

Creating an online archive for LGBT history

By Ross Burgess

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In July 2011 I heard about a new Wikipedia-style project to record Britain's LGBT history, and immediately knew it was something I wanted to help with. I had been editing Wikipedia articles for about seven years, so I was very familiar with the wiki approach to building an online database; and I also had an interest in LGBT history: for instance in 2004 my partner and I had staged re-enactments of the mediaeval church's same-sex union ceremonies – *adelphopoiesis* – as part of the campaign to support the introduction of civil partnerships.¹ So when Jonathan Harbourne asked for volunteer editors for his new LGBT History wiki, I signed up at once. The project's title includes 'LGBT' (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) which is probably the most convenient and widely understood abbreviation for our community. But its scope could be better defined as 'LGBT+' – it definitely includes intersex people, those who classify themselves as queer, non-binary, pansexual, etc, etc.

Jonathan's project was a virtual 'time capsule', a resource for people and academics in years to come. The image of the time capsule has been part of the project's logo from the outset. He said at the time,

In another ten or twenty years, I don't want people to forget the struggle and the fight that won us our equalities and freedoms. But I don't want it to be all doom-and-gloom either – as a perceived minority we not only stood out against injustice, but often shone out, ... we celebrated our differences, with the word 'Pride' becoming synonymous with being LGB&T, and we stuck together during the health crisis we faced, raising millions of pounds.²

Jonathan set the project up as a wiki, which has been defined as: 'A website or database developed collaboratively by a community of users, allowing any user to add and edit content.'³ The project adopted the same software package – MediaWiki – as used for Wikipedia, the best-known example of a wiki. The look and feel of the site will be very familiar to Wikipedia users: there are plenty of links from one article to another, and every article is a member of one or more 'categories', to help find your way round. But there are some important differences from Wikipedia, as I discuss below.

The project very soon expanded to cover the whole of British LGBT history, starting from 55 BC, with the first visit by Julius Caesar. Caesar is said to have had male as well as female lovers,⁴ and would today be regarded as bisexual, although the term and the concept were not invented for another 2,000 years, so he's a good starting point for a chronicle of LGBT life in these islands.



Figure 1. The original logo

So what sort of subjects get included?

- About 1,300 individuals – not just LGBT people, but also supporters and opponents of LGBT equality, and prominent men and women whose views on the subject have been recorded; the articles about famous people concentrate on LGBT aspects, rather than offering full-blown biographies.
- Every county, region, city, district, and major town in the UK, many smaller towns and villages, and an increasing number of significant pubs, bars and other venues.
- Potentially every LGBT club, group, or association in the country, including:
 - the early campaigning and social groups
 - the hundred-odd CHE groups in the 1970s
 - smaller groups that have popped up and maybe disappeared.
- Events, symbols, books, magazines, terminology, and other topics of LGBT relevance.

The wiki covers the United Kingdom, currently England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland. But before 1922 the United Kingdom also included the rest of Ireland, so how should we deal with this? In practice we've made no attempt to cover the whole of the Republic in detail – that sounds like a project for someone in Ireland to undertake – but we do have articles for some events and people from before partition, and we've recognised developments in the age of consent both sides of the border, and the recent Irish referendum on same-sex marriage.

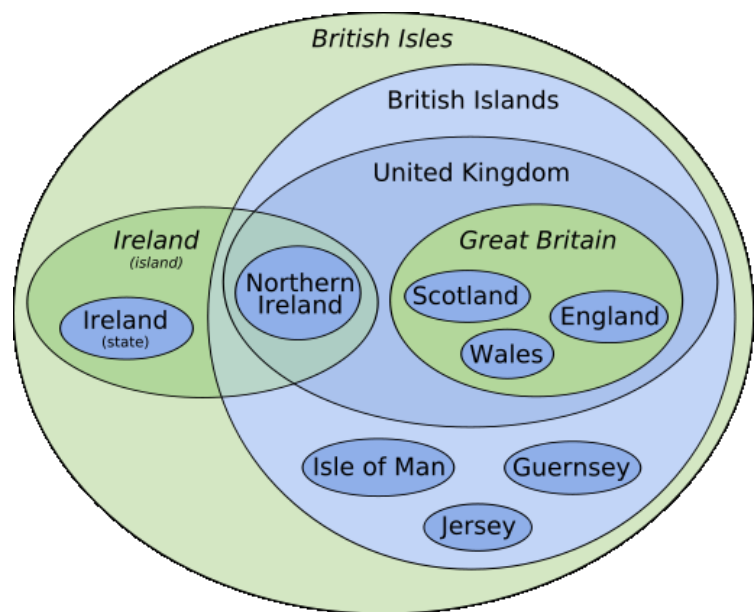


Figure 2. The British Isles (from Wikimedia Commons)

