Ageing

Who we are, what we feel and how we act in our present life is all based on our past.

If the past includes experience of prejudice, discrimination, criminalisation, harassment – this is bound to have an impact on how we see ourselves as older people and how open we are with others.

‘Before the Act’ started around 1998, becoming the Older Gay men’s Group, meeting in the Gay Men’s Health Project offices until 2001, moving from there to Belmont in 2003 and then supported by Age Concern (AgeUK) up until recently when it has temporarily closed.

Several events were held in 2008 showing Gateway to Heaven – a powerful and often humorous performance based entirely on the memories of older lesbians and gay men, collected by writer and lesbian comedian Clare Summerskill.

In 2012 the Rainbow Film Festival screened the film Gen Silent to an invited audience of people from the health and social care sector. The film powerfully reveals that many old and older LGBT people are a ‘silent generation’, fearful for their future, many going back into the ‘closet’ as they experience and/or are afraid of discrimination or worse, as they become increasingly dependent on others. This raised a question amongst the audience – what is the experience of those who live in Shropshire and what do we need to do to make sure that people are not afraid and that ‘care providers’ understand the issues?

This proved to be a pivotal point and after some stops and starts SAND (Safe Ageing No Discrimination) was formally launched in Shrewsbury, to raise awareness and encourage our own communities to talk about the issues that are impacting on their lives.

Healthwatch Shropshire gave us a small grant to begin our research – finding out what the issues are. We concluded that there is much to be done in terms of awareness raising and a key aim for SAND is to encourage people to ‘get that there is something to get’ – that prejudice, discrimination, exclusion, fear, bullying, ignorance is still the experience of many LGBT people, despite changes in legislation, and impacts on their lives in many different ways – and that being older does not mean we have no sexuality!

Some context

1885
Offence of ‘gross indecency’ created, making all sexual acts between men illegal.

1895
Oscar Wilde prosecuted for gross indecency and sentenced to two years in prison.

1933
Nazis round up homosexuals and send them to the concentration camps. Gay men have to wear a pink triangle on their camp clothes.

1954
Alan Turing commits suicide, 18 months after being given a choice between two years in prison or libido-reducing hormone treatment for a year as a punishment for homosexuality.

1957
Wolfenden committee recommends the decriminalisation of gay sex between consenting adults over 21, except in the armed forces.

1967
Gay sex decriminalised, with new privacy clause - no act may take place where a third party is likely to be present. Age of consent set at 21 (compared to 16 for heterosexuals and lesbians).

As well as the serious stuff, we have fun and attend local events

“Imagine someone living in a care home, or accessing care support who feels unable to talk about their life, their experiences, memories, hopes, family and relationships”
Allies

The struggle for LGBT rights is strengthened by the support of heterosexual allies. This was particularly important when times were hard and many LGBT people felt unable to be visible, particularly in a small town.

Parents need support when their offspring come out. Support groups were formed in the 1970’s, later becoming FFLAG.

The campaign for equal marriage had large, active, support from allies. Meetings were held in the Unitarian church in Shrewsbury.

FFLAG members supported various campaigns, vigils (one in Shrewsbury’s Pride Hill) and marches.

Arthur Hardy, who came to live in Shropshire, was one of FFLAG’s founding members. He set up the local Group.

Window display in Crabapple - Clause 28 demo in Pride Hill

Arthur Robert Hardy

ARTHUR Robert Hardy, a prominent member of FFLAG (Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays), the support group for parents, has died at the age of 77. With his second wife, Rose, he ran a parents’ support line from his home for many years.

The parent of a gay son, Arthur worked for gay rights within his trade union and in the Cyclists Touring Club. He wrote letters to the press and an article, with his son Geoff, for Gay News. He also appeared on television.

His involvement in gay rights spanned almost two decades and all the major political campaigns. During the struggle against Section 28, he attended a local vigil in Shrewsbury and a march in Manchester.

A pacifist, Arthur supported conscientious objectors during the Second World War and in the 1950s and 60s became involved in CND and in non-violent direct action with the Committee of 100. A lifelong Libertarian Socialist, he also wrote for many years for the Socialist Leader, the newspaper of the Independent Labour Party.

