

History Topic of the Month

The Gay Pride Movement in the UK

The UK provides one of the highest degrees of liberty in the world for LGBT+ people today. However, it took decades of struggle and protest to get to this point. Along the way, the movement was met with police brutality, repressive legislation and persecution towards the LGBT+ community and their supporters. Many people in Britain believed that gay and lesbian people were inferior to heterosexual people and some religious groups felt that same-sex relationships were immoral. By the early 1970s, the movement started to make progress and gained more publicity. Groups such as the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) began to organise themselves, holding weekly meetings and planning the UK's First Gay Pride Rally in London.



Contributor: © Paul Brown / Alamy Stock Photo

Crowds gathered in Trafalgar Square at the Pride London gay parade 29 June 2013, London. UK.

How the law in Britain has changed over time

In sixteenth-century England, homosexuality was a criminal offence because of the Buggery Act of 1533. This was during the reign of Henry VIII. The law said that sexual relations between two men were illegal and punishable by death. This was the first time that such matters had been enshrined in English law; before this, accusations of same-sex relations had gone through religious courts. Walter Hungerford, the owner of Farleigh Hungerford Castle in Somerset, was the first man to be executed under the Act in 1540.

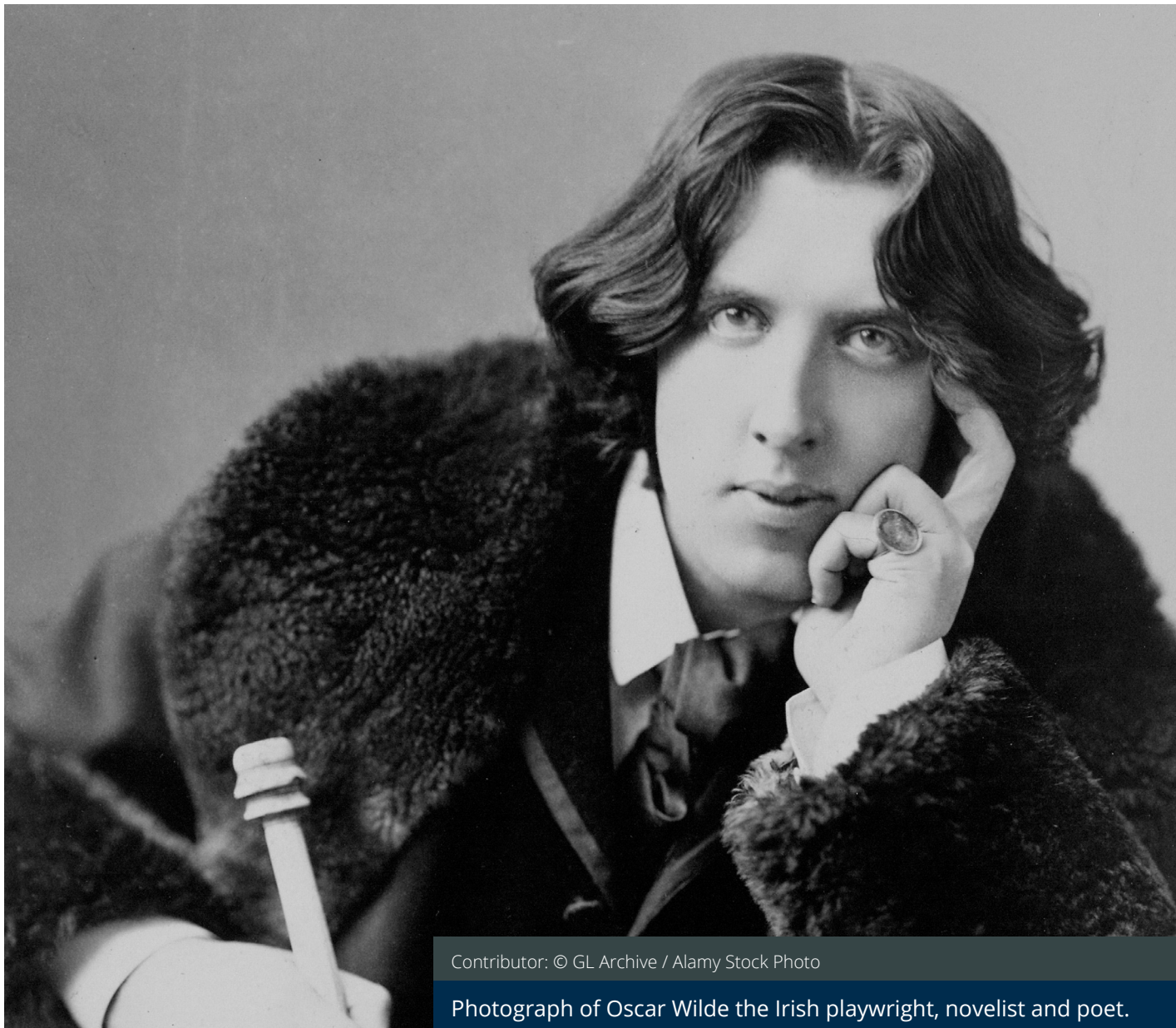
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In 1855, the Criminal Law Amendment Act strengthened UK law against any kind of sexual activity between men under the legal term 'gross indecency'. It also extended the laws to include any kind of sexual activity between males. Oscar Wilde was convicted under this law and sentenced to two years of penal labour between 1895 and 1897. It is important to note that these laws did not apply to lesbians or queer women. Homosexual activity remained a capital offence until 1861. The last execution took place on 27 November 1835 when James Pratt and John Smith were hanged outside Newgate Prison in London.

