



Transcript of a Keynote form
“Kings & Queens 7” (2018):
*Researching and Interpreting
Gender and Sexuality at Historic
Royal Palaces*

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Transcript of A Keynote from “Kings & Queens 7” (2018): Researching and Interpreting Gender and Sexuality at Historic Royal Palaces¹

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HISTORIC ROYAL PALACES

Abstract: Historic Royal Palaces researches and interprets histories of gender and sexuality in the palaces it cares for. Work on LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Queer) histories and identities has increased in museums and heritage sites recently. There is a pressing social need for this work, as LGBTQ people continue to experience various kinds of discrimination and prejudice. Evidence suggests that the work of museums and heritage organisations can have a positive impact on LGBTQ lives and rights. There are many examples of queer lives and identities in British royal history, but this paper shows that beyond the ‘usual suspects’ (such as James VI & I and Queen Anne), the histories of courtiers, servants, artists, and designers around the royal court are rewarding areas of study. This paper suggests that material culture studies could be used more effectively, and histories of creative queering of monarchy can inform perceptions of the institution itself.

Keywords: LGBTQ; Queer History; Heritage, museums; palaces; Historic Royal Palaces; Public History

In *The Lion in Winter* (1968), based on the 1966 play by James Goldman, Hollywood legend Katherine Hepburn appears as Eleanor of Aquitaine. In a film described as “*Dynasty in the Middle Ages*,” she schemes and politics her way through a royal family Christmas, while proving a wimple is a great look in any era.² The script is ridiculously quotable, and in one scene Hepburn as Eleanor looks back on her former marriage to Louis VII of France. Addressing her sons by Henry II, she utters the lines:

Oh, but I do have handsome children. If I had managed sons for him [Louis] instead of all those little girls, I’d still be stuck with being queen of France, and we should not have known each other. Such, my angels, is the role of sex in history.³

Perhaps the conference should have been called “Kings and Queens 7: The Role of Sex in History,” as although a light-hearted example, this quote gets to the core of many of the issues we look at every day as royal historians. Gender, marriage, fertility, sex, sexuality, personal

¹ This is a transcript of the opening address of the *Kings & Queens 7, Ruling Sexualities: Sexuality, Gender & the Crown* conference, delivered at Hampton Court Palace on 9 July 2018. The text has been edited and revised for publication.

² Alex von Tunzelmann, “The Lion in Winter: It’s *Dynasty in the Middle Ages*,” *The Guardian*, 2 April 2009, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2009/apr/01/the-lion-in-winter-reel-history>.

³ *The Lion in Winter*, dir. Anthony Harvey (Haworth Productions, 1968).

relationships, and inheritance are at the heart of hereditary monarchy. You can guarantee that the one fact visitors to Hampton Court Palace will know about its most famous resident, Henry VIII, will be that he had six wives—a powerful statement about the King’s heterosexuality, and his concern for the continuation of his dynasty.

A broad range of examples of royal gender and sexuality will be examined in the papers that follow, but the main focus of the day at Hampton Court Palace, and of this opening address, are LGBTQ (Lesbian Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Queer) histories and identities, in a British royal and court context. Before I look in more detail at that area, I would like to highlight Historic Royal Palaces’ recent work in re-assessing female royal histories, as many of the papers are concerned with gender.

2017 saw the exhibition *Enlightened Princesses* at The Yale Centre for British Art in New Haven, and at Kensington Palace in London.⁴ The collaborative exhibition was the result of a major research project led at Historic Royal Palaces by my colleague Joanna Marschner. The exhibition was accompanied by a major publication.⁵ *Enlightened Princesses* put the eighteenth century royal consorts, Caroline of Ansbach, Augusta of Saxe-Gotha, and Charlotte of Mecklenburg-Strelitz, back at the heart of the intellectual and cultural life of their century. The research project, book, and exhibition looked at the way that these royal women worked with philosophers, scientists, artists, and architects, to promote the Hanoverian dynasty, and the intellectual and industrial life of the country, leaving a lasting legacy.

In 2018, Queen Charlotte was the focus of displays at Kew Palace, marking the 200th anniversary of her death there. The displays explored her personal intellectual and artistic achievements, her artistic patronage, and her role in securing the future of the Hanoverian dynasty through the double marriage of two of her sons. The 200th anniversary of Queen Victoria’s birth at Kensington Palace will be marked in 2019. New displays explore her life, while a funded research project with Historic Royal Palaces and the University of Warwick examines Victoria’s role in the fashioning of her own image and her roles as Queen, wife, and mother.

The Social Context and Need For LGBTQ Research and Interpretation

Returning to LGBTQ histories, I would like to look at my own and Historic Royal Palaces’ work in this field, the current state of knowledge, and to look at avenues for further research. This is an area of research we intend to grow and develop. First of all, I would like to establish terminology around the term “LGBTQ.” I am aware many people feel constrained or awkward when talking about Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Queer people and identities. Resources from charities such as Stonewall are a good place to start.⁶ Many people worry about using the correct terminology, but it is often better to have a go and be nice than to be nervous. If in doubt, ask the person you are addressing, or seek further advice. Our society’s

⁴ *Enlightened Princesses: Caroline, Augusta, Charlotte, and the Shaping of the Modern World* exhibition. Yale Centre for British Art, New Haven, 2 February 2017–30 April 2017, and Kensington Palace, London, 22 June 2017–12 November 2017.

⁵ Joanna Marschner, David Bindman, and Lisa Ford, eds., *Enlightened Princesses: Caroline, Augusta, Charlotte, and the Shaping of the Modern World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

⁶ “Glossary of Terms,” *Stonewall*, accessed 29 May 2019, <https://www.stonewall.org.uk/help-advice/glossary-terms#1>.

constructions of sexual and gender identities are changing, and I am always learning and changing my ideas and knowledge. In the context of this paper trans identities will include cross-dressers—that is, those who dress themselves in the clothing generally associated with the opposite gender they were assigned at birth.

