LGBT History – a general overview

This text is written only as a brief, basic guide to LGBT history, and was researched and written by Ingvild Nilssen, as part of a dissertation for her Public History Masters Degree, Royal Holloway University of London, 2010-2011. Edited by Di Stiff, Collections Development Archivist, Surrey History Centre.

This text is based on the following books:
Naphy, William, Born to be Gay: a history of homosexuality, 2006
Cook, Matt, A Gay History of Britain, 2011
Brady, Sean, Masculinity and Male Homosexuality, 2005
Robb, Graham, Strangers: Homosexual love in the nineteenth century, 2003
Dictionary of National Biography online (DNB)

Works are cited in brackets.

Homosexuality in early civilizations
Evidence dating from 3000 BC to the beginning of Christianity shows that homosexual practices were an accepted part of the cultures of the Near East. This is confirmed by many literary and legal texts in which homosexual activity is mentioned. (Naphy)

In Eastern religions there was much sexual activity of all varieties. Hindu gods have same-sex relations, they alter their gender, and in some cases they are seen as having manifestations both as males and females (and in some instances both at the same time). (Naphy)

Same-sex relationships and gender ambiguity also occurred in early Roman and Greek mythologies, as well as Roman and Greek cultures. The same-sex relationships in these cultures were normally of a younger and an older man. (Naphy)

Judaism introduced a profoundly different attitude to sex. Because they were surrounded by hostile forces, the small tribal Jewish groups saw the need to strengthen and increase their group. It was therefore essential for the tribes that sex served the purpose of procreation. The notion that sex was for procreation and not pleasure would later be spread worldwide through Christianity and Islam. (Naphy)

From the early days of the Christianity, this new religion wished to be distinct and morally superior to their pagan neighbours. Promiscuity, prostitution, adultery, homosexuality, and sex with youths were all part of the pagan sexual world rejected by the Christian Church. The Christian ideas of sexuality created the basis for the increasingly violent condemnation of homosexuality and homosexuals. (Naphy)

Once the emperors in Rome adopted Christianity the situation began to change dramatically in regard to the openness and acceptance of same-sex relationships that had been practiced for centuries. The first Christian emperor, Constantine the great (272-337AD) started a Christianisation of the imperial law, and abolished any
recognition of gay marriages. In 533 AD emperor Justinian introduced the first specific laws that aimed to outlaw all types of homosexual behaviour. (Naphy)

**The Middle Ages**

In the twelfth century the church started taking an even greater interest in sexual immorality. In 1102, the Council of London required that sodomy should be confessed as a sin, and attempts were made to enforce celibacy amongst monastic communities. In the period leading up to the Black Death (c. 1350) regulations against homosexuality increased because it became more associated with heretical movements. (Naphy)

In the fourteenth century the Black Death wiped out large numbers of the population in Europe. People now sought to explain why God had punished them so horrifically, and numerous groups were targeted as scapegoats. Amongst those that were targeted were Jews and homosexuals. People thought that ‘toleration’ of sinfulness and moral impurity was the cause of God’s anger, as it had been in the Biblical tale of Sodom and Gomorrah - since God might show his anger against a city in the form of a contagious epidemic the community sought to cleanse itself of ‘pollution’ and ‘prevent recontamination’. (Naphy)

Europe was repeatedly attacked by plague throughout the late medieval period, and the depopulation put a greater focus on producing legitimate children. Therefore, prostitution and male homosexuality were condemned as unproductive as well as immoral. (Naphy)

**The Reformation and the introduction of legislation**

When Western Christianity splintered into Catholicism and Protestantism in the sixteenth century, this worsened the situation for homosexuals. The rival religions sought to attack the morals of the opponent but at the same time it was essential for both sides to maintain a spotless record. (Naphy)

