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Resources

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A Modern History of Lesbian and Gay Rights.

1885

Criminal law Amendment Act made sexual acts between men illegal in the UK.

1895

Oscar Wilde sentenced to 2 years hard labour.

1921

Attempt made to include sexual acts between women within the law for the first time. Rejected, as even to mention the possibility could corrupt.

1928

Radcliffe Hall's 'Well of Loneliness' published and banned. The first time lesbianism had been written about publicly.

1939-1945

World War Two. The number of courts martial for 'indecentcy between males' greater than for any other offence.

Under the Nazis, homosexuals were persecuted and placed in concentration camps. They had to wear a pink triangle in the same way that Jews had to wear the yellow Star of David. Some 50,000 gay men perished in the camps.

1948

The Kinsey Report 'Sexual Behaviour in the Human Male' found that homosexuals existed in every walk of life and not just the minority that could be easily identified.

1950's

Homosexuality now designated a disease. Aversion therapies were used and in some cases lobotomies and chemical castration in the form of hormone therapy.

1953

The Kinsey Report equivalent 'Sexual Behaviour in the Human Female' published. Attempts were made with both books to have them banned on the grounds of obscenity. These attempts were ultimately unsuccessful.

1952

Arrests increased from 956 in 1938 to 3,757. The Home Secretary of the time Sir David Maxwell Fyfe told the Commons: 'Homosexuals... are exhibitionists and proselytisers and a danger to others'. The police's consequent response was reflected in the increased arrests.

1957

In September, the Wolfenden report recommended that homosexual behaviour between consenting male adults (21 and over) should be decriminalised. Parliament, aware that the public were still divided on the issue, left the decision for another decade.

1960's

Between 1957 and 1967, when the Wolfenden Committee's recommendations were finally made law, the issue was raised in Parliament several times without success.

1963

'Towards a Quaker View of Sex' is published by The Religious Society of Friends (Quakers). They are the first British Christian Church to say that it is the quality of a relationship that matters, not the sexuality of the partners.

1969

The Stonewall Riots, which started in a New York bar, marked the beginning of the modern 'Gay Rights' movement. It was the night of Judy Garland's funeral and, when the police started their usual round of arrests, gay men fought back for the first time. Gay Pride events across the world are held at this time to commemorate this turning point.

The term 'Gay' began to be used more and more frequently to describe people who identified as homosexual. It started as an acronym which stood for Good As You

1970's

The Gay Liberation Front started, as a more militant campaigning organisation than the Homosexual Law Reform Society (which later became CHE- Campaign for Homosexual Equality.) They campaigned around slogans such as 'Glad to be Gay' and the British Gay Pride events started around this time. 'Gay News' the first national gay newspaper was launched. Then came the first lesbian and gay help and information telephone line in London. In 1975, Manchester launched it's own Gay Switchboard. Both these organisations are still operating.

1973

After years of controversy and often stormy debate, the Board of Trustees of the American Psychiatric Association declares that 'by itself homosexuality does not meet the criteria for being a psychiatric disorder.'

1974

The Australia and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists becomes one of the first such groups to eliminate homosexuality from its official listing of mental disorders.

1976

Lynn Ramson of Oaklands California is the first openly lesbian mother to win custody of her children in court.

1980

Scotland has a different legal system so the 1967 amendments to English law didn't have effect. The government wouldn't act to bring Scotland in line and so a case was brought to the European Court and the reforms were finally enacted

1982

Northern Ireland had to wait longer. Attempts were made to liberalise the law in 1977. Once again the government was taken to the European Court and in 1982 the law was finally enacted.

In July a young gay man called Terence Higgins died of AIDS. By October 1985 the recorded number of deaths had risen to 241. The Gay community rallied in the United States and in the UK but the attitude of the general public was the opposite. Papers reported the coming of the 'Gay Plague' and a survey in 1987 found 74% disapproving of homosexual relationships. With the newspaper reports came an increase in 'queer bashing' and anti-gay violence and harassment.

1984

Chris Smith becomes the first openly gay Member of Parliament.

1985

The 9th United States Circuit Court of Appeals rules that federal immigration authorities cannot prevent lesbians and gay men from entering the country purely on the grounds of their sexuality.

The Labour Party Annual Conference approves a resolution calling for the end to all legal discrimination against lesbians and gay men.

Margaret Roff becomes the country's first openly lesbian mayor for Manchester.

1987

Opinions became polarised. After many councils' attempt to counteract the prejudice against lesbians and gay men the government initiates Clause 28 to the Local Government Bill which states;

'A local authority shall not: a) intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality and b) promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship.'

For the first time lesbians were now included within the legislation. Despite a huge campaign to stop it the clause was passed and became Section 28.

At this time the Chief Constable of Greater Manchester Police spoke publicly against the gay community referring to them as 'swirling around in a cess pit of their own making.'

1988

'Stop The Clause' rallies in London and Manchester total 30,000 and 20,000, the largest events of this kind ever seen.