At Historic Royal Palaces, we had a debate over terminology, and the LGBTQ acronym. In public-facing work, we use the acronym LGBTQ+; the ‘plus’ denoting the huge range of identities, biologies, and behaviours that are outside male/female heterosexuality and binary gender identity. These can include asexuality, intersex biologies, and people who are questioning their identity. In this paper, I use the term “queer,” as I feel it best denotes these behaviours and identities in historical societies, before our current structures were developed. This is widely accepted practice in the field, especially in academic contexts, but it can still have derogatory associations to some people, so it should be used sensitively. I’ll use other terms already mentioned as appropriate.

My research builds on the successful Palace Pride events organised by Historic Royal Palaces in 2017, as part of nationwide events to mark the 50th anniversary of the partial decriminalisation of male homosexual acts in England and Wales in 1967. This anniversary was restricted to England and Wales, as in the United Kingdom (UK) decriminalisation did not take place in Scotland until 1980, and Northern Ireland until 1982. Equality legislation has been a slow and ongoing process: it wasn’t until 2001 that the age of consent was equalised in England, Scotland and Wales, and Northern Ireland still does not allow same-sex marriage. I’m aware that the legal situation differs hugely around the world.

Although in many western societies, great advances have been made in recent years to improve the rights of LGBTQ people, the situation varies throughout the world. Focusing on the UK, in July 2018 the Government published the results of a major survey into the lives and experiences of LGBT people.⁷ The headline findings, widely reported in the press, were that although respondents were generally positive about the UK’s record on the rights of LGBT people, significant problems remain:

- LGBT respondents are less satisfied with their life than the general UK population (rating satisfaction 6.5 on average out of 10 compared with 7.7). Trans respondents had particularly low scores (around 5.4 out of 10).
- More than two thirds of LGBT respondents said they avoid holding hands with a same-sex partner for fear of a negative reaction from others.
- At least two in five respondents had experienced an incident because they were LGBT, such as verbal harassment or physical violence, in the 12 months preceding the survey. However, more than nine in ten of the most serious incidents went unreported, often because respondents thought ‘it happens all the time’.
- 2% of respondents had undergone conversion or reparative therapy in an attempt to ‘cure’ them of being LGBT, and a further 5% had been offered it.
- 24% of respondents had accessed mental health services in the 12 months preceding the survey.⁸

⁷ “National LGBT Survey,” accessed 29 May 2019, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/722314/GO-LGBT-Survey-Report.pdf.

⁸ “National LGBT Survey.”

This is in the UK, a country that is world-leading in LGBT rights. ILGA-Europe—the European Region of the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association—publishes a chart showing the countries of Europe ranked on a scale of gross violations of the human rights of LGBT people to full respect and equality. The UK scores highly, but is dropping down the rankings thanks to countries such as Malta, which has seen huge recent legislative changes.⁹ The situation varies hugely across the world, with many countries continuing to criminalize homosexuality. Even in generally tolerant countries, many queer people are used to finding, and have even assimilated, coping mechanisms for the continual sense of tension which homophobia in society forces them to live with. I had not really recognised this until I heard a 2014 Tedx talk by Panti Bliss, Ireland’s premier drag queen. I think Panti’s insights spoke to many queer people:

We live in this sort of homophobic world and you might think that a small little thing like holding hands in public, well it’s just a small thing; and you’re right - it is indeed just a small thing, but it is one of many small things that make us human. And there are lots of small things every day that LGBT people have to put up with, that other people don’t have to put up with. Lots of small things that we have to put up with in order to be safe, or not to be the object of ridicule or scorn; and we are expected to put up with those things and just thank our blessings that we don’t live in a country where we could be imprisoned or executed for being gay; and we are so used to making those small adjustments every day that, even now, we rarely ourselves even notice that we’re doing it, because it is part of the background of our lives, this constant malign presence that we have assimilated.¹⁰

But do not worry: as historians, academics, and heritage professionals, we *can* make a difference. There is real evidence that the work of museums and heritage organisations can change attitudes, and that this is achieved best when supported by high-quality academic work and research. The University of Leicester recently carried out audience research as part of their collaboration with the National Trust, as part of the 2017 *Prejudice, Pride and Place* project to mark the 50th anniversary of partial decriminalisation. The audience research showed that engaging with LGBTQ histories within a heritage context can enable people to discuss and increase their understanding of contemporary queer identities. I was particularly struck by a couple of testimonies that were collected by researchers at National Trust properties that were hosting LGBTQ interpretation. One woman said:

I’m a bit worried that I’m being left behind actually, I feel like I missed those opportunities to have those sorts of conversations in a safe environment ... I feel as you get older and you’re more formed as a person, and arguably your peer group is more formed and fixed, I think you have less and less opportunity to just discuss these things in an open and safe way. So I’m sitting here going to you, I feel a bit embarrassed, that I feel a bit uncomfortable with all this transgender stuff because I don’t know what to do with it

⁹ “Country Ranking,” *Rainbow Europe*, accessed 29 May 2019, <https://rainbow-europe.org/country-ranking>.

