



## London

by Brock Thompson

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The capital of the United Kingdom and one of the world's largest and most interesting cities, London has recently become home to an active and diverse glbtq population.

### Medieval and Early Modern Periods

In the Middle Ages London emerged as the largest city in England. As the city grew, it offered individuals the benefits of urban anonymity, which no doubt facilitated same-sex sexual activity that would not have been possible in smaller cities and towns. Not surprisingly, London became a center of sexual diversity, as is clear from the satirical literature of the medieval and Renaissance periods.

The numerous, usually satirical, references to sodomites and catamites point to a concern with sodomy as a social problem in the city. References to "male stews" in the sixteenth century, for example, may refer to gathering places where same-sex sexual activity was condoned.

Moreover, in the homosocial world of early modern London, including especially the Court, where men's most important emotional and social bonds were with other men, same-sex sexual activity was also facilitated. The Court of James I, who ruled from 1603 until 1625, was especially known as a site of same-sex sexual attraction. The emergence of homoeroticism as a serious theme in Renaissance English literature, especially drama, probably bespeaks an awareness of the power of same-sex sexual relations in real life.

### The Georgian Era and the Rise of an Urban Subculture

In *Mother Clap's Molly House: The Gay Subculture in England, 1700-1830*, historian Rictor Norton argues that in periods such as the Elizabethan and Stuart age, same-sex desire flourished only in particular environments such as courts. However, after 1700, when London became the largest city in Europe (boasting a population of 750,000 by 1725), it achieved a population large enough to support subcultures of all sorts. It was at this time in London that men who desired other men began to come together in organized social settings that could be defined as an urban subculture.

At the beginning of the Georgian era (1714-1811), inner London provided an environment in which homosexuality and homosexual desire were viable options. Institutions known as "molly houses" began to spring up on the north side of the river Thames and along the Strand south towards Fleet Street. Molly Houses, either a series of private rooms adjoining a tavern or a private home, catered to a pre-industrial middle-class clientele, mainly tradesmen and artisans such as carpenters and blacksmiths.

The "mollies" who gathered in these places were a new phenomenon in that many of these derived their identity from a larger group identity based on their sexual proclivities, long before the creation of the



**Top:** Detail from an aerial photograph of London created by Mai-Linh Doan in 2005.  
**Above:** The Old Bailey (criminal court) where Oscar Wilde was convicted of "gross indecency." Photograph by David Monniaux. The aerial view of London (copyright © 2005 Mai-Linh Doan) appears under the Creative Commons Attribution ShareAlike 2.0 License France. The image of the Old Bailey (copyright © David Monniaux 2005) appears under the same license.

category of homosexuality and the homosexual near the end of the nineteenth century.

The molly houses of London provided a sense of community and identity; they offered a place for men to join together in the spirit of drink, dance, and song, and, if desired, have sexual intercourse with one another. For many of the mollies, this guarded venue also represented one of the few urban spaces where one could engage in same-sex desires without fear of reprisal. Essentially, the molly house was a place where one could remove the mask of conformity.

Besides the molly house, eighteenth-century London had several other public spaces where one could find willing participants for casual sexual encounters. Indeed, cruising became a popular pastime for many Londoners, and the piazzas of Covent Garden, the greens of Lincoln's Inn, and the gardens of St. James Park provided ample space for those looking for anonymous sexual partners.

These molly houses and cruising areas did not appear all that odd against the London backdrop. The city was already full of male-only institutions such as schools, theaters, and army barracks. Places such as these offered environments where same-sex sexual contact was likely. In some of them, such as the cruising grounds, upper-class individuals, the capitol's elite, could merge with the easy-going and sexually expressive artisan class that frequented the taverns and saloons of the Strand and Fleet Street.

The freedom enjoyed by London's early male homosexual subculture proved to be short-lived. In 1720, London offered over 50 venues that could be considered predominantly gay by today's standards. In 1726, however, the "Society for the Reformation of Manners" began what was to be the first of several raids aimed at closing down the molly houses of London.

For the most part, the reformers' goals were met. Using spies and decoys to entrap and then prosecute individuals, the Society succeeded in closing the last of the molly houses in 1810. Some of those men arrested and found guilty of sodomy were executed; others were sentenced to stand in the pillory, where they were subject to verbal and physical abuse from a London crowd increasingly hostile towards same-sex eroticism.

Little is known of lesbianism in the earlier periods, but in the eighteenth century, the phrase "romantic friendship" emerged to describe the love between women. Because they were presumed to be non-sexual, romantic friendships between women enjoyed a social acceptability that did not extend to male-male sexual relationships.

### **The Victorian Era**

By the end of the nineteenth century, homosexuality had become a social identity, defined in terms of illness as well as crime and sin. If during most of the period, it was the love that dared not speak its name, by the end it had become a topic freely--if mostly censoriously--discussed.

Nineteenth-century London was the site of two major scandals involving homosexuality, one at the beginning, the other at the end of the century. The 1810 conviction of the Vere Street Coterie, a group of men arrested in a male brothel, led to the most brutal public punishment of homosexuals in British history. Two men were executed and others were subjected to the pillory. At the end of the century, Oscar Wilde, the dandiacal playwright and wit who exemplified a new way of being homosexual, was convicted of "gross indecency" and sentenced to two years in prison at hard labor.

On the one hand, the difference in the punishment of those involved in these scandals indicates some progress. In 1861, the punishment for "buggery," which had been execution, had been reduced to imprisonment; but in the 1880s, the Labouchère Amendment vastly expanded prohibited conduct, covering not simply sodomy, but also other acts of "gross indecency." Although Wilde was allegedly spit upon by a mob, it did not physically attack him the way earlier mobs had attacked members of the Vere Street

Coterie who stood in the pillory.

