



HUMANISTS AND LGBT RIGHTS: A HISTORY

Humanist
Heritage

 LGBT
Humanists UK



Gay Humanist Group at Stop Clause 28 demonstration in Manchester, 1988

Since its founding as the Gay Humanist Group in 1979, LGBT Humanists has been at the forefront of campaigns for equality and acceptance, from fighting Section 28 to legalising same-sex marriage. But even before that, the humanist movement had long championed LGBT equality in the UK, dating back to the 19th century – with openly gay, lesbian, bi, and queer humanists among some of Humanists UK’s founding members, and sexual equality regularly featuring in pamphlets and conference agendas.

And in the decades leading up to same-sex marriage, members of LGBT Humanists and Humanists UK pioneered humanist commitment ceremonies for same-sex couples, and created vital spaces for non-religious LGBT people to celebrate life and love.

This booklet introduces the founding of LGBT Humanists and a history of the current campaign focus for LGBT Humanists – banning conversion therapy – as well as exploring the pre-1979 legacy of religious LGBT oppression and humanist LGBT campaigning. You can discover more about the heritage of LGBT Humanists on the Humanist Heritage website.

heritage.humanists.uk

BORN OF MARY

In 1976, *Gay News* published a poem by James Kirkup entitled 'The Love that Dares to Speak its Name', a homoerotic depiction of the crucifixion of Jesus. Outraged, the infamous conservative activist Mary Whitehouse launched the first prosecution for blasphemy in half a century, against the magazine and its editor – and won.

George Broadhead, co-founder of LGBT Humanists, later recalled how Whitehouse's prosecution helped bring the group into being. As described in the first chairperson's report: 'A Mrs. Mary Whitehouse, of whom you may have heard, began stating in public that just about everything "good and true" that "every decent person believes in" was being undermined by "the humanist gay lobby".' The group's co-founders seized their moment.

As Broadhead wrote: 'That there is no such lobby, and the obvious concern that such an idea provokes, provides the spark which convinces us that the opportunity offered to a gay humanist group is too good to miss.'

Throughout the following decades, the group served a range of political, artistic, and social functions, campaigning for gay rights as well as holding events and printing publications.

A cartoon depicting Mary Whitehouse, printed repeatedly in the newsletters of LGBT Humanists since 1981, as well as on their 25th anniversary cake





HUMANIST ACTION AGAINST CONVERSION THERAPY



For decades, humanists have suffered and protested so-called 'conversion therapy', which remains legal in the UK. The first newsletter issued by LGBT Humanists included an article decrying attempts to 'save' homosexuals through 'counselling' by a Christian organisation with close ties to the homophobic evangelical movement, Nationwide Festival of Light, co-founded by Mary Whitehouse.

In 1991, representatives of LGBT Humanists – then known as the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association (GALHA) – wrote to the Bishop of London protesting a Church of England initiative in London to 'heal' lesbians and gay men through therapy and prayer. As one of GALHA's many letter-writing campaigns, members and affiliated groups on their Postal Action List were urged to write similar letters to the Bishop of London and the Archbishop of Canterbury.

LGBT Humanists and Stonewall
pictured at a Ban Conversion
Therapy protest in September 2023

As of 2024, it has been six years since the UK Government first announced its commitment to banning conversion therapy, but this promise was subjected to repeated U-turns, and all the while victims of conversion therapy remained unprotected. Humanists UK is committed to challenging this inaction, working alongside other LGBT rights campaigners. As LGBT Humanists Coordinator Nick Baldwin wrote: 'We will continue to campaign for a conversion therapy ban. And it must be one that is inclusive of the whole LGBT community.'

