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## SIOBHAN HEWISON meets the queer beer lovers across the country finding a sense of community and belonging

**I**t's not exactly a secret that LGBTQ+ people are underrepresented in all walks of life - from films and TV shows, to positions of leadership within businesses, to traditionally male-dominated industries such as those encompassing STEM subjects, or the food and beverage industries. Yes, even craft beer.

Beer is for everyone. I know that, we all know that. However, the reality is that it's an industry dominated by cisgender, straight white men, and that doesn't represent the diverse variety of drinkers who actually consume the beverage.

Within the craft beer industry, there are several avenues down which queer people such as myself are venturing, to try and undo some of this systemic inequality and make ourselves known; one of these is forming community drinking groups.

Out and About, a queer drinking group based in Sheffield, started up in early 2019 after founders Michael and Heather attended Sheffield Pride. Michael explains: "Covered in glitter and flags and not much else, we decided we wanted to go for a pint after and we had to really

question where we would be able to go, dressed as we were. So we ended up forming Out and About as a response to that. We thought it was important to be visibly queer in beer-focused pubs to try and break down some of the barriers between the queer community and the beer community."

So, the pair got to planning, and they had their first meeting in March 2019. It has been a great success (pandemic notwithstanding, of course). Michael comments: "Some were keen to find a sense of queer community in a city where the gay scene is pretty much non-existent. Others liked the idea of rebellion by being visibly queer in what is an intensely masculine space."

In London, the group Gaybeers has

been going since 2014, and was started up by Nick on the website MeetUp.com. Unlike Sheffield, London's 'gay scene' is very active, and somewhat iconic across the globe. With that in mind, Nick explains: "It's a space to make new friends, enjoy good beer and conversation, and it's accessible to those who don't always feel comfortable in LGBT-exclusive spaces."

The importance of setting up more queer-friendly spaces is inescapable, then, whether your local area has a 'gay scene' or not. Yes, craft beer is theoretically an inclusive industry, but the fact of the matter is that the stereotype of 'straight white bearded man with pint' is still very pervasive across the industry. Nick from



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PHOTO: OUT AND ABOUT

Gaybeers echoes these sentiments when talking about welcoming queer folk into the world of beer: "I think the industry is very cis straight male oriented, so this allows us to take over these spaces and create a temporary safe space for those who aren't."

Over the border in Scotland, I set up my own group called Queer Beer Drinkers Edinburgh in late 2020 (when I naively thought Covid was on its way out and it would all be business-as-usual in no time). I held the first meeting 18 months later in March of this year, and I can honestly say it's one of the greatest, most heartwarming things I've ever done. The pints flowed, the chat was fantastic, and it was so lovely and inspirational to be surrounded by likeminded people who also wanted queerness to be more visible in traditional drinking spaces.

These folks trusted me with their wellbeing (emotional as well as physical); in a world where LGBTQ+ people are still very much marginalised

despite so much social change in the last few decades. Being openly queer is very much still a radical act, and being openly queer in a group of over a dozen other queers is even more so. We took up space in the world together, even if it was just a small corner of a pub in Leith, and we had an incredibly wholesome, fun evening. I'm not ashamed to say that I cried on the way there, and I cried on the way home.

I started Queer Beer Drinkers to get more people interested in beer, to diversify the scene, and to provide a safe, sociable setting for those who want to try more tasty beers. But, it was also to create a community where queer folks can feel supported and accepted, and drink freely in 'regular' establishments rather than feeling like they can only hang out in 'gay bars', where I know for a fact the choice of beers is usually very limited (at least in the Edinburgh ones).

Michael from Out and About shares my thoughts: "Spaces where queer

people can be amongst others like them are extremely important and in some cases life-saving. And this goes for the beer community too. The problem is that here in Britain things are regressing in terms of queer rights, and our trans siblings are under siege from a government and media which vilify them. Whilst I think the idea of groups like ours is important, being visibly queer in public is becoming more and more dangerous, and if you're in charge of a group like ours you are responsible for the safety of those attending."



Of course, you can't talk about queerness in beer without mentioning The Queer Brewing Project, a non-profit championing greater diversity, acceptance, and visibility in beer and brewing. Its founder, Lily Waite, a queer trans beer writer and artist, has collaborated with breweries across the world to raise awareness of LGBTQ+ issues, and to raise funds for charity too by brewing a wide variety of beers. By partnering with well-known names across the industry, the project reinforces the notion that inclusivity and diversity are issues that everyone must pay attention to and advocate for, not just those within those communities. We need everyone to be vocal allies,

otherwise the burden of social change lies solely on us.

However, it's difficult to feel like we are not constantly shouldering all

the responsibility - when you look around at the beer landscape, often the most you see is a small handful of queer people, or people of colour, or women, talking on panels and running events to try and enact change, but there's not much quantifiable change or action beyond that. Talking about the need for these kinds of sociable drinking groups, Michael, Nick and I all come to the same conclusion: things are getting better in terms of diversity, but it's not enough.

Michael says: "This is not an inclusive industry. It's as simple as that, and of course that breeds groups such as ours and other important groups for women or people of colour. The beer industry needs to diversify its customer base if it wants to survive."

Nick adds: "The industry is definitely not inclusive, although it seems to

be improving slowly. I probably need more non-cis male organisers to make Gaybeers even more inclusive too, but they are hard to find."

On a positive note though, Michael comments: "I do think the industry is bucking the trend slightly though and is progressing, due in large part to the likes of Lily Waite at Queer Brewing and Helen Smith at Burum Collective, both of whom I massively admire for their determination to change an industry which it is so easy to become disillusioned with."

Beer, and the pub in general, are such integral parts of British social culture. Why would we not try and harness this as a vehicle for change and better levels of diversity within the community? As per one of the Queer Brewing Project's slogans which is emblazoned on t-shirts and baseball caps, 'All beer is Gay beer'.



WE'RE QUEER, WE'RE BEER

PHOTO: QUEER BEER DRINKERS EDINBURGH

PHOTOS: THE QUEER BREWING PROJECT