

Exploring London's LGBT+ Lives



The Museum of London's collections reveal historical evidence that people with LGBT+ identities have lived in London since the city's origins, although they are unlikely to have identified with the terms 'LGBT+'.

Listed below are frequently asked questions about our LGBT+ schools resources. If you have a question that isn't answered, email the Museum of London secondary schools team via learning@museumoflondon.org.uk.

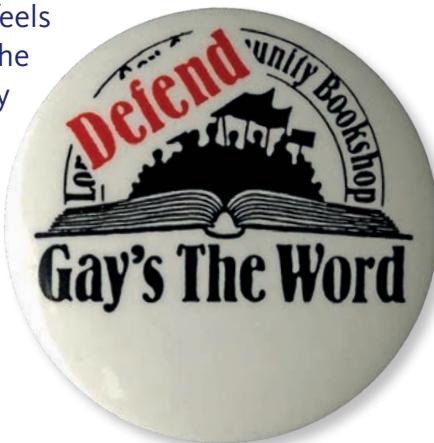
Have the words 'lesbian', 'gay', 'bisexual' and 'trans' always been used?

No. Language has changed over time. Before the 20th century, these and other terms, were hardly ever or never in use. Today we may view historic Londoners as part of the LGBT+ community, but in the past, they may not have identified with this terminology.



Why does the Museum of London use the word 'queer'?

In academia, 'queer' is used as a catch-all phrase to mean the LGBT+ community. As an academic organisation, the Museum of London uses the word 'queer' in some resources in this academic sense. In the broadest sense, 'queer' encapsulates those who feel that they don't neatly fit into any of the LGBT+ letters. However, each queer person has their own view of the word's meaning and not everyone feels comfortable with the term, as historically it has been used homophobically.



Why is LGBT+ history difficult to uncover?

The stigma surrounding these identities throughout history meant people often lived in secrecy and fear. This is largely because, in English law, it was once illegal for men to be gay. Lesbianism has never been illegal, but has been marginalised and remained hidden, as have other LGBT+ identities.

Why aren't there more objects which tell the stories of LGBT+ people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) backgrounds?

People from BAME backgrounds are often missing from conversations around LGBT+ people in British history. This is not due to a lack of stories and experiences to tell, but because of issues with how records have been made and kept. Most LGBT+ people who recorded their experiences came from privileged, wealthy, and white backgrounds. Historically, people from BAME backgrounds in Britain weren't often in privileged enough positions to record their stories in a lasting way, and so many of them have been lost.

Which time periods and subjects feature in our LGBT+ resources?

Our LGBT+ resources focus on five key objects, covering:

- Roman London
- Medieval fashion and religion
- Victorian literature and performance
- The Suffragettes
- Music

We have chosen not to include objects and stories from the mid-late 20th century as many individuals are still alive.

How can I start a conversation?

On the following pages we have provided two lesson starters. You could:

- Read each description aloud and ask students to note down which word fits the definition
- Print the chronology resource for your students to complete by matching the events and dates.

These lesson starters can be used as starting points to discuss the following concepts:

- LGBT+ history stretches back to the Roman period
- Enormous change has occurred during the 20th century
- Today's terminology has only been used very recently
- Individuals have the right to self-identify and everyone will have a different relationship with the words that they choose to identify themselves with.



Further resources for discussion

Collections Online

Films: London's Queer Objects

[youtube.com/playlist?list=PLcUgvdvJPCKcM9U2XbBbgtyw3Kd46seZb](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLcUgvdvJPCKcM9U2XbBbgtyw3Kd46seZb)

Blog: Hidden Pride: London's LGBT history:
museumoflondon.org.uk/discover/london-pride-london-lgbt-history-gay-rights

Blog: The Royal Vauxhall Tavern: charting an iconic LGBTQ venue:
museumoflondon.org.uk/discover/new-plan-royal-vauxhall-tavern

Blog: Night Flowers: stunning portraits of London's alternative club scene:
museumoflondon.org.uk/discover/night-flowers-stunning-portraits-londons-queer-club-scene