Victorian London was a great contradiction. Beneath the harsh conservative tone of the Victorian era, in which sexual repression came to be seen as a sign of good breeding, there was a vast sexual underworld that thrived on the city's poverty. It was no accident that the chief witnesses against Wilde were male prostitutes.

At the end of the nineteenth century, homosexuality emerged as a social identity, and so did a rudimentary movement for homosexual emancipation.

### **Modern Times, Thatcher, and the Rise of the Gay Ghetto**

In the earlier twentieth century, London's homosexual subculture was largely underground. While a number of homosexuals achieved prominence in the worlds of literature, theater, arts, and design, harsh criminal penalties and the memory of the persecution of Oscar Wilde kept most of them in the closet.

Among the most important, largely homosexual artistic group of the earlier to mid-twentieth century was Bloomsbury. Its name taken from the London neighborhood encompassing Gordon and Fitzroy Squares, where Vanessa and Virginia Stephen lived, following the death of their father Leslie Stephen in 1904, Bloomsbury was an important cultural outpost where homosexuality figured prominently.

In the conservative times following World War II, however, social reformers, now led by such notable figures as Sir Bernard Law Montgomery, sought again to rid London of homosexuality. In the late 1940s and the 1950s there was a vast increase in the number of prosecutions for homosexual offences throughout England, but especially in London.

However, the increase in police raids and arrests of cruisers now generated not only public hysteria about homosexuality, but occasionally unexpected public sympathy. For example, when newly knighted actor Sir John Gielgud was arrested for soliciting in 1953, he was greeted by his fans with an ovation rather than with the scorn he probably expected; and when Lord Montagu of Beaulieu, his cousin Michael Pitt-Rivers, and journalist Peter Wildeblood were convicted of having sexual relations with young working class men and received sentences ranging from twelve to eighteen months in prison, a portion of the London press openly questioned whether their behavior merited such treatment.

During this period, there was a vast disparity in punishment meted out to individuals convicted of homosexual offences. Some were fined small sums of money while others were sentenced to life imprisonment. Some offenders were required to undergo aversion therapy and hormone treatments as conditions of parole or probation.

In response to such disparities in treatment, and goaded by the psychiatric belief that homosexuality might better be treated as an illness than a crime, the Home Secretary appointed the Wolfenden Committee in 1954 to study the matter. The Committee's 1957 Report recommended the decriminalization of private and consensual homosexual acts performed by those over the age of twenty-one.

The government and public opinion initially resisted the Committee's recommendation, but the Report had the effect of stirring public debate. After more than a decade of lobbying by reformers, Parliament finally implemented the Committee's recommendation in 1967.

The latter years of the twentieth-century saw increased visibility and politicization of gay men and lesbians in London. The gay and lesbian rights groups formed in the 1960s flourished in the 1970s. New venues for gay men and lesbians were established as areas of the city became more welcoming. The nightclub Heaven opened its doors in 1979, and soon became the largest gay disco in Europe.

The election of Margaret Thatcher in 1979 and the introduction of her decidedly anti-gay measures only added to the political context that gay and lesbian Londoners would organize around in the 1980s. The infamous Clause 28, adopted by Thatcher's government in 1988, was a direct response to the success of gay and lesbian activism in the city. It prohibited the promotion of homosexuality or teaching in state schools the acceptability of homosexuality as a "pretended family relationship."

If Clause 28 was a conservative reaction to the gay-positive actions of the London city authorities, it in turn sparked an ever increasing activism on the part of gay and lesbian Londoners. The homophobic measure may be said to have made gay activists out of people who might never have come out, such as, for example, the actor Ian McKellen, who revealed his homosexuality in a BBC radio interview in response to the legislation, and then joined with other prominent gay men and lesbians to form the Stonewall Group, Britain's first major lesbian and gay rights lobbying organization. Other organizations, including the group OutRage!, agitated for the repeal of Clause 28, which was finally repealed in 2003.

Thatcher's radical free-market and individualist politics in many ways contributed to the rise of the Soho, London's gay ghetto. The 1980s and early 1990s saw a renewed and increased vigor in gay politics. Responding to the new voracious commercial consumerism, the AIDS crisis, and a conservative government's repressive and reactionary measures, London's gay men and lesbians sought to create a visible niche for themselves.

Soho, featuring London's former red-light district and Old Compton Street, became the place that reflected the new political agenda as well as restored queer self-confidence in urban, public space. During the 1990s, London's gay scene expanded immensely, as politically upfront visibility merged with free-market commercialism.

Soho and Old Compton Street occupy the ideal space for a new gay community. In the heart of London, the area is positioned between some of London's busiest areas, sitting only blocks from such popular destinations (and old, familiar cruising grounds) as Covent Garden, Chinatown, and Piccadilly.

The new queer visibility in the heart of England's capital did, however, make gay men and lesbians targets. Following similar racially motivated attacks in London, a crude nail bomb exploded in the Admiral Duncan bar in Old Compton Street on April 30, 1999, killing two and injuring more than eighty.

Money was poured into the Soho neighborhood as investors saw gay men and lesbians as a huge, untapped commercial resource, and gay men and lesbians continued to see a need for physical boundaries to define their community as an expression of new urban freedom.

However, the glbtq community in London is by no means limited to the Soho. Gay men and lesbians live throughout the city, including areas such as Earls Court, Islington, and central and inner-city London. With recent political successes on both the national and municipal levels, London's gay men and lesbians have become an increasingly visible and significant part of London life.

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**Brock Thompson**, a native of Conway, Arkansas, holds degrees from Hendrix College and the University of Arkansas. Currently he is a doctoral candidate in American Studies at Kings College, University of London. His studies focus on Southern gay and lesbian history, identity politics, and queer theory. His other interests include political activism and music from the 1980s.