In his later years he became a Quaker, describing himself “a spiritual sort of person, but not religious”.

Arthur had been a keen cyclist all his life, but had recently suffered from minor heart attacks, which became more frequent, curtailing his ability to walk and cycle. His death was sudden. Arthur will be missed by his wife Rose, his son Geoff and his many friends.

Arthur Robert Hardy, born May 3rd 1921, died June 8th 1998

Crabapple, a wholefood shop in Castle Gates (now Pomona Grocery, who are Rainbow Film Festival sponsors), hosted window displays around various campaigns and Pride Weeks. Also, they stocked The Pink Paper and Scene Out.
Are We Being Served

Representations of LGBT in the media were often non-existent or negative. Are You Being Served, a TV comedy show, was a typical example; where a key character (played by John Inman) played out a very stereotypical role as a flapping, amusing, “silly old queen”. Research (Lesbians and Gays and Broadcasting Report, 1987, stated that “… 25 minutes out of 688 hours (of monitored national TV and radio, 12 -18 August 1985) …given to lesbian representation”

Square Peg

Outlets for LGBT artistic expression became more common in the 1980s. Square Peg was an arts magazine. It proved a good opportunity for Shropshire born artist, Stephen Harwood. Alongside his painting ‘Drinks’ he wrote “being 16 and gay isn’t the easiest thing in the world…….” “If I wasn’t an artist I don’t know what I’d be like”

Coming Out

A need for positive images, especially for lesbians, was paramount. Postcards etc. became more available and LGBT people could more positively reflect and celebrate their lives eg by sending a nice postcard to friends!

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender History

Local Authorities began, some belatedly, to promote LGBT images, history and writings (although the spectre of “Section 28” still caused some reluctance for some). A leaflet put out by Shropshire County Library Service in 2007, may have reflected this reluctance – on the front page the image of a woman reading a book (which may, or may not be LGBT subject matter) doesn’t show her head, which makes her invisible.

Shropshire LGBT History Month

One of the founders of Schools Out (which started LGBT History Month in the UK), Paul Patrick, was booked to speak at Shrewsbury Library on 9th February 2007. Paul was one of the few LGBT teachers to be “out” in the classroom in the 1970s (but, unlike others did not suffer disciplinary action from his employer). Unfortunately he cancelled due to ill health and died not long afterward. It is quite likely that a life of dealing with homophobia played a part in his early death.

Manda Scott

Manda Scott, a prize winning local author, was pleased to lend her name to LGBT History Month 2010.

The Pride Ball 2012

Local entrepreneur, Martin Monahan has dedicated hours of his time and significant resources to help the LGBT community. The Pride Ball 2012 had over 1000 guests at the ICC in Birmingham, it endorsed the campaign ‘It Gets Better’ (to help young LGBT people) as well as raising a lot of money for HIV/AIDS charities and LGBT organisations.

The Shropshire Rainbow Film Festival

The Shropshire Rainbow Film Festival started in 2006, stating that “Films are the Mirrors of: Our Hopes, Our Dreams, Our Diversity, Our Lives”. A bold statement meant to challenge the the dominance of heterosexual stories and images in film.

Prior to the early years of this century, portrayals of LGBT people were generally as “mad, bad or sad”. LGBT films made by LGBT people have increased and are a popular entertainment (for both LGBT and heterosexual people). The Rainbow Film Festival celebrated its 10th anniversary with record audiences. However it is still a struggle to find good quality films that reflect lesbian or Trans lives.
We all come from one. Some of us have children before we ‘come out’, some after, some have their children taken away from them and are deemed unfit parents. For many LGBT people who have been rejected by ‘family’ their own community becomes ‘family’.

Marie Claire Magazine

‘Soon after we started our family, Section 28 appeared to mean we only had a pretended family!’ said the parents of Liam, born at the Royal Shrewsbury Hospital in 1988.

