BELOW: Kenneth: "At work they say I'm pretentious. As Samantha I'm sweeter."
BOTTOM: Brian alias Barbara (right) making himself/herself up in the cloakroom. "Outside I carry the usual kitchen sink in my handbag."

Twilight world of the trans Lads

They want to wear women's clothes, to create an illusion of femininity, not to mock women. And sometimes, like these in our photographs, they form support groups. (Turn over for story.)

By RICHARD RAYNER

MAIN PICTURE: All dressed up and nowhere to go . . . except behind the red door where men can play at being women in peace. BELOW : Derrick (Diana): "It's not sexual."

vestite in lingerie

Pictures: BARRY LEWIS

ABOVE: Michael Higgins (Tricia) and clubfounder Nick Sinclair (Yvonne). RIGHT: Pat (Patricia) had to look up "transvestism".

(From page 101)

'Dad dresses like a woman'

THEY'RE to be found everywhere – London, New York, Johannesburg and even Bloemfontein.

Just think back to the woman with heavy make-up and a wig you saw in Hillbrow, Sunnyside or Sea Point . . . possibly "she" was a transvestite.

Or the attractive girl with the bright red dress you saw buying cigarettes . . . when she opened her mouth, the voice was gruff. Perhaps she sheepishly made the excuse that she had a bad cold. She could have been a transvestite.

She was apologising for herself and this is part of the misery of being one. Other than this one difference they're quite normal and harmless yet people regard them with a mixture of shock and abhorrence and shy away from them or ity them.

It's an intolerable burden, being a freak. It's utterly lonely. How South African transvestites manage to live with their strange affliction nobody knows: elsewhere they succeed in coming to grips with it.

THIS is the story of a group of them: men who, behind the red front door, are apparently transformed into women.

Michael Higgins lives in Croydon, England. He's a mechanic at a local garage. Glance at him and you immediately think this one's a real heavy.

He is 20, more than two metres tall, with bushy black hair. At weekends he hangs around with the motorcycle crowd. Clad in a leather jacket he burns up the road on his 500 cc "iron".

But sometimes the leather outfit stays in the wardrobe. That's when Michael goes to London to satisfy the other great compulsion in his life. Because Michael Higgins is a transvestite.

It's 10 o'clock on a Friday evening in a British Rail train. Michael isn't "dressed" yet, he's wearing jeans and a black denim jacket and he says:

"I like wearing women's clothes. That's all.

"I'm in love. My girlfriend is a policewoman. She knows all about it. Occasionally she comes along but I actually prefer it if she doesn't because then I can dress like a real tart."

We alight, walk to an alley and stop in front of a warehouse. The windows are tightly shut. The door is red. Higgins disappears inside swinging a sports bag and goes into a dressing room.

I walk up the stairs. The room above is long, with comfortable seats, tables, lamps and a nook where you can get sandwiches and cooldrinks. It's neat and hospitable. The room is full of men . . . dressed as women.

Some are long and lanky like broomsticks in dresses and it looks as if their make-up has been applied with boxing gloves. Others wear shiny nail-polish and flourish long cigarette-holders.

And some are quite astonishing – they strut so convincingly. It's a bit like stepping into a room full of peacocks unsure whether they are peahens.

A voice over my shoulder says: "It's wonderful coming here." It's Michael. He's wearing a black dress with sequins, black stockings and black high-heeled shoes. His face is smothered in make-up, he's overdone the eyelashes.

You look around. Transvestites are talking in low voices. They're drinking coffee, tea and diet cooldrinks.

Michael says: "Before I began coming here I would sit around at home in a dress and frilly undewear and wonder if I was supposed to be like this. Being here is a wonderful escape, a great relief."

"Here" is the support group for transvestites and transsexuals. The founder and leader is a 57-year-old former sailor, Nick Sinclair alias Yvonne. Tonight he's wearing a yellow satin dress and looks remarkably like Margaret Thatcher.

He says in a deep voice: "Listen. The purpose of this place is to ease the loneliness of transvestites so they can realise they are not unique and have somewhere to come without being in the public eye.

"And to get rid of those guilty feelings, not to have to go home at night and draw the curtains and dress up on the sly."

Nick founded the group in 1982. At the end of that year there were 59 members. Now there are 1 000 and an average of two new members from various walks of life arrive each day.

They meet four times a week, sometimes 80 at a time. Some bring their wives and girlfriends who're a little confused about the new members: "Is that a he or a she?"

About 150 members are transsexual – men who feel they're actually women trapped in the wrong body and are looking for surgical help to correct the error.

Sinclair says transvestites are not transsexuals. They are seldom effeminate or homosexual. They want to create the illusion of femininity, to be like a woman – not to mock her.

Russel Reid, a psychiatrist and head of the Gender Identity Clinic at London's Charing Cross Hospital, says: "A person's gender is far removed from his sexual identity. Most transvestites are heterosexual but they're confused. Obviously.

"They have no choice. No one chooses to be a transvestite any more than anyone chooses to be a diabetic. Transvestism is, psychologically, almost like a drug to which the transvestite is addicted. Most of them accept their masculinity."

I then ask Nick to give me a reason.

He looks round the room. "Talk to this lot and you'll hear 50 different stories about why they do it. They'd been abused by their fathers. They were mishandled by their mothers. They got too much love from both. They always liked their sisters' undies.

"And not many of these stories are the truth."

Nick has always worn women's clothes. He became a cabaret dancer and appeared as a man and as a woman. He'd been married to a showgirl who'd known from the outset about his transvestism. She'd accepted it. They'd had five children.

Later he worked as a deckhand on a tanker. For a while he ran his own interior decorating business and for three years lived as a woman, donning women's clothing every morning and travelling to one of London's big department stores where he first worked in the packing department and later sold women's underwear.

He says: "For one wonderful week I was head of the lingerie department."

One day his daughter was asked to write a school essay describing her father. She wrote: "Dad dresses like a woman. Then he goes to work." The next week a social worker visited him and he was fired from the department store.

He says: "My wife and I divorced when the children were grown. She died in February last year. We'd always remained friends."

Finally here is a love story about a middle-aged couple, married for 25 years, with three children, a house and two cars. this sounds quite conventional doesn't it?

The couple are Pat and Mike but Mike (short for Michelle) is the woman. The man is called Pat, alias Patricia, a transvestite.

Mike says: "I first heard about it some three years ago. One day he said, 'I like wearing women's clothes.' I first thought he was joking. Then I thought he must be homosexual.

"I knew nothing about transvestism. I looked it up in the dictionary. The first time I saw him like that I thought I was going to be sick."

Pat says: "We had some terrible times after that. I wished I hadn't told her. But I'd been living with the secret for a long time."

Mike says: "Our children know. They accept it as I do now. But if he said he would stop tomorrow I'd jump for joy."

It's midnight and we leave. At the door Nick holds out his hand to me. I'm not certain if I should kiss it or shake it.

But he points to the tattooed girl on his wrist and says: "With the exception of Michelle this is the only girl you've seen here tonight."

That's the truth. Or so I was led to believe.