The first secular law forbidding homosexuality in England was ‘The Buggery Act’ of 1533, passed at the time of Henry VIII’s break with Catholicism. The act defined ‘buggery’ as an ‘unnatural sexual act against the will of God and man’, which could be punished by death. Monks were accused of homosexual behaviour, and the act sought to justify the dissolution of the monasteries and the seizure of their land. Control over homosexuality passed from the Church to the state and all trials were documented in state prosecution records. Most of the sources of homosexuality, therefore, date from after the act. (Naphy and Cook)

The playwright and schoolmaster at Eton, Nicholas Udall (1504-1556), appears to be the second person to be convicted by the act. Udall pleaded guilty to the charge of ‘buggery’ in 1541 and was committed to the Marshalsea prison in London. (DNB)

**The spread of Christian and Muslim values**

The European explorations of the African coast and the Americas from the fifteenth century onwards brought Europeans into contact with cultures that had different attitudes to gender, sex and sexuality. The explorers (and later the colonialists) saw it as essential that these people converted to Christianity and made a break with their past. The idea of sex for procreation only spread slowly across the continents with
Christianity. At the same time Islam brought the view to East Africa and the Indian subcontinent. (Naphy)

**Victorian values**
Because the Enlightenment was a period of liberal thinking, a somewhat more lax attitude to sexuality existed in the eighteenth century. Although homosexual behaviour had been illegal since the sixteenth century, the law had hardly been enforced before the 1720s. It was only after 1780 that the numbers of men arrested started to rise significantly. The law from the sixteenth century that only appeared to criminalize one kind of sexual act, was now adapted so that it could be used against all kinds of male ‘homosexual behaviour’. (Cook)

Edward Onslow (1758-1829), a member of the well-known landed Surrey family was accused of homosexual advances in 1781. He had started his political career as an MP for Aldborough a year earlier. When the case was brought before a magistrate, public pressure forced Onslow to resign his seat in Parliament, and rather than receiving punishment, he was exiled to France. (See Edward Onslow’s story on the Exploring Surrey’s Past website: [http://www.exploringsurreyspast.org.uk/themes/people/notable_residents/edward_onslow/](http://www.exploringsurreyspast.org.uk/themes/people/notable_residents/edward_onslow/)

In the nineteenth century when puritan, Victorian moral values started to impact upon society. This led to an unprecedented rise in the numbers of men being punished for engaging in homosexual acts. Same-sex desire was now criminalised and policed more vigilantly than ever before. Never before in the British LGBT history had so many men been arrested, put in the stocks, imprisoned or executed for homosexual offences. (Naphy and Cook)

The criminal law tended to work in favour of the wealthy in the nineteenth century, and the vast majority of those punished for homosexual acts were poor. On average, ninety men a year were charged with homosexual offences in the nineteenth century and about a third as many were arrested and questioned. Most of the men convicted were imprisoned, but before the death penalty for homosexual acts was abolished in 1861, 404 men were sentenced to death in that century alone. Only fifty-six were actually executed, and the remainder were either imprisoned or transported to Australia for life. However, the abuse the men faced in the stocks sometimes also lead to death. (Cook)

A further widening of the law took place in 1885 when a clause in the Criminal Law Amendment Act stated that “Any male person, who, in public or private, commits any act of gross indecency with another male person, shall be guilty of a misdemeanour”. What ‘gross indecency’ actually meant in law was never specified, but the courts seem to have added it to existing offences and used it to describe consenting acts that were not defined by the previous law. By interpreting homosexual acts in a broad sense as ‘attempts’ to commit sodomy, the courts could apply the law to almost anything. (Cook and Brady)

The most famous person affected by 1885 law amendment was Oscar Wilde. In 1895, Wilde was tried and imprisoned for acts of ‘gross indecency’. He was given a degrading and physically wearing punishment in Reading gaol for two years.
Following the sentence he was forced into exile where he died shortly after. (Cook and DNB)

**The emergence of LGBT activism**
The beginnings of the Gay movement started as a response to the harsh persecution of homosexuals in the nineteenth century. The German doctor Karl Henrich Ulrichs was the first to campaign for legal and social acceptance of homosexuality in the 1860s and 1870s. Ulrichs wrote essays and books that explained same-sex love and desire as natural and biological, and he invented a system of classifying the various types of same-sex desire and gender-identities.

