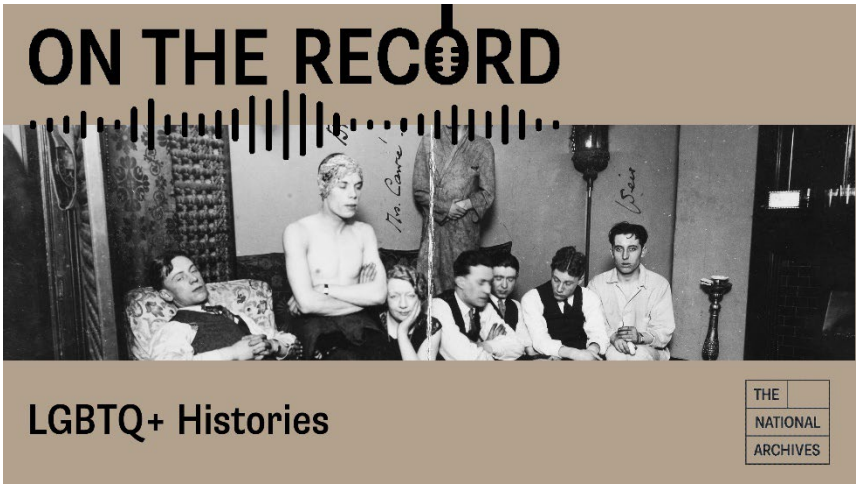
	Show Notes – Bonus Episode LGBTQ+ Histories	THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES



In this episode, we bring you four stories that span two hundred years of British history. Two women leave their families to make a new life together in Wales in 1780, a Manchester drag ball in 1880, a secret gathering space for gay men in 1920s London, and a community archive collected by Black LGBTQ+ Londoners.

Documents from The National Archives used in this episode: CRIM 1/387, PROB 10/5282, PROB 10/5128.

If you're interested in finding out more about the stories featured in this episode, read our blogs on The Ladies of Llangollen and Fitzroy Square. Our guide to sexuality and gender identity history provides advice for researchers interested in LGBTQ+ histories.

For help navigating our catalogue, you can watch our top level tips on using Discovery.

You can find out about London Metropolitan Archives by visiting their website. Dr Thomas McGrath's research blog can be found here.

Listeners, we need your help to make this podcast better! We need to know a bit more about you and what themes you're interested in. You can share this information with us by visiting smartsurvey.co.uk/s/ontherecord/.

Transcript

[Teaser Clips from Episode]

Katherine Howells: This is On the Record at The National Archives: uncovering the past through stories of everyday people. I'm Katherine Howells.

Mark Dunton: And I'm Mark Dunton.

Katherine and I are both historians at The National Archives in Kew, West London, where we research, look after, and help our audiences better understand the Archives' collections of historical government and public records.

Katherine: In this episode, we're bringing you four LGBTQ stories from two hundred years of British history: two women who left their families to make a new home together in Wales in 1780, a Manchester drag ball in 1880, a secret gathering space for gay men in 1920s London, and a community archive collected by Black LGBTQ Londoners that celebrates communities and spaces active from 1975 to 2010.

Mark: These stories just scratch the surface of the long and rich history of LGBTQ individuals and communities in Britain, but we hope they will inspire you to dig deeper into our collections and perhaps even do your own research to uncover stories yet to be told.

Katherine: Before we begin, it's important to say that descriptive terms relating to gender and sexuality have changed over time. Where possible, we will use the language that historical individuals would have used to self-identify, but elsewhere we may use umbrella terms like LGBTQ or "queer" to describe people in a way modern listeners will understand.

Now, let's begin in Wales, with the Ladies of Llangollen, as told by Vicky Iglikowski-Broad, Diverse Histories Record Specialist here at The National Archives.

Katherine: So who were the Ladies of Llangollen, and how did these two women's relationship make them celebrities?