¹⁰ “Transcript Of Panti’s Tedxdublin Talk,” *Science Gallery*, accessed 29 May 2019, <https://dublin.sciencegallery.com/blog/2015/01/transcriptpantistedxdublintalk>.

and I don't know what I'm supposed to say and how I'm supposed to behave, but I don't want to offend anybody. But I don't feel I have the opportunity to have that conversation in a more public space. I'm not sure whether it would be appropriate, isn't that sad?¹¹

Most touchingly, I liked this comment from an 85-year-old woman:

when I married at 25 I had never heard of homosexuality. Now I want to explore shades of grey, not binary. Two nurses I worked with were lesbians and only in retrospect I realise this. I want to understand the modern world. I do not want a closed mind.¹²

Historic Royal Palaces' 2017 Palace Pride season consisted of tours at the Tower of London and Hampton Court Palace, a podcast that discussed terminology and professional practice in heritage organisations, and a successful social media campaign. The standout event was *Long Live Queen James* at the Banqueting House—a “Jacobean Drag Show in Polari” that used contemporary queer performers, but also the language of gay men at the time of decriminalisation, to tell the story of James VI and I and his male favourites. All the events were repeated in 2018. In an effort to embed LGBTQ stories in our interpretation, I worked with our digital team to create a page of stories on our website. There is now a permanent online presence for these stories on Historic Royal Palaces' website.¹³

2017 built on a slow increase over the last decade of museums and heritage organisations in the UK engaging with queer identities and histories. For me, this area of academic research and public interpretation within the museums and heritage industries is not only important, but also has the potential to have real impact in society, through the influence of universities, museums, and heritage sites.

Historic Royal Palaces received very positive feedback from attendees of our Tower and Hampton Court Palace LGBTQ tours:

“Fantastic. It made me feel proud to be British”;
“I now feel more welcome being LGBT. Knowing that the Tower supports LGBT+ people”;
“It was both fascinating but also somewhat heart-warming. In a strange way it made me feel even better about my sexuality”;
“Learned new interesting facts not heard on previous tours. Cool to have LGBT history represented at such an important and historically significant venue.”¹⁴

I suspect that some of these attendees at the Historic Royal Palaces events may have been LGBTQ people, but even knowing that we had created an environment where they felt welcomed and free from the usual background homophobia and transphobia of society, as Panti Bliss described it, makes me feel glad.

¹¹ Jocelyn Dodd and Sarah Plumb, “Whose Voice Do We Hear?,” in *Prejudice and Pride: LGBTQ Heritage and its Contemporary Implications*, ed. Richard Sandell, Rachael Lennon, and Matt Smith (Leicester: University of Leicester, 2018), 80–81, https://le.ac.uk/~/_media/uol/docs/rcmg/publications/prejudice-and-pride.pdf?la=en.

¹² Dodd and Plumb, “Whose Voice Do We Hear?,” 81.

¹³ “LGBT+ Royal Histories,” *Historic Royal Palaces*, accessed 29 May 2019, <https://www.hrp.org.uk/tower-of-london/history-and-stories/lgbt-royal-histories/>.

¹⁴ Audience feedback at Historic Royal Palaces events received through questionnaires, 2017.

Beyond that, these comments tell us about the public perception of sites and histories that are connected to the establishment and to royalty. Messages given in sites associated with the history and culture of government and royalty are perceived to have the power and authority of that history and culture behind them. Even as historians working for an independent heritage charity, which Historic Royal Palaces is, we are perceived to have the power and authority of that history and culture behind us when we speak. I'd argue this is the case for people speaking authoritatively about royalty in general. When we do speak, when we do tell those stories, what stories can we tell?

I am sometimes asked, when people hear I'm researching queer royal histories: "Are there any?" There are indeed, from the Middle Ages to the present day, from Edward II, who reigned from 1307 until 1327, to a future king, Prince William, the Duke of Cambridge, who appeared on the cover of the July 2016 issue of the gay lifestyle magazine *Attitude*. Same-sex desire and non-binary gender identities have existed in every human society. However, our understanding of them has changed throughout time, and because they have often been socially unacceptable or illegal, they can be hard to trace. Very broadly in western societies, same-sex desire has seen a change in social understanding from a behaviour (something you do) to an identity (something you are). This change appears to have happened in the eighteenth century, with groups such as mollies, men who were defined by their effeminate behaviour and sex with other men, beginning to appear. The term 'homosexual,' which is widely understood in our modern culture, was only coined in the 1860s, and only came to be widely used in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹⁵ We cannot find gay, lesbian and bisexual people in the past, as we understand those identities today, because they did not exist in other historical periods. However, 'queerness' did. Given the prevalence of sharing beds with members of the same sex in the past, most people would have had ample opportunity for same-sex sex, even if their motivation or sexuality may be open to argument.

Cross-dressing also occurs throughout history, with people dressing, and sometimes living and passing as people of the opposite gender, although it can be hard to determine their motivations for this. Were they motivated by a feeling that their gender assigned at birth did not conform to their gender identity, as modern trans people do? Were they comfortable in their assigned gender identity, but preferred to dress in clothes of the opposite gender? Or did adopting the dress of the opposite gender confer a change in their social status that they wished to take advantage of? Finding modern trans people is difficult, but again, finding queer people is less so.

It is interesting that the respondent in the National Trust property identified "shades of grey, not binary" when discussing interpretation of queer subject matter in a historic space and relating it to contemporary society. She recognised that in the past and today, same-sex desire and gender identities exist on spectrums. This, for me, is fundamental when we look at LGBTQ histories. In her contribution to Tate Britain's *Queer British Art* exhibition catalogue, the academic Laura Doan warns against trying to search for, as she puts it, "X," or contemporary constructions of gender or sexuality, in the past.¹⁶ Modern Lesbians, Gay men,

¹⁵ H.G. Cocks, "Secrets, Crimes and Diseases, 1800-1914," in *A Gay History of Britain: Love and Sex Between Men Since the Middle Ages*, ed. Matt Cook (Westport, CT: Greenwood World Publishing, 2007), 132.

