

# What does **Emperor Hadrian's** preference for male same-sex relationships reveal about the attitudes of Roman Londoners?

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## OBJECT IN FOCUS

### Head of Emperor Hadrian, early 2nd century

#### What is it?

This replica bronze head, found in the River Thames in 1834, was once part of a slightly larger than life-sized statue of the Roman Emperor Hadrian (reigned 117-138 CE).

Although most famous for Hadrian's Wall in northern England, Hadrian also made a mark on Roman London (Londinium), which was a thriving city and a beacon of Roman power at the time of his reign. His visit to Britain in 122 CE prompted a programme of rebuilding, with the new Forum and Basilica becoming the largest the Romans had ever built north of the Alps.

The statue would have been put up in a public space like a Forum to celebrate his visit. This was probably the new Forum, but since the head was found in the River Thames, it could have been on the approach to the bridge that the Romans constructed over the river.

The original is at the British Museum.

#### Why is it related to LGBTQ+ history?

When Hadrian visited Londinium in 122 CE, his entourage is likely to have included young men with whom he was openly intimate. This would not have shocked his contemporaries as, although during the Roman period there was no word for homosexuality as we conceive it today, sexual relationships between men were common.

Hadrian may have been gay in the modern sense of being only attracted to other men, rather than being bisexual which was relatively common in the Roman world. Certainly, what made him stand out most amongst other emperors was the uniquely public show of adoration which he lavished upon one male lover – Antinous.

Hadrian probably met Antinous – a Greek youth – just after his trip to Londinium. They became lovers but Antinous tragically drowned in the River Nile. Hadrian, heartbroken, flooded the Roman world with Antinous's image, dedicating shrines and idols to him in the same way that the Romans did to their gods. He even named a new Egyptian city – Antinoopolis – in his honour.



Bronze head of Emperor Hadrian,  
2nd century

Today we might refer to London's LGBTQ+ community. It's important to remember that this is modern terminology that would not have been used at the beginning of the 20th century.

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## Lesson starter

Here is a suggestion for a short activity to get your class started with this topic. It should take students no more than 15 minutes.

Use your whiteboard to display an image showing the bronze head of the Emperor Hadrian statue. You might want to introduce him as a Roman Emperor, but not reveal anything else.

Then, ask students to work in pairs to answer the following question. They'll only need a couple of minutes.

### What words would you associate with this image?

Students may consider wealth, childhood, appearance, job or background. Alternatively, you could focus on it as an object and think about materials, weight, artistic style or size.

When everyone has given feedback, reveal that Emperor Hadrian:

- was responsible for a huge programme of improvements and building works in Roman Londinium
- was a husband, married to a woman whom he treated with respect
- was known for having acceptable affairs with young men
- was known for openly showing his affection for one young man – Antinous
- would not have referred to himself as 'queer' or 'gay'



Model of London's new Forum and Basilica, one of the huge building projects associated with Hadrian's visit to Britain in 122 CE

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# What can we discover about identity in medieval London from the tale of the bearded female saint?

## OBJECT IN FOCUS

Pilgrim badge,  
late 14th – early 15th century

### What is it?

The London Museum hosts a huge collection of medieval pilgrim badges, which were purchased by Christians at holy sites dedicated to God and the saints of the Christian Church. They were believed to protect the wearers from harm and to heal the sick.

These badges often depicted saints or other religious icons. Experts have recently identified the depiction on this late 14th – early 15th century badge as one of Christ. However, originally, it was thought to be a representation of the bearded female saint, Wilgefortis.

### Why is it related to LGBTQ+ history?

The legend of St Wilgefortis seems to date to 14th century Portugal. She is said to have been a princess who converted to Christianity and took a vow of virginity. When her pagan father tried to force her to marry the King of Sicily, she prayed to God to save her, and, on the day of her wedding, she woke to find that God had blessed her with a fully grown beard. When the groom saw this, he called off the wedding, but Wilgefortis's father was so angry that he crucified her. Having been slain for her devotion to God, she became a martyr of the Christian faith.

Idols and statues cropped up across Europe of a person being crucified, wearing a dress and boasting a full beard. St Wilgefortis, who disrupted the idea of the gender binary, had become an iconic religious idol who was celebrated by the medieval Christian Church, rather than being the target of criticism.

St Wilgefortis was worshipped by unhappily married women, or those who did not wish to marry at all. It wasn't until the 16th century that the clergy tried to suppress her story and image.



Late 14th – early 15th century pilgrim badge depicting Christ

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## Lesson starter

Here is a suggestion for a short activity to get your class started with this topic. It should take students no more than 15 minutes.

Use your whiteboard to display an image of the pilgrim badge. Give students a couple of minutes to consider the following question on their own:

### What words would you associate with this image?

Pilgrim badges were precious symbols of a holy journey. Pilgrims displayed them on their cloaks and hats to show pride in the connection they had to their Christian faith.

