

The Box



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Introduction:

The Box is a social space for people, art, ideas and experiences. We preserve the city's cultural collections and share extraordinary stories to explore the pressing issues of our age.

From our home in Plymouth, we nurture and support individuals to be creative and curious about the world around them, exploring the past in order to imagine new futures.



About this resource

This resource has been created in partnership with the Pride in Plymouth Community Trust. Highlighting shared archival material from The Box and Pride in Plymouth's community archive, it introduces some of the people and places who form part of Plymouth's LGBTQIA+ history.

The acronym LGBTQIA+ stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex and Asexual. The + sign relates to lots of other ways in which people might explain aspects of their identity and/or orientation.



When people couldn't speak their truth

Historically, aspects of LGBTQIA+ lives, in particular homosexuality between two men, have been criminalised in the United Kingdom. Although decriminalised in England and Wales after the Sexual Offences Act of 1967, subsequent changes in law, such as Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988 which prohibited 'the intentional promotion of homosexuality', meant people who identified as LGBTQIA+ felt further stigmatised and often tried to keep these aspects of their lives secret.

Through the work of UK-based LGBTQ rights organisations and charities such as Stonewall, laws such as Section 28 and the long-term ban on

homosexuality in the armed forces were overturned in the 2000s.

This meant that until very recently, LGBTQIA+ stories were often not recorded or sometimes censored or coded. As a result, archives either don't exist or aren't referenced in an accessible way. Through the work of organisations such as the Pride in Plymouth Community Trust and the wider LGBTQIA+ community, the stories within this resource remind us LGBTQIA+ people have always been part of Plymouth's past and will continue to be part of its present and future.



Robert Gould Shaw III

Robert (Bobbie) Gould Shaw III was the eldest son (from her first marriage) of Plymouth's Nancy Astor. Nancy Astor was an iconic local figure, famous for being Lady Mayoress during the Blitz and the first woman to take a seat in parliament after her husband, Lord Astor, became a peer.

Bobbie Shaw was born in Massachusetts, USA, moving to England with his mother after his parents divorced. Growing up to be a champion steeplechaser, Shaw had a respectable military career rising to the rank of lieutenant within the Royal Horse Guards.

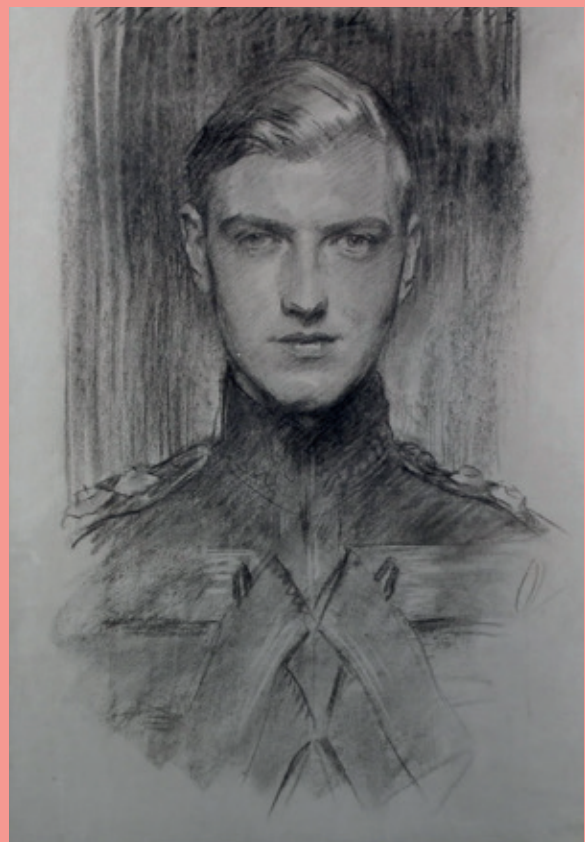
During the summer of 1931, Bobbie was arrested after being caught in an encounter with another man and imprisoned for six months for homosexual offences. Shortly afterwards his name was removed from the Army list, effectively ending his military career.

Bobbie's stepfather, Waldorf Astor, owned The Observer newspaper and with the support of his half-brother, John Jacob Astor (proprietor of The Times) and Lord Beaverbrook (owner of the Daily Express) the Astor family managed keep the incident out of the mainstream press.

Suffering from alcoholism and depression throughout adulthood, Bobbie later took his own life following the death of his mother and his

half-brother William. It's believed his imprisonment led Lord Astor to support the campaign to decriminalise homosexuality, led by The Observer newspaper, in the 1950s.

During his life, renowned artist John Singer Sargent drew Shaw's portrait and although their relationship was never recognised, Lady Astor gifted this drawing to his longstanding partner, Alfred Edward Goodey.



John Singer Sargent (1856-1925), Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons



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Mark Weston

In May 1936, regional paper the Western Morning News, reported the story of Mark Weston, a 30 year old Oreston resident who, having been raised as a woman, was now 'in his true element' as male after two operations.

Mark Weston was a successful British Athletics champion, who won the British Championships shot put medal seven years running and later won at the International Games. After his athletic career, Weston decided to undergo a series of gender-affirming surgeries at Charing Cross Hospital in London in 1936.