In 1869, the Austrian journalist and human rights campaigner, Karl-Maria Kertbeny, was the first to coin the words 'heterosexual' and 'homosexual' as we use the terms today. The term 'homosexual' was used to replace existing offensive words that had previously been used to describe homosexuals. (Cook and Robb)

These ideas made their way to Britain in the 1880s and 1890s. Partly to combat England's harsh laws and try to make a case for legitimacy of same-sex desire, scientific enquiries were made into the nature of sexuality from 1880s onwards. At the same time the artistic Aesthetic Movement, of which Oscar Wilde was a leading figure, rejected the Victorian middle-class ideals of duty and morality. They advocated art for art's sake, a passion for intense feeling and an embrace of classical Greece with its subtly homoerotic ideals of beauty. (Cook)

Edward Carpenter (1844 –1929), a socialist writer, philosopher and sexologist, who lived in Guildford with his lover, George Merrill, is the best known and most influential early English LGBT activist. He argued that homosexual men and women made up a third or 'intermediate' sex besides men and women. He believed that they shared some characteristics with both sexes, which gave them a whole range of beneficial traits usually confined to one gender. In Carpenter's terms homosexuals were the bearers of the future, a sign of evolutionary progression of the human race into a higher sphere. He controversially argued that they were likely to be more useful to society than 'normal' men and women (Cook). Carpenter's story can be read on Exploring Surrey’s Past website http://www.exploringsurreyspast.org.uk/themes/people/writers/edward_carpenter/

**Post-war LGBT activism**
LGBT activism started to emerge in Britain in the late nineteenth century, but a more fixed and unified movement did not transpire until after the Second World War. The British gay and lesbian movement that emerged in the post-war era was a response to a vast increase in persecution of homosexuals in the period. (Engel)

The First and Second World War were in many ways a time of freedom for homosexuality, but from 1944 purges against homosexuals sought to rebuff the lax attitude that had been prevalent. In the post-war period there was a state administered focus on morality and social reconstruction. Attitudes to sexuality had been relatively lax during the war, when many felt that different rules applied in the ordeals of wartime and when away from home. The purges against homosexuals that started from 1944 were one means of rebuffing the lax attitude to morality. (Engel)
There was a popular misconception at the time that homosexuality was contagious. This created the belief that homosexuality had to be rooted out to prevent it from ‘demoralising’ the population. Prosecutions were staged to set dramatic examples for the media, and they usually involved socially prominent but politically expendable figures. The actor John Gielgud, who attended Hillside preparatory school, near Godalming, is an example. He was arrested and pleaded guilty to soliciting sex in a public toilet in 1953. He was fined ten pounds and the told by the magistrate to “see your doctor the moment you leave this court”. Whether notable or not, he received a standing ovation at his first theatre performance following the arrest. (Engel and DNB)

The persistent persecutions meant that gay men had to be extremely cautious. They were continuously vulnerable to blackmail, theft and violence, and were not likely to get much sympathy from the police. Accordingly, the Church of England advocated the legalization of sex between consenting men and an equal age of consent in 1954. The Church argued that the law led to blackmail and suicide. (Cook and Engel)

The mathematician and Guilford resident, Alan Turing (1912-1954), was a case in point. Turing had played a significant part in breaking the Nazi Enigma code, and his research laid the foundation for modern-day computing. In 1952, he was prosecuted for ‘gross indecency’ and he was ‘treated’ with estrogen hormone as an alternative punishment. Turing committed suicide in 1954. (Engel and SHC text). Read Turing’s story on the Exploring Surrey’s Past website http://www.exploringsurreyspast.org.uk/themes/people/scientists/alan_turing/

