

# Centre for the Social History of Health and Healthcare (CSHHH) Seminar Series



## Rubber Gloves and Liquid Gold: Drugs and the Regulation of Queer Spaces in the 1980s

**Dr Ben Mechen**

**King's College, London**

**Tuesday, 18 February 2020**

**5.00 pm LH228**

**Lord Hope Building**

All welcome!

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## Rubber Gloves and Liquid Gold: Drugs and the Regulation of Queer Spaces in the 1980s

In January 1987, thirty-five Metropolitan Police officers in rubber gloves raided the Royal Vauxhall Tavern, one of the city's most famous gay pubs, claiming it to be a den of drugs, drunkenness and prostitution. The pub's landlord, suppliers and staff were soon charged, under an obscure clause of a Victorian law, with offences relating to the sale of poppers (amyl nitrate, "Liquid Gold"), an inhalant popular in London's gay subculture for its muscle relaxant properties and for providing an instant rush of euphoria – a chemical technology of pleasure that symbolised some of the affective, embodied and communal dimensions of the years of gay liberation.

With public anxieties about AIDS reaching fever pitch, and some doctors and gay health activists drawing connections between the use of poppers and Kaposi's Sarcoma, the rubber-gloved raid on the RVT was quickly held up by campaigners as a telling example of the institutional homophobia of the Met. Through its harassment of queer nightlife, the force seemed determined to quarantine the city from what *The Sun* had famously dubbed "the gay plague".

Drawing upon the gay press, ephemera, oral histories and the records of the Gay and Lesbian Police Monitoring Group, this paper will examine the entangled history of drugs, policing, and sexual politics in modern London, arguing that the raid on the RVT helped pave the way for the closure of countless gay venues (though not the RVT) during the city's rapid gentrification from the 1990s. The paper concludes by exploring how this apparent privatisation of gay social life helps account for the rise of hook-up apps and the associated phenomenon of 'chemsex'. Here, the insights of queer urban history might allow us to depart from dominant pathological explanations that root gay men's drug use and the search for apparently 'anonymous' sex in an anti-social hedonism or else the internalisation of homophobia and the desire for self-destruction.

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