

HOW TO:

Queer
your
HISTORIC HOUSE

a practical guide

by Indigo Dunphy-Smith

A practical guide

This guide is for anyone seeking to uncover and share queer stories within historic places and spaces.

It encourages exploring the context of a historic site, examining the broader social and cultural connections to the property's time period and location.

This method is used to better include sites without direct LGBTQ+ links, while still supporting properties with known queer residents to develop a wider interpretation of their world.

It has been inspired by the accelerating body of sector expertise and academic research, which has been combined with a grassroots approach, so it remains practical and budget-friendly for heritage sites and their staff.

Historic places and spaces, where objects, identity, and location intersect, have the potential to tell endless stories about our history. This includes queer history, which has often been overlooked or disconnected from mainstream narratives. But queer histories have always shaped, and been shaped, by their broader cultural contexts. Historic houses offer a unique opportunity to create immersive environments for visitors that reconnect these histories to the social and cultural narratives of their time. Whether broad or specific, the stories that emerge can deepen our understanding of culture, society, and historical change and exchange.

This resource advocates for rethinking and reorienting the narratives traditionally tied to objects and spaces within heritage sites. By doing so, it opens up space for everyday objects to be linked to queer stories, helping to fill the gaps left by the absence of LGBTQ+ (Lesbian, Gay Bisexual, Transgender, Queer) perspectives in heritage settings. This approach not only acknowledges and validates a legacy that is now tied to modern identities but also opens the door to more inclusive public engagement.



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Challenges

This guide is shaped by my own practice, working in Visitor Services teams for both national and local heritage organisations. It draws on my experience navigating and negotiating various institutional perceptions and positionings. My advice is to embrace the messy process of disrupting established narratives, investigate every ping in your gaydar and trust the process!

Address the Challenges in Integrating Queer Histories

Interpreting and integrating queer histories into historic properties presents unique challenges. See them as opportunities for thoughtful and imaginative storytelling. By combining rigorous research with inclusive and creative interpretation, you can overcome these barriers.

Here's how to confront some of the common challenges with confidence:

Challenge One

“But no one queer lived here!”

Historic houses are rarely just about *who* lived there; they often also represent the time period and wider history of the site's location. Use the property as a tool to explore these broader themes through a queer lens—like the impact of repressive laws, social norms, visual coding and individuals who were part of the wider contextual community.

Challenge Two

Lack of documentation

Evidence of queer histories have often been hidden or destroyed. This is a story in itself. When you encounter gaps in the record, acknowledge them and invite conversation about what they might mean and how that has shaped the spaces lived in and left behind.

Challenge Three

Censorship and communication

Queer people and communities have always found ways to connect, often leaving behind subtle evidence in coded language, symbols, or behaviours. To navigate research into lives and experiences that might signal queer experiences, it is essential to understand the unique words and relationship structures of your site's time.

Challenge Four

Bias in interpretation

Heritage spaces have traditionally been interpreted through a heteronormative lens—one that assumes straight, cisgender experiences as the default. To challenge this, revisit the stories being told and ask if something has been previously overlooked or if an object or space may have layers of meaning that reflect queer use, identity, or subversion.

Method: Case study

Researching and interpreting queer history is a bit like investigative journalism: you are looking for clues, working off hunches, bringing expertise learnt through repetitive practice and perhaps a sprinkling of lived experience.

To apply the method to a historic property requires you to recontextualise and reimagine the site and its collection within its wider social, legal and cultural geography. This work requires thorough contextual analysis and attention to detail: drawing connections between objects, people, narratives, spaces, terminologies, and cultural associations relevant to the property's period/s.

Use the objects and/or spaces within the house as markers through which to turn your research into stories and scenes.

Start with one object or theme per room.

I have provided a step-by-step guide with examples from my own practice at The Georgian House, a 1790s neoclassical townhouse in Edinburgh's UNESCO World Heritage listed New Town.



Step One

Frame the queer context

The method begins by researching the shifts in how personal identities and sexualities were understood and practised by individuals and the collective.

The Georgian House was built during the 18th-century Scottish Enlightenment, a period in history when ideas about the individual began to emerge. Primary sources reveal a shift in understanding sexuality, from something you did to something you were.