BRITISH SOCIETY FOR THE STUDY OF SEX PSYCHOLOGY

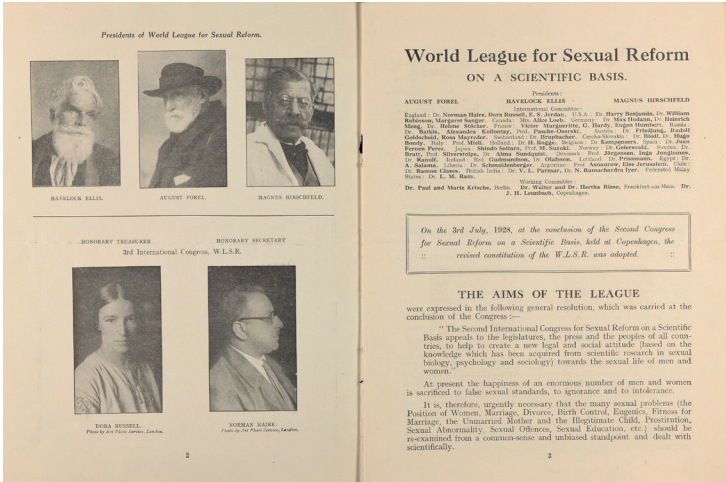
The BSSSP was originally formed on 12 August 1913, as the British Society of Psychiatry, by a group of freethinkers including poet Edward Carpenter. It aimed 'to advance a particularly radical agenda in the field of sex reform' by discussing sex rationally, and on the basis of science – not superstition.

One of these founding members was the gay humanist writer Laurence Housman, who was Vice President of the Ethical Union (now Humanists UK) for almost 40 years. Discussing the purpose of the BSSSP in 1914, he wrote: 'We must recognise... that human nature is a much more open problem than has ever yet been allowed by our moralists and theologians of the past.'

The BSSSP held meetings, facilitated discussion, and published on a range of topics relating to sex, sexuality, and law reform. Housman later wrote that it had been 'instrumental in helping to form a new public opinion – or a new open-mindedness towards sex'. Decades later, LGBT Humanists continued in this vein, for example by campaigning against Section 28's prevention of local authorities from taking part in the 'promotion of homosexuality'.



Laurence Housman, c. 1920, photographed by Elliott & Fry © National Portrait Gallery, London



1928 booklet for the World League for Sexual Reform, Wellcome Collection, SA/EUG/D.250

WORLD LEAGUE FOR SEXUAL REFORM

In 1921, organised by the German sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld (who also chaired the BSSSP), the First International Conference for Sexual Reform on a Scientific Basis took place in Berlin, out of which the World League for Sexual Reform was created. Over the following years, the League and its conferences would bring together scientists, activists, and thinkers from around the world – including many humanists.

In a 1929 international congress for the World League for Sexual Reform, a number of humanist activists spoke, including Dora Russell, Naomi Mitchison, Stella Browne, and Janet Chance. Another, the prominent humanist Bertrand Russell, challenged the twin evils of laws governing obscenity and homosexuality, noting the recent furore over Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*, and its lesbianism. 50 years later, LGBT Humanists continued the fight against censorship of LGBT literature, campaigning for the repeal of blasphemy legislation, following its homophobic usage against *Gay News* in the 1977 trial brought by Mary Whitehouse.