Becoming parents has presented LGBT people with many dilemmas. Of paramount importance has been how best to protect the children from prejudice. Some equate those issues with similar concerns faced by couples from different races and/or a different cultural heritage.

The options can seem overwhelming in the different decisions to be made and the consequences for all the family, whether the starting point be e.g. adoption, fostering, shared parenting, donor insemination, IVF, donor womb.

Marie Claire magazine published a very positive article in its UK edition in September 1991, illustrated with nice photographs of what they called “gay families”.

The idea that LGBT people should be allowed to adopt was (and still can be) an area of contentious. In 1999 the Children’s Society decided to place “needy children with homosexuals”. Does this beg the question: would non needy children be reserved to heterosexuals?

Some Christian faith organisations were opposed to the whole prospect and St Mary’s Parochial Church in Albrighton, Shropshire made their opposition very apparent.

By 2005 there were more positive stories about LGBT parents. The Shropshire Star reported, in April 2005, that a gay man living in Malinslee, Simon Ryder, had been nominated to represent the region by Asda staff at Donnington Wood, for the national Wonder Mum finals in London. Simon had fostered some 10 children with his partner, Chris Newton, between the ages of 3 and 11 years. Simon said “It is very nice to be nominated ….me and the kids had a bit of a laugh about it”.

From the 1970s onward support groups for the families and friends of LGBT people had formed, first in London and then Manchester and elsewhere. By 2015 the need for specific support for the families of Trans people was apparent and in 2015 SOFFA Marmalade, based in the Midlands, produced a leaflet to advertise their group which aims “…to support those who may or may not be struggling to come to terms with the issues.”
**HIV/AIDS**

**Don’t Die of Ignorance**

In 1983 the Gay Medical association published “A.I.D.S”, the first attempt in the UK to warn people of the danger. Unfortunately, their work was not heeded by the Government. It took them until 1987 to act. Every household had a leaflet delivered and adverts appeared on the TV. Most people remember “AIDS, Don’t Die of Ignorance”, the adverts with exploding volcanoes and AIDS being chiselled into a block of stone.

For the first time the words “gay” and “straight” appeared on advertising hoardings. For many, not just gay men, it was a very frightening time.

**HIV aids**

With money from the Department of Health, Shropshire Council Social Services, reported in 1993 on what had been done in the county from 1986 to 1992. The first case of HIV infection officially notified in the county was in 1989. By 1992, 30 people were known to be HIV positive.

**Young Gay Men**

The Terrence Higgins Trust (named after one of the first British people to have died following Aids) made their leaflets available across the UK. Initially government agencies were reluctant to use explicit language about sex and were unrealistic in dealing with sex between young gay men. By 1994 the age of consent had lowered for gay men from 21 to 18, but many young men have sex before the age of 18. The Trust was better placed to deal with these issues.

**Dykes + Safer Sex**

The Shropshire Gay and Bisexual Men’s Health Project, based in Shrewsbury took innovative steps to engage lesbians in the fight against HIV infection. They were aware of the prominent role of lesbians in US cities in giving blood donations and voluntary care and support services to people suffering in consequence of HIV.

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**Shropshire Buddies & Male Out**

Shropshire Buddies and Body Positive recognised that many men who have sex with men do not identify as being gay. Many were married men. Some thought that because they saw themselves as being heterosexual they could not become HIV positive.

**Shropshire Gay and Bisexual men’s health project outreach**

There was an awareness that because of homophobia in society a significant number of gay men and, what became referred to as “mesmen” (i.e. men who had sex with men but were not gay) met at public toilets for sex, there or elsewhere. Outreach workers spoke to these men at the public toilets and gave advice about safer sex and offered lubricants and condoms.

**Shropshire & Telford Gay Health Closure**

By 2001 the availability of combination therapies and a focus more on HIV testing caused the health services to review their funding of HIV/AIDS treatment and prevention. In 2001 Shropshire & Telford Gay Health closed and much work transferred to voluntary agencies.

