

ADMIRAL DUNCAN

United front: Jeremy Moore (below left), whose brother Nik was killed by the Soho bomb, with Mark Taylor (below right), manager of the Admiral Duncan



Six months ago, a nail bomb caused carnage in a Soho pub. **Philip Watson** discovers how the gay community is coping with the aftermath. Photographs by **Jason Bell**

life goes on

It's a sunny, late autumnal morning in Old Compton Street, and while road sweepers clean Soho's most famous thoroughfare, shops, cafés and restaurants are opening for business. A typically diverse and vibrant Soho scene, it's a setting so violently removed from what happened here six months ago that it's hard to imagine what actually took place.

The Soho bomb had a profound personal effect on its victims, their partners and their families, but it has taken on a much wider significance. For the residences and businesses along Old Compton Street, both gay and straight, it has become the symbol of the notion that a single act of extreme prejudice should never be allowed to triumph over the more tolerant and progressive will of a larger community.

And as an act of violence that killed a pregnant woman drinking with her husband and their gay friends (two of whom were killed), the bomb has forced people to confront the fact that the straight and gay communities are more integrated than they might have believed.

On a political level, the bomb has not only galvanised gay campaign groups, and the broader gay community, but has also led to changes in the law. While very different in nature from the Stonewall gay liberation riots that rocked New York 30 years ago, the bombing of the Admiral Duncan can still be seen as its nearest British equivalent.

'The bomb has made everyone in the gay community much closer and stronger,' says the Admiral Duncan's manager, Mark Taylor, who was working on the night of the attack. 'The bombing was a political act, and the pub has become a kind of rallying point. When the four people won their case against the gay ban in the armed forces, they came here to celebrate.'

Mark Taylor had been alerted to the sports bag that contained the bomb by his staff, and was about to inspect it when it exploded. He suffered 75 per cent burns to his body, and shrapnel wounds to his legs, arms and face. After six weeks in hospital, he returned to work with the rest of his staff when the bar reopened

just two months after the bomb – and on the weekend of Soho's annual Gay Pride march. As a residential manager, he also returned to his flat above the pub. He was insistent that the traditional-style bar should be returned as much as possible to its former look, so the pub's distinct pink and purple exterior was replaced, as were its traditional wooden floors and bar.

The only major addition – other than the security men who now check customers' bags – is the memorial light that hangs from the ceiling near the entrance. A work commissioned by the pub's brewery, Scottish & Newcastle, the chandelier has 86 small white lights for each victim of the bomb, and three red flames for those who died.

'It was an act of defiance to come back to work, and I wanted people to be able to remember the place as it was before the bomb,' says 31-year-old Mark Taylor, sitting on a stool at the pub's bar, very near to where the bomb exploded. He remains scarred from his injuries, and still has to spend

Keeping the flag flying: Soho's gay community has coped with the aftermath of the horrific bombing with dignity and courage

time in hospital having skin grafts. 'The bomb has made me a stronger person and I wasn't going to let anyone or anything stop me doing what I enjoy doing,' he says. 'And I enjoy working at the Admiral Duncan.'

This feeling of resistance is echoed throughout Old Compton Street and London's (sometimes apathetic) gay community. 'In my bar, people are tolerant, comfortable and don't suffer prejudices. Old Compton Street shows that society can move on, and that no lone nutter is going to change that,' says Prady Balan, owner of the Balans Café, a few doors down from the Admiral Duncan.

Sarah Massie, who runs the Admiral Duncan Project, set up after the bomb to offer support, also sees the Soho bomb as having a galvanising effect on London's gay men and women. 'At the reopening of the Admiral Duncan there was a sense of reclaiming,' she says, from her office next door to the pub. 'There was a feeling that we won't be knocked off Old Compton Street, and that we are here to challenge bigotry.'

It is naive, of course, to think that prejudice towards gays has lessened following the bomb. Even in London, the world's most cosmopolitan city, homophobia is still rife. In the five weeks following the Soho bomb, 27 homophobic incidents were reported to the Metropolitan Police in the West End alone. And because the bomb made some of its victims very public figures, there have even been incidents of survivors, and their partners and families, being further victimised. Some have even needed to be rehoused.

Yet the bomb also made the general public more sympathetic to the gay community – if only in the short term. 'I think people were genuinely disturbed by the bomb,' says Boy George, who attended the Admiral Duncan reopening ceremony. 'It's like we're the last minority that it's cool to ridicule, but the bomb made homophobia real. People had been killed and it wasn't a joke any more. It was as if the Soho bomb forced people to think again about the gay issue.'

opposite of their purpose.' Because of this, many believe that the Soho bomb may have been a watershed in gay politics, and there are now moves to enshrine certain gay rights in legislation. While Julian Dykes may receive up to £10,000 from the Criminal Injuries Compensation Board for the loss of his wife, Gary Partridge has been denied the right to compensation for the death of his partner John Light, with whom he had lived for more than a year and who saved his life by taking the full force of the blast. This has led to calls for a change in the law.

'Gary Partridge has been a victim three times,' argues gay MP Ben Bradshaw in a letter to the Home Secretary, Jack Straw. 'He was a victim of the bomb himself, he has lost a partner, and now he



'The bomb made homophobia real. People had been killed and it wasn't a joke any more'

has become a victim of an unjust system.'