The 1967 Sexual Offences Act made consensual sex between men over the age of 21 and in private, legal in England and Wales. This was extended to Scotland in 1980.

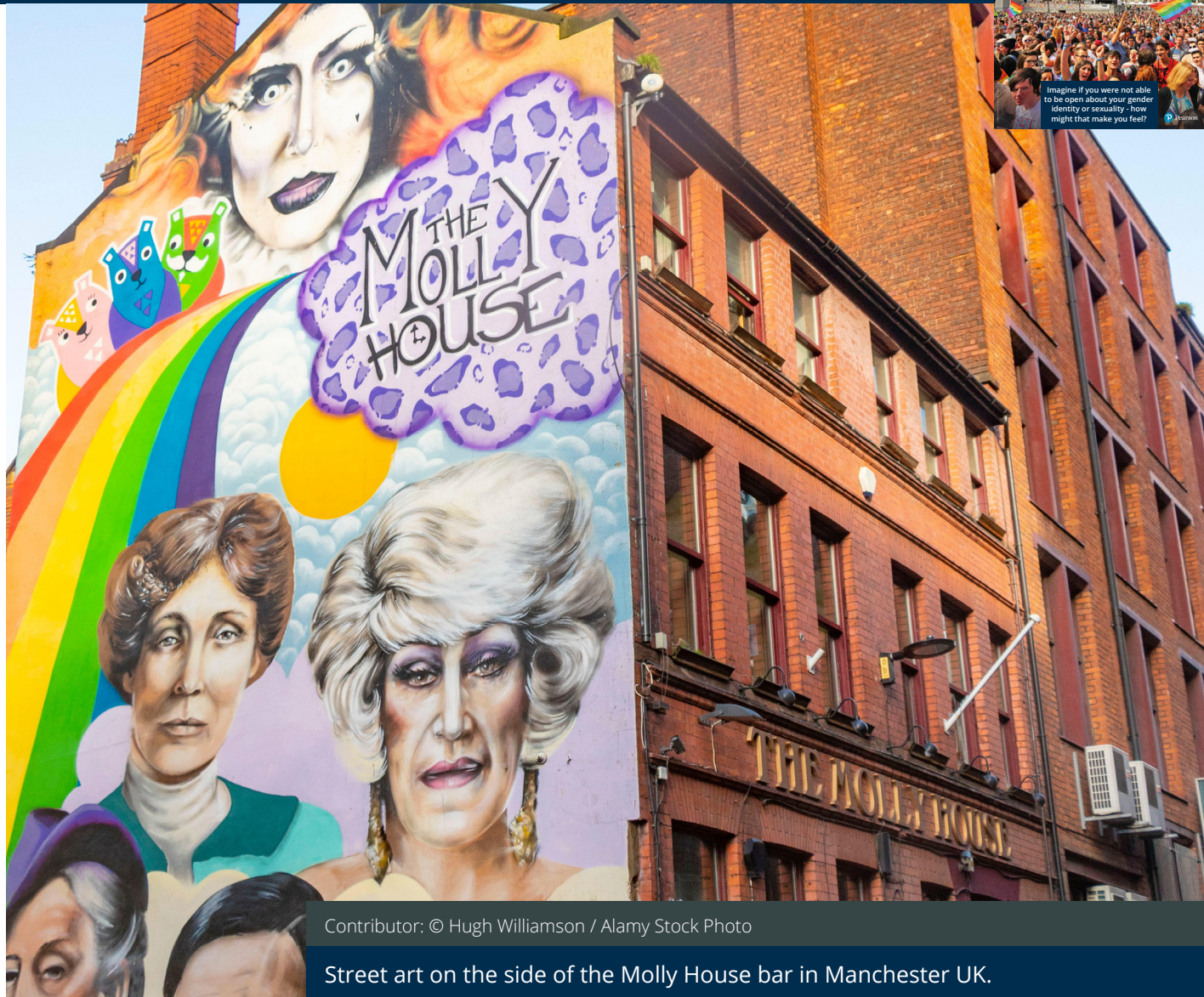
Despite this, gay men still did not have equality with opposite-sex couples. The age of consent for heterosexual relations was much lower at 16. It also meant that gay couples were still too scared to show affection to their partner in public. As a result, many queer people's lives remained hidden.