You could use this to introduce how St Wilgefortis – a person who breached strictly defined medieval gender binaries – was sometimes used as a precious symbol by medieval women who wished to challenge the norm by remaining unmarried.

Now ask students to choose an object, symbol or image which they believe represents their identity. There are lots of ways in which you could address this, for instance:

- A group discussion
- Students could draw the symbols/objects which relate to them
- Make a display of objects brought in by the students. Each student could write a 'museum label' to accompany their object.



The London Museum collection contains many medieval pilgrim badges, including this one depicting St Thomas Becket

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# How can shoes worn in the **medieval period** provide information about London's historic LGBTQ+ community?

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## OBJECT IN FOCUS

### Shoe, late 14th century

#### What is it?

These slightly ridiculous-looking shoes were the height of fashion from around 1370 to 1400, and then again in the mid 15th century. They are known as 'poulaines', or Polish shoes.

Some of the shoes in the London Museum collection have points extending over 10cm beyond the toe.

#### Why is it related to LGBTQ+ history?

These pointed poulaine shoes are just one example of the ways in which people in the past may have used their dress to indicate hidden LGBTQ+ identities.

As with many fashion movements before and since, this new trend was a controversial one to some. The church associated extravagant fashions, and pointed shoes in particular, with alternative or deviant sexualities and 'sodomy'—a catch-all term for any sex considered non-standard at that time.

The idea of using fashion signifiers to advertise a sexuality which is considered deviant by society is a familiar one for the LGBTQ+ community. While we may see rainbow flags and other symbols of the community every day in modern London, in the past this was not so overt.



Pointed poulaine shoe,  
late 14th century

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## Lesson starter

Here is a suggestion for a short activity to get your class started with this topic. It should take students no more than 15 minutes.

Clothing, accessories, hairstyles and symbols are used by all of us as indicators of our identities.

Split your class into small groups. Ask your students to think of a famous person, or provide them with images of famous Londoners, for example:

**David Bowie**  
musician

**Stephen Fry**  
actor, comedian and writer

**Kate Moss**  
model

**Moira Stuart**  
presenter and broadcaster

**Stormzy**  
musician

**Steve McQueen**  
filmmaker

**Dina Asher-Smith**  
Olympic sprinter

**Nadiya Hussain**  
chef and presenter

Their task is to note down or share any aspects of that person's clothing, hair or accessories that tell us something about their lifestyle or identity.

If you have time, why not ask students to think about an item of clothing that they like to wear and invite them to consider how that piece of clothing relates to their own identity?

- Does it have any motifs, words or symbols?
- Do the colours have a particular relevance?
- Are their clothes from a particular culture?
- Would they choose not to wear it in particular circumstances? Why?

You may want to ask students to share their thoughts or keep them private.

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# How did Oscar Wilde's personal life influence the plot and performances of his play *The Importance of Being Earnest*?

## OBJECT IN FOCUS

### Theatre programme for *The Importance of Being Earnest*, 1895

#### What is it?

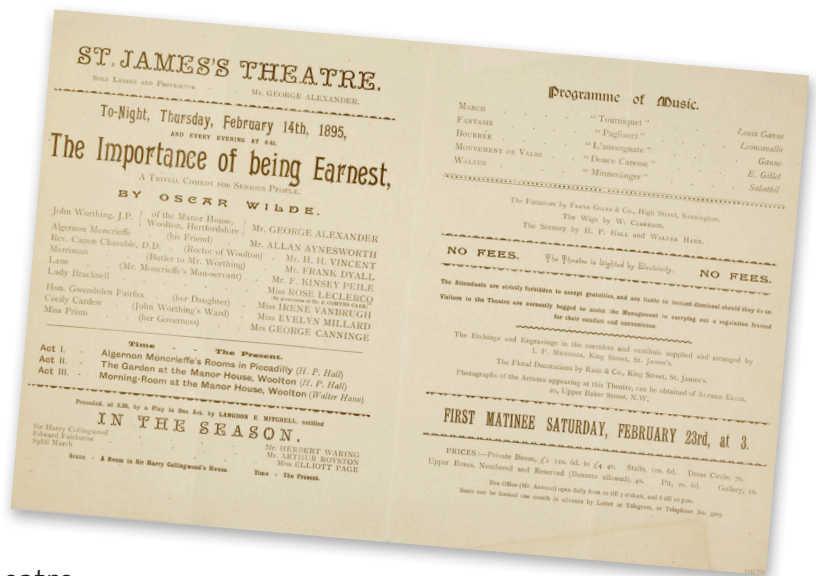
Oscar Wilde was an Anglo-Irish novelist, playwright and a celebrity in late 19th century London. This is a theatre programme for the first performance of his play called *The Importance of Being Earnest* at St James's Theatre on 14 February 1895. The programme includes the full cast list and general information about the theatre. *The Importance of Being Earnest* was Oscar Wilde's fourth West End hit in only three years.