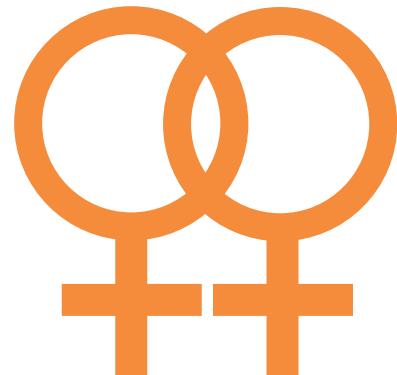
Lesson starter

Terminology

Below are some key definitions related to LGBT+ lives*.

LESBIAN

A woman who has a romantic and/or sexual attraction towards women. Some non-binary people may also identify with this term.



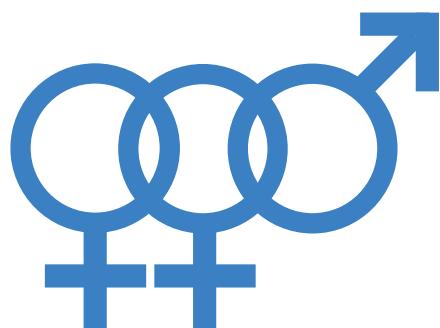
GAY

A man who experiences romantic and/or sexual attraction to other men. Sometimes also used by women who are attracted to women in place of the term lesbian. Some non-binary people may also identify with this term.



BISEXUAL

Used to describe a romantic and/or sexual orientation towards more than one gender.



TRANS

An umbrella term to describe people whose gender is not the same as, or does not sit comfortably with, the sex they were assigned at birth.



QUEER

A term used by those wanting to reject specific labels of romantic orientation, sexual orientation and/or gender identity.

It can also be a way of rejecting the perceived norms of the LGBT+ community (racism, sizeism, ableism etc). Although some LGBT+ people view the word as a slur, it was reclaimed in the late 80s by the queer community who have embraced it.

Lesson starter

Chronology

Match the dates and events below together to put them in the right order.

DATE	EVENT
AD 122	London's Gay Liberation Front is founded.
14th century	Croydon-born Roberta Cowell becomes the first (known) British trans woman to undergo reassignment surgery.
1533	Gay's the Word, opened in 1979 as London's first bookshop specialising in gay and lesbian literature, is raided by Customs and Excise.
18th century	Emperor Hadrian visits Roman London where male relationships are common. Later, he meets Antinous, his young, male Greek lover.
1835	Offences Against the Person Act replaces the death penalty with a prison term for sexual acts between men.
1861	Section 28 of the Local Government Act prohibits local authorities from teaching or publishing about homosexuality.
1885	The Buggery Act makes any sexual relationships between people of the same sex punishable by death.
1895	Section 28 is repealed in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.
1951	The Buggery Act makes having any type of sex which is seen as against the 'will of God' punishable by death. Although not specified, this would have included sex between two men.
1967	The London Pride parade attracts around 25,000 people and is continuing to grow.
1970	The last men to be sentenced to death for homosexual acts are hanged in front of Newgate Prison.
1972	Molly houses – taverns where men could have sexual liaisons with other men – spring up across London.
1984	London's first Pride march.
1988	The legend of Wilgefortis – a bearded female Christian saint – reaches London.
1981	Oscar Wilde is sentenced to two years hard labour for gross indecency. The Sexual Offences Act decriminalises sex between two men over 21 and 'in private'.
2003	Section 11 of the Criminal Law Amendment Act 1885, commonly known as the Labouchere Amendment, makes severe punishments for same-sex desire and love more widely enforceable.
2014	

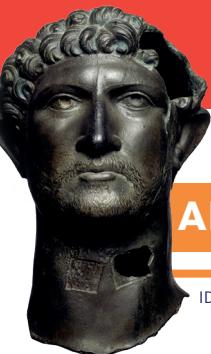
London's LGBT+ History Key Moments



18th century



The Buggery Act makes having any type of sex which is seen as against the 'will of God' punishable by death. Although not specified, this would have included sex between two men.