1989

Stonewall is founded by Sir Ian McKellan, Michael Cashman and Angela Mason to campaign for Equal Rights within the law for lesbians and gay men.

1993

The World Health Organisation officially deletes homosexuality from its list of disorders.

Ireland decriminalises same sex relationships for consenting adults and set the age of consent at 17

1994

The age of consent for gay men is lowered from 21 to 18, making it the first piece of positive legislation for nearly thirty years.

1995

The Archbishop of Canterbury tells the press 'We reject homophobia in any form.'

For the first time in history the United Nations considers lesbian and gay rights abuses at the International Tribunal on Human Rights Violations against Sexual Minorities. Following testimonies from a number of women and who have suffered abuse ranging from torture to forced institutionalisation, the tribunal recommends that the UN document sexual orientation and gender identity issues around the world and integrate them into the organisation's human rights agenda.

1996

The European Parliament calls for an end to all discrimination and/or equality concerning homosexuals in every country in the European Union.

The process of equalization of the age of consent for gay men begins. It takes 5 years for it to become law.

1999

The European Court of Human Rights announces that the UK policy banning lesbian and gay personnel from the Armed Forces is illegal, unjust and unfair. All investigations and discharges are suspended. The ban is lifted as the Directive against discrimination on the grounds of sexuality becomes law in December 2003.

The New Millennium

2001

The age of consent for gay men is brought in line with heterosexuals. Age now set for everyone at 16.

2003

Homophobic violence remains a real and present threat. However, steps are being made to combat this. In October 2003 the CPS announces that, as with Race Hate Crime, there will now be Gay Hate Crime. In other words criminal activity that includes hatred towards a gay person or people can now be an aggravating factor in any arrest and/or conviction.

In Manchester the police introduce a system for monitoring Hate Crime against gay people and include a gay section on the GMP web site which includes information about safety.

The churches play a prominent role in the continuation of prejudice against Gay people. They also play a prominent role in promoting their rights to be treated as equal. This has been evident in the activity and furore provoked by the consecration of a gay bishop in America in October 2003. Gene Robinson of the Episcopal Church had the backing of his clergy and thousands of worshipers but his consecration has caused outrage across the wider Anglican

communion.

On November 17th Section 28 is finally repealed.

On December 1st 2003 it becomes illegal to discriminate, harass, victimise or bully a gay person on the grounds of their sexuality in the workplace.

2004

On November 17th the Partnership Bill is finally passed through the Lords giving lesbians and gay men the right to register their relationship. This puts gay relationships on an equal footing legally with heterosexual marriage, and gives gay partners the same rights within their relationship as heterosexual people. In its final reading in the Commons it passed by 426 to 49. A huge 'all parties' majority, showing how attitudes have shifted since the days of Section 28. This new Bill comes into effect in December 2005.

Prejudice is gradually reducing. A MORI poll found that 63% were comfortable with the idea of a lesbian or gay doctor. 73% said they wouldn't mind if their child's teacher was lesbian or gay. 17% still, however, said that they were against lesbian and gay people. We still need legislation to protect lesbians and gay men's rights to access goods and services. In June 2004 a Scottish Guest House owner refused to allow two gay men to stay and gay people routinely still receive a second class service in areas of the public sector such as healthcare provision and education.

Homophobic Bullying is still a big problem for lesbian and gay young people at school and college. In a survey conducted by Stonewall in 2004 four in five teachers in secondary schools say they are aware of verbal homophobic bullying and one in four are aware of physical homophobic bullying. Just 6% of British schools have fully inclusive anti-bullying policies which address homophobic bullying.

2005

A decision has been made by the Anglican Communion to separate from the Episcopal Church in America for three years to give time for consideration of its position with regards to its acceptance of homosexuality and the ordination of gay priests. This is widely considered to be the first step towards a permanent split in the Anglican Church.

A new Pope is named by the College of Cardinals. Cardinal Ratzinger is elected pontiff. He was formally the head of Opus Dei, the organisation charged with protecting orthodoxy in the church. Since becoming Pope he has confirmed the church's continuing opposition to various issues, including homosexuality.

The Last Chapter?

More high profile figures in the media also help to change people's perceptions. Some of our most popular figures are gay, Benjamin Britten the composer, Julian Clary and Graham Norton, the television personalities, Sir Ian

McKellan the actor, Sandy Toksvig the writer, Rhona Cameron the comedienne, and Anne Eagleton MP, to name just a few.

Lesbians and gay men have made important contributions to society. Their contributions, some widely acknowledged and honoured, others quiet, unobtrusive and unnoticed, have helped mould, change, care for, reflect and entertain the society in which they live. Many, both famous and less well known, have paid a price for who they are sexually, instead of who they have been and what they have contributed professionally. All lesbians and gay men want is to be acknowledged as equal citizens of this country with the same rights and responsibilities as any other citizen. We work for a day when it simply won't matter what sexuality we are.

With acknowledgment and thanks for the history to that marvellous publication Opening Doors' Working with Older Lesbians and Gay Men'. Published by Age Concern England
Also to the web site www.infopt.demon.co.uk/gayhist.htm

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