

How can shoes worn in the **medieval period** provide information about London's historic LGBT+ community?



Object in focus

Shoe, late 14th century

What is it?

These slightly ridiculous-looking shoes were the height of fashion from around 1370s to 1400, and then again in the mid 15th century. They are known as 'poulaines', or Polish shoes.

Some of the shoes in the Museum of London collection have points extending over 10 cm beyond the toe.

Why is it related to LGBT+ history?

These pointed poulaine shoes are just one example of the ways in which people in the past may have used their dress to indicate hidden LGBT+ identities.

As with many fashion movements before and since, this new trend was a controversial one to some. The church associated extravagant fashions, and pointed shoes in particular, with alternative or deviant sexualities and 'sodomy'- a catch-all term for any sex considered non-standard at that time.

The idea of using fashion signifiers to advertise a sexuality which is considered deviant by society is a familiar one for the LGBT+ community. While we may see rainbow flags and other symbols of the community every day in modern London, in the past this was not so overt.



Pointed poulaine shoe, late 14th century

Today we might refer to London's LGBT+ community. It's important to remember this is modern terminology that that would not have been used during the medieval period.

Further information

Blog: **Satan's Claws: pointy shoes & sodomy in medieval London**

museumoflondon.org.uk/discover/lgbt-london-stories-pointy-shoes-and-sodomy

Lesson starter

Here is a suggestion for a short activity to get your class started with this topic. It should take students no more than 15 minutes.

Clothing, accessories, hairstyles and symbols are used by all of us as indicators of our identities.

Split your class into small groups. Ask your students to think of a famous person, or provide them with images of famous Londoners, for example:

DAVID BOWIE
musician

STEPHEN FRY
actor, comedian and writer

STORMZY
musician

KATE MOSS
model

MOIRA STUART
presenter and broadcaster

DINA ASHER-SMITH
olympic sprinter

QUEEN ELIZABETH II
queen

STEVE McQUEEN
filmmaker

NADIYA HUSSAIN
chef and presenter

Their task is to note down or share any aspects of that person's clothing, hair or accessories that tell us something about their lifestyle or identity.

If you have time, why not ask students to think about an item of clothing that they like to wear and invite them to consider how that piece of clothing relates to their own identity?

- Does it have any motifs, words or symbols?
- Do the colours have a particular relevance?
- Are their clothes from a particular culture?
- Would they choose not to wear it in particular circumstances? Why?

You may want to ask students to share their thoughts or keep them private.

