

Under the radar: A snapshot of lesbian and gay lives in London, 1700 – today

Social attitudes to same-sex love and relationships today are very different to those of the past.

The lives of many gay men and women were lived in secrecy and fear. This was due to the stigma surrounding homosexuality in society. There were also extremely harsh punishments given to those who were caught.

Despite this, historical evidence reveals that many lesbian and gay liaisons took place. These individuals may not always have defined themselves as lesbian or gay, or belonged to a gay community. Their identities are not always known to us, but their lives can provide fascinating insights into diverse relationships in London's history.

How did attitudes towards homosexuality change in London between 1700 - 1900?

From 1533, homosexual activities between men became both a sin and a crime punishable by death.

Gay people having sex did so at great personal risk. Despite this, many men frequented known gay meeting places. In 1701 the Society for the Reformation of Manners entrapped 100 gay men in an attempt to 'cleanse' the streets.

Society despised gay men as a corrupting influence and revelled in the scandals reported in the press.

Etching of Ganymede & Jack-Catch by M Darly. 1776. Portrayal of Samuel Drybutter (Ganymede) as he escapes being hanged for gay activities.



It was not until 1861 that the death penalty was changed to life imprisonment. However, in 1885 the Criminal Law Amendment Act, known as the 'blackmailer's charter' was passed. It meant that any form of homosexual expression could be prosecuted.

In 1895 the sensational trials of Oscar Wilde forced Victorians to confront evidence of homosexuality, helping to create the beginnings of a movement for homosexual emancipation.

Between 1800 and 1834, 80 men were hanged in England for having sex with other men.

Where did lesbian and gay people meet up in London?



1920s shop window from J Lyons and Co. Ltd. Corner House, Coventry Street, London. The restaurant was a popular gay meeting place.

London's urban environment offered a variety of places for gay encounters.

In the 1700s, in order to avoid discovery, men engaged in gay sex in guarded rooms behind taverns called 'Molly houses'.

Bars, coffee houses, music halls and theatres around London's West End became popular meeting places, from the 18th century onwards. The Lyons Corner House on Coventry Street, affectionately known as the 'Lily Pond', was frequented by gay and straight clientele.

For lesbians, the Gateways Club, Chelsea was one of the few places in the UK where they could openly meet from the 1940s – 1960s. Locally, pubs like The Chepstow in Notting Hill were meeting places for lesbian networks.

During the 1970s, the gay scene became openly visible in Soho. Today gay life exists across most areas of London.

In 1984, police raided 'Gay's the Word', a lesbian and gay bookshop and meeting place, seizing hundreds of books.

How did the lesbian and gay community fight for equal rights?

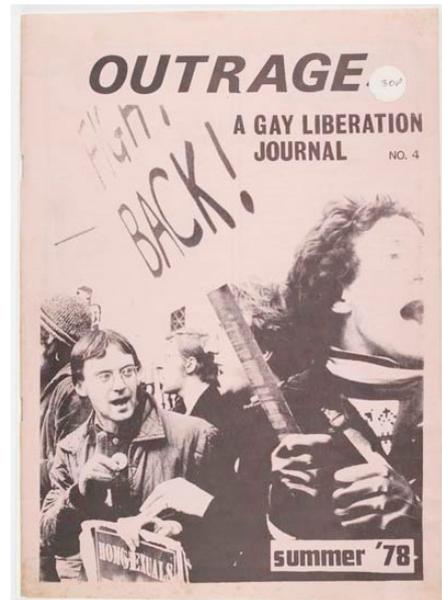
London's lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community has been central to the national fight for equal rights.

Organised campaigning began in 1958. Anthony Grey was foremost in actively campaigning with the Homosexual Law Reform Society to end laws against gay men.

In 1970, the London Gay Liberation Front was founded and the first gay demonstration took place in Islington. Protests, lobbying and gay publications continued to put pressure on the government to end discrimination.

In 1988, Section 28, the first anti-gay law to be passed since 1885, prompted lesbian protesters to abseil into the House of Lords and storm the BBC newsroom.

Bravery, ingenuity and persistence by campaigners has brought an end to legal discrimination in the workplace, legal equality for same-sex partnerships and improved policing against hate crimes. Today the fight continues, for example to outlaw homophobia in schools and sport.



Outrage: A Gay Liberation Journal was set up in the 1970s. It contained articles and advice on gay rights.

Hidden from history? Lesbian lives in London

In the 1700s and 1800s it was not unusual for women to have passionate friendships with each other. However, proving that relationships were romantic and sexual was difficult. Moreover, there was no specific law against lesbianism, so cases rarely appear in court records.

The existence of an identifiable lesbian scene in London dates back to the 1940s. With more women working and away from home, an exciting bar scene began to emerge.

In the 1950s, butch/femme culture, with its distinct style of dressing, became prominent. Many women had to conform to these roles in order to break into close-knit lesbian networks. Secrecy was necessary to avoid a hostile police force and public.

KENRIC, a social organisation for lesbians, was founded in London in 1965. By 1970, it had almost 600 members and is still going strong today.



Labrys earring. The double-headed axe or labrys, became a popular symbol of lesbian and feminist strength in the 1970s.

In 1827, author Mary Shelley helped Mary Diana Dods (known as Walter Sholto Douglas) and Isabella Robinson to escape to Paris after they married.

How have lesbian and gay Londoners contributed to life in the capital?



Pashmina scarf created by Alexander McQueen, 2009. McQueen was a celebrated and successful gay fashion designer.

The lesbian and gay experience in London has changed dramatically in 300 years. Today the community is more socially accepted and better protected by the law. Gay and lesbian characters on TV have become part of our social fabric and gay couples with families have become more commonplace. However, some areas of life remain difficult; for example, religious communities continue to be divided over lesbian and gay rights.

Lesbian and gay people have contributed significantly to the capital's economy and businesses. The visibility of the gay community has grown, particularly in the arts and entertainment industries. So has its economic power, creating the phenomenon of the 'pink pound'. The lesbian and gay leisure scene has helped define London as one of the most gay-friendly cities in the world.

It is estimated that more than a third of all gay people in the UK live in London.

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Further resources for teachers/tutors

Explore the images for this topic in the Picturebank: www.museumoflondon.org.uk/picturebank

Further reading

Alkarim Jivani, *It's not unusual: A History of Lesbian and Gay Britain in the Twentieth Century*, 1997.

www.schools-out.org.uk

lgbthistorymonth.org.uk

www.stonewall.org.uk

Visit the museum

Many objects relating to this topic are on display in the World City gallery at the Museum of London.