We have also included the three Crown Dependencies (Jersey, Guernsey, and the Isle of Man) which are outside the UK but part of what is sometimes referred to as the 'British Islands'. So our scope is the same as for 'Team GB' in the Olympic Games. We also include articles on international bodies that affect the UK, and a very small number of non-UK subjects. For instance given the various British institutions with 'Stonewall' in their name, it seemed appropriate to include a short article on the 1969 Stonewall Riots in New York.

The project is intended to answer users' questions such as:

- Is there any LGBT history associated with my town? — We've found LGBT history for all but nine local government districts, out of 300-odd in the UK.⁵
- What's the history of <name of LGBT organisation>? — This is a work in progress – some organisations announce their formation, but very few announce their demise; some just appear on the scene and later disappear. My colleague Peter Scott-Presland, in his book *Amiable Warriors*, has been documenting some of the early CHE groups, with more to come.⁶ Researching the detailed history of other groups would be an interesting project for someone.

- Where's my nearest gay club? — The wiki doesn't set out to be a directory, and we aim to cover venues from the past as much as those of the present day; we may have what you're looking for, but you might do better to look elsewhere.
- Is/was <name of famous person> gay, lesbian, etc? — We've included a long list of famous people, with their sexual orientation and gender identity where known and documented. But for many people in our encyclopaedia, particularly those from earlier centuries, we can only record what was said about them, and we'll never know the whole story.
- What did <name of famous person> say about LGBT issues? — This is a fascinating subject that we've barely covered at all, apart from a few quotations attributed to Sir Winston Churchill. Again this would be a good project for a researcher.
- Did Queen Victoria stop lesbianism being made illegal? — The answer of course is NO! But perhaps we should have a category of common misconceptions.

The wiki has now expanded to include over 3,700 articles. It regularly gets around 200,000 page views a month, rising to over 400,000 in January and February 2016. The total number of page views at the end of February 2016 was approaching seven million.⁷

The monthly viewing figures for individual articles sometimes reflect shifts in current interest in the subject in question: for instance the 'Age of consent' page saw a dramatic increase during 2013, when there was a short-lived debate about lowering the age. Other figures have been less easy to explain, and perhaps all such statistics should be taken with a pinch of salt. But by the end of February 2016, 17 pages had each been viewed at least 17,000 times, which constitutes a 'Wikifactor' of 17, as proposed by the physicist Carl McBride and popularised on the WikiIndex website.⁸

Around 80 per cent of our pages now include pictures. Our preferred source of illustrations is to use images that have been uploaded to Wikimedia Commons: one benefit of using the Mediawiki software is that Commons images are immediately available for use in our articles; also any copyright problems are avoided, as images uploaded to Commons are required to be out of copyright or licensed for free use. We've also contributed a number of images to Commons, through our membership of the LGBT Free Media Collective,⁹ – mainly photographs taken by our editors, or logos that are too simple to be copyrighted.¹⁰

But more than half of our illustrations are from other sources. Some have been copied from Wikipedia. Some of the rest would probably be allowed on Wikipedia under the banner of 'fair use', although the legal situation on this is less clear in the UK than in the USA. In many cases however we've borrowed images from websites, particularly those of LGBT organisations, on the assumption that they are more likely to welcome the publicity than to complain of copyright infringement. People are invited to email us if they're unhappy with our use of their images; so far, there have been no complaints.