Vicky Iglikowsky-Broad: The Ladies of Llangollen were two incredible women: Lady Eleanor Butler and Sarah Ponsonby. They were Irish women who lived outside of the mould of what was expected of them in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. They'd been born into privileged lives– a lot of wealth–but essentially they wanted to live in a different way. They became friends when they were young, having grown up in close proximity to each other, and they decided to escape their life in Ireland, and they ran away to Wales together. Supposedly, they did that in quite a dramatic fashion. They ended up using a fishing boat to row from Ireland, and they set up this life in Wales, which wasn't kind of what was expected of two upper-class Irish women at the time. But they wanted to really hide away from the world and escape the pressures of marriage and conventional life that would have been expected of women of their background at the time.

Katherine: And there are lots of depictions of Eleanor and Sarah and letters by and to them in various archives. What do these records tell us about them and their lives?

Vicky: There's some really interesting visual depictions of the pair during their lifetime. They're drawn in quite interesting ways, often wearing masculine clothes, wearing things like top hats,

wearing a lot of black clothing, and not conforming to the ideals of their gender in terms of dress at the time. They also did things like they wore chalk in their hair to style it. Even so in visual depictions, they were setting themselves quite apart. But there was also a culture around them at the time that meant that people were quite fascinated about them. So their lives at the time attracted a lot of attention, and part of that was delivered through imagery at the time.

Katherine: So we know that a lot of famous people came to visit and meet them. Can you tell me a little bit more about some of them?

Vicky: All sorts of politicians and prominent individuals of the era would almost pilgrimage to Wales to see the Ladies of Llangollen. In many ways, this was ironic because they'd escaped to get away from the life that was expected of them and the drama of it but actually, instead of having this sleepy Welsh life, they cultivated like a salon of people around them that wanted to come and visit. It's interesting to note that one of the individuals that did visit them was Anne Lister, in her own right, a well-known lesbian– now and indeed at the time. And it's believed that she was inspired by their model of a relationship and that led to her asking her partner to essentially engage in a lesbian marriage later in the century.

Katherine: A lot of modern sources available for Eleanor and Sarah are very ambiguous and vague when it comes to any suggestion of them being a romantic or sexual couple. What are the challenges in discussing historical same-sex life partners like the Ladies of Llangollen, and how do they fit into a broader LGBTQ reading of the past?

Vicky: Lady Eleanor and Sarah Ponsonby lived in a really unconventional way at the time and when they ran away together, they ran away together and set up a life very much like a marriage at the time. Now we can't know the full details of their relationship, but a lot of speculation has gone on since the time and people pilgrimaged essentially to see them as pretty much a lesbian couple.

And they were idolized in this idea of a romantic friendship. Romantic friendship was the kind of idea of a relationship where people were relying on each other, but they were from the same gender and that was quite an 18th-century idea in general.

But in contrast to other kind of lesbian figureheads at the time like Anne Lister, the Ladies of Llangollen didn't explicitly mention sexual activity and things like that in their letters and diaries. So it's hard to know exactly the nature of their relationship, but they were very much idolized as a lesbian couple ever since. And at the time, attracted a lot of attention because they were curious and they lived their life in different ways. And whether that meant that they were lesbians as we would now consider lesbians is I guess still up for debate.

Often, the language used to identify sexuality didn't exist in the same way in the past. We now have terms that people wouldn't necessarily have identified with historically. But we can see traits and patterns through history of same-sex relationships, women who have always loved women, and other kinds of sexual relationships. So although it's difficult and challenging to have terms that we use that weren't used in the past, we can see that there were patterns that we can now recognise within our modern understanding of sexuality and gender identity as well.

Katherine: And what can we say for sure about their relationship?

Vicky: It's really difficult to know now how to look at the relationship of the Ladies of Llangollen, but what we can say is it was very much a life partnership and a hugely loving relationship. They stayed together for many decades and lived in their house together with very much a shared life, share dreams. They would be in the library together, one of them would be reading, the other one would be doing portraiture. And it was very much a loving relationship that they cultivated. So although it's difficult to say in our modern terms how we would define their relationship–and

when we can't ask them ourselves– but ultimately this was a lifelong partnership that was until the end of their lives.

Mark**:** Eleanor was 90 when she died in 1829, and Sarah was 76 when she died two years later. They are buried together in their local churchyard alongside their servant and companion Mary Caryll, who had lived and worked with them from the time they moved to Wales to her death almost thirty years later.