Consider how the property's location (cosmopolitan, rural, suburban, coastal) may have influenced a queer experience or attitudes towards it.

The Georgian House was built during the construction of Edinburgh's New Town, a neoclassical urban design that contrasted sharply with the medieval Old Town. Close to Leith, Scotland's second-largest port, the New Town's connection to trade, culture and wealth influenced attitudes toward identity and relationships.

Examine the role of class, race, gender, and wealth to make sure your interpretations are intersectional. Reflect on the way the different source material, its tone and purpose might impact how a queer experience is recorded.

The Georgian House uses a comparative upstairs/downstairs model to explore how wealth and class shaped queer visibility. The elite, who lived "upstairs," had greater privilege and autonomy, allowing for more freedom of expression in diaries and letters, albeit discreet. In contrast, records of queer experiences among the working-class individuals "downstairs" are mostly found in legal records rather than personal accounts. This highlights how class influenced both the expression and preservation of queer experiences.

Step Two

Identify how objects connect

Explore how different cultural movements influenced both individual and collective queer experiences.



Engraving of The Honourable Baron David Hume, Henry Raeburn, 1823, NTS. GH.15

In the Georgian period, travel and trade, the revival of classical eras and narratives, and advances in science and society are common themes. This engraving of Scottish judge **Baron David Hume** is used

to talk about queer history in a legal context, particularly regarding how sodomy was addressed within 18th century judicial and legislative systems.

In contrast, this engraving of **Jupiter disguised as Diana seducing the huntress Callisto** is used to reflect on the tension between law and culture. It references both the inherent queerness of classical mythology—rich with themes of same-sex desire and gender fluidity—and the ways individuals in the 18th century used these stories to subtly signal queer identities.



Engraving of Jupiter Disguised as Diana Seducing Callisto, after Angelica Kauffmann, c. 1766-1781, NTS. 75.563.2



Japanese steel spice box with six removable compartments for ginger, cinnamon, mace, cloves, allspice and nutmeg, 19th c. NTS. 2017.2704

This **spice box** is used to explore Scotland's role in the British Empire, where extensive trade and travel networks created opportunities for social ambiguity, reinvention, and cultural exchange.

Consider how the objects relate to the space.

The Parlour, a space for leisure and learning in a domestic setting, can help frame interpretation.

The **globe** is used to contrast global and local attitudes toward gender and sexuality. It also serves as a gateway to explore cultural exchange and the ways colonial power shaped, and often controlled, expressions of queer identities and actions across different regions.



The **bookcase** or a **newspaper**, is used to talk about the comparatively limited way people accessed information in the 18th century, and the role this has played in shaping attitudes and exposure towards queer identities and actions.

To complement this, a personal **diary** or **letter**, is used to inspire a story about private versus public and personal versus institutional perspectives on queer identities and actions.

Remember, objects that don't have direct or explicit connections to queer stories or experiences can still resonate with contemporary LGBTQ+ audiences. These sometimes subjective and appropriated connections can provide another layer of interpretation.

Step Three

Use social networks

Lastly, use a networking approach to trace associations between queer individuals connected to the house or its immediate surroundings. This involves identifying relationships, social circles, and affiliations that might indicate queer links with the house, either directly or indirectly.

In 1810, a neighbour of the first owners of The Georgian House faced a defamation lawsuit. Two female teachers, Jane Pirie and Marianne Woods, sued her after she publicly accused them of being in a sexual relationship.

Creating evidence informed stories through objects can help bring queer people connected to the history of the site's location to life within the house.



James Robertson & Co Mahogany
Medicine Chest, 1830, NTS.
75.134

The **medicine chest** is used as a storytelling tool to talk about the life of Dr James Barry, who lived as a man throughout his adult life. He graduated as a Medical Doctor from the University of Edinburgh in 1812 and later became a surgeon in the British Navy. His story engages with themes such as colonial networks, interracial relationships and social status.

The painting of **St Bernard's Well and the Water of Leith** serves as a visual reference point for the story of Sibella Maclean and Anne Lister during Lister's tour of Scotland in 1828. Lister recorded passing St Bernard's Well in her carriage in a diary entry, along with several other landmarks around Edinburgh. The painting's location in The Georgian House Drawing Room is used to reimagine the New Town townhouse (located a street over from the historic house) where the couple stayed and socialised, situating the story in a room "just like this one".