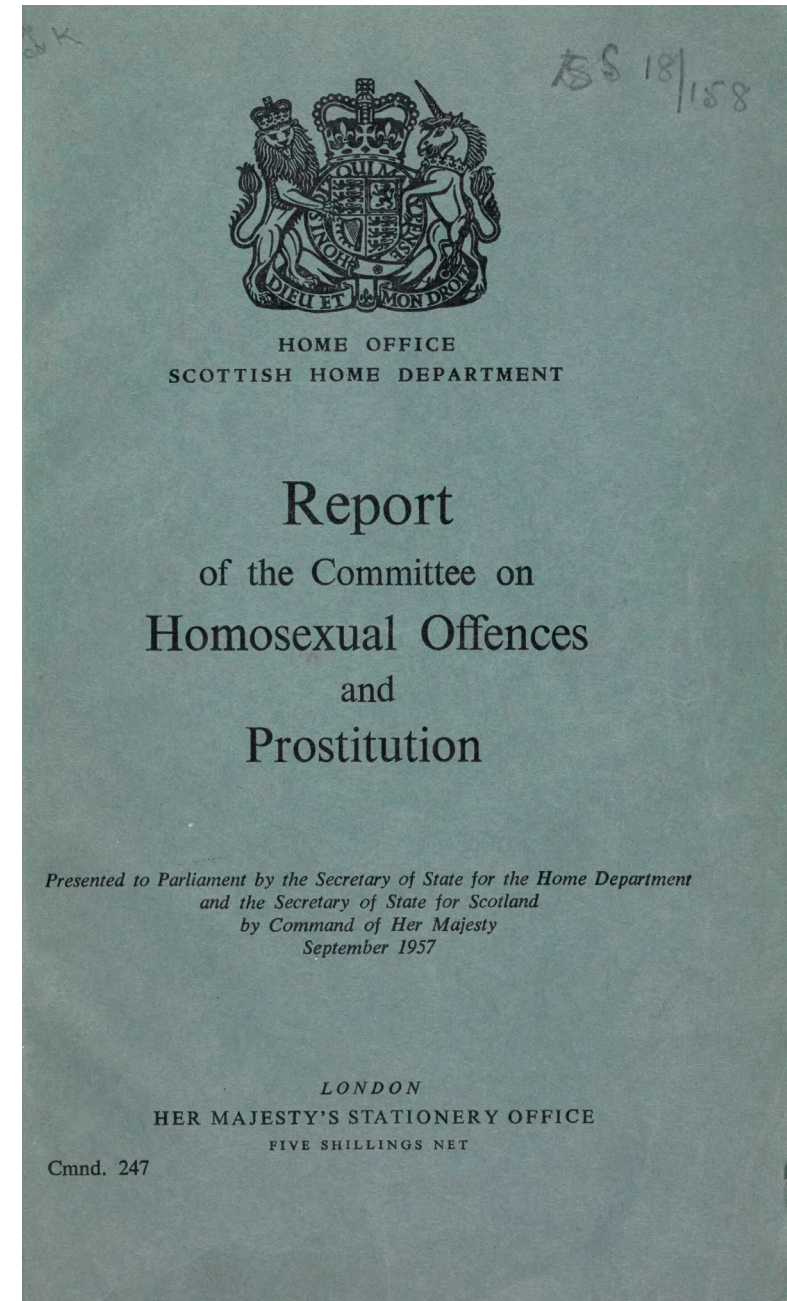
WOLFENDEN COMMITTEE

The Wolfenden Committee was established in 1954 to investigate the legality of homosexuality and prostitution – when imprisonments under the existing law had risen to over 1000 per year. The Ethical Union (now Humanists UK) submitted evidence to the Committee advocating reform on the basis that the law had no business interfering in private conduct between consenting adults. Ultimately, the committee agreed, concluding that there ‘must remain a realm of private morality and immorality which is, in brief and crude terms, not the law’s business’, and recommending decriminalisation.

A number of prominent humanists, before and after the report’s publication, pushed for the Government to introduce the reforms recommended by the Wolfenden Committee. Prompted by the gay academic A E (Tony) Dyson and E M Forster (longtime Vice President of the British Humanist Association, now Humanists UK), many gay humanists and their straight allies submitted a letter to *The Times* calling for these reforms. Signatories included the humanists A J Ayer, Isaiah Berlin, Julian Huxley, Stephen Spender, Bertrand Russell, Angus Wilson, and Barbara Wootton.

Brought together by their work together on Wolfenden, many became active in the national Campaign for Homosexual Equality (CHE), whose 1979 conference saw the official launch of LGBT Humanists. Dyson went on to found the Homosexual Law Reform Society. The group’s President was the (heterosexual) humanist philosopher A J Ayer, who also headed up Humanists UK in the period. Its secretary in the 1960s was longtime LGBT Humanists member Antony Grey.

Front cover of the Wolfenden Report, 1957



LGBT ADVOCATES IN PREVIOUS CENTURIES

MOLL CUTPURSE (c.1589-1615)

Moll Cutpurse (also known as Mary Frith, among other names) was an infamous celebrity of 17th century London. She was convicted in 1612 by the Lord Bishop of London for having 'blasphemed and dishonoured the name of God' with her 'immodest' behaviour, which was 'to the disgrace of all womanhood'.