The Wolfenden report and the extension of rights
The same year the government established a committee led by Sir John Wolfenden to study the law regarding homosexuals. Wolfenden lived in Guildford and was vice-chancellor of Reading University; his own son Jeremy was gay. In 1957, the Wolfenden Committee released its report that recommended decriminalisation of private consensual homosexual acts between men over twenty-one. Despite heavy lobbying Parliament rejected the Wolfenden proposal for ten years and the Sexual Offences Act was not passed until 1967. An article on the Wolfenden report by Philip French in The Observer, can be seen here http://www.theguardian.com/theobserver/2007/jun/24/features.review27

Though the result of the act was welcome, it was simply not substantial enough. The act did not apply to Scotland, Northern Ireland or the Channel Islands, and homosexual sex also remained illegal in the merchant navy and armed forces until 1999. Many men refused to ‘comport themselves quietly’ after 1967, and they demanded both rights and respect for their sexual and potentially cultural difference. (Cook)

The Campaign for Homosexual Equality (CHE) was founded in 1964. CHE’s visions were wider than merely law reform, and they called amongst other for the establishment of social clubs for gays. The more radical organization Gay Liberation Front (GLF) was founded in 1970, and drew on the increasing European radicalism of the late 1960s. Like CHE, the GLF was not a single-issue reform group, but labelled themselves a people’s movement. (Engel)
The GLF dissolved as an organization in 1972 much due to internal disputes. Still, the philosophy they had prompted lived on not least through the development of the gay press. The GLF also provided a model for other gay rights groups, for instance for the Gay Activist Alliance (GAA), founded in 1978. More than simply specific campaigns and experiments in communal living, the GLF and later the GAA demonstrated the scope to ‘come out’ to more than a small circle and to pursue a distinctive unapologetic lifestyle. Nonetheless, although GLF made the biggest splash, CHE was larger and set to be much longer lasting. (Cook). A local Surrey CHE Group existed from the early 1970s until 1975 (http://homepage.ntlworld.com/johngu2/history/index.htm).

Conservativism and AIDS
In the midst of the AIDS endemic in 1987, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher used her conference speech after her third successive election victory to ‘question those who claim an inalienable right to be gay’. The government followed up this rhetoric with legislative action by inserting the infamous Section 28 into the 1988 Local Government Act. Section (or clause) 28 represented attempts to push homosexuality back into the closet, ruling that:

A local authority shall not (a) intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality: (b) promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship (Cook, Matt, A Gay History of Britain, p. 205).

However, the law itself (which turned out to be fairly toothless) was not as important as its effect on gay politics. The crisis which the clause represented served as a drive for collective mobilization on an unprecedented scale, leading to the establishment of British ACT UP, Outrage, and Stonewall in 1989. This way the objective of the clause backfired as it caused an increase of national LGBT visibility.

In the same that way Section 28 spurred protests and activism, the tragedy of AIDS stimulated the growth of self-help organizations and re-politicised the movement. Gay visibility expanded further in the 1990s media, which helped to obtain support for equal rights. In 1994, the age of consent for homosexuals was lowered from 21 to 18 (although still not equalized to the heterosexual age of consent at sixteen), and in 2000 the British government lifted its ban on openly gay men and lesbians from serving in the armed forces. The age of consent was finally equalized in 2001, and Section 28 was successfully repealed in Scotland (2003 for the rest of Britain).