¹⁶ Laura Doan, "Public Indecency: Portrait of an X," in *Queer British Art*, ed. Clare Barlow (London: Tate Publishing, 2017), 49-53.

Bisexuals and Trans people and other contemporary sexual identities cannot be found in the lives of people in the past, however hard you try. For me, as a heritage professional, this is liberating. With contemporary attitudes to gender and sexuality changing, and individuals' own understandings of their desires and identities also changing, history gives us welcome precedents for embracing grey areas, spectrums, and change. Doan sees this as evidence that we may be coming "full circle" in our understanding of queer identities, and embracing this allows us to encounter, in her words: "a world at once familiar and radically unlike our own."¹⁷

It remains the case though, that a huge issue in studying queer history is the problem of evidence. Male/male sexual activity was criminalised in Britain and many other countries, so it has found its way into court records; female/female sexual activity, which was generally not criminalised, has not. There is also more than sex to queer lives. In this, many queer historians and heritage professionals have questioned the weight of evidence required to identify historical individuals as queer. Why everyone in the past is straight until proven otherwise? In an ideal world, queer historical individuals would have left us letters saying to their partners, "I put this part of my body in that part of your body last night, I felt these emotions and this means that I am X, Y or Z."¹⁸ Sadly, and partly because of changing understandings of gender and sexuality, evidence like this rarely exists. However, given that monarchs and their courts have left us a greater quantity and quality of historical records than many other figures in the past, potentially we have more to work with in this field.

LGBTQ Royal Histories: The Usual Suspects

There have been 43 monarchs of England, and then Britain, since the Norman Conquest in 1066 (with a few additional disputed ones, such as Lady Jane Grey). How many of them might have felt same-sex desire or non-binary gender identities? It is almost impossible to quantify how many people experience same-sex desire today, let alone in the past. The Office of National Statistics figures show that in 2016, 2% of the UK population above the age of 16 identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual.¹⁹ Although 4.1% of 16 to 24 year olds identified as such, it shows that this can be related to what you are comfortable declaring publically, rather than what you feel, and that historical homophobia may have discouraged older people acting on or declaring their feelings.²⁰ If we think about changing attitudes, more young people may be comfortable exploring the range of their feelings today than in the past. Reliable figures on trans identities are even harder to come by. If we assume that between a pessimistic 2% and an optimistic 10% of modern individuals experience same-sex desire, then between one and four of our 43 monarchs might qualify. However, social constructions of gender and sexuality have changed. Randolph Trumbach suggests that male/male sex was very common in the early modern period, often structured around differences in age. In Renaissance Florence, for which excellent records survive, at least two-thirds, and potentially all, men may have been engaged in

¹⁷ Doan, "Public Indecency," 53.

¹⁸ I am grateful to Clare Barlow for the idea for this form of words, which are my own.

¹⁹ "Sexual Identity, UK: 2016," *Office of National Statistics*, accessed 29 May 2019, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/sexuality/bulletins/sexualidentityuk/2016>.

²⁰ "Sexual Identity, UK: 2016."

same-sex sex, and Trumbach, not unproblematically, extends these figures to the rest of Europe.²¹ Does this mean that 25 or more of our monarchs may have been 'queer' in some way? Add to any of these speculative percentages the children, relatives, courtiers and servants of the monarch, and we are potentially dealing with a lot of people. Perhaps most significantly, the monarch is at the heart of the cultural and legislative life of the country, and that culture and legislation have affected the lives of all queer people. The subject of queer monarchy may therefore be a very large one indeed.

I am now going to look at the existing field of study in British histories, and suggest new possibilities for research. The focus is on British histories, as the area of my research, and of the properties Historic Royal Palaces cares for. There is, of course, a broader queer royal history beyond the British Isles, and the papers that follow will examine some of these.

There is a cohort of 'usual suspects' when looking at British queer royal history, and many of the relevant sources for them have been extensively analysed. There is Edward II, and his relationships with royal favourites, including Piers Gaveston. This is a difficult and contested history, with much written after the events. Edward's history does show that the phenomenon of the favourite, and the sense that they exercised undue influence, is important to queer royal history. James VI of Scotland and I of England had relationships with a series of male favourites, including the handsome, but unintelligent, Robert Carr, Earl of Somerset, and the handsome, but unpopular, George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham. There is little doubt that James' relationships with his male favourites were physical and also emotional. Yet, James also fathered children with Anna of Denmark, and wrote against sodomy as inappropriate for a king.²² Historians have written extensively on James's relationships, which were used to malign his legacy from the seventeenth century onwards, suggesting that politicised memory is a significant avenue to pursue in this area.

William III's close relationship with Arnold Joost van Keppel, 1st Earl of Albemarle, is also sometimes claimed to have been romantic, but equally this may be a politically-motivated slur. Similarly, the close relationship between Queen Anne and her female favourites, including Sarah Churchill, Duchess of Marlborough, has been extensively studied. Anne later transferred her affection to the gentler personality of Sarah's cousin, Lady Abigail Masham. With these relationships it is unclear whether the affection was the usual close friendship between aristocratic women, which was then misrepresented by Anne's political enemies to slander her, or whether they were genuinely romantic.

Interestingly, I speculated that between one and four of our 43 monarchs might qualify, and here we have four monarchs who are often spoken of as queer. A couple more royals might also qualify, but the connection is more speculative. Richard I is often cited, but as with Edward II, the evidence is contested. While accounts of his relationship with Philip Augustus of France state that "they loved each other so much that that the king of England was absolutely astonished," this could be ritualised language indicating their political closeness.²³

²¹ Randolph Trumbach, "Modern Sodomy: The Origins of Homosexuality, 1700-1800," in *A Gay History of Britain: Love and Sex Between Men Since the Middle Ages*, ed. Matt Cook (Westport, CT: Greenwood World Publishing, 2007), 77.