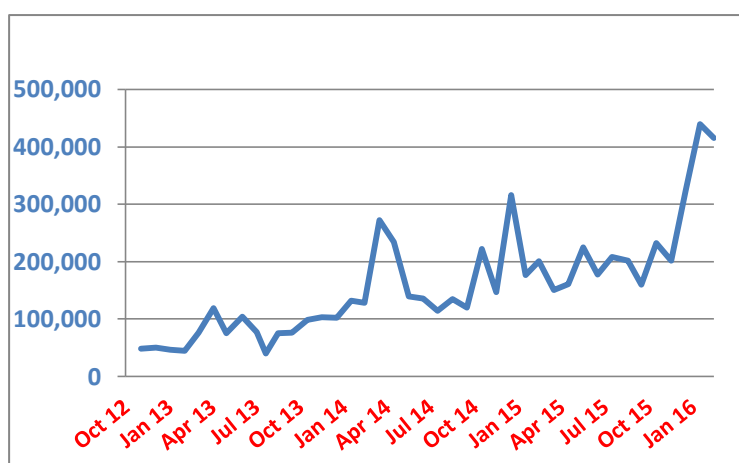


Figure 3. Number of views per month

Finding subjects to write about has not been difficult. For individuals, obvious starting points have included people listed in the Stonewall Awards (even as Bigot of the Year), the *Independent on Sunday*'s 'Pink List' (now re-named the 'Rainbow List'),¹¹ the 'World Pride Power List',¹² Michael Petry's book *Hidden Histories*,¹³ and the Index to the files at the Lesbian and Gay Newsmedia Archive.¹⁴ The *Koymasky* website¹⁵ supplies a useful list of people to be investigated, although its articles about them may not always be reliable, while the locations listed on *Pride of Place*,¹⁶ and the brief biographies on the Canada-based *QueerBio.com*,¹⁷ are worth monitoring. Our list of topics still needing articles has crept up to over 5,000, so there's plenty of scope for new editors.

Some of our information has been derived from Wikipedia, which is a good source for instance for dates of birth and death. But Wikipedia is not always reliable. When researching for our article about the concert pianist Peter Katin,¹⁸ I was surprised that Wikipedia said he had attended the Whitgift School in Croydon. This was quite erroneous (as confirmed by Peter himself) and has now been corrected. But for a time the school had included him on its own online list of alumni, trusting to the prestige of Wikipedia rather than its own records.

More recently I was starting an article about the poet and activist, the late Alan Wakeman. The obituary in *The Guardian* said he was born in Ramsgate, whereas his own biographical website said London. There had been a similar question about the birthplace of the broadcaster Ray Gosling. In each case the answer was found from the subject's birth certificate.

We've regularly been promoting the project at the London Metropolitan Archives' LGBT Conferences, generally in conjunction with CHE, the Campaign for Homosexual Equality, which has been getting more and more involved in LGBT history. We've also had a long association with LGBT History Month, and we're now one of their Key Partners.¹⁹ Each year, LGBT History Month has a particular theme. In 2011–12, when our project was getting started, the theme was 'Sport'; our formal launch in November 2011 was part of a History Month event at the Oval Cricket Ground,²⁰ and Jonathan Harbourne (who had been involved in the campaign to bring the 2018 Gay Games to London) added a Timeline of Sport to the wiki, with a specially commissioned graphic.²¹ We've continued to track the History Month themes year by year, with a Timeline of Science and Technology,²² a Timeline of Music,²³ and most recently a Timeline of Religion, Belief and Philosophy, reflecting the theme for 2016.²⁴

I mentioned above that we're rather different from Wikipedia. The obvious difference is that we concentrate exclusively on British LGBT issues. But there are less obvious differences, mainly concerned with inclusiveness. Wikipedia's policy is only to cover topics