Contributor: © GL Archive / Alamy Stock Photo

Photograph of Oscar Wilde the Irish playwright, novelist and poet.

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Contributor: © Hugh Williamson / Alamy Stock Photo

Street art on the side of the Molly House bar in Manchester UK.

LGBT+ London

London's relationship with the LGBT+ population has a complex history. On the one hand, London provided havens and safe spaces for gay communities, but it also has a history of treating queer people very cruelly. There were many places for homosexual and queer people to meet in London. 'Molly-house' was a term used in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain for a meeting place for homosexual men. 'Molly-houses' took place in pubs or coffee shops and, whilst it is alleged that London had more gay pubs and clubs in 1720 than it did in 1950, people were not completely safe. Raids on known 'molly-houses' were frequent and often resulted in imprisonment. Margaret 'Mother' Clap was an owner of a well-known 'molly-house' house in Holborn. The house was under surveillance for two years before it was raided in 1726. As a result, 40 men were arrested as well as Mother Clap herself, who was accused of keeping a disorderly house for entertaining homosexuals.

However, in the early to mid-twentieth century, London had a thriving gay culture. The Gateways Club was the longest running lesbian nightclub in the world, opening in 1936 and closing in 1985.

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Contributor: © Philip Scalia / Alamy Stock Photo

Iconic gay bar The Stonewall Inn, Greenwich Village, New York City, USA.

The Gay Liberation Front (GLF)

In 1969, eight police officers raided the Stonewall Inn in the Greenwich Village neighbourhood of New York City, USA. The Stonewall Riots prompted six days of protests and violent clashes with law enforcement. These uprisings sparked the gay liberation movement in the USA. In early July 1969, discussions in the gay community led to the formation of the Gay Liberation Front (GLF). They demanded an end to the persecution of homosexuals in the USA. They also used their struggle to denounce racism. In 1970, two individuals called Bob Mellors and Aubrey Walter met in New York at a Black Panther event. Inspired by the GLF, they decided to create a London version. The first UK meeting was held on 13 October 1970 in a basement at the London School of Economics. Their 1971 manifesto was printed on flyers, listing their demands. They demanded 'that all discrimination against gay people, male and female, by the law, by employers, and by society at large, should end'. In addition, they also wanted sex education in schools to 'stop being exclusively heterosexual' and for 'gay people to be free to hold hands and kiss in public'.

Find out more about Stonewall in our previous History topic of the month here

Highbury Fields, 1970

The first gay rights demonstration in Britain took place in Highbury Fields, Islington on 27 November 1970 when 150 members of the Gay Liberation Front held a torchlight rally. They were protesting because of the police harassment and arrest of a young man called Louis Eakes. He was arrested by undercover police, accused of 'cruising'. Whilst homosexuality had been decriminalised partially in 1967, many men were still convicted just for smiling or flirting with other men in public. The Highbury Fields rally was a key turning point because it was the first time LGBT+ people had protested for their civil rights in Britain. It is important to note that the gay liberation movement and the civil rights campaigns for racial justice also worked together. The GLF had broad appeal because it spoke out against racism, and one of the first GLF marches was run by people from the famous Mangrove Caribbean restaurant in Notting Hill.

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The Festival of Light, 1971

By 1971, the UK GLF was recognised as a political movement in the national press, holding weekly meetings of 200 to 300 people. The GLF organised a series of high-profile direct actions to get their message across. One of the best-organised GLF actions was the disruption of the launch of the 1971 Festival of Light. The Festival was a movement by British Christians concerned about the so-called 'permissive society', including homosexuality. In response, groups of GLF members dressed in drag marched into the event and spontaneously kissed each other as a sign of protest. Other members of the GLF released mice, sounded horns and waved banners. A small group disguised themselves as workmen, gained access to the basement and turned off the lights.

