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London's Pearly Kings and Queens are a cockney institution.

A new generation of Pearlies is revitalising the tradition, with fresh attitudes fit for the 21st century.

Zoey Goto meets the young royals

PHOTOGRAPHS: PHIL FISK





What would London be without its royalty? Last month, the world came to the British capital to celebrate the life of one monarch and herald the arrival of another. But, away from the great halls of state, you'll also find London's Pearly Kings and Queens – the dapper leaders of an organisation that's existed since Victorian times. With its roots in the East End, the Pearly collective has long been an iconic symbol of the city's rich cockney heritage – as authentic as jellied eels, pub singalongs and the rhythms of rhyming slang.

Having fallen off the radar in recent years, the Pearly Kings and Queens of London are now stepping back into the spotlight, partly due to a swell of interest generated by their involvement in this year's Platinum Jubilee celebrations. Throw into the mix some switched-on creative projects – including a collaboration with jewellery designer Lou Taylor on a range of hipster brooches and necklaces, a photography project with London graffiti artist Stik and somehow finding the time to be snapped by *Vogue's* favourite fashion photographer, Mario Testino, for his *A Beautiful World* project – and we have all the ingredients for a distinctively British comeback.

Meet Jack, Shannon, Connor and Amy, the new generation of monarchs breathing life into this treasured institution – and they can still direct you to a great pie and mash shop. ▶

JACK JAMES

Age: 31

Day job: Events manager

Pearly title: Pearly King of Royal Kensington & Chelsea

How did you become the Pearly King of Royal Kensington?

I was born into the role but, like most Pearlies, I went through a stage of stepping away. When I was 16, I was so embarrassed that I even contacted Google asking them to remove my Pearly photos! But when my nan passed away, I wanted to continue her legacy, so I put the buttons back on.

Has social media helped spread the word with a younger audience?

When I returned to the Pearlies, there wasn't a

"OUR ASSOCIATION HAS A COUPLE OF GAY MEMBERS, MYSELF INCLUDED, AND WE'VE BEEN WELCOMED WITH OPEN ARMS. WE EVEN HAVE A MEMBER WHO'S TRANSITIONED"

social media presence and the website was awful, so I revamped it and started our Instagram account. We've since had some posts go crazy.

Is there more of a focus on inclusivity with the new generation of Pearlies?

Our association has a couple of gay members, myself included, and we've been welcomed with open arms. We even have a member who's transitioned from a Pearly King to a Queen, which would have been unheard of 30 years ago, but we're proud of her.



It's also important to show our support for movements such as Black Lives Matter.

How long did your Pearly suit take to make?

I'm a bit of a perfectionist so it took two years. I spent many weekends sewing, with Cher playing in the background - it was like therapy.

Favourite Pearly moment?

I don't actually remember it, but there's a baby photo of me being held by Princess Diana.

What are your hopes for the future of the Pearlies?

We've marched in Brighton Pride, so my next goal would be London Pride. We'd also love to do a fashion collaboration with a label like Alexander McQueen and have a merchandising range sold in the souvenir shops in London. ▶

SHANNON CROWE

Age: 25

Day job: Bartender and parent

Pearly title: Pearly Queen of Haggerston

How did you become the Pearly Queen of Haggerston?

Although I took up the title at 13, initially I kept it quiet. The turning point came a couple of years later with the 2012 Summer Olympics, where we walked in the opening ceremony. I realised it is actually pretty cool to be a Pearly.

Is there more of a focus on inclusivity with the new generation of Pearlies?

Definitely! The inclusive movement has a huge place in my heart and resonates not only in my Pearly work but throughout my whole life. I want to show that we can all be an ally.

Are the attitudes of the younger Pearlies different to the elders?

I think at our core, our values are the same. But times change and what was OK 20 years ago isn't now. But if we move forward with love, then the older and younger generations can be on the same path.

Favourite pie and mash shop?

The Eel & Pie House on Leytonstone High Road.

Has social media helped spread the word with a younger audience?

We were photographed recently at a gay bar with some drag artists who it turns out have a huge following online. Moments like this really help to spread the word with a new crowd.



How does your suit differ from the costumes usually worn by other female Pearlies?

Traditionally, women wear long skirts past the knee. But I wanted to put my own spin on the top hat and tails worn by the original Pearly King himself, Henry Croft. Someone on Etsy adapted a second-hand blazer into a tailcoat for me, which I team with a black denim pinafore, decorated by hand



“I WANTED TO PUT MY OWN SPIN ON THE TOP HAT AND TAILS WORN BY THE ORIGINAL PEARLY KING HIMSELF, HENRY CROFT”

with buttons. My suit will never be finished, though – you're constantly repairing or adding to it.

Where can the Pearlies be found?