The outcry over this legal discrepancy induced Straw to announce Government plans to recognise the rights of gay partners for the first time. The change was introduced as part of the Sexual Offences (Amendment) Bill in the Queen's Speech to Parliament this week, a bill that, for the third time, proposes the equalisation of the age of consent for homosexuals to 16.

Other legal changes have followed. Not only did the House of Lords rule recently that a homosexual couple in a stable relationship can be defined as a family, but the Government has also

'I think most people know that the tide has turned violently against homophobic thoughts and actions, that most rejoice in our diverse society,' says actor Simon Callow, who was a signatory to an open letter on gay rights to New Labour ahead of the party's Bournemouth conference. 'But, in the end, the only way we can guarantee that is in law. The law is the ultimate safeguard.'

As for the Admiral Duncan, it is, says Mark Taylor, who has worked in the bar for three years, busier than ever. Not only did the pub receive countless messages of support from around Britain and the world following the bomb, but it remains a grue-

The public may also have been moved by the fact that a young, pregnant, heterosexual woman was one of the three people killed. It may seem a cynical view, but the death of 27-year-old Andrea Dykes, married just 20 months, no doubt touched people more than if she had been a 50-year-old gay man found dead in fetishwear and a rubber jockstrap. She also became symbolic of the way straight and gay societies are becoming more harmonised. 'If it didn't change people's minds regarding homosexuality, it certainly softened their views,' says Cary James, editor of gay weekly *The Pink Paper*. 'These deaths achieved the exact

announced plans to repeal Section 28, the controversial law which forms part of the 1988 Local Government Act placing a legal ban on schools teaching the acceptability of homosexuality.

And while the Soho bomb has led to anti-homophobia posters being produced by, among others, the Metropolitan Police, gay campaign groups have also argued for the Government to criminalise hatred on the grounds of sexual orientation. Malicious homophobia is, after all, often found in the literature of neo-Nazi groups like the White Wolves, who cynically and untruthfully claimed responsibility for the Soho bomb just two hours after it exploded.

some reminder of an event most Londoners recall every time they walk along one of the city's favourite and most sociable streets.

'We get 80-year-old married couples coming in now to have a drink, and Japanese tourists who get off coaches to take photos of the outside,' says Mark Taylor. 'It's strange really, but this now has to be the best known, and most popular, pub in the world.' ■

Donations to victims and their partners and families can be made through the Admiral Duncan Project, 56 Old Compton Street, London W1V 5PA, or the April Bombings Appeal, c/o Massow, 36-38 West Street, London WC2H 9NA.



Nik Moore (above left) and his close friend John Light (above right) both died in the Soho bomb blast. Nik's brother, Jeremy, is a British Telecom project manager and lives in Felixstowe, Suffolk. Like Nik and his elder brother, Colin, he is gay.

'I was at home when I heard the terrible news about the bomb, but although Nik lived in London, it's a big city, so I thought nothing of it. At around 9pm, I went to our local bowls club, where my dad was working, and told him that two people had been killed in a pub called the Admiral Duncan. He turned to the people in

The Soho bomb: Jeremy Moore talks about the loss of his brother

the club and said, "Oh, my boy uses that pub. He took me there once." It was then that I started to worry.

'I tried Nik's mobile, but got the recorded message. At around midnight, Dad phoned the emergency numbers, but he couldn't get any information. I still thought the chances were remote, so I went to sleep. At 2am, Dad phoned to say they had found John [Light] in one of the hospitals, that he had serious injuries, and that Nik should have been in his party. One of Nik's exes, Peter, was rushing around the hospitals trying to find him, but he wasn't on any of the lists.

'Dad phoned again at 6am and said that Scotland Yard had told him there were only two unidentified bodies – a male and a female. Then, half an hour later, the police called Colin and told him they thought that the dead man was Nik. They said, "They've got to put him back together before they know who it is."

'The police told us death would have been instantaneous, that Nik wouldn't have known anything about it. I found out later that the Admiral Duncan was Nik's favourite pub, and that the group were going to see *Mamma Mia!* at the [Prince Edward] theatre along the street. They could only have been in there a few minutes – Nik and Andrea were at the bar getting the drinks. Colin and his partner were supposed to be going on the trip too, but they couldn't get tickets. So, I could have easily had another brother in the party.

'Nik was happy-go-lucky and he never made any enemies. He was a rolling stone who picked up friends wherever he went. And he didn't seem to lose those friends. He had been a partner of John's for a year or so and, even though they had split up, they were still close.

'We held the funeral in our local church two weeks later, and there was a huge turn-out – around 400 people. We celebrated the person

Nik was, and what he did in his life – not his sexuality, because that wasn't an issue. Nik led his life, as I do, openly mixing with colleagues, family and friends. Afterwards we wrote farewell messages to Nik ("Have fun in the cottage in the sky" was mine), and tied them to pink balloons that we released into the sky. We all stood in silence as the sun caught the balloons as they flew up and away.

'I think Nik's death has done more good than harm. It's made me re-evaluate my life and take advantage of every opportunity that arises. And it has shown that the bomber is in the minority now. He has only succeeded in opening up the gay community to everyone.

'I can't even say that I harbour any hatred towards the bomber – in fact, I don't know of anybody in our family who has ever harboured any hatred towards anybody. Nik never hated anyone. But I do sometimes ask myself why this happened to a person like him and to a family like ours.'