AD 122

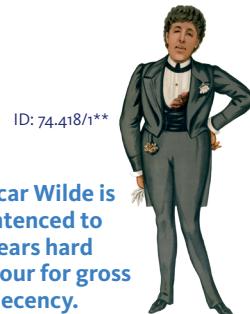
Emperor Hadrian visits Roman London, where male relationships are common. The following year he meets Antinous, a young Greek man, who becomes his lover.



ID: 82.8/7*

The legend of St Wilgefortis – a bearded female Christian saint – reaches London.

14th century



Oscar Wilde is sentenced to 2 years hard labour for gross indecency.



1984

ID: 2007.1/27*
'Gay's the Word', opened in 1979 as London's first bookshop specialising in gay and lesbian literature, is raided by Customs and Excise.

1988



Section 28 of the Local Government Act prohibits local authorities from teaching or publishing about homosexuality.

1972

London's first Pride march.

ID: 2006.31/41*

London's Gay Liberation Front is founded.

1970

The Sexual Offences Act decriminalises sex between two men over 21 and 'in private'.

1967



Croydon-born Roberta Cowell becomes the first (known) British trans woman to undergo reassignment surgery.

1951



Marriage (Same-Sex Couples) Act comes into effect, allowing same-sex couples the opportunity to get married in England and Wales.

2014

1991

London's Pride parade attracts around 25,000 people and continues to grow.

2003

Section 28 is repealed in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

* Visit museumoflondon.org.uk/collections and search these ID numbers to discover more about these objects and their connection to London's LGBT+ history

** When this timeline was created these objects were not yet on the museum's Collections Online catalogue

These are a small selection of landmark moments which are important to London's LGBT+ community through time.

What does Emperor Hadrian's preference for male same-sex relationships reveal about the attitudes of Roman Londoners?



Object in focus

Head of Emperor Hadrian, early 2nd century

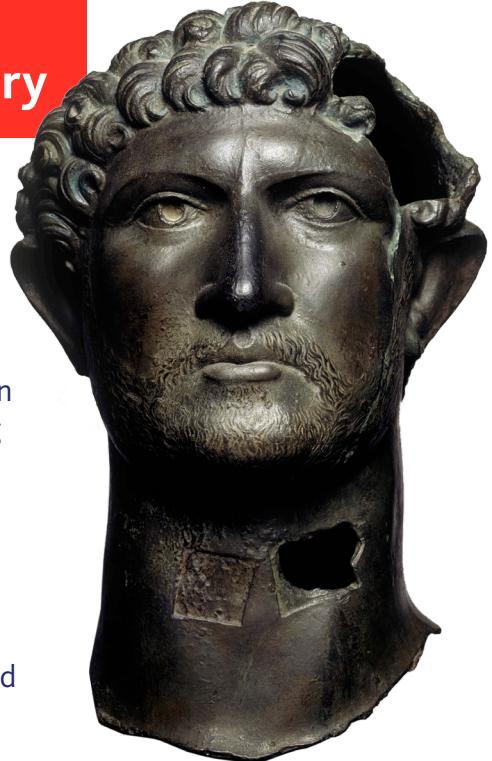
What is it?

This replica bronze head, found in the River Thames in 1834, was once part of a slightly larger than life-sized statue of the Roman Emperor Hadrian (reigned AD 117-138).

Although most famous for Hadrian's Wall in Northern England, Hadrian also made a mark on Roman London (Londinium), which was a thriving city and a beacon of Roman power at the time of his reign. His visit to Britain in AD 122 prompted a programme of rebuilding, with the new Forum and Basilica becoming the largest the Romans had ever built north of the Alps.

The statue would have been put up in a public space like a forum to celebrate his visit. This was probably the new Forum, but since the head was found in the River Thames, it could have been on the approach to the bridge that the Romans constructed over the river.