**Out of Sight Out of Mind**

December 1st is World AIDS Day. In Shropshire the day was and still is marked by the sale of red ribbons. Funds are raised for agencies helping to prevent the spread of HIV. Over the years services were held at St Laurence’s Church in Ludlow and candle lit vigils held in the Square in Shrewsbury.

**Vivant**

In recent years Shropshire Rainbow Film Festival has screened a film relevant to HIV/AIDS at the Hive in Shrewsbury on World AIDS Day. As time passes more hopeful films have been made. In 2015 the RFF screened ‘Vivant’, a film about five HIV positive men working together to take their first sky dive, with lots of humour and positive images.
Marriage

SM4A (Shropshire Marriage for All) was set up after a lobbying meeting with Shrewsbury MP Daniel Kawczinski, on March 10th 2012. Daniel said that he was ‘minded to vote for’ the Same Sex Marriage Bill.

SM4A members were LGBT and heterosexual allies and the majority were people of faith communities. The Group viewed marriage as an equality issue, not ‘gay marriage’.

It was a long, hard campaign. There was a lot of highly vocal opposition. Daniel received a lot of mail from both sides.

SM4A campaigned through the media, letter-writing, collected petition signatures in the Town Centre and distributed flyers and wristbands. Most people were supportive.

Daniel voted for the Bill, as did Telford’s MP David Wright.

The Same Sex Marriage Act was passed in July 2013 and the first marriages were in March 2014.

Marriage was a huge step forward in terms of legal equality, but heterosexuals were denied access to Civil Partnerships.
The National Festival of LGBT History has grown out of the work of Schools Out (www.schools-out.org.uk) who, in 2004, initiated LGBT History Month. Their intention is ambitious – nothing less than providing the general public and our community with the education denied and kept hidden from them in mainstream education.

Educating ‘out’ prejudice and making all LGBT people visible and safe. The idea is to enable everyone – LGBT and heterosexual alike – to discover the contributions and experiences of the LGBT community in all their diversity. This will only happen if the history, lives and experiences of LGBT people are made visible within educational curriculums and educational institutions are safe places for all.

Amongst other things Schools Out has created The Classroom (www.the-classroom.org.uk), offering a series of lesson plans to enable teachers to include the LGBT experience through a variety of lesson plans in all key stages. It also presents a simple but effective methodology to enable us all to be an inclusive practitioner and promoter of equality and diversity.

Looking at their relatively clear and straightforward methodology helps us to understand what we need to do to promote inclusion and equality. We think this can apply to other areas of life, as well as teaching.

What we need to do is ‘usualise’ and ‘actualise’

‘Usualise’ isn’t a word that is found in any dictionary but it describes very well the process and avoids the potentially negative connotations of ‘normalise’ – problematic when describing humans as it assumes there is a ‘right’ way of being and is therefore a pejorative term to many who consider themselves outside the majority. It also has connotations of ‘trying to fit in’ rather than embracing diversity.

When we usualise something, we acclimatise people to its presence, and take away the threat of difference which creates fear and discrimination. Usualising in schools has more to do with familiarizing learners with a subject’s everyday occurrence or existence rather than an in-depth understanding of the subject.

In schools ‘usualising’ acclimatises children to the existence of something (e.g. LGBT people). This prepares them to be taught in more detail about those lives later on. This more in-depth teaching is the second teaching method called ‘actualising’ and involves lessons with specific objectives that include a greater understanding of LGBT identities, and their impact on people and culture.
Section 28

The Local Government Bill, probably, galvanised LGBT people, their families and allies to protest to a degree not seen before in the UK. Some would say that, in the long term, it was an own goal for the Government. Unfortunately, it was not repealed until 2003. One consequence was that many young LGBT people during that time failed to receive sensible advice, including how to avoid HIV infection, at school.

The clause (later Section 28) stated that local authorities could not fund or “intentionally promote” homosexuality. State schools could not promote “the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship”.

The drafting was mean in intent and most legal opinion was that it was unenforceable nonsense (no cases therefore, were ever brought to Court), but it gave succour to local authorities who wanted to continue to ignore, and be unpleasant to, their LGBT local tax payers.

