Being Known: Homosexuality and the last 200 years

By Stephen M Hornby

Stephen M Hornby, National Playwright in Residence to LGBT History Month, considers the last 200
years of progress and asks if equality has been reached.

What do we call ourselves? What do others call us publicly and privately? Who do we call family? How does our knowledge about ourselves, about how to live, the wisdom of our lives pass from one generation to the next? Fifty, sixty years from now will anyone speak our name? Creating any modern life involves grappling with these questions. From the 1950s sneering street yob challenge of, "queer", inviting either a violent repost or a full-on bashing, to the a global media system that uses "queer" casually as a description in Instagram bios, the world of the has not simply changed, it has inverted. Creating a gay life across decades of tumultuous change has brought each of them into sharp focus and often created unexpected and complex answers.

England (and perhaps mostly Manchester and London) sees the first evidence of a slight thawing towards of the late Victorian attitude to male homosexuality in the 1950s. But even the Victorian iceberg of stigmatising condemnation and silence is not itself a single attitude but a process of an evolving stigmatising system.

At the start of the nineteenth century, homosexuals do not exist. There is a concept of "sodomy" from the 1533 Sodomy Act, which relies on a religious prohibition of what we'd now call anal sex, be that with a man, women or animal. And it meets with the death penalty. But it is usually understood as a behaviour and not a category of person. Some historians argue that there has always been an identifiable subset of people who are almost exclusively attracted to the same sex, an essentialist view of human sexuality. Each generation has a fixed percentage and all that changes is the degree to which that attraction is publicly expressed and recorded.

Other historians and sexologists argue that sexuality is a kind of performance of desire to oneself and others and that that as culture, legal, social and intellectual views change, so does sexuality itself. It is "polymorphous perverse", plastic and capable of being moulded into any shape by the forces to which it is exposed.

If we take the world-wide pan-historical view, in as much as we know it, what we now call "bisexuality" seems to win the day. But the Victorians wanted to name things, label and categorise. It gave them control over things and helped to define what they were and were not.

Enter "the homosexual", via a Prussian sexologist who in 1869 coins the term in the first known pamphlet advocating gay rights. There are some competing terminologies, but the notion of the "homosexual" as a category of person, as opposed to "sodomy" as a category of behaviour, immediately becomes useful to the forces of homophobia. A person can be identified and controlled. Sex is, but its nature, usually a private act. So, if both parties say it didn't happen, who's to know? And how can it then be controlled? If the homosexual, however is a type of person, if they move and walk, and dress and talk differently to other people, then they can be hunted out.

1861 saw the death penalty abolished for male homosexuality. But, it's replacement with up to two years hard labour, was generally thought to be enough to "break" if not kill most men. Knowing this, juries were often unwilling to convict and evidence of sodomy, that one specific sexual act, was often down to witness accounts or dubious testimonies from rectal examinations. A solution was found in 1885 with the creation of the offence of "gross indecency", criminalising pretty much any form of pleasurable physical contact between males and the offences of "soliciting" and "importuning for an immoral purpose". Now, even chatting someone up is illegal, lingering too long in a public toilet is illegal, placing a coded contact ad in a newspaper is illegal. Homosexuality, and the homosexual, has achieved a state of total criminalisation.

But it still goes on, of course. After a brief period of sexual freedom during World War Two, the state wants to control sexuality and gender once again. The Police start to regularly entrap men in public toilets, sometimes even famous and powerful men.

The arrest of Sir John Gielgud for "cottaging" in 1953 forms the heart of another 2008 play, Nicholas de Jongh's '*A Plaque of Over England*'. It is clear that the association of homosexuals with security risks had led to a minor moral panic, but following this and other arrests, there are also growing calls for "tolerance".

In 1954 the Wolfenden report is commissioned and reports in 1957 with a recommendation to "decriminalise" male homosexuality in limited circumstances. Implementing this is so unthinkable to the political establishment that it takes a further ten years to achieve, after the careful campaigning of such groups as the North West Committee for Homosexual Law Reform (later the Campaign for Homosexual Equality), founded in 1964 by Allan Horsfall.

This "liberalisation", however, should not be misread as a civil rights triumph. Alan Turing's arrest is first dealt with in the 1986 play '*Breaking The Code*' by Hugh Whitemore. Turing avoids prison by accepting a Probation Order with a condition of treatment. This compels him to be injected with oestrogen, reducing his sex drive, leading to breast tissue growth and arguably the depression that sees him commit suicide in 1954. The move from a criminal to a medical model simply changes the level of compulsion around "treatment".

"Treatment" itself ranges from a host of quack cures to talking therapies to aversion therapies. Distinguishing between "aversion therapy" and behaviour we'd now regard as torture is not easy, but different forms of it are available on the NHS, administered with differing degrees of alacrity, for those brave enough to confess their condition to their GP. Manchester, thanks to a private donation to the Crumpshall Hospital, opens the UKs first research unit for the treatment of homosexuality in 1964. It dispenses powerful emetic drugs and painful electrocutions to men who are shown erotic images of other men. All it ever succeeds in doing was temporarily extinguishing any sex drive from the men who took part in the vicious experiments.

In this context, appropriating a word that means "light-hearted and carefree" seems more than faintly ridiculous. But the use of the term "gay" to describe male sexual attraction emerges as a profoundly radical and political act. It is a repudiation of the "homosexual" as a criminal or as a patient, and the assertion of something happy, positive not in need of a cure. Gay men come out, they publicly declare their sexuality, a political act of radicalism in the 1970s, and expose society's attitude towards them as the real problem. Pride begins in London in 1972 and steady social progress towards, if not equality, then at least acceptance begins.

The response to the AIDS pandemic from 1982 derails everything. A section of the popular press incites violent hatred of gay men like never before. The moral panic that is creates finds a focus in the protection of children. Section 28 is passed, the first piece of regressive law for over a 100 years, which bans Local Authorities from the promotion of homosexuality as a pseudo family.

The horror of the AIDS crisis is captured by Larry Kramer in his 1985 play, '*The Normal Heart*' which comes to London in 1986. Each day of the run, a number written of the set is rubbed out and a higher figure replaces. It is the total number of recorded AIDS death to date.

Since the 1990s, there has been steady progress towards legislative equality for gay men, though marriage is still not available to those living in Norther Ireland. For some people, it is possible to cocoon themselves in acceptance and question whether discrimination really exists anymore.

Being equal before the law and being equal in society, however, should never be conflated. Racial discrimination has been illegal in the UK since the 1976 Race Relations Act, but only a fool would claim that racism doesn't exist.

In Greater Manchester last year, the Police recorded just under 100 LGBT-related hate crimes and incidents per month. Victim studies estimate the annual figure to be over 24,000 for the UK in a single year.

Legal equality is not the end of the battle to be treated equally. It is the beginning.

Stephen M Hornby
Playwright and Incidental Historian

This article was commissioned by Green Carnation Company and published on the 12th October 2018 in conjunction with their production of Alexi Kaye Campbell's play, 'The Pride', and formed part of the project's extended reach programme.