The original is at the British Museum.



Bronze head of Emperor Hadrian,
2nd century

Why is it related to LGBT+ history?

When Hadrian visited Londinium in AD 122, his entourage is likely to have included young men with whom he was openly intimate. This would not have shocked his contemporaries as, although during the Roman period there was no word for homosexuality as we conceive it today, sexual relationships between men were common.

Hadrian may have been gay in the modern sense of being only attracted to other men, rather than being bisexual which was relatively common in the Roman world. Certainly, what made him stand out most amongst other emperors was the uniquely public show of adoration which he lavished upon one male lover – Antinous.

Hadrian probably met Antinous – a Greek youth – just after his trip to Londinium. They became lovers but Antinous tragically drowned in the River Nile. Hadrian, heartbroken, flooded the Roman world with Antinous's image, dedicating shrines and idols to him in the same way that the Romans did to their gods. He even named a new Egyptian city – Antinoopolis – in his honour.

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

Further information

Blog: [Uncovering LGBTQ Londinium](https://museumoflondon.org.uk/discover/lgbtq-roman-london)
museumoflondon.org.uk/discover/lgbtq-roman-london

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.

Use your whiteboard to display an image showing the bronze head of the Emperor Hadrian statue. You might want to introduce him as a Roman Emperor, but not reveal anything else.

Then, ask students to work in pairs to answer the following question. They'll only need a couple of minutes.

What words would you associate with this image?

Students may consider wealth, childhood, appearance, job or background. Alternatively, you could focus on it as an object and think about materials, weight, artistic style or size.

When everyone has given feedback, reveal that Emperor Hadrian was also:

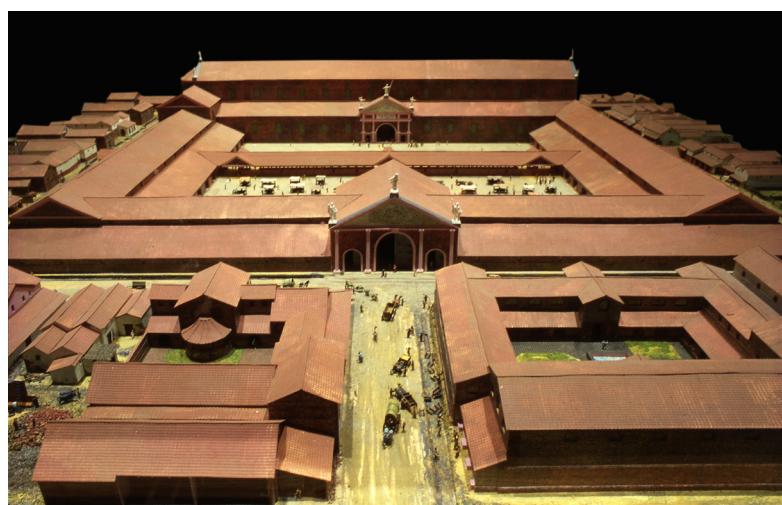
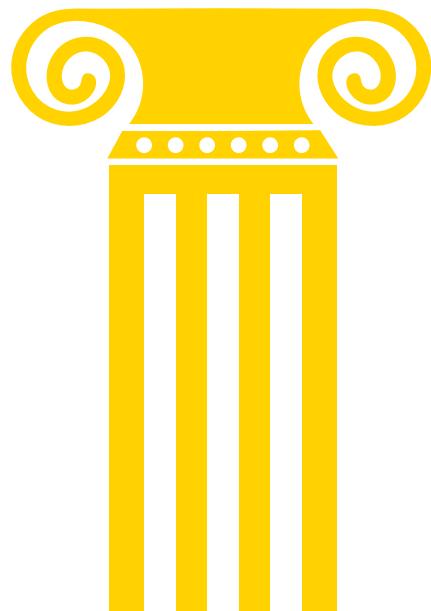
responsible for a huge programme of improvements and building works in Roman Londinium

a husband, married to a woman whom he treated with respect

known for having acceptable affairs with young men

known for openly showing his affection for one young man – Antinous

would not have referred to himself as ‘queer’ or ‘gay’



Model of London's new Forum and Basilica, one of the huge building projects associated with Hadrian's visit to Britain in AD 122

We've created a suite of resources on London's LGBT+ History, just for you. Discover these and other resources for secondary schools on our website:
museumoflondon.org.uk/schools/learning-resources

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.