The ‘Stop the Clause’ organisation organised many public demonstrations. For the first time action was co-ordinated across Europe.

Humorous post cards aimed to highlight the absurdity of the law. It is suggested that the cartoon figure in one of the postcards had a likeness to Mary Whitehouse, a former Shropshire County Council Librarian and founder, some years before, with Malcolm Muggeridge, of the National Viewers and Listeners Association.

How do you promote homosexuality? A high profile advertising agency was asked, if hired, how it would do so. It had to say it could not be done!

Places that had never seen a LGBT demonstration saw angry LGBT people on their streets. Significant numbers of people travelled from Shrewsbury to demonstrations, not just in London, but nearer to home e.g. Manchester and Wolverhampton. Shrewsbury saw its own demonstration at the top of Pride Hill, which included a number of “pretended families”!

On 14th March people opposed to the clause held a public meeting at the English Bridge Community Workshop. As the clause passed through the parliamentary process it changed its number, at that time it was clause 25, this was very confusing.

People were very glad to see the back of Section 28, when it was repealed in 2003. However that was not the case for one of the Shropshire MPs, Owen Paterson. He was not at the House of Commons for the vote but said that “…I would have voted to keep Section 28 as a further means of protecting children”.

Humorous post cards aimed to highlight the absurdity of the law. It is suggested that the cartoon figure in one of the postcards had a likeness to Mary Whitehouse, a former Shropshire County Council Librarian and founder, some years before, with Malcolm Muggeridge, of the National Viewers and Listeners Association.
2011: Shropshire Rainbow Film Festival created street banners, which hung over town centre streets. This increased numbers attending and raised LGBT visibility.

Peter Gilbert, inspired by the festival, set up Chill Out: a non-scene social group, meeting monthly at the OMH Café Bar.

The first Chill Out took place on Monday 6 June 2011. “I climbed the steps to the Old Market Hall nervously and couldn’t believe the hubbub of voices audible before I even reached the entrance! Amazingly, there were thirty people there that first evening,” Peter recalls.

Border Women: the network for lesbian and bisexual women on the Welsh-English borders continues to meet regularly and has done for the past 28 years.

SM4A (Shropshire Marriage 4 All) was formed in 2012, to campaign for same sex marriage. SM4A lobbied MP’s, wrote letters to the media, distributed leaflets. Two Shropshire MP’s: Daniel Kawczinski (Shrewsbury) and Peter Wright (Telford and Wrekin) voted in favour.

2012: LGBT Shrewsbury set up Shrewsbury Carnival Pride.

2013 saw Shrewsbury’s first LGBT float on the Town Carnival, which won First Prize for ‘Most Original Form of Transport’ and in 2015 won again for the 3rd year running.

2014: Shropshire Fire & Rescue HQ flew the rainbow flag to mark IDAHO (International Day Against Homophobia).

Inspired by women's football post-match parties, the original intention was to hold a festival of sport and music for 'women who liked women'. The concept grew when organiser, Cindy Edwards approached the Shropshire Rainbow Film Festival (later SpringOut 2012/13) who added film and arts to the programme. The Laughing Cows Provided comedy.

L Fest wanted to offer something different and the ethos of caring for those who came was high on the agenda – always provide clean toilets, never run out of toilet paper and – as the sun beat down – offer bottled water and suntan lotion.

Year one was a hit – but it needed to be bigger if it was going to survive. It also needed interim events and from the very first year there was a sister event L Festive during the Winter; and L Fest del Mar – the Spanish version arrived on the scene in 2013.

L Fest is about bringing people together, having a good time and sharing important issues in a safe and friendly environment, whether as a single person or in a couple. It also provides a huge opportunity to encourage and promote lesbian music, arts, creativity, writing, poetry, dance, film and fun!

After two years in Shrewbury, L Fest moved to Uttoxeter Racecourse where it continued to see a pattern of growth in terms of what it offered and numbers attending. The demographic however was less expected, it was consistently attracting an older age group than the initial foot-balling audience! Time to investigate. In 2015, L Fest commissioned research to find out why younger lesbians were not coming along. This found that, despite huge progress, increased visibility and the presence of role models, many young lesbians still do not feel safe to be out.

