Gold at the end of the rainbow: sharing LBGTQ+



Activist Dame Ethel Smyth (1858 – 1944) Surrey History Centre, Lewis Orchard Collection

We take a look at four pioneering historical LGBTQ+ figures: Dame Ethel Smyth, Alan Turing, Mark Weston and Dr Louisa Martindale.

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The personal journeys of the four individuals below remind of us of the importance of sharing the UK's hidden heritage and celebrating remarkable people who fought prejudice and ignorance.

1. Dame Ethel Smyth

Dame Ethel Smyth (1858 – 1944), was a composer and writer. Her song, 'March of the Women', became a rallying cry for the Women's Suffrage Movement. A dedicated activist, Smyth served two months in Holloway Prison for her involvement in a co-ordinated window-smashing campaign. The majority of her romantic relationships were with women, and she confessed love for fellow Suffrage activists Emmeline Pankhurst and Virginia Woolf.

Her story is told in the HLF-supported project The March of the Women - Surrey's Road to the Vote.

2. Mark Weston

Mark Weston (1905 –1978), a championship British athlete, was nicknamed ‘The Devonshire Wonder’ and born Mary Edith Louise Weston. Undergoing gender reassignment surgery in 1936, he received a formal paper from Charing Cross Hospital declaring: "Mr Mark Weston, who was always brought up as female, is male and should continue life as such.”

3. Dr Louisa Martindale

Dr Louisa Martindale (1872 – 1966) was a Suffragette and a published author, she was also a highly-accomplished surgeon specialising in obstetrics and gynaecology - performing more than 7,000 surgeries. Educated at Royal Holloway College and the London School of Medicine, she pioneered radium therapy for cervical and ovarian cancer. She was the first female Justice of the Peace to be appointed in Brighton and was made a Fellow of the Royal College of Obstetricians. She lived with her partner, Ismay Fitzgerald, for 35 years, until Fitzgerald’s death in 1945.

4. Alan Turing OBE

Alan Turing OBE (1912 – 1954), was a codebreaker at Bletchley Park. He worked tirelessly to break the Enigma code and was considered the father of digital computation. A key figure in Britain’s war effort and eventual victory, Turing was openly gay, for which, despite his instrumental contribution to national security, he was criminally convicted in 1952.

His story was explored in HLF-supported project Past and Present.



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be yourself?



Six women: stories of our LGBT+ heritage