Pointed poulaine shoe,
late 14th century

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.

Today we might refer to London's LGBT+ community. It's important to remember this is modern terminology 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](https://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:



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.



We've created a suite of resources on London's LGBT+ History, just for you. Discover these and other resources for secondary schools on our website:
museumoflondon.org.uk/schools/learning-resources

What can we discover about identity in medieval London from the tale of the bearded female saint?



Object in focus

Pilgrim badge, late 14th-early 15th century

What is it?

The Museum of London hosts a huge collection of medieval pilgrim badges, which were purchased by Christians at holy sites dedicated to God and the saints of the Christian Church. They were believed to protect the wearers from harm and to heal the sick.

These badges often depicted saints or other religious icons. Experts have recently identified the depiction on this late 14th – early 15th century badge as one of Christ. However, originally, it was thought to be a representation of the bearded female saint, Wilgefortis.



Late 14th – early 15th century
pilgrim badge depicting Christ

Why is it related to LGBT+ history?

The legend of St Wilgefortis seems to date to 14th century Portugal. She is said to have been a princess who converted to Christianity and took a vow of virginity. When her pagan father tried to force her to marry the King of Sicily, she prayed to God to save her, and, on the day of her wedding, she woke to find that God had blessed her with a fully grown beard. When the groom saw this, he called off the wedding, but Wilgefortis' father was so angry that he crucified her. Having been slain for her devotion to God, she became a martyr of the Christian faith.

Idols and statues cropped up across Europe of a person being crucified, wearing a dress and boasting a full beard. St Wilgefortis, who disrupted the idea of the gender binary, had become an iconic religious idol who was celebrated by the medieval Christian Church, rather than being the target of criticism.

St Wilgefortis was worshipped by unhappily married women, or those who did not wish to marry at all. It wasn't until the 16th century that the clergy tried to suppress her story and image.

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

Further information

The Museum of London has an internationally important collection of medieval pilgrim souvenirs. Discover more on our website:
[collections.museumoflondon.org.uk/online/
group/19998.html](http://collections.museumoflondon.org.uk/online/group/19998.html)

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.

Use your whiteboard to display an image of the pilgrim badge. Give students a couple of minutes to consider the following question on their own:

What words would you associate with this image?

Pilgrim badges were precious symbols of a holy journey. Pilgrims displayed them on their cloaks and hats to show pride in the connection they had to their Christian faith.

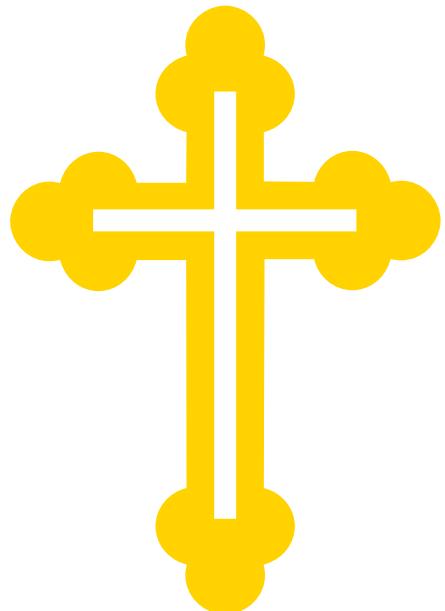
You could use this to introduce how St Wilgefortis – a person who breached strictly defined medieval gender binaries – was sometimes used as a precious symbol by medieval women who wished to challenge the norm by remaining unmarried.