Here at The National Archives, we have the wills of all three women. When Mary died, she left everything to Eleanor and Sarah. And when Eleanor died, her will left everything to quote “Her beloved friend, Sarah Ponsonby.”

[Musical transition]

Katherine: Now, for our next story, we’re heading even further north to the suburbs of Manchester in the late 19th century. And we’re joined by Dr Thomas McGrath, a historian who’s done quite a bit of research on this particular event.

Thomas McGrath: So today, I'm going to be talking about a private male-only party which took place in a suburb of Manchester in 1880. What happened at this party was considered shocking at the time and when the police raided the party and arrested the 47 men there, they discovered that about 19 of them were dressed in women's clothing.

Katherine: So, can you set the scene for this party?

Thomas: So we need to cast our minds back to Manchester in the northwest of England in the year 1880. And we're not even in Manchester city centre itself, we're slightly outside of Manchester in Hulme which is very much a working-class suburb. So where the drag ball took place–or the fancy dress ball–as it was known at the time, was in a Temperance Hall in a tiny little backstreet nestled

between terraced houses and pubs in Hulme. So it was very much a working-class district and it was surrounded by buildings on all sides which would prove pivotal to the events of that night. This Temperance Hall could be let-out to different groups and parties. And apparently, the Pawnbrokers Assistance Association had hired this hall in September 1880, and we now know that the Pawnbrokers Assistance Association did not exist and this was the guise that these men used to hire this hall for their private party.

Katherine: And why did they need to hide what was going on?

Thomas: So what we need to remember with Manchester in 1880 is that these men were doing something that was very much out of the ordinary and very much to the extreme. They were actively challenging masculine stereotypes at the time. They were expressing themselves and flaunting their personalities in a way which was not deemed socially acceptable, hence why they felt the need to hide and lie about what this event actually was.

Just 20 years before this event took place in Manchester, homosexual activity was punishable by death. And after 1861 it was still punishable by life in prison as well, so there's an atmosphere of fear for these men as well. They know what they are doing is illegal and they know that it is questionable to society as well.

Katherine: So what went on at the Temperance Hall? And how do we know what happened?

Thomas: From about 9:00 at night of the evening of the Friday the 24th of September 1880, men started to arrive at the Temperance Hall in Hulme. Now, the police had already been tipped off about this event and they'd been told to watch out for any dubious looking parties that were male attended. The custodian of the Temperance Hall had actually raised these concerns with the police.

So as the men were arriving at 9:00 p.m., the police were already positioned and watching the hall and watching the attendees. Some of the participants at the event that night walked up to the hall and walked in and they were in their male clothing. Others arrived in carriages carrying suitcases, hat boxes, and things like that in male clothing, and one or two arrived already partially dressed in women's clothing. At the time, the police didn't know whether these were just women arriving to the party or that they were men arriving to the party, but they had their suspicions.

One of the preparations that the man had taken place that night was to cover all the windows with paper and calico so that nothing could be seen, apart from some of the windows at the back of the Temperance Hall. This was to prove pivotal to the events of the night.

So at 9:30 p.m. the party started and from the outside, the police could hear singing, dancing, they could hear women's full names being used, and higher-pitched feminine voices being used as well. Now, the police were still more suspicious and what they did was go to the street at the back of the Temperance Hall and climb onto the roofs of the terraced houses. And they had a direct line of sight into the uncovered parts of the windows, and they could see the main space in the Temperance Hall and they could also see a private anteroom. The main detective in Manchester at the time was Jerome Caminada and he was leading this investigation, and he was on the roof looking in. He saw that half the men were now dressed in women's clothing and that these were historically inspired costumes. So we know that there was Elizabeth I and Sir Francis Drake, there was Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn. There was also Romeo and Juliet and all sorts of fantastic costumes on display. We know that a lot of the men were wearing not only female clothing, but they'd also brought with them accessories such as feather boas, they had ornaments in their hair, they had jewellery. So we know that this is something that they must have invested in overtime as well and something that they did quite frequently to have these items to hand.