²² Michael B. Young, *King James and the History of Homosexuality*, rev. ed. (Stroud: Fonthill Media, 2016), 65.

²³ Robert Mills, "Male-Male Love and Sex in the Middle Ages, 1000-1500," in *A Gay History of Britain: Love and Sex*

Frederick, Prince of Wales (son of George II), is also mentioned in queer histories for his relationship with John Hervey, 2nd Baron Hervey. Hervey referred to himself as Hephaestion, implying Frederick was Alexander the Great, a classical reference to a possible gay relationship.²⁴ Hervey is a key figure in eighteenth-century queer studies: his effeminacy used as a political tool against him in his own lifetime, and his fifteen-year emotional—and probably physical—relationship with Stephen Fox-Strangways, 1st Earl of Ilchester, is a key feature of his biography. Disentangling close male/male homosocial relationships from romantic relationships at this time is difficult. I would, however, advise you to remember the unusually, and, I would say, unreasonably, high standards of evidence we demand before we identify historical figures as queer.

Prince Albert Victor, Duke of Clarence and Avondale, the eldest son of Edward VII and Queen Alexandra, who died aged only 28 in 1892, is also often identified as queer. A king who never was, he has been implicated in the Cleveland Street Scandal of 1889, which involved a male brothel patronised by leading men in society.²⁵ His name was associated with the scandal at the time, and it has been suggested that this influenced the police investigation. However, there is no reliable evidence associating him with the scandal. Albert Victor also seems to be a magnet for conspiracy theories, including that he was Jack the Ripper, and that he lived into the 1930s. Rumour and slurs can disguise true histories, especially when royalty is concerned.²⁶

LGBTQ Royal Histories: Gender, Queenship, and Material Culture

Moving from same-sex attraction to queer gender identities, I would like to propose that queenship, and its material cultures may also be a useful area to explore further. Figures like Elizabeth I and Queen Victoria had to negotiate their role as women in societies where the social status of women was proscribed, in the role of a monarch that was designed for a man. Can their wardrobe choices and compromises, which express their negotiation of gender roles, be considered queer? Much has been written about Elizabeth’s self-representation at events such as her speech at Tilbury, where she famously uttered the words: “I know I have the body but of a weak and feeble woman; but I have the heart and stomach of a king, and of a king of England too,” before going on to say: “I myself will be your general, judge, and rewarder of every one of your virtues in the field.”²⁷ When spoken by a woman, these words seem queer, and the image of the queen wearing armour—whether she actually did or not—has an enduring power. Similarly, Queen Victoria’s 1850s military jackets are a material manifestation of her gender compromise between her feminine role subservient to her husband, and

Between Men Since the Middle Ages, ed. Matt Cook (Westport, CT: Greenwood World Publishing, 2007), 1–2.

²⁴ Lucy Moore, *Amphibious Thing: The Life of Lord Hervey* (London: Viking, 2000), 135.

²⁵ Cocks, “Secrets, Crimes and Diseases,” 132.

²⁶ The claims are made and explored in: Harford Montgomery Hyde, *The Cleveland Street Scandal* (New York: Coward, McCann, & Geoghegan, 1976); Colin Simpson, Lewis Chester, and David Leitch, *The Cleveland Street Affair* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1977); and Theo Aronson, *Prince Eddy and the Homosexual Underworld* (London: John Murray, 1986).

²⁷ British Library, Harley MS 6798, fol. 87. I have modernised the text. There is debate concerning the veracity of the speech, which exists in different versions. See Aidan Norrie’s article in this issue of the *Royal Studies Journal* for a discussion of the Tilbury Speech.

masculine role as sovereign and head of state.²⁸ A male military tunic design was combined with a female riding jacket, allowing Victoria's female body to meet her role as military commander.²⁹ Can these compromises, and the garments associated with them, be considered queer?

I feature these examples as I believe the methodologies of art history and material culture studies do not appear to have been utilised, and the two dress examples may suggest a useful avenue in considering queer royal histories. Theoretical frameworks for exploring gay male material culture have been suggested in academic literature that acknowledges the difficulties in associating artefacts with individuals.³⁰ The well-understood and provenanced material culture of the monarchy and elite court culture may again overcome these difficulties. What may be more difficult is that as same-sex desire and non-binary gender identities have often had to be hidden, with material culture signs understood only by those operating within the subculture, decoding them today can be difficult.

Recent research on the assignment of apartments within the Hampton Court Palace of William III by Jo Tinworth may present opportunities for further work.³¹ In particular, the south-east corner of the palace—where on the first floor the king's and queen's apartments meet, while on the ground floor the king's private apartments met those of the Earl of Albemarle—seems to be a crucial geographic point of courtly intimacies. The structures, both organisational and physical, which allowed or prevented intimacies in the court and palace, appear to be a very fruitful area of further research.

LGBTQ Royal Histories: The Court and Courtiers

The experiences of people in the royal court aside from the monarch, both courtiers and members of the household, seem also to be understudied. Some very suggestive stories could be better understood and contextualised. For example, Arabella Hunt, a young musician at the court of William and Mary, married a James Howard in 1680, when she was 18. However, James was a woman called Amy Poulter who dressed in male clothes, and was already married. Amy had courted Arabella dressed in both male and female clothes. In order for Arabella to annul the marriage, a team of five midwives were needed to determine Amy's biological sex, a particular concern at a time when doctors were fascinated by hermaphroditism. When faced with the court, Amy claimed the whole affair was a joke that had got out of hand (although contracting a marriage does seem to be taking a joke very far indeed). The marriage was annulled, and Amy died only a few months later, with the cause of

²⁸ "Queen Victoria's Military Jacket," *The Royal Collection Trust*,

<https://www.rct.uk/collection/search#/41/collection/71979/queen-victorias-military-jacket>.