So – what next?
2016 is the 6th year of L Fest and tickets are already selling fast – watch this space!

www.lfest.co.uk

Inspired by a woman who produced a flyer using her own personal contact details inviting others to join her in starting a local group. She contacted a reporter on the Hereford Times who agreed to write an article about lesbians in the Borders. About 20 women turned up for the first ‘meeting’ in Leominster Community Centre where the name Border Women was chosen.

A follow up letter, circulated to those present, described it as follows:

The meeting... was extraordinary in many ways – to be in Leominster with nearly 20 other lesbians felt revolutionary and miraculous! Although women might have felt anxious, scared to come, tense... I feel that we co-operated in a good way. It was intense and tiring – but just think, we’d never met before. For some of us, including me, the meeting was breaking the isolation of many years. I feel that it is worth the work and effort and personally I shall carry on: even if we only reach one new woman a month it’s worth it for her and for us!

A monthly newsletter was initiated shortly after this inaugural meeting and two years later the group was still going strong as described in The Pink Paper (16th June, 1990):

Border Women, the lively lesbians from the Welsh Marches, are celebrating their second birthday... the group has spread from Telford to Brecon and Worcester to Aberystwyth with 100 women receiving their newsletter. They meet regularly in Shrewsbury and there is a social and disco every month in Ludlow, as well as one-off video showings, workshops, parties and picnics.

The network survived with collective input from women all over the County who organised as ‘regional reps’ to support and advertise Border Women, as well as editors who produced the essential monthly newsletter which was at that time based in Ludlow.

In 2007, one of the women central to the newsletter sadly died. Energy was low, membership had dwindled, and the archives were moved from Ludlow to Shrewsbury.

By 2008 the paper-copy newsletter was complemented by a revitalised electronic version and membership numbers started to grow once again. In 2010 the group moved to an entirely online social networking site where membership has now risen to 150 (in 2016) with an age range from 20-90; members post their own range of events, such as going to the cinema, picnics and parties, walking and cycling.

www.borderwomen.net
Work

What About the Gay Workers?
Until early this century LGBT people were vulnerable to dismissal by employers who were averse to homosexuality. In 1979 John Saunders, a handyman at a Scottish Youth Camp, was dismissed. The case made it clear in law that it was reasonable to sack a person because some people are prejudiced. The Campaign for Homosexuality reported on the vulnerability of LGBT people in employment, in 1981.

Susan Shell
Susan Shell was sacked from a local authority girls’ home because of a conversation, in which she mentioned she was a lesbian. The campaign to get her reinstated, “Defend Susan Shell”, was one of a number of similar campaigns that took the matter to the trade union movement. One of the first to take a positive stand was Nalgo (the National and Local Government Officers Association).

Gay Rights
LGBT members of the union for public sector staff, NALGO (today called Unison), formed a group, in 1974, called Nalgay. Over time they persuaded the union to have a policy which protected LGBT staff from prejudice at work. In 1984 the group “Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners” made positive links with the National Union of Mine Workers, this in turn led to the adoption of positive policies by the Labour Party, from 1985

Equality 2000
Stonewall, the national LGBT rights organisation, started an “equality 2000” campaign in 1997. Its aspiration was to achieve full equality in all aspects of life for LGBT people by the year 2000. (It got close with the criminal law, which became equal in 2003; equality in the civil law came about, nearly, in 2013 (if you are a Church of England Christian and wish to marry in your church – in law, it is forbidden). In 1997 there was still no direct protection for LGBT people at work.

New Rights
In 2003 the Trades Union Congress could celebrate its role in the passing of the Employment Equality (Sexual Orientation) Regulations 2003 in its pamphlet “New Rights”. This was thanks to European Union law, which caused the UK to protect LGBT workers against being treated less favourably than their heterosexual colleagues.