Now ask students to choose an object, symbol or image which they believe represents their identity. There are lots of ways in which you could address this, for instance:

A group discussion

Students could draw the symbols/objects which relate to them

Make a display of objects brought in by the students. Each student could write a ‘museum label’ to accompany their object.



The Museum of London collection contains many medieval pilgrim badges, including this one depicting St Thomas Becket

We've created a suite of resources on London's LGBT+ History, just for you. Discover these and other resources for secondary schools on our website:
museumoflondon.org.uk/schools/learning-resources

How did Oscar Wilde's personal life influence the plot and performances of his play *The Importance of Being Earnest*?



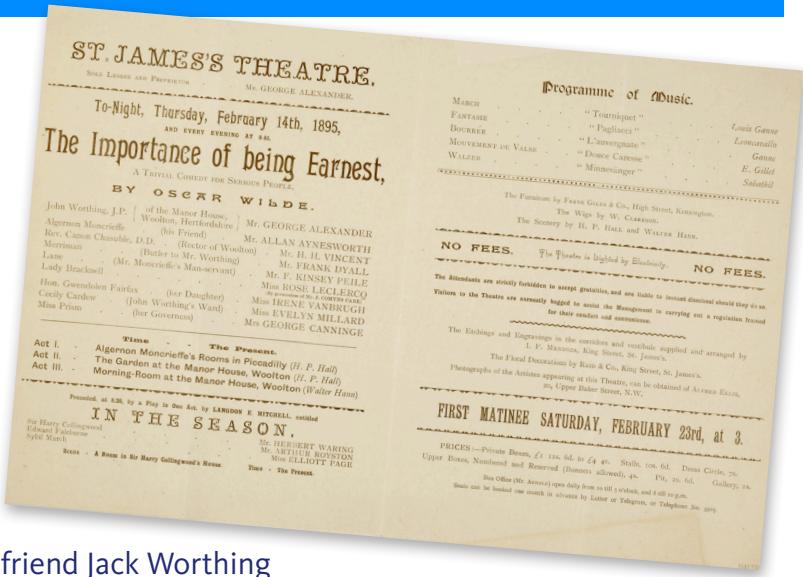
Object in focus

Theatre programme for *The Importance of Being Earnest*, 1895

What is it?

Oscar Wilde was an Anglo-Irish novelist, playwright and a celebrity in late 19th century London. This is a theatre programme for the first performance of his play called *The Importance of Being Earnest* at St James's Theatre on 14 February 1895. The programme includes the full cast list and general information about the theatre. *The Importance of Being Earnest* was Oscar Wilde's fourth West End hit in only three years.

The plot of the play revolves around the mischief caused by Algernon Moncrieff and his friend Jack Worthing as they both lead 'double lives' and invent characters to justify how they act when in the respectable country, or the thrilling society of London.



Theatre programme, 1895

Why is it related to LGBT+ history?

The *Importance of Being Earnest* was a huge success until Wilde was embroiled in a scandal. Despite being a popular and talented playwright, he was not protected from Victorian laws which forbade and condemned homosexuality.

From 1891, Oscar Wilde had an affair with Lord Alfred Douglas. In 1895, Douglas's father, the Marquis of Queensbury, discovered the affair and accused Wilde of homosexuality. In turn, Wilde sued the Marquis for libel. The resulting court case quickly turned into one against Oscar Wilde's homosexuality, and the scandal forced *The Importance of Being Earnest* to close as theatre goers stayed away in disgust. During the case, Queensbury revealed love letters which Wilde had sent to his son and read out homoerotic passages in his works, leading Wilde to be sentenced to two years of hard labour for gross indecency.

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

Further information

Object entry: [The Importance of Being Earnest](http://collections.museumoflondon.org.uk/online/object/67347.html)

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.

Present your students with a brief summary of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, focusing on the aspect of 'double lives'.

In what ways could Jack and Algernon's behaviour reflect Oscar Wilde's own experiences?

Students might consider these questions:

The play isn't about being earnest (honest) at all, but instead about two men who are lying about a character called 'Ernest' in order to lead double lives. How much does the title reflect Wilde's own life?