The plot of the play revolves around the mischief caused by Algernon Moncrief and his friend Jack Worthing as they both lead 'double lives' and invent characters to justify how they act when in the respectable countryside, or the thrilling society of London.

#### Why is it related to LGBTQ+ history?

*The Importance of Being Earnest* was a huge success until Wilde was embroiled in a scandal. Despite being a popular and talented playwright, he was not protected from Victorian laws which forbade and condemned homosexuality.

From 1891, Oscar Wilde had an affair with Lord Alfred Douglas. In 1895, Douglas's father, the Marquis of Queensbury, discovered the affair and accused Wilde of homosexuality. In turn, Wilde sued the Marquis for libel. The resulting court case quickly turned into one against Oscar Wilde's homosexuality, and the scandal forced *The Importance of Being Earnest* to close as theatre goers stayed away in disgust. During the case, Queensbury revealed love letters which Wilde had sent to his son and read out homoerotic passages in his works, leading Wilde to be sentenced to two years of hard labour for gross indecency.



Theatre programme, 1895

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## Lesson starter

Here is a suggestion for a short activity to get your class started with this topic. It should take students no more than 15 minutes.

Present your students with a brief summary of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, focusing on the aspect of 'double lives'.

### In what ways could Jack and Algernon's behaviour reflect Oscar Wilde's own experiences?

Students might consider these questions:

- The play isn't about being earnest (honest) at all, but instead about two men who are lying about a character called 'Ernest' in order to lead double lives. How much does the title reflect Wilde's own life?
- Homosexuality was viewed as deviant in the 19th century. Like Jack and Algernon, gay men had to hide aspects of their lives. How can this context add to your understanding of the play?
- Oscar Wilde hid his relationships with men from public view until they were revealed by someone else. How is this similar to the characters in the play?
- Wilde was married while having his affair with Douglas. Does this count as a double life? Why?
- Jack and Algernon's secrets lead to a positive outcome. Can the same be said for Wilde?

If you have more time, you could also link this to other works of Wilde, or those referred to in the trial. For example:

- During Wilde's trial it was claimed that the premise of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), where an older artist is attracted to the beauty of a younger man whose portrait he paints, has homoerotic undertones
- Lord Alfred Douglas had written a poem called *Two Loves* in 1892, the last line of which reads 'The love that dare not speak its name'. This was presented as evidence during Wilde's trial as a reference to their secret relationship.

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# How can we use a photograph to explore the identity of the composer and Suffragette **Ethel Smyth?**

## OBJECT IN FOCUS

### Photograph of Ethel Smyth, May 1913

#### Who was Ethel Smyth?

Ethel Smyth was an accomplished classical composer of the early 20th century, who dedicated two years of her life to the Suffragette movement, which campaigned for women to be allowed to vote in parliamentary elections. One of her most significant contributions to the campaign of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) was the well-remembered marching song, 'The March of the Women', the original sheet music for which is in the London Museum collection.

Despite her father's protests, Ethel studied composition and symphony from a young age and, in 1922, she became the first woman to receive a Damehood for her contribution to the field.

#### Why is this photograph related to LGBTQ+ history?

Ethel Smyth had many confirmed relationships with women throughout her life and some references to them have been found in her writing, including a relationship with the ex-Empress of France. Smyth also had a relationship with a man named Henry Brewster, although she confided to him that it was 'easier for me to love my own sex passionately, rather than yours'.

It is important to recognise that the term 'lesbian', though referred to as early as 1893, did not popularly circulate until long after some women gained the vote in 1918, and so we shouldn't use this language to describe Smyth.



Portrait photograph of Ethel Smyth, 1913



Cover of sheet music for 'The March of the Women', composed by Ethel Smyth with words by Cicely Hamilton, 1911

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## Lesson starter

Here is a suggestion for a short activity to get your class started with this topic. It should take students no more than 15 minutes.

Use your whiteboard to display the photograph of Ethel Smyth.

You might want to introduce her as a Suffragette, but not reveal anything else.

Then, ask students to work in pairs to answer the following question.

They'll only need a couple of minutes.

### What words would you associate with this image?

Students may consider Ethel's wealth, childhood, appearance, job or background. You could focus on the photograph as an object and think about artistic style, its potential purpose, size and Ethel's pose.

When everyone has given feedback, reveal that Ethel Smyth was also:

- a renowned composer
- the first woman to receive a Damehood for her contribution to the field of symphony
- known for having passionate affairs, often with women
- a Suffragette
- sentenced to two months in prison for window breaking for the votes for women cause in 1912
- a good friend of Emmeline Pankhurst. Emmeline stayed in her Woking home whilst recuperating after a hunger strike in 1913.

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