Talking Point staff newsletter
LGBT employees at Shropshire County Council set up a LGBT staff group in 2005. The Shropshire Star, of 10th August 2005, endearingly carried a headline “Council to cater for gay workers”! An image of members of the group, reclining on a sofa, in Shropshire County Council’s in house newsletter of December 2006, was a source of consternation for some readers.

Pride not Prejudice
Although LGBT people had legal protection from 2003, the Law Centres Federation created a dvd to help them to use that law. They realised that a change in the law did not mean that employers’ behaviour, in many cases, toward LGBT people had changed. They were dealing with many cases of harassment and discrimination.

In 2014 TUC Education at Shrewsbury College ran the first (free) Out At Work course aimed at stewards, reps, members and activists, equipping them with advice, information and reference points on LGBT issues.
History helps provide a map that shows where we have come from, the events that have inevitably shaped our lives and the societies we live in. Looking at history, we see the way certain actions and decisions brought about events and what the consequences of those events were.

**Back in Time: the National Festival of LGBT History in Shrewsbury**

Is a great opportunity to highlight Shropshire as a place where many LGBT people have always lived, loved, set up home, created families and lived their everyday lives. We also know that there are many who have fought hard, campaigned, challenged the heterosexual and binary gender ‘norms’, making their voices heard as people with the right to live their lives.

We use the term LGBT as a catch all to include...Lesbians, gay Men, Bisexual People, Trans People and others who do not conform to heteronormative assumptions

A few of us attended the first National Festival of LGBT History in Manchester in February 2015 and following our presentation about LGBT activity in Shropshire, were asked if we wanted to be a ‘hub’ in 2016, alongside York, London, Newcastle, Bristol, Manchester. We knew that it would be a lot of work but how could we resist!

History stuff gets to you, especially once you realise how little we know ourselves, never mind how much the general public know about LGBT lives:

- How people met each other
- Where they could meet and feel safe, non-judged, accepted for who they are
- The impact of being criminalised
- The impact of being abused, discriminated against, ignored, demonised
- The contact ‘coming out’ and sometimes lack of choice in ‘being out’
- The ‘codes’ that helped people to ‘find’ each other and ‘share’ experiences without overtly announcing their sexuality

In a large rural county, finding and meeting people is harder and undoubtedly a lot of people gravitate towards larger cities and towns where there is more likelihood of a ‘gay’ club, bar, group meeting and even an LGBT Community centre!! Also we know that some have come to the ‘metropolis’ of Shrewsbury from some very small rural communities

**History Month**

The National Festival of LGBT History has grown out of the work of Schools Out (www.schools-out.org.uk) who, in 2004, initiated LGBT History Month. Their intention is ambitious – nothing less than providing the general public and our community with the education denied and kept hidden from them in mainstream education, educating ‘out’ prejudice and making all LGBT people visible and safe. The idea is to enable everyone – LGBT and heterosexual alike – to discover the contributions and experiences of the LGBT community in all their diversity. This will only happen if the history, lives and experiences of LGBT people are made visible.

Whether at school, through art, a museum, theatre, culture....we consistently need to be made aware of the presence of LGBT people. We exist in all times, places, all religions, cultures, ages. We should be referred to as part of everyday life without necessarily needing particular comment.

In schools ‘usualising’ acclimatises children to the existence of something (e.g. LGBT people). This prepares them to be taught in more detail about those lives later on. This more in-depth teaching is the second teaching method called ‘actualising’ and involves lessons with specific objectives that include a greater understanding of LGBT identities, and their impact on people and culture.

**This exhibition**

Largely based on material collected over the years by a few individuals. In the main it deals with the 1970s onwards. More funding is needed to do a more extensive job of collecting and displaying archival materials, shedding light on hidden lives and understanding more about the history of LGBT people and their communities, whether campaigning for change, pointing out injustices or simply getting on with their lives.

The focus is mainly on Shropshire but, we are aware that there are gaps. Where it seemed helpful we have added material from other sources. We appreciate that this exhibition is partial – we all have our own experiences, perspectives and views of ‘what happened, when, how....’

We hope this exhibition will open up discussion and debate, encouraging others to start telling and sharing their own stories, adding to our understanding of LGBT lives.