The first UK Gay Pride March, 1972

In 1972, homosexuality was wrongly seen as an illness, and employers could sack you for being LGBT+. On 1 July 1972 the GLF organised the UK's first official Gay Pride March in London. The date chosen was the 1 July, the nearest Saturday to the anniversary of Stonewall. Between 1,000 and 2,000 people joined the march, many of them dressed in drag. The march was a carnival-style parade, which also featured a mass 'kiss-in' that, at the time, was against the law. Other organisations such as the Campaign for Homosexual Equality (CHE) and those who had been part of the recent miners' strikes also joined in. However, there was a very strong police presence at the march and reactions from the public were not always supportive. The slogan of the first UK Pride was 'Innovate, don't assimilate!' The campaigners wanted real change in society; they did not call for equality but instead for proper liberation.

Pride today

The second gay pride march happened the following year in 1973. In the 1980s activists protested against the government's response to the AIDS crisis and Section 28, which meant it was illegal to 'promote homosexuality' in schools. Since the 1990s, Pride events have taken place annually across major cities in the UK, including Brighton, Manchester and Birmingham. In 2005, UK Black Pride was created by Phyllis Opoku-Gyimah. It has become Europe's largest celebration for African, Asian, Middle Eastern, Latin American and Caribbean heritage LGBT+ people. The 2015 Gay Pride Parade in London attracted 1 million people, making it the seventh-largest gay event in the world, and the 2019 Pride in London attracted over 1.5 million people, making it the biggest Pride in the UK.

The GLF have helped to give a voice to the LGBT+ campaign in Britain. Those people who marched in 1972 like Peter Tatchell, Nettie Pollard and Ted Brown have paved the way for LGBT+ people in Britain to be able to have more visibility, and changes in the law have occurred such as the introduction of civil partnerships, the 2002 Adoption Act and same-sex marriage. However, some campaigners believe that Pride has now lost its political edge, and in 2020 some original members of the GLF joined forces with the Black Trans Lives Matter march, to provide solidarity and fight for liberation for all in society.



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Discussion points

- Imagine if you were not able to be open about your gender identity or sexuality - how might that make you feel?
- Why do you think the law only criminalised gay men and not lesbian or bisexual women? Do you think lesbian and bisexual women would have still been discriminated against?
- Why do you think the first meeting of the GLF took place in a basement? What does this tell us about life for LGBT+ people in Britain at this time?
- The GLF's marches attracted support from a range of people, including those fighting for workers' rights, racial justice and women's liberation. Can you find out how and why these groups supported the LGBT+ movement? What did they have in common?
- Many organisers from the 1970 and 1972 marches still campaign fiercely for LGBT+ liberation today. What else can you find out about people such as Ted Brown, Peter Tatchell, Nettie Pollard, Bob Mellors and Walter Aubrey?
- What can you find out about the struggle for equal rights in the UK? What was life like for LGBT+ people in the UK during the 1980s? What was the impact of Section 28?
- What else can you find out about the different Prides that take place around Britain? Is there a Pride that takes place near where you live?
- How has Pride changed over time?
- What can you find out about LGBT+ campaigns or protests in countries where homosexuality is still illegal?

About the author

This piece was written by guest author Bex Bothwell-O'Hearn (she/her), Bex is a History and Politics teacher at a secondary school in Suffolk.

To find out more about what she's doing to celebrate more diversity across her school take a look at this case study.

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Articles



<https://www.bl.uk/events/pride-before-pride>

<https://www.petertatchellfoundation.org/my-memories-of-britains-first-lgbt-pride-in-1972/>

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2021/apr/08/ted-brown-the-man-who-held-a-mass-kiss-in-and-made-history>

<https://artsandculture.google.com/exhibit/the-story-of-gay-liberation-front-in-britain-lse-library/GwKSAJsATOGtIg?hl=en>

<https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/gay-liberation-front-manifesto>

<https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/history/blog/2021/gay-liberation/>

<https://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/discover/london-pride-london-lgbt-history-gay-rights#:~:text=The%20first%20Gay%20Pride%20march,lesbian%2C%20transgender%20and%20crossdressing%20community.>

<https://historicengland.org.uk/research/inclusive-heritage/lgbtq-heritage-project/>

Books



- *Pride: The Story of the LGBTQ Equality Movement*, Matthew Todd (2021)
- *Queer City: Gay London from the Romans to the Present Day*, Peter Ackroyd (2018)
- *United Queerdom: From the Legends of the Gay Liberation Front to the Queers of Tomorrow*, Dan Glass (2020)
- *From Prejudice to Pride: A History of LGBTQ+ Movement*, Amy Lame (2019)

Podcasts

- <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p09jkf45>

Websites

- <https://www.stonewall.org.uk/>
- <https://prideinlondon.org/>
- <https://prideinlondon.org/parade/>