²⁹ Kay Staniland, *In Royal Fashion: The Clothes of Princess Charlotte of Wales and Queen Victoria 1796-1901* (London: Museum of London 1997), 151.

³⁰ Keith Matthews, "The Material Culture of the Homosexual Male: A Case for Archaeological Exploration," in *Gender and Material Culture in Archaeological Perspective*, ed. Moira Donald and Linda Hurcombe (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 3–19.

³¹ Joanna Tinworth, "Housing the Favourite: Spatial Politics and the Power of Architecture at William III's Hampton Court, 1699-1702" (paper presented at Kings & Queens 7, Ruling Sexualities: Sexuality, Gender & the Crown, University of Winchester, July 2018).

death unrecorded. Arabella, although free to remarry, never did.³² Stories of cross-dressing abound in the historic record, but it can be hard to define the motivation for women dressing as men. Did people like Amy feel themselves to be men, did they dress as men to enable them to have relationships with women to whom they were attracted, or did they want to gain the social advantages of being treated as a man? In this case, how did the unmarried Arabella look back on her brief marriage to Amy as she became a celebrated court musician, lauded by both the public and composers? This case suggests a better understanding of non-binary gender identities at court is needed.

A focus on the royal household as an area of study allows us to explore twentieth-century histories. There is a popular belief that the modern British royal household is unusually full of gay male servants. As researchers, what can we do with openly gay servants, such as the notorious William Tallon, known as "Backstairs Billy," a steward and member of the Queen Mother's staff at Clarence House? Photos show him with his partner, Reg Wilcock, and also dancing with the Queen Mother. Many sensational stories about him can be found, usually on the *Mail Online*, but is the sidebar of shame a reliable source for academics?³³ The only book published about Billy is entirely free of footnotes, making it a disconcerting source for the academically-minded.³⁴

There are many examples of the creative associations between the royal family, and of course many other upper-class clients at the time, and gay men. In 1974, the Queen Mother appointed Oliver Ford as her decorator, giving him the royal warrant. He carried out decorative schemes at the Royal Lodge in Windsor and at Clarence House. Ford's homosexuality can not have been a secret, as in 1967 he had been arrested on gross indecency charges, and stood trial in May 1968 along with two soldiers. All three were charged with procuring other guardsmen for sex and for acts of gross indecency. All three were convicted and Ford was fined £700.³⁵ The author of his obituary in 1992 declined to mention this key event, but does mention his association with royalty. The obituary refers to him as a "bachelor" and notes his "charm," which both sound like euphemisms for homosexuality to me.³⁶ His qualities of discretion and ability to charm his clients, which suited him well to royal patronage, were also qualities associated with creative gay men at this time.

Ford's arrest led to an investigation of Knightsbridge Barracks, which uncovered that thirty or forty soldiers in the Barracks had been involved in sex work.³⁷ The association of guardsmen stationed near the royal parks of St. James's and Hyde Park with sex work was by this time decades old. Anecdotal stories of men being taken into the royal palaces by male

³² Patricia Crawford and Sara Mendelson, "Sexual identities in Early Modern England: The Marriage of Two Women in 1680," *Gender & History* 7, no. 3 (November 1995): 362–377.

³³ See, for example: Tom Quinn, "Outrageous secrets of Backstairs Billy," *Mail Online*, 14 March 2015, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2994947/The-Queen-Mother-s-waltzing-mocking-master-mischief.html>.

³⁴ Tom Quinn, *Backstairs Billy: The Life of William Tallon, the Queen Mother's Most Devoted Servant* (London: Biteback Publishing, 2015).

³⁵ Matt Cook, *Queer Domesticities: Homosexuality and Home Life in Twentieth-Century London* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 74.

³⁶ George J. Levy, "Obituary: Oliver Ford," *The Independent*, 21 October 1992, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/obituary-oliver-ford-1558651.html>.

³⁷ Cook, *Queer Domesticities*, 74.

servants of the household abound, and are a feature of Backstairs Billy's biography. A 1953 image of a guardsman preparing for his role in the coronation, by the gay artist John Minton, is often read as having a gay subtext.³⁸ This wealth of stories and associations, sometimes anecdotal, and sometimes relying on recognition of hidden symbols, suggests that queer histories of twentieth-century British courtiers and servants are a fruitful area for further study. They could certainly benefit from further rigorous academic work.

It is obvious when looking at these case studies, even briefly, that several fundamental problems will face the academic researcher of queer royal histories. Many of the sources can seem unreliable to the academically trained, with much based on gossip, slander, and hearsay. Stories of same-sex desire have been used to discredit monarchs and to provide lurid satisfaction to the reader, and the purveyors and receivers of gossip. The nature of the evidence from the scandal sheets aimed at Queen Anne to Backstairs Billy's appearances in the *Mail Online*, suggests that perception, rumour, and gossip as phenomena in themselves are rich areas of study.

Much research has concerned itself with individual case studies, but I believe there is room for a more comprehensive understanding of the queer experience in royal courts, both in Britain and elsewhere. Courts are self-contained worlds, with strict social structures, hierarchies, rules, and geographies, but they are also highly permeable. Courts reflect and influence broader societies, and servants, courtiers, and a huge range of other people pass between courts and the rest of society.

