

Old beats of hate and horror

A former NSW police officer has spoken out about gay bashings by officers during the 1980s in Sydney. **Greg Callaghan** reports.

When Mark Higginbotham was a boy growing up in Castle Hill in Sydney's west in the 1970s, then a sleepy country town, he dreamed of becoming a cop, inspired by his dad's best friend, Joe, a retired inspector and a larger than life character highly respected in the area.

"He was the Santa Claus in the shopping centre every year and quite famously, as a retired police officer, made a citizen's arrest of someone who stole his donations," Higginbotham says. "It was Joe who led me to see policing as a way of making a social contribution, who was a referee on my application for the NSW police."

After training at the Redfern Academy, Higginbotham went to Windsor police station and enrolled in law, aiming to be a police prosecutor. "Because I was headed towards the courts, I figured I needed a fast, street-wise education and so volunteered to go to Darlinghurst Police Station. I was a naive boy from the suburbs and was soon shocked by what I saw."

Notorious former police officer Roger Rogerson was based at the station at the time, but the now-familiar stories of protection money, pay-offs from crime bosses and cops being on the take at Darlinghurst, Surry Hills and Kings Cross police stations have missed another, arguably more significant story: how police were allegedly bashing gay men. Higginbotham was witness to this at one gay beat in Moore Park.

"The thing that was most disturbing initially for me was the baton charging I saw at Moore Park," Higginbotham says. "I can remember walking across the park behind the fast-advancing police, seeing them surge forward with batons and hearing physical confrontation in the toilet blocks. I recall men running and yelling that the police were advancing."

At first, Higginbotham assumed the police were targeting muggers, as street crime was common at that time. "But after this happened a few times, I realised the exclusive target of these operations were men gathering for public sex. And I feel a deep sense of shame to have been part of it, even if I never participated in any of the violence myself," he says.

Higginbotham's recollection is that up to 10 policemen in three to five cars took part in these assaults, suggesting involvement of officers from more than one station, but he can't remember the assaults being discussed at Darlinghurst. "I was never part of any debrief," he says. "[After] a violent confrontation of that kind, it was quite routine to check in with each other's recollections, but not on this."

During his time at Darlinghurst, NSW Police changed the form of baton for street policing. "Up until then, the standard weapon was a rubbery truncheon; but in 1983, a different weapon was adopted, a 70cm long piece of aluminium tubing. The



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memory of police holding those things, walking across the grass, has stayed with me all these years."

Higginbotham was mystified by the anger directed towards gay men by these officers, "which isn't what you would have expected in the middle of a gay area". The depth of that anger became abundantly clear to Higginbotham when he arrested a man for a gay bashing that happened only blocks away from the station. He saw the victim outside the station, bleeding and dishevelled, as he pulled up in a police car. "I do remember thinking he was gay and asking him what had happened. Then I asked him if he felt well enough to identify his attacker, so he jumped in the back of the car and we drove around the neighbouring streets in a random patrol," he says.

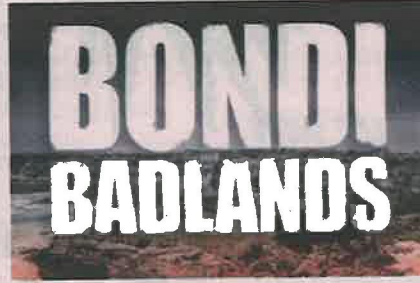
"Pretty quickly the victim pointed out 'that's him' and my partner and I approached his alleged assailant. A violent scuffle followed - we had the attacker on the ground before handcuffing him - and we radioed for a transport vehicle."

But it was what happened back at the station, as Higginbotham presented the suspect to the charge crew and filled out a fact sheet, that would become forever burned into his mind. The managing sergeant of the shift began screaming at Higginbotham in a protracted rage that "we don't arrest people for poofster bashing" in front of all his colleagues. "It ended with me standing there, like a child, absolutely humiliated and overcome with disbelief. I had so much self-respect and pride in being a police officer, and it was stripped away from me in that moment."

Worse followed. After the victim, the



Clockwise from main: Mark Higginbotham worked at Darlinghurst police station during the 1980s; campaigner MLC Shayne Mallard; and former footballer turned actor Ian Roberts. Photos: Eddie Jim, Wolter Peeters



editor of a gay newspaper, wrote a positive story about Higginbotham and the Darlinghurst police, Higginbotham became seen as some kind of avenger and protector for the gay community by at least two senior staff at the station, who subjected him to a soul-destroying bullying campaign, at its nastiest during the "tasking parade" at the commencement of each shift, when jobs were allocated. "I was identified as a faggot - I can remember that word being used repeatedly to humiliate me: 'who wants to work with the faggot?'" Higginbotham was not insulted by being labelled a homosexual by his tormentors (for the record, Higginbotham is heterosexual) but because they were using that word to try to demean and destroy him.

He says: "I told my dad about what was happening, and he was very angry on my behalf and encouraged me to speak out, but at 19 I really didn't know what to do. Who could I complain to? Anyone who rocked the boat could be set up, drugs planted in their locker or whatever. It wasn't unusual to hear police discussing overt violence against anyone who complained."

Higginbotham became a prosecutor in the local court system in inner Sydney before quitting the NSW Police in 1987 and moving to Victoria, where he rediscovered his desire to serve as a police officer. He has been with the Victorian police for 29 years, pioneering work in improving practices for supporting sex crime victims in the court process.

As early as next week, a decision will be made on whether a judicial inquiry will proceed into the unsolved cases of suspected gay and transgender hate crime deaths between 1970 and 2010. Shayne Mallard, chair of the Upper

House committee that last May tabled the results of an 18-month parliamentary inquiry, says there is now a pressing need for a judicial inquiry, perhaps run by a retired judge, who would have the power to call witnesses and examine evidence. The failure of the NSW Police to properly investigate these cases, he says, means the killers and attackers have got away with their crimes.

"Time is running out on these murders and assaults," says Mallard, who has been a victim of a homophobic assault himself. "The perpetrators, gangs mostly, still walk the streets today and they'd be my age or older. And it's time they were held accountable for their actions. This is unfinished business for the gay, lesbian and transgender community, which collectively still mourns the crimes."

Former rugby league footballer, now actor, Ian Roberts, says the anti-gay crime spree rolling across Sydney in the late 1980s and early 1990s contributed to his decision to postpone his coming out as gay (he had planned to come out at the end of 1989 football season, but didn't do so until 1994).

"The public backlash against [English] soccer player Justin Fashanu (who came out in October 1990) also made me hesitate," says Roberts. "I witnessed bashings and was myself the target of attacks on Oxford Street. If someone my size could be attacked, anyone could be." A public acknowledgment of past wrongs via a judicial inquiry, Roberts says, will finally allow "our community to heal".

Higginbotham says there was a time when his father regretted encouraging him to join the police force. "There was so much corruption and they probably thought I didn't have the life skills to survive it," he says. "But I'm grateful they encouraged me into community service, and with the exception of that dark chapter, I've been able to become the man they wanted me to be."

Higginbotham's story, as well as Ian Roberts' memories of the anti-gay crime wave in Sydney in the late 1980s, can be heard in episode five of the *Herald's* podcast, *Bondi Badlands*.