At one point in the night, Jerome Caminada saw two men go into the anteroom; he later said that he saw them in positions which he did not care to describe. Now, by 19th century standards, this could be anything. It's a very tantalising quote which we don't have any more information for, but it gives us an idea that there were other things going on at this party besides just singing and dancing.

At around 2:00 that night, Caminada had had enough of watching the events and he decided to raid the party. So he knocked on the door and a voice on the other side asked who it was. And Caminada knew that there were often code words used to gain entry to these private balls so he said the code word “sister” in his best high-pitched voice, and the door was unlocked. The police rushed inside and started to arrest everyone in sight.

Unfortunately, the men were all taken to Jackson Street police station and then they were taken to court in the days that followed. And of course, this being a working-class neighbourhood of Manchester, there was a huge crowd of people and spectators waiting and watching as these men were led out of the hall.

Katherine: Fantastic. That’s an incredible story, Thomas. So, how have you used archives and archival research to uncover this story? And can the paper trail tell us anything about what happened to the attendees beyond this one event? I know when we were preparing for this episode, you mentioned Archives+ at Manchester Central Library, the British Newspaper Archives, and online sources like Find My Past and Ancestry.

Thomas: Yeah, so the archives have proved absolutely fascinating in following what happened to this story afterwards and what happened to these men after that one night. Newspapers have been a great source of information.

And the thing was that this was deemed so shocking, that it was a story that was quickly picked up by lots of provincial newspapers up and down Britain and the United Kingdom in general. So from the very far parts of Scotland to Southern England, even newspapers in Dublin reported on this story. And not only did they report on the story, but the police leaked the men's personal information to the press as well. So of those 47 men, their names, their ages, their marital status, their occupations, and their home addresses were given to these newspapers. So there was no escape for these men; anyone who knew them or knew of them would tie them to this event.

Now, as a historian that is absolutely fascinating and that's gold dust because it means we can follow these people on in the censuses and other records that come after 1880. But we can only imagine how awful that must have been at the time for these individuals that up and down the country, everyone would have known exactly what they had been up to. A few of these men were married as well and had families and a lot of them as well were working in public-facing roles such as landlords of pubs, shopkeepers, accountants etc., so their whole social network would have been aware of this, and it probably destroyed livelihoods in some cases.

I've been able to use the archives to trace what happened to some of the men afterwards and I thought that was a really important part of this story because quite often when this has been written about in the past by other researchers and other historians, they talk about it as an enclosed event that sort of happens in September 1880, and ends with the trial when the men are let go. Ultimately, they aren't convicted because it's deemed that they didn't do anything wrong.

But what we can do, and what I wanted to do was see what happened to these men afterwards. So I used the census from 1881, which was about nine months after this event, and then subsequent censuses to see if I could trace these men and where they went. Now unsurprisingly, a lot of them are not at the addresses they gave in September 1880 so it's made tracing them quite difficult.

Some of them were still at home with their families. And it's very easy to read into things and obviously, as historians, we can't do that, but it's nice to know that some of them did remain at home in family units. There was one man in particular who went on to found a sort of boarding house for single and unmarried men. After he died, his niece paid for memorial pieces in the newspapers every year on the anniversary of his death. So it's really nice that these men were loved and some of them were not estranged from their families and relatives.

Unfortunately, this isn't the case for all individuals that I had a look at and tried to trace from that event. I think one of the saddest one is the case of George Broughton and Henry Cartwright who both gave the same address when they were arrested. So we know that these two men lived together in Stalybridge. Broughton was a schoolmaster, so very much a public-facing role and a position of authority in the community. And Cartwright was a draper's assistant. I have been unable to find these two men after that event. It must have been heartbreaking for them, really, because these were two men who had found each other in this time whether they were friends or more, we do not know. But they'd found each other, they had that connection, they attended this ball together, and then it seems to me that they were separated afterwards because of the aftermath.

Katherine**:** So Thomas, this is clearly a story that contributes to our understanding of the LGBTQ past, but it's not as clear how these party-goers fit into our contemporary understanding of gender and sexuality. You've already addressed this a bit, but can you talk more about the challenges of interpreting this historical event and the individuals caught up in it?