St Bernard's Well and
the Water of Leith,
Alexander Nasmyth,
c. 1803, NTS.
75.196

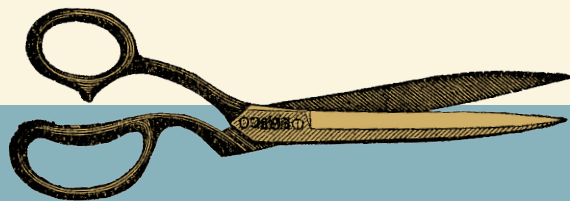
Interpretation tips

Through creative interpretation objects and spaces can take centre stage, serve as visual aids, or assist in crafting immersive reimaginings that highlight queer histories. Using the house and its collection as the focal point for these interpretations can bring these narratives to life, ensuring they are meaningfully woven into the property's wider contextual story.

To find queer narratives in historic properties, practitioners must:

Use an inclusive approach

Avoid the "straight until proven gay" mindset, and instead, approach materials through an inclusive perspective. This reframes LGBTQ+ histories not as hidden or obscure but as integral to understanding the broader social and cultural dynamics of the period.



Consider terminology

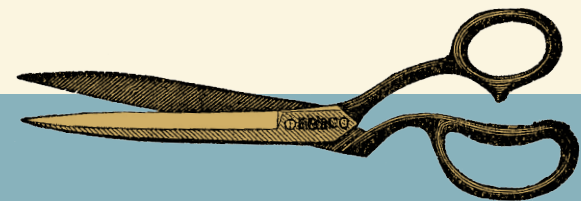
Compile and analyse contemporary terms, both official and slang, which were used to describe queer identities and behaviours. This approach helps shed light on how queer individuals and communities were perceived and may have self-identified in different historical contexts.

Re-think evidence in queer histories

Limiting "proof" to explicit examples of same-sex sexual acts risks erasing broader aspects of queer lives, including relationships, communities, personal choices and self-expression.

Compare the past with the present

Encourage reflection on how attitudes towards queerness have evolved over time. Comparing historical and contemporary understandings of gender and sexuality keeps the narrative relevant and engaging.



Application

Allow your resources and research to unfold organically, follow rabbit holes and test out ideas through knowledge exchange with community members.

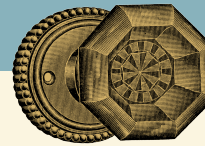
Be open about your evolving research and include it in everyday interactions with staff, volunteers or even visitors. By doing so, queer histories become seamlessly woven into the public interpretation of the house. Over time, this approach creates a culture where queer stories are an inherent part of how the house is understood and experienced by visitors.

Establish a research framework

Identify a support network: Connect with colleagues and communities (online and in-person) for inspiration, guidance and support, ensuring individuals with lived experience are included in the project from the outset.

Define research objectives: Clarify your goals, such as highlighting hidden queer narratives or reinterpreting historical figures.

Plan scope and timeline: Develop a project plan outlining key milestones and the end goal.



Engage community and stakeholders

Consult with LGBTQ+ communities: Collaborate with colleagues, local LGBTQ+ community groups, and networks to gather feedback. This process not only ensures accuracy but also helps identify blind spots and incorporates an intersectional approach.

Conduct historical research

Understand the context: Research relevant queer histories from the property's time and location.

Research terminology: Compile historical LGBTQ+ terminology for more accurate research and interpretation.

Read the fine print: The story markers for contextual (or direct!) links to your property or objects will often be in the details.

Apply the queering process

Identify and analyse: Examine objects, artworks, spaces and relationships for links to the stories you have uncovered.

Contextualise findings: Relate your discoveries to the cultural norms of the time.

Give agency: Explore how you can present the queer individual, theme, or event through their perspective.

Design public programs and interpretation

Implement interpretation: Develop research notes that are both comprehensive and dynamic so they can be integrated into general guiding notes for the property as well as chopped, changed and connected to other projects.

Organise themed events: Host talks, workshops, or property tours around queer themes.

