

Background Information

Who was Lord Wolfenden?



Born in 1906, John Frederick Wolfenden is most famously known for his pivotal role in chairing the Departmental Committee on Homosexual Offenses and Prostitution, most commonly known as the Wolfenden Committee, from 1954 to 1957. Prior to his work on governmental committees, Wolfenden taught Philosophy at Oxford University, served as headmaster of a prestigious public school, and was appointed Commander of the British Empire for his work directing the Air Training corps during World War II. At the time of the Wolfenden Committee, Wolfenden was serving as vice chancellor of the University of Reading, overseeing great expansion.

What was the situation in Britain prior to the “Wolfenden Report”?

Male homosexuality had been criminalised for centuries prior to the “Wolfenden Report”. Whilst homosexuality had been illegal since the Buggery Act of 1533, the law was strengthened in 1855 with the Criminal Law Amendment Act, which criminalised all homosexual acts, including those in private. It was under this act that prosecutions of homosexual acts were pursued with increasing vigour during the 1950s, with as many as 1,000 men detained every year. Undercover police officers regularly acted as ‘agent provocateurs’, posing as gay men to entrap men soliciting in public places. Paranoia and blackmail was rife. Politicians, such as Home Secretary Sir David Maxwell Fyfe, spoke of conducting a “new drive against male vice” which would “rid England of this plague. Rather ironically, Maxwell Fyfe oversaw the creation of the Wolfenden Committee but more on that later. Alongside rising convictions, the popular press began to show increasing interest in sensationalist stories involving well-known homosexuals, or suspected homosexual, figures. The suicide of Alan Turing in 1954, after months of public shaming, and the defection of homosexual Russian spies Donald MacLean and Guy Burgess in 1951, placed homosexuality firmly on the public agenda. In response to these cases, and another prominent case in 1954 (detailed below), the government established the Departmental Committee on Homosexual Offenses and Prostitution under Sir John Wolfenden (later Lord Wolfenden).

What was the Departmental Committee on Homosexual Offenses and Prostitution and what was the “Wolfenden Report”?



The “Wolfenden Report” presented the findings of a three-year investigation by the Departmental Committee on Homosexual Offenses and Prostitution. The committee was comprised of doctors, MPs, lawyers, ministers of religion and three women. Appointed in 1954, the committee was tasked with re evaluating the criminalisation of homosexuality and the situation of prostitution in Britain. As part of the investigation, the committee considered the testimonies of over 200 witnesses, to include homosexuals, and representatives of professional bodies.

The report recommended, “that homosexual behaviour between consenting adults in private be no longer a criminal offence”, having concluded that the law “should not intrude into matters of

personal morality” . With regards to prostitution, the report advocated for the introduction of stricter penalties for soliciting. The act did not concern lesbian acts, as lesbianism has never been explicitly illegal in the United Kingdom.

What was the reaction to the “Wolfenden Report”?

The publication of the report garnered substantial interest. The first print of 5,000 copies sold out within hours. Despite intense interest, and a Parliamentary motion to implement the findings in 1960, the motion failed and the significant governmental opposition prevented implementation for a further 7 years.

Who was Peter Wildeblood and what was the importance of the Wildeblood trial?



In the same year as Alan Turing’s suicide, the British public was rocked by another scandal. A rising star in journalism, Peter Wildeblood, alongside Lord Montague of Beaulieu and his cousin Michael Pitt-Rivers, were arrested and tried for homosexual offences. Public interest in the case was tremendous, with news outlets reporting daily from the court. Whilst the lengthy prison sentences handed down to Montagu, Wildeblood and Pitt-Rivers (12 months for Montague and 18 months for Wildeblood and Pitt-Rivers) caused substantial public discussion and debate, the nature in which the three men came to be convicted, and disclosures made by the men during the trial, arguably challenged public opinion to a greater degree. But who was Peter Wildeblood and why was the case so scandalous?

Peter Wildeblood was a former royal correspondent, turned diplomatic correspondent for the Daily Mail. He began a relationship with an RAF corporal called Edward McNally. During the summer of 1953, Wildeblood’s friend Lord Montague invited Wildeblood and McNally to stay at a beach hut on his estate. The couple were joined by RAF serviceman John Reynolds and Montague’s cousin Michael Pitt-Rivers . The events of that evening vary depending upon which testimony is read.

