can be a little off-putting. Your experiences and background are totally different from most people. It can hurt in a way.”

Clive tells me that he was in a relationship for 22 years, but is single these days. “I’d love to have had the chance to get married. But of course, when I was young, it wasn’t a possibility.” I ask if he’s lonely. “I’ve got friends, so not really. But last night, when I was in pain from my back, there wasn’t anybody there. It’d be lovely to have somebody there. That’s what you miss, the companionship.” He fixes me with his kind green eyes and says: “So whatever you do, do find a partner.” I have never felt more single in my entire life.

Towards the end of the drinks evening, which finishes at 8pm sharp, Bob brings out some cake decorated with a bee and a single candle to celebrate Margaret’s 79th birthday. The cake is rapidly sliced and dispensed around the room on paper napkins. I clutch my slice of cake and step back to take in the small, joyful pockets of people talking and laughing. “We all came in for one reason,” Min had told me, “to find our own community, to live without discrimination and fear, and find a new family. And we’ve found it.”

These days the residents of Tonic have started organising their own events. They go for a pub roast on the first Sunday of the month and did a potluck meal on Easter Monday. The four staff members at Tonic keep everything running, but it’s the residents who are writing its future. Yet another John, who I only speak to briefly, tells me he and Steve went to the pub last week. “And would you believe, he got absolutely twatted!” he giggles.

“Well, somebody needs to make this a disreputable establishment,” I say, finishing my beer.

Clive looks up and replies, through a mouthful of cake, “We’re doing our best.”

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