Evaluate and integrate

Collect visitor feedback: Use observations and surveys to refine your approach and gather data to support future funding opportunities.

Stay informed: Monitor emerging research in queer history and contribute to the conversation by engaging with other heritage professionals and sharing insights.

Integrate queer histories: Weave LGBTQ+ stories into the site's main narrative by adding them to tours, guiding notes and object trails to create a more inclusive experience.



Reading List

Available online:

Pride of Place: England's LGBTQ Heritage, Historic England.

Prejudice & Pride: LGBTQ heritage and its contemporary implications, Research Centre for Museums and Galleries, University of Leicester.

History of Sexuality & LGBTQ Collections, Institute of Historical Research, University of London.

Looking for Queer Possibility Together, Margaret Middleton, Queer Heritage and Collections Network.

The Queer Code: Secret Languages of LGBTQ+ Art, The National Galleries of Scotland.

Migration, Race & Empire: LGBT+ histories tour, OUTing the Past Festival at People's History Museum.

How can your museum engage children, young people and families with LGBTQ+ heritage?, Margaret Middleton, Kids in Museums.

Gendering the Museum Toolkit, James Daybell and Kit Heyam, Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC).

Trans-Inclusive Culture: Guidance on advancing trans inclusion for museums, galleries, archives and heritage organisations, Research Centre for Museums and Galleries, University of Leicester.

Museum Activism, Robert R. Janes and Richard Sandell, 2019, Routledge, Oxon.

Academic Literature Review, Queer Heritage and Collections Network, from LGBTQ Heritage and Collections - SSN Literature Review, Kris Reid and Richard Sandell, RCMG, University of Leicester.

Available in print:

Joshua Adair, *Water Closet Wisdom: Queer Sexuality and Historical House Museums*. Faculty & Staff Research and Creative Activity, no. 269, Murray State University, 2019.

Matt Cook, Alison Oram, and Justin Bengry, eds. *Locating Queer Histories: Places and Traces across the UK*. London: Bloomsbury, 2020.

Sean Curran, *Queer Activism Begins at Home: Situating LGBTQ Voices in National Trust Historic Houses*. PhD, University College London, 2019.

Ben Pilkey, Rosie Scicluna, Ben Campkin, and Barbara Penner, eds. *Sexuality and Gender at Home: Experience, Politics, Transgression*. 1st ed. London: Routledge, 2017.

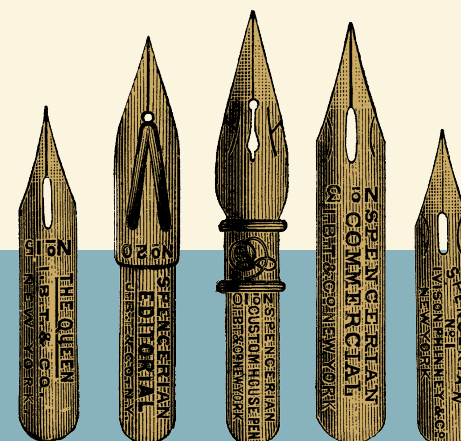
Graham Sparks, *Hiding in Plain Sight: how eighteenth-century country house art and architecture can reveal the ghosts of queer lifestyles and the implications for contemporary visitor interpretation*, MA Dissertation, Birkbeck University of London, 2024.

About the Author

Indigo (she/her) is a researcher and writer based in Edinburgh, focusing on queer storytelling through museum and gallery collections. From castles to convict barracks, she has worked in the heritage sector for over ten years across Australia and Scotland. She specialises in research and public programmes that make space for marginalised stories in traditional places.

Indigo has delivered conference papers and workshops about how to uncover queer links in historic houses and appeared on the podcast *Bad Gays*. She is currently the co-chair of the National Trust for Scotland's LGBTQ network and supports heritage organisations in queering their spaces and stories.

You can find out more about her work through her website: [A Queer Was Here](#).



How to Queer Your Historic House encourages heritage professionals to view historic spaces as active resources for the formation, expression, and identification of queer identities throughout history.

By examining how heritage properties, their locations, and collections can be interpreted, we can uncover not only individual queer experiences but also the social-political context and broader queer histories tied to those spaces.



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