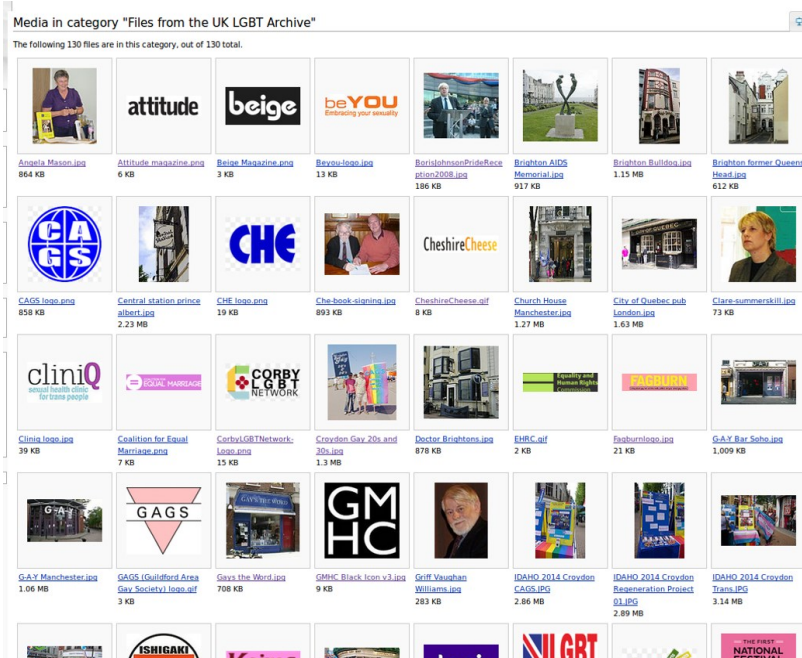


Figure 4. Some of the images we've uploaded to Wikimedia Commons

that are 'notable', and they impose a threshold of notability that would cut out a large proportion of our articles; moreover the information is supposed only to come from third-party reliable sources. Our wiki on the other hand aspires to become a really comprehensive LGBT-related encyclopaedia. We aim to cover every British person, event, place or organisation with a recorded LGBT connection, for instance every group that's been a member of the LGBT Consortium,²⁵ or been listed in directories such as the *London LGBT Almanac*.²⁶ Many of the subjects we cover are nowhere near 'notable' enough to meet the Wikipedia criteria.

We do try to make sure that we document our sources. Any statement likely to be contested should be backed up by reference to a book, newspaper article, website, or archived document. But we can't be as choosy as Wikipedia in selecting our sources, as many of the groups we feature are undocumented except via their own websites. If we'd applied Wikipedia's notability threshold, we would have ruled out a lot of information that urgently needs to be captured before it disappears forever.

And websites can change or disappear without warning. Research by the British Library found that after only two years, 60 per cent of the websites they surveyed had disappeared or changed into something unrecognisable.²⁷ Already some of our older articles refer to websites that are no longer available: this is a problem we share with Wikipedia, which at the time of writing lists over 68,000 articles with dead links.²⁸ This danger doesn't only apply to small and unfunded organisations; in several cases substantial projects have created useful online resources which then disappeared as the funding dried up: for instance the LGBT Excellence Centre with its timeline for Wales,²⁹ or the LGBT London site,³⁰ which was funded (for a time) by London Councils. Sometimes we can find an archived copy of the website on a service such as the Wayback Machine,³¹ but the archived version may lack images or formatting, and sometimes the page was never archived, and there may be no way to recover the lost link.

So having learnt our lesson, we now try to ensure, when citing an external website, that we create an archive of the page there and then, typically using the Web Citation Project,³² remembering that access to our external sources can be as valuable as the content of the articles.

For over 300 years there has been a legal requirement to deposit with the British Library a copy of every book published in the UK. In 2013 the law was extended to cover websites, and the Library now automatically harvests pages from the web. As a rather odd result of the legislation, you need to be physically present in the Library to view the data. However a subset of the collection, the UK Web Archive, is publicly available. We specifically asked for



Figure 5. Jonathan Harbourne (left) with the author at the London Metropolitan Archives LGBT Conference, 2013 with the combined LGBT History Project / CHE stall. The panel with the red background illustrates the Project's Timeline of Music.

our wiki to be included in this, and it now holds archived versions for 2012, 2014, and 2015.³³ We've been looking at possibilities of getting a mirror copy of the site, as a backup, but that's a project for the future.

At the outset, our aim was to make the site very easy for ordinary LGBT people to edit, without even needing to sign up. However it's a sad fact that websites that allow anonymous contributions attract spammers: people who add nonsense content including links to the web addresses they are being paid to promote. Within weeks from our site being created, an anonymous user had vandalised the main page. Jonathan banned anonymous edits, but it soon became clear that we needed to go further, and stop people creating their own accounts. Our statistics show over 1,500 registered users, but the vast majority of these represent time-wasters who were speedily banned. Until we can find a good solution, potential volunteers will need to email us and ask us to create an account for them before they can start editing – we're very keen to recruit editors with a genuine interest in LGBT history.

Jonathan's original vision included a place for first-person narratives; you were invited to create a 'vox pop' entry describing your own experiences. This never really took off, and the need to prohibit anonymous posting has rather put a stop to it. Maybe it could be reinstated in the future, if we can find a way to accommodate such contributions within the framework of an encyclopaedia.

In May 2015 CHE's Annual Conference voted to support the project.³⁴ During a break in the Conference, Jonathan and I discussed the future of the wiki with Jeff Evans, academic lead for LGBT History Month. Jeff argued strongly for a change of name. He pointed out that we were building an archive – assembling and recording facts, rather than attempting, as an historian would, to interpret them. This has proved a somewhat controversial point: on the one hand we follow

the general principles as pioneered by Wikipedia, of 'No Original Research' and 'Neutral Point of View'; on the other hand the selection of facts to record must involve an element of interpretation. Maybe a 'chronicle', rather than a 'history', is a better analogy. Anyway we agreed to follow Jeff's advice, and what was 'The LGBT History Project', has been renamed 'The UK LGBT Archive'. A possible extension of our role as an archive might be to create an index of the various physical archives around the country (the Hall-Carpenter Archives are the best known but there are many others) containing LGBT-related material, perhaps along the lines of the Collections Catalogue hosted by the LGBT Religious Archives Network.³⁵