The Adoption and Children’s Act followed in 2002, making Britain one of the first countries to allow joint adoption by gay couples. The culmination, so far as civil liberties for the LGBT population were concerned, came with the Civil Partnership Law in 2005. The law gave homosexual couples who register their relationship almost identical legal protection as married heterosexual couples. In many ways, the conservative backlash, which was crystallized in the passage of Section 28, provided further opportunity for the British gay community to develop from the victimized status to an assertion of pride and political power. (Cook and Engel). In 2014, gay marriage was legalised.
Gino Meriano, chair of Gay Surrey and resident of Weybridge, was a staunch campaigner for the Civil Partnership and Equality Act. Preparing for the act he worked alongside the Registration Service. He has also worked with companies and public authorities on equality and diversity. Meriano continues to provide innovative consultancy on how to approach such a sensitive subject as the LGBT community in business and society (see SHC ref.8506/6/2, 'OK!' Woking Borough Council staff newsletter, 2009, held at Surrey History Centre):
http://www.exploringsurreyspast.org.uk/collections/getrecord/SHCOL_8506_6_1_1_1

Lesbianism and female cross dressers
Unfortunately little is known about lesbianism before the eighteenth century. While sexual activities between men were punished and debated, sexual relationships between women were given little attention. Church authorities in England had acknowledged and disciplined lesbianism as early as the seventh century, but over the following centuries the civil legal systems did not show interest in the subject. (Oram)

The male-dominated society seemed not to be familiar or concerned with female sexual activity at home amongst themselves. In addition, there was a real fear that publicising information about lesbianism might simply lead women to experiment. (Naphy)

In the twentieth century, however, a greater legal discussion over lesbianism arose. While the law never directly prohibited sexual relations between women, it increasingly began to correlate such activity with criminal indecency and it became more firmly linked with immorality. Attempts were made in parliament to criminalise lesbianism in 1921, 1937 and 1956, but criminalisation never took place. However, sexual relations between women were effectively illegal under British military law until 1999. (Naphy)

Because homosexuality laws were in place, there are many more sources for male homosexuality than there are for female. Nevertheless, lesbian history has become more complex as historians have traced same-sex erotic themes and cultural reference points in novels, medical texts and in sources from educational institutions in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. And, according to Alison Oram there is a rich literature of unconstrained romantic expression between women, which has no parallel for homosexual men. (Oram)

The concept of a ‘lesbian identity’ emerged in the late twentieth-century. Women who today describe themselves as lesbian, bisexual or transsexual did not previous have a language enabling them to do this. They could only understand their desires, behaviour and experiences within the social context of their own time. This is also the case with male homosexuality. The term ‘homosexual’ as we know and use it today was used for the first time in 1869. (Oram)

World War I is often credited with enhancing social awareness of lesbianism. The blurring of gender lines as women took over some male roles, the masculine image of women in uniforms of the auxiliary services, and the challenge to conventional sexual morality led to fears about the prevalence of both male and female homosexuality. (Oram)
The archetypes of lesbianism in modern British history-writing are of cross-dressing women and romantic friends. Cross-dressing has been viewed as a working-class version of lesbianism in the past, whilst romantic friendship is the equivalent in the middle and upper classes. (Oram)

**Romantic friendship**
Throughout most of the nineteenth century the dominant belief was that respectable middle-class women were without sexual passion. This meant that romantic friendship was largely acceptable within the framework of female virtue. Nevertheless, most women were economically dependant on male relatives and had few opportunities for choice in relation to partner and creation of households. Only a small number of women could be truly independent via inheritance or professional work until the later part of the nineteenth century. At the same time openness about their love was easier for the nineteenth century than the twentieth century women, since awareness of lesbianism as a stigmatised sexual identity increased in the twentieth century. (Oram)

**Cross-dressing**
Women were excluded from most skilled work and earned less than the typical male wage, some barely had enough to survive on without recourse to prostitution or the workhouse. By passing as men, women could take male occupations, and they could secure both economical and physical freedom. This way they could travel, seek adventure, or participate in wars. There was no law against women’s cross-dressing, but they would often be ridiculed if they were exposed. There are sources for cross-dressing women marrying or having relationships with other women, but we must assume that some of them simply desired to be men and did not have same-sex desire. Therefore, cross-dressing in the nineteenth century may be seen as gender inversion, and today may be classified as transgender or transsexuality.