Homosexuality was viewed as deviant in the 19th century. Like Jack and Algernon, gay men had to hide aspects of their lives. How can this context add to your understanding of the play?

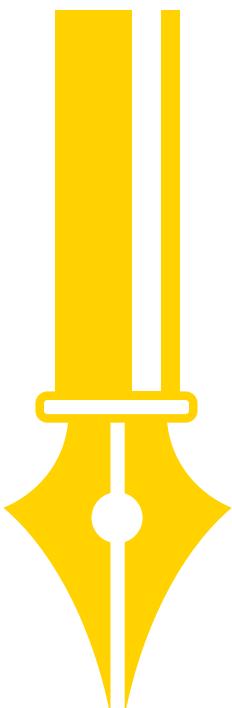
Oscar Wilde hid his relationships with men from public view until they were revealed by someone else. How is this similar to the characters in the play?

Wilde was married while having his affair with Douglas. Does this count as a double life? Why?

Jack and Algernon's secrets lead to a positive outcome. Can the same be said for Wilde?

If you have more time, you could also link this to other works of Wilde, or those referred to in the trial. For example:

- During Wilde's trial it was claimed that the premise of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), where an older artist is attracted to the beauty of A younger man whose portrait he paints, has homoerotic undertones
- Lord Alfred Douglas had written a poem called 'Two Loves' in 1892, the last line of which reads 'The love that dare not speak its name'. This was presented as evidence during Wilde's trial as a reference to their secret relationship.



How can we use a photograph to explore the identity of the composer and Suffragette Ethel Smyth?



Object in focus

Photograph of Ethel Smyth, May 1913

Who was Ethel Smyth?

Ethel Smyth was an accomplished classical composer of the early 20th century, who dedicated two years of her life to the Suffragette movement, which campaigned for women to be allowed to vote in parliamentary elections. One of her most significant contributions to the campaign of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) was the well-remembered marching song, 'The March of the Women', the original sheet music for which is in the Museum of London collection.

Despite her father's protests, Ethel studied composition and symphony from a young age and, in 1922, she became the first woman to receive a Damehood for her contribution to the field.



Portrait photograph of Ethel Smyth, 1913

Why is it related to LGBT+ history?

Ethel Smyth had many confirmed relationships with women throughout her life and some references to them have been found in her writing, including a relationship with the ex-Empress of France. Smyth also had a relationship with a man named Henry Brewster, although she confided to him that it was 'easier for me to love my own sex passionately, rather than yours'.

It is important to recognise that the term 'lesbian', though referred to as early as 1893, did not popularly circulate until long after some women gained the vote in 1918, and so we shouldn't use this language to describe Smyth.



Cover of sheet music for 'The March of the Women', composed by Ethel Smyth with words by Cicely Hamilton, 1911

Today we might refer to London's LGBT+ community. It's important to remember this is modern terminology that would not have been used at the beginning of the 20th century.

Further information

Collections in Focus: **The Suffragettes**
collections.museumoflondon.org.uk/online/group/18146.html

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.

Use your whiteboard to display the photograph of Ethel Smyth. It can be found with further information here: collections.museumoflondon.org.uk/online/object/294232.html

You might want to introduce her as a Suffragette, but not reveal anything else. Then, ask students to work in pairs to answer the following question. They'll only need a couple of minutes.

What words would you associate with this image?

Students may consider Ethel's wealth, childhood, appearance, job or background. You could focus on the photograph as an object and think about artistic style, its potential purpose, size and Ethel's pose.

When everyone has given feedback, reveal that Ethel Smyth was also:

A renowned composer

The first woman to receive a Damehood for her contribution to the field of symphony

Known for having passionate affairs, often with women

A Suffragette

Sentenced to two months in prison for window breaking for the votes for women cause in 1912

A good friend of Emmeline Pankhurst. Emmeline stayed in her Woking home whilst recuperating after a hunger strike in 1913.