Recalling the events of that summer, Montague notes that in the weeks after that evening local policemen appeared to make considerable efforts to incriminate him. When reporting a theft on his property, Montague found himself arrested and charged with offences against a young boy. Montague was acquitted but the media and police began to pay very close attention to his elaborate lifestyle. In January 1954, police launched dawn raids at Montague’s, Wildeblood’s and Pitt-River’s properties. Investigations conducted by the RAF had uncovered Wildeblood and McNally’s relationship through love letters sent between the pair. The love letters themselves were read out in court during the trial, a process Lord Montague described as “the cruellest thing”. Promised immunity in return for their testimonies, RAF servicemen McNally and Reynolds gave incriminating evidence and named over 20 other sexual partners. No action was taken against McNally, Reynolds or the 20 men named. It soon became clear that the more influential and privileged Montague, Wildeblood and Pitt-Rivers were the clear targets for prosecution.

During the trial, Peter Wildeblood became one of the first British men to publically come out as gay. Whilst Wildeblood did face some abuse during the trial, being spat on by a stranger a few days before sentencing, the ordeal the three men endured during the trial led to a surprising shift in public opinion. As the three men left the court to start their prison sentences, a crowd who applauded the men, gave thumbs-up and told the men to “keep smiling” surrounded the car. In contrast, a crowd of 200 jeered McNally and Reynolds, who left the court as free men. The case had invoked great sympathy for the plight of gay men amongst the general public.



Who was Leo Abse and what led to the Sexual Offences Act 1967

Leo Abse was a long standing Labour MP who served for nearly 30 years. A flamboyant and provocative figure, Abse was known to champion social issues often avoided in mainstream politics, namely “homosexuality, divorce and capital punishment”. During his career, Abse oversaw the passing of more backbench reforming legislation than any other MP in the 20th century.

From 1957-1967 significant lobbying took place to push for implementation of the Wolfenden Committee’s recommendations regarding homosexuality. Two bodies were formed which actively campaigned for decriminalisation. The Homosexual Law Reform Society (HLRS) was formed in 1958 whilst the Campaign for Homosexual Equality (CHE) began as the North Western Committee for Homosexual Law Reform (NQCHLR) in 1964. The lobbying campaigns included talks at Rotary Clubs, university debates, public meetings and letter-writing. In 1965 Lord Arran, submitted a motion to support the implementation of recommendations made by the Wolfenden Report. The motion failed to gain support with the Labour government taking a neutral position. Roy Jenkins, the Home Secretary at the time, pointedly remarked that a Sexual Offences Bill was only likely to pass if submitted as a “private member’s measure, with all members free to vote according to their personal convictions”.

In 1966 Labour backbencher Leo Abse sponsored the Sexual Offences Bill as a private members bill. To gather support for the bill Abse played upon stereotypes and presented the homosexual as a pitiful figure. With ignorance and hostility towards homosexuality still widespread in society, Abse argued that a change in the law would “prevent...little boys from growing up to be adult homosexuals”. The bill passed but with many compromises.

What impact did the Sexual Offences Act (1967) have?

The Sexual Offences act decriminalised homosexual acts in private, between consenting men aged over 21. Whilst the passing of the act could have been seen to provide greater freedoms, in reality, prosecutions for homosexual behaviour actually trebled in the decade after the act was passed due to heavier penalties imposed by the act upon homosexual acts in ‘public’. What is perhaps particularly telling was the failure to define the term ‘private’ in the act. As such, law enforcement and the courts were given the power to define the term ‘private’ and subsequently decide whether homosexual acts were legal or illegal.

In addition, setting the age of consent for homosexual acts at 21 years of age (fives years later than consent for heterosexual acts) ensured that homosexuals aged under 21 faced prosecution for activities which heterosexual young people were free to engage in. Moreover, the later age of consent also reflected a commonly held fear in society, that young people and children would be corrupted by an older homosexual.

What were the Stonewall Riots?



In the early hours of the 28th of June 1969, police raided the Stonewall Inn in Greenwich Village, New York City. Patrons of the bar fought back against police brutality, leading to six days of demonstrations and violence. The police raid and subsequent protests would later become known as the Stonewall Riots, often referred to as the Stonewall Rebellion within the LGBT+ community. The riot served as a catalyst for gay rights worldwide, leading to the formation of many prominent rights organisations. The riots have frequently been cited as the inspiration for LGBT pride marches worldwide.

What led to the riots and why have the riots been seen to be a pivotal event in LGBT+ history?