She was sentenced to perform public penance on 9 February 1612, standing in a white sheet at St Paul's Cross during the Sunday morning sermon. According to a biography of Moll from the period, 'this penance did not reclaim her, for she still went in men's apparel'. These challenges to societal norms, accusations of blasphemy, and punishment by the Church place Moll within a long history of repression and resistance shared by LGBT Humanists.

We know from the Church's Consistory Court Records that Moll performed 'in man's apparel' at the Fortune Playhouse in 1611 – the same year and same theatre that Thomas Dekker and Thomas Middleton debuted the play *The Roaring Girl: or, Moll Cut-Purse*. In the play, this semi-fictionalised Moll character is described with a range of gendered terms, such as 'woman more than man, man more than woman', 'codpiece daughter', and 'a thing one knows not how to name'.

18th century etching of Moll Cutpurse inspired by a similar print made during Moll's lifetime
© National Portrait Gallery, London





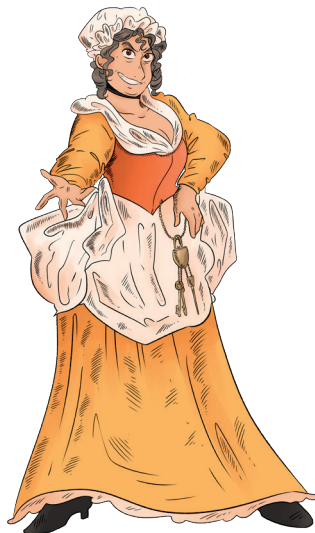
MOTHER CLAP (Died c.1726)

Margaret Clap was a brave ally for a persecuted community in London during the 1720s. She welcomed gay men to drink and sleep at her husband's house in Holborn, earning her the nickname 'Mother Clap'. She defended her customers against the Buggery Act's outlawing of gay sexual activity as a crime punishable by death, lying on their behalf to have them acquitted of such charges. Her allyship was suppressed, however, when her venue was raided and closed down, after being infiltrated by a constable from the fervently religious Societies for the Reformation of Manners, pretending to be the husband of one of Clap's male customers.

The surviving records of Clap's life are mainly found in transcripts of trials brought by the Societies against Clap and her customers. They provide a glimpse into the fascinating phenomena of molly houses – venues primarily for gay men who met for sex and companionship. Clap is documented to have rented accommodation to gay couples and facilitated ceremonies in her Marrying Room. These unions are somewhat comparable to humanist weddings today – they were secular, inclusive of same-sex couples, and led by a celebrant who encouraged the couple to freely structure their own ceremony.

Through marital support, legal advocacy, and provision of safe spaces for free expression, Clap championed humanist principles of compassion and the commitment to activism, leading the way in treating those persecuted on religious grounds with respect and dignity, instead.

Illustration of Mother Clap produced by Claire Mead in 2024 for the *Picturing Nonconformity: LGBT Humanist Heritage* exhibition



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The aims of GHG are to:

- Promote an understanding & awareness of humanism among gay people
- Further an understanding & awareness of gay people among humanists
- Protect & promote the rights of gays & humanists

If you would like to support GHG, become a member by filling in the form below, and you will receive the quarterly newsletter and news of the group's monthly meetings and other events.

To: The Secretary, GHG
34, Spring Lane,
Kenilworth,
Warwickshire.

I support the above aims and apply for membership of GHG enclosing my annual subscription.
(£ 2.00 for non-earners
£ 3.50 for others.)

Signed: _____

date: _____

NAME: _____

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— introducing
the

gay humanist group

we are

GAYS

who support
HUMANIST
VALUES

&

HUMANISTS

who support
GAY
RIGHTS

Honorary President: _____ Maureen Duffy

This booklet was produced through research on The National Lottery Heritage Fund project *Humanist Heritage: Doers, Dreamers, Place Makers*. In celebration of the 45th anniversary of LGBT Humanists, the Humanist Heritage team are championing the groundbreaking work of LGBT Humanists, for example by producing the landmark exhibition *Picturing Nonconformity: LGBT Humanist Heritage* in July 2024.

Scan the QR code opposite to view the virtual tour of our anniversary exhibition.



Humanists UK