Everyone's welcome to attend our harvest festival at St Martin-in-the-Fields church on the first Sunday in October. Keep an eye on our Instagram page for forthcoming events.

CONNOR CROWE

Age: 27
Day job: Firefighter and parent
Pearly title: Pearly King of Wembley

How did you become the Pearly King of Wembley?

I didn't join until my late teens. My parents and



older sister were Pearlies; I finally decided to jump in after seeing how much fun they were having at events.

What does it feel like to wear the buttoned suit?

Initially, it felt quite weird. But I'd grown up seeing my dad as a Pearly King and it's almost like a cockney character that he plays when he slips the suit on, having a dance and putting a smile on people's faces, so it soon came naturally.

What's special about your borough of Wembley?

Wembley Stadium is a big deal for football fans, so I love that aspect. Plus, there are lots of buildings going up, so it feels like a really up-and-coming area.

Is there more of a focus on inclusivity with the new generation of Pearlies?

London is so diverse; I feel it's important in our Pearly role to engage with as many different cultures and communities as possible. We were in Mile End recently, with lots of people who didn't know about the Pearlies, but they were really interested. The suit is such a great conversation starter. It also means I can talk to people about their lives, so it works both ways.

Where's the best pie and mash shop?

Robins Pie & Mash in Wanstead. They also hold an annual pie and mash brunch in Camden. It's held in a nightclub with live music and Pearly Kings and Queens attend.

Favourite cockney rhyming slang phrase?

"Apples and pairs," which means stairs. It's simple and rolls off the tongue easily. ▶



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AMY ROWE

Age: 25
Day job: Junior project manager
Pearly title: Pearly Princess of Shoreditch

What's special about your Shoreditch borough?
 There's just so much history in Shoreditch. It was the first London borough to have theatres and William Shakespeare would visit the Curtain Theatre to get ideas for plays. Nowadays, it's a really inspiring and creative place, with urban food markets, street artists and the pop-up BOXPARK shopping area.

What are your hopes for the future of the Pearlies?
 We have to change with the times and have an online presence, but the core value remains our charity fundraising. There have been eight generations of Pearlies and we're one of the oldest London charities, so it's important that the younger generation step up to keep the tradition alive.

Is there more of a focus on inclusivity with the new generation of Pearlies?

Gender equality is something I've always championed, speaking up for other women, as I know how daunting it can be. The Pearlies have always been structured to be very equal, as there's no leader and we all have a say. There's no male or female domination – where there's a Pearly King, there's always a Pearly Queen.

What's your favourite part of the job?

Visiting St Joseph's Hospice, one



"THE PEARLIES HAVE ALWAYS BEEN STRUCTURED TO BE VERY EQUAL"

of the charities we support, to see how the donations are being used. Our charity work took a hit from the pandemic. We managed some virtual jobs but it's much better to meet in person. We've now started to do meet and greets with groups of American visitors who come to London with a tour operator.

Favourite cockney song?

The Lambeth Walk. I remember singing it as a kid and doing the knees-up action.

✂ Fly to London

WOULD YOU ADAM AND EVE IT?

PEARLY FACT BOX

🕒 The Pearly tradition was born out of east London's street market culture in the 1870s, where traders used cockney rhyming slang as a secret language and embellished their clothing with pearls to attract the eye of potential customers.

🕒 The first Pearly monarch – Henry Croft, a road-sweeping orphan with a flair for street theatre – was inspired to decorate his own suit in a riot of mother-of-pearl buttons, and would wear it to collect pennies for poor children and hospitals.

🕒 The Pearly suits can be covered in nearly 30,000 buttons, weighing as much as a 10-year-old child. 🕒 To see a Pearly suit up close, head to the Museum of London near Barbican, where an ensemble once worn by the Pearly King of Islington is displayed.

🕒 While traditionally Pearly titles are passed down through families, the rules have loosened in recent years to allow those with a genuine passion to apply for membership. 🕒 The major event in every Pearly diary is the annual harvest festival,



held at St Mary-le-Bow and St Martin-in-the-Fields. Both are open to the public. 🕒 Pearlies have left their sartorial mark on pop culture: Jack and Meg of The White Stripes have

donned versions of the bejewelled cockney suits, and high-end fashion houses Edun and Gaultier have both sent gleaming interpretations down the catwalks.


ADDITIONAL PHOTOS: ALAMY

THE
BEST OF
WHAT'S
ONBOARD

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BOW DOWN
TO HORROR'S
MAD GOD

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BRIDGET
EVERETT'S
HOMECOMING

AUDIO
THINK YOUR
WAY TO
THE TOP

virgin atlantic 

Travel in Technicolor

vera

October 2022

**ALWAYS
IN STYLE**

The enduring darkness
of Christina Ricci