After the two surgical procedures Weston returned to Plymouth, changing his name to Mark Edward Louis Weston. Well known and well respected in the city, Mark received several letters from residents showing their support and wish to remain friends and was 'delighted with the way in which all my friends of both sexes are standing by me.'

Today Mark would be considered an intersex person who had been assigned a gender at birth that did not relate to who he knew himself to be. In the words of Mr. L. R. Broster, the Harley Street surgeon who treated him: 'Mark Weston, who has always been brought up as a female, is male and should continue to live as such.'

In an additional interview Weston offered to forfeit his British Athletic championship records but was told this was not necessary. Later, in 1936, the paper reported that Mr. Weston had married Miss Alberta Bray whom he had been childhood friends with at school.

The acceptance and support that was offered to Mark Weston alongside his doctor's note showed that the people of Plymouth were happy to accept him in his true identity and is an enduring legacy of allyship.



Prudence de Villiers and Gay Jones: In Other Words

As a result of social stigmatisation and enforced laws against LGBTQIA+ identities, people tended to meet and perform in spaces where they felt safe to express themselves. In the 1960s, the 'back bar' at the Lockyer Tavern became a safe space as it had its own entrance and toilet facilities. In the 1980s, Mr Harry's Nightclub in West Hoe, was known in Plymouth as an openly gay space.

Another safe space was a bookshop called 'In Other Words', owned by Prudence de Villiers and her partner Gay Jones. After it opened in 1982, it broke new ground in Plymouth and became a focal point for the city's radical activists. The shop stocked wide-ranging literature but specialised in feminism, nuclear disarmament, LGBTQ+ rights, climate justice and anti-racism.

In the same year, the Evening Herald reported that *'there is none of the hushed 'library' in this warm and friendly emporium. The joint owners...have*

cleverly created the right conditions for study and perusal where customers may have a cup of tea or coffee while browsing or just chatting'. Gay added that 'in the last 20 years people have been exploring different ways of living – alternative medicine, alternative sources of energy and so on, not to mention alternative ways of living'.

As this article proves, attitudes towards LGBTQIA+ lives meant that Prudence and Gay were referred to as 'joint owners' and not a couple, even though they were prepared to share this aspect of who they were.

'In Other Words' closed in 1997. Although it continues to flourish online, the physical shop is still missed by its customers, volunteers and staff who enjoyed its welcoming environment, social events and 'safe space' where people could feel part of a community whilst challenging the status quo.



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LGBTQIA + legacy in Plymouth

Historically, Plymouth was a place where people didn't talk about being LGBTQIA+. More recently however there has been a surge in local groups bringing underrepresented voices and Plymouth's LGBTQIA+ heritage to the forefront.

The Pride in Plymouth Community Trust highlights stories from Plymouth's past, raising awareness through sessions in schools and businesses and running regular pop-up events in the city. As part of its 'Pride 365' campaign, it aims to encourage and support the LGBTQ+ community to show pride in who they are every day of the year.

Plymouth Pride CIC, which has run the annual Pride Festival since 2022, brings Pride to the heart of the city. Pride is a celebration of love and belonging, uniting people of all genders and sexualities, from across the city and beyond in the wider region. Plymouth Pride marches through Plymouth every summer before gathering in a festival of dance, music and visibility.

Plymouth's Queer District Collective (QDC) runs regular events including a book club, sea swimming group and monthly pop-up art exhibitions. Inspired by historic LGBTQIA+ safe

spaces in the city, Queer District Collective's 'Two Sides of the Same Coin' project was displayed as part of LGBTQIA+ History Month at The Box in 2024. Alongside Beryl Cook's 'Lockyer Street Tavern' painting, which was a large inspiration for the project, the project brought an inclusive perspective to the LGBTQIA+ stories of the city, often kept separate from Plymouth's wider history.



Further resources

Some of the stories and themes within this resource are represented here alongside groups and national organisations that offer LGBTQIA+ support and services in Plymouth and the South West.

Plymouth Pride - <https://plymouthpride.co.uk/>

Pride in Plymouth Community Trust - <https://prideinplymouth.org.uk/>

Trans Pride in Plymouth - <https://www.instagram.com/transprideplymouth/>

The Old Queeriosity Bookshop - https://www.instagram.com/toqs_lgbt/

Queer District Collective - <https://www.instagram.com/queerdistrictcollective/>

Proud2Be - Proud2Be | Supporting LGBTQIA+ People in Devon and Beyond

Sunrise Diversity - LGBTQ+ Social Group and Support | Sunrise Diversity | North Devon

Queer Kernow - Queer Kernow – Queer History is Cornish History

Queer Out Loud - <https://queeroutloud.com/>

Stonewall - <https://www.stonewall.org.uk/>

Intercom Trust - <https://www.intercomtrust.org.uk/>

Mermaids - <https://mermaidsuk.org.uk/>

Not Alone - <https://www.notaloneplymouth.co.uk/>

Out Youth - <https://www.outyouth.co.uk/>

Museum of Transology - <https://www.museumoftransology.com/>



Queer
District
Collective.

PRIDE
IN PLYMOUTH

The Box



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