Whilst the 1960s were a decade of freedom and sexual liberation for many, the decade was not as carefree or welcoming for LGBT+ Americans. LGBT+ individuals in New York City were faced with statutes prohibiting solicitation of homosexual relations and demanding people wear at least “three gender-appropriate articles of clothing” or face arrest. Gay bars and clubs were a haven where LGBT+ individuals could express themselves freely and relatively safely. However, these havens faced substantial harassment from law enforcement and were regularly raided. Whilst homosexual behaviour within bars was not criminalised, many bars operated without liquor licenses, as they were Mafia owned. This arguably gave the police ample excuse to raid LGBT+ bars under the guise of illegally selling alcohol. Police raids were a regular occurrence but corrupt police would often tip off bars before raids occurred.

The Stonewall Inn was owned by the Genovese family who ensured that the inn remained open through bribery of law enforcement and blackmail of the inn's wealthier patrons, who were anxious to keep their sexuality secret. The Stonewall Inn was one of the only LGBT+ bars which welcomed both dancing and drag queens, several drag queens in particular played a large role in the riots.

On the 28th June 1969 the police raided Stonewall Inn unexpectedly, without a tip off to the owners. The police began to rough up patrons, seize bootlegged alcohol and arrest 13 people, from employees to individuals violating the state's gender-appropriate clothing statute. A crowd gathered, increasingly agitated by the aggression and violence shown by law enforcement. When one officer hit a lesbian over the head she shouted at bystanders to act. Within minutes, bottles were thrown as missiles and hundreds fought on the street. Some attempted to hide in the bar itself, which was subsequently set alight. Whilst the crowd was eventually dispersed, protests involving up to thousands of people continued for five more days.

The riots sparked a rise in LGBT activism, leading to the formation of several prominent LGBT organisations, such as: the Gay Liberation Front; Human Rights Campaign; Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG); and Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD). One year after the riots, the first Gay Pride was held. Two years after the riots and gay rights organisations existed in every major US city. The impact the riots have had in agitating protest and change was acknowledge by President Barack Obama who designated Stonewall Inn, and the area around the inn, as a national monument in recognition of the "area's contribution to gay and human rights."

Who were the key figures in the riot?



Two of the key figures in the riot were two trans women of colour called Marsha P Johnson and Sylvia Rivera. Both women were sex workers and drag queens who actively fought for equality. At the outbreak of the riot, Johnson and Rivera were among the first people to take action, throwing bottles at the police and trying to help patrons who were escaping from the police vans. After Stonewall, Johnson and Rivera co-founded Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR), "a group dedicated to helping homeless young drag queens and trans women of colour". Both Johnson and Rivera are considered the mothers of trans activism. However, their role in the riots was largely erased in the recent film *Stonewall* (2015), with the producers of the film choosing a fictional cis white male character called Danny as the film's protagonist.

What was Section 28?

Section 28 was a controversial amendment of the Local Government Act 1988 which stipulated that local authorities "shall not intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality" or "promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship". The amendment failed to clarify what was meant by the term "promote homosexuality". This ambiguity caused significant anxiety and confusion amongst educators and schools, with uncertainty and fear leading many to avoid discussing or teaching about any LGBT+ issues. The amendment, also known as Clause 28, was finally repealed in Scotland in 2000 and repealed across the rest of the UK in 2003.

What led to Section 28?



From the 1960s to the 1980s British society saw a social transition from homosexuality as "illegal but discussed" to "legal but not always approved". Moreover, the 1980s saw increasing conservatism, with Margaret Thatcher's government in power, coinciding with the AIDs epidemic. Hostility towards the left-wing local authorities was high, with concerns arising over government funding towards minority groups. Furthermore, the AIDs epidemic gave voice to scaremongering and false accusations against the gay community. Conservative MP Jill Knight, who introduced Section 28, claimed that the tone of publications by the Gay Liberation Front, calling for the "abolition of the family", drove support for the amendment. The night before Section 28 became law, lesbian protestors attempted to raise their concerns by abseiling into Parliament and invading the BBC Six O'Clock news, with one protestor chaining herself to Sue Lawley's desk.

What is the legacy of Section 28?

The introduction of Section 28 caused divisions across the political spectrum. Whilst the Conservative party became increasingly split between modernists and traditionalists, the introduction of section 28 brought activists together and led to the rise of prominent gay rights organisations such as Stonewall and OutRage ! Whilst Section 28 was repealed in 2003 (2000 in Scotland), Conservative-run Kent County Council elected to keep Section 28, introducing provisions which stated that "heterosexual marriage and family relationships are the only firm