We re-launched the project in November 2015 at the London Metropolitan Archives LGBT Conference, with the new name and a new logo, still using the 'time capsule' theme. UK domain names can now end in just '.uk' rather than '.co.uk' or '.org.uk', so our new URL is short and simple: 'lgbtarchive.uk'.³⁶

So the LGBT Archive is now well established, and is fast on the way to becoming an indispensable source reference for historians as well as the general public, a record of past struggles and achievements, and a reminder that there is no guarantee that recent advances for LGBT people could not be reversed. But new editors are needed, both to assist with the



Figure 6. The current logo

backlog of work to be done, and to better reflect the full spectrum of the LGBT+ community. In the future the project will also need investment, to ensure that it continues to be available and maintained and updated into the next generation. All offers of help and assistance will be gratefully received.

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- ¹ www.lgbthistoryuk.org/wiki/Adelphopoiesis
 - ² www.divamag.co.uk/category/news/lgbt-history-project-launches-at-london's-oval-%281%29.aspx
 - ³ www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/wiki
 - ⁴ www.lgbthistoryuk.org/wiki/Julius_Caesar
 - ⁵ www.lgbthistoryuk.org/wiki/Category:Districts_with_no_LGBT_history
 - ⁶ Peter Scott-Presland, *Amiable Warriors: a History of the Campaign for Homosexual Equality and its times*, Volume One (London: Paradise Press, 2015). Volumes Two and Three to follow.
 - ⁷ www.lgbthistoryuk.org/wiki/Special:Statistics
 - ⁸ http://wikiindex.org/Template:Size#How_to_calculate_the_wikiFactor_of_a_site
 - ⁹ https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Commons:LGBT_Free_Media_Collective
 - ¹⁰ https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Files_from_the_UK_LGBT_Archive
 - ¹¹ www.independent.co.uk/news/people/therainbowlist/rainbow-list-2015-1-to-101-a6731391.html
 - ¹² www.worldpridepowerlist.com
 - ¹³ Michael Petry, *Hidden Histories: 20th Century Male Same Sex Lovers in The Visual Arts*. (London: Artmedia Press, 2004)
 - ¹⁴ www.lagna.org.uk/archive/people
 - ¹⁵ <http://andrejkoymasky.com/liv/fam/fam00.html>
 - ¹⁶ <http://mapme.com/prideofplace>
 - ¹⁷ <http://queerbio.com/wiki>
 - ¹⁸ www.lgbthistoryuk.org/wiki/Peter_Katin
 - ¹⁹ <http://lgbthistorymonth.org.uk>
 - ²⁰ www.gaystarnews.com/article/lgbt-history-month-founder-excited-2012-event/#gs.L1fdsYg
 - ²¹ www.lgbthistoryuk.org/wiki/Timeline_of_UK_LGBT_Sport
 - ²² www.lgbthistoryuk.org/wiki/Timeline_of_UK_LGBT_Science
 - ²³ www.lgbthistoryuk.org/wiki/Timeline_of_UK_LGBT_Music
 - ²⁴ www.lgbthistoryuk.org/wiki/Timeline_of_UK_LGBT_Religion,_Belief_and_Philosophy
 - ²⁵ www.lgbtconsortium.org.uk/directory
 - ²⁶ www.centred.org.uk/content/publications
 - ²⁷ <http://britishlibrary.typepad.co.uk/webarchive/2015/09/ten-years-of-the-uk-web-archive-what-have-we-saved.html>
 - ²⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:All_articles_with_dead_external_links. Accessed: 2016-03-03. (Archived by WebCite® at <http://www.webcitation.org/6fjV4b26Q>)
 - ²⁹ www.lgbthistoryuk.org/wiki/LGBT_Excellence_Centre
 - ³⁰ www.lgbthistoryuk.org/wiki/LGBT_London
 - ³¹ <https://archive.org/index.php>
 - ³² www.webcitation.org
 - ³³ www.webarchive.org.uk/ukwa/target/66158869
 - ³⁴ <http://c-h-e.org.uk/motions2015.shtml>
 - ³⁵ www.lgbtran.org/CollectionsCatalog.aspx
 - ³⁶ www.gaystarnews.com/article/lgbt-wiki-is-necessary-for-the-preservation-of-our-history/#gs.tyNjtQU