LGBTQ Royal Histories: Creating the Image of Royalty

Exploring queer histories can help us to better understand courts and monarchies, and I would argue that they can aid an understanding of the perception of monarchy, and its place in society. Gay men in particular have shaped perceptions of the monarchy in the twentieth century. Yvonne Ward has suggested that two of Queen Victoria's earliest biographers and editors of her letters, Lord Esher and Arthur Benson, two gay old Etonians, were unable to properly comprehend the femininity of their subject. Their inability to understand women has arguably had a devastating effect on an accurate understanding of the Queen.³⁹

More positively, gay men also had a fundamental role in shaping the visual image of the twentieth century monarchy. Gay men were seen to dominate art and cultural life in this period, with jealousy expressed by outsiders of the "homintern" or protective gay cultural mafia, which operated.⁴⁰ Discretely gay couturiers such as Norman Hartnell and Hardy Amies defined the image of the female members of the Royal Family. The iconic image of the Queen on the day of her coronation shows her wearing a Norman Hartnell dress.⁴¹ Hartnell's success as a couturier came from his sensitivity as a designer, combined with a sense of discretion, both qualities that are associated culturally with middle- and upper-class gay men like Hartnell,

³⁸ "Dressing Rooms at Whitehall," *Victoria and Albert Museum*, accessed 22 August 2019, <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O72003/dressing-rooms-at-whitehall-print-minton-john/>.

³⁹ Yvonne M. Ward, *Censoring Queen Victoria* (London: One World Publications, 2014).

⁴⁰ This cultural phenomenon is explored in: Gregory Woods, *Homintern: How Gay Culture Liberated the Modern World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016).

⁴¹ "Photograph," *Victoria and Albert Museum*, accessed 22 August 2019, <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O244423/photograph-beaton-cecil-sir/>.

or as noted, Oliver Ford, at the time. Hartnell’s design had to accommodate the age-old queenly challenge of adapting ceremonial clothing that had been designed for men to the body of a woman.⁴² Not only that, but the photograph was styled and taken by the gay man Cecil Beaton, who brought all his sense of queer theatricality to the image. Westminster Abbey is shifted to an impossible angle as a backdrop, while a swagged curtain completes the dramatic setting. All things considered, the defining image of Elizabeth II’s reign seems very queer indeed.

The relationship between gay artists and the royal family was mutually beneficial. In 2015, I nervously sat in an auction room and successfully acquired a watercolour design for a fancy dress costume for Princess Margaret by Oliver Messel, for Historic Royal Palaces’ collection. Messel was Margaret’s uncle by marriage, and their partnership extended to his designing her Caribbean home on Mustique, *Les Jolies Eaux*. When Messel decided to move permanently to the Caribbean with his male partner Vagn Riis-Hansen, he was prepared to throw away his extensive archive of stage designs. It was Margaret’s intervention that led them to be saved and stored at Kensington Palace before finding their way to the Victoria and Albert Museum.⁴³

LGBTQ Royal Histories: Queering Royalty

The monarchy of course has a place in culture beyond direct patronage or the creation of official image and biography, and a queer view of the institution has often been taken. In this context, I mean queer in its broadest sense, both referring to queer as a noun referring to identities and behaviours that are not straight, but also queer as a verb. In this sense, “to queer” is an action where the normal and normative is resisted, subverted, or even ignored.⁴⁴

This is particularly powerful in the context of royalty and monarchy. The monarch is the head of the state, and at the centre of legislation. The monarchy is associated with power, and with established forms of religion. The British monarch is the Head of the Church of England, and the coronation is a religious ceremony. In the UK, the royal family has sought to present itself as a model of family life, a project begun by George III, and continued by Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, and by the current royal family. Royalty has always sought to be anything other than queer, (hence why people ask me with genuine surprise if there even are queer royal histories). For this reason, attempts to queer royalty are especially powerful. Queer subversions of royalty have a long history, and are linked to the phenomenon of suggesting same-sex desire and relationships to slander monarchs and their legacies. Claims of the homosexuality of Edward II, James VI and I, William III, and Queen Anne, as outlined above, have all included an element of slander, often long after the individual monarch’s death, in order to subvert and undermine their legacies.

Christopher Marlowe’s 1593 play *Edward II* equates homoeroticism and politics, and

⁴² For example, in 1838, Queen Victoria required a new set of coronation robes suited to her gender and figure. See: Kay Staniland, *In Royal Fashion: The Clothes of Princess Charlotte of Wales and Queen Victoria 1796-1901* (London: Museum of London 1997), 108–116.

⁴³ Charles Castle, *Oliver Messel: A Biography* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1986), 252–253.

⁴⁴ For an accessible introduction to these concepts, see: Meg-John Barker and Julia Scheele, *Queer: A Graphic History* (London: Icon Books, 2016), 7–15.

has profoundly shaped the perception of Edward. It is significant that the queer artist and filmmaker Derek Jarman adapted the play as a film.⁴⁵ Released in 1991, the film foregrounds the play’s homoerotic elements, and by combining medieval with modern settings, costumes and themes, relates both the medieval subject matter and sixteenth-century play to the experience of late-twentieth-century gay men.⁴⁶ Most notably, the anachronistic portrayal of Edward’s army as modern gay rights protestors has the effect of giving the post-AIDS gay community a direct connection to a medieval royal past. As we have seen, relating modern LGBTQ identities and communities to historical precedents can be a powerful validation and starting point for understanding.

Jarman had used royalty to enforce the political statements of his films before. His 1978 punk classic *Jubilee* opens with Elizabeth I transported forward in time to a nihilistic imagining of late 1970s Britain, where she is confronted with the body of the dead Elizabeth II, abandoned face down after a mugging.⁴⁷ Elizabeth I is emblematic of a golden age of English culture, while the high esteem in which Elizabeth II is held by many people, even more so in the 1970s, makes her violent and undignified death even more shocking and subversive. Elizabeth I, who can be regarded as queer through her negotiation of her gender role and the artifice of her image making, participates in a scene that queers the place of the monarchy at the heart of British life. If the scene had featured a different historical monarch confronting the body of any other person it would have lost much of its subversive edge. The scene relies on the role of royalty in society to work.

Elizabeth I’s distinctive image, and high level of recognition, sees her frequently used in popular culture. She appears most queerly in Sally Potter’s 1993 adaptation of Virginia Woolf’s novel *Orlando*.⁴⁸ The source novel is itself queer, with the central character, Orlando, changing sex from male to female while living un-aging through more than three centuries.⁴⁹ The book is a love letter from Virginia Woolf to Vita Sackville-West, on whom the character of Orlando is based. In her adaptation of the novel, Sally Potter took these queer themes of gender further, casting a man in the role of Elizabeth I. And not just any man: Potter’s Elizabeth was played by Quentin Crisp, the unique, flamboyantly-effeminate, self-proclaimed “stately homo of England.” At 83, when he filmed the part, Crisp had cemented his reputation as a gay public figure through numerous books and public appearances, although his effeminate style was increasingly at odds with a gay scene in his adopted home of America, which valued masculine conformity. As Glyn Davis has pointed out in a recently published chapter of a volume devoted to the representation of the British monarchy onscreen, Crisp also appeared in place of Queen Elizabeth II in the same year, 1993, in the first of Channel Four’s *Alternative Christmas Messages*. In both contexts, subversive high camp queer culture, embodied by Crisp, himself an old queen, collided with the public images of two old official queens. In the case of *Orlando*, this enhanced the gender subversion of the plot, and worked because of the widely understood historical negotiation of Elizabeth I’s gender role. When set

⁴⁵ *Edward II*, dir. Derek Jarman (British Screen, BBC Films, and Working Title, 1991).

⁴⁶ Robert Mills, “Male-Male Love and Sex in the Middle Ages, 1000-1500,” in *A Gay History of Britain: Love and Sex Between Men Since the Middle Ages*, ed. Matt Cook (Westport, CT: Greenwood World Publishing, 2007), 6; and Robert Mills, *Derek Jarman’s Medieval Modern* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2018), 62–68.

⁴⁷ *Jubilee*, dir. Derek Jarman (Whaley-Malin Productions and Megalovision, 1978).

⁴⁸ *Orlando*, dir. Sally Potter (Adventure Pictures, 1992).

⁴⁹ Virginia Woolf, *Orlando: A Biography* (London: Hogarth Press, 1928).

against Elizabeth II at Christmas, Crisp as an embodiment of queer culture subverted one of the key institutions of the modern monarchy, the Christmas day message.⁵⁰

LGBTQ Royal Histories: The Modern Monarchy

Queer culture then, by challenging and subverting our associations of royalty with power, the establishment and conventional family, can—oddly enough—help us to understand them better. The monarchy, of course, retains a central position in our society, and I have mentioned the power of institutions that are associated with it accepting queer people.

I spoke earlier about the way homophobia and transphobia remain caustic and damaging problems in our society, and the royals have positively challenged and shaped popular perceptions. There are some important recent examples. Diana, Princess of Wales’ gloveless handshake with a gay male AIDS patient in April 1987 at the London Middlesex hospital sent a powerful message that reduced fear and misinformation about the illness, which at that time was largely associated with, and increased homophobia against, gay men. Her 1996 red Catherine Walker suit, displayed in Historic Royal Palaces’ exhibition *Diana: Her Fashion Story*, at Kensington Palace, was worn to an event to launch an appeal for the HIV/Aids Charity London Lighthouse. The charity had a history of royal support, with Princess Margaret opening the centre in 1988. It shows Diana adopting the visual language of HIV/AIDS activism, the red ribbon, in a typically intelligent choice of clothing.

One of the most important queer moments for Kensington Palace happened in 2016, when Prince William invited members of the LGBTQ community to Kensington to discuss homophobic and transphobic bullying, as part of his wider anti-bullying campaign. The accompanying article in *Attitude*, a gay lifestyle magazine, and above all William’s cover photo, felt like a groundbreaking moment of engagement between the future king and the LGBTQ community.⁵¹

September 2018 saw the first same-sex wedding of a member of the wider royal family, when Lord Ivar Mountbatten married his fiancée James Coyle. He was given away by his former wife Penny Mountbatten. All three are shown happily smiling in widely published photographs, in a clear demonstration of the growing acceptance of same-sex relationships, and a world away from the way a royal same-sex relationship would have been treated, even in the recent past.⁵²

To bring us to today, Historic Royal Palaces is committed to further researching and telling LGBTQ royal histories. I hope the *Ruling Sexualities* conference and published papers will stimulate further discussion and open new avenues of research in this field. We know that engagement can change perceptions. Historians, academics, and museum and heritage professionals, through high-quality research and the ability to communicate to broad audiences, can change our perception of the past, and the lives of people today.

⁵⁰ Glyn Davis, “Queens and Queenliness: Quentin Crisp as *Orlando’s* Elizabeth I,” in *The British Monarchy on Screen*, ed. Mandy Merck (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 155–178.

⁵¹ Matthew Todd, “Bullying Is Abuse That Can Create Long-Term Suffering It Has No Place In Any Society,” *Attitude*, July 2016, 84–103.

⁵² Rebecca Hardy, “Royal Family’s First Gay Wedding,” *Mail Online*, 16 June 2018, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-5849971/Royal-familys-gay-wedding-story-Queens-cousin-Lord-Ivar-Mountbatten.html>.