Thomas: It is very difficult as a historian to look at it and try to take that step back and try to view them as they would have viewed themselves. I think it's just important that we don't put any labels on them but we keep an open mind when we're looking at this event as well. These men faced so

much labelling in their time and their names were spread all over the country and everyone knew everything about them, and I would hate to accidentally do the same now looking back at them and miscast them or mistype them.

But in a sense, as well, we can see that these people are sort of...we could say trail-blazers, I don't know if that's too strong a word. Because we have the idea that these men were going out and they were going to these parties, and you know, despite the social conditions and the constraints of society at the time, they were not afraid to express themselves in this way. Yes, they may have been doing it behind closed doors and privately, but they had formed this group, they had formed these connections in this little network. So we know that they are kind of trail-blazers in that sense that they've made a community. And I think that's probably the best way of looking at it, is that they are the start of a community, one that in subsequent decades and years was pushed underground and reemerged and, and it's come again in different forms and guises. But I think that this is the start of that community.

Katherine: So based on the newspaper reports from the time, it seems people were shocked that something like this would happen in Manchester. I'm curious, were other parties like this going on in the north and elsewhere in the country?

Thomas: It's not as unique as we think. When we look at it first, you think, "Oh, my God, this is such an amazing event and this must have been such a one-off and that's why the police raided it." But what we actually know is that Caminada was tipped off to watch these events in the weeks and months before by his superiors, so clearly this must have been happening more at least in Manchester than we initially think it was. And what happens is, I think that this is probably just the final straw and this is the one where he thinks, "Right, there's enough people here, I can arrest them now and this will make a splash."

We know that some of the men who were at the event at Hulme that night and were arrested had previously attended a ball in a different part of Manchester. And Caminada had also watched that event. And this was a few months before, but he decided not to act and didn't arrest anybody. So this type of thing is going on a lot more than we think and it's not just in Manchester and the northwest of England. We know that a lot of men at the event that night came from Sheffield. So we know that there's connections with Yorkshire, and we know that they have this network. We also know that in 1878–so two years before the Manchester ball there was a similar kind of ball in Leeds where there were 100 men and three women. And the police raided that one again and were apparently disgusted by the amount of men and that some of the men were in women's clothing, and that the three women were literally there as just a front to make it look like it was more of a normal event as it were. So this type of thing is happening a lot more than we know; it is just because it was in the newspaper that we hear so much about it.

And we can see examples of cross-dressing–as it would have been known at the time–on a national level as well. So in April 1870, 10 years before the Manchester ball, Thomas Park and Thomas Ernest Boulton – who were more famously known as Fanny and Stella–were arrested at a theatre in London as their female alter egos, and that caused a huge sensation at the time as well.

What we also have going on in and around Manchester are women who lived their lives as men. This is slightly different to the men at the ball who were men dressing in women's clothing for this social event, what we also have going on are women who live their lives outwardly as men, and they are only discovered as men in extreme circumstances. There is an example from the 1830s in Manchester and Salford of Harry Stokes, who was a bricklayer and a special constable, and he was outed by his wife of 22 years as a “female husband.” Apparently, they'd got into a bit of an argument and Harry Stokes' wife had decided to reveal that Harry was actually was born a female.

But Harry had managed to live all these years outwardly as a man. And there were other events like this as well in Manchester again in the 1860s. There was Thomas Green and John Jones, who were both discovered to be biologically women when they were arrested and had to change and be showered in the prison. And it was discovered that they were women living their lives as men. Of course, that was slightly different because our men aren't living their lives as outwardly as women, and the way the press deal with it as well is different. So it's kind of sensationalism, yes, but it's almost brushed under the rug. It's seen as something almost comical and whimsical that these women would decide to do this. However when it's a man dressing as a woman, that's a big social taboo; that goes against the codes of morality of the time, that goes against what masculine ideals were of the time.

There is a lot going on in 19th century Britain and late 19th century Britain, but the way that we see these portrayed in newspapers and archival records is very different.

One of the biggest challenges for historians when looking at LGBTQ history is that it is weighted to the side of the oppressor almost. So when we often find out about these disinformation in these lives, it's through criminal records or it's through newspaper articles reporting on these kinds of events. And of course, these people are seen as the transgressors, and what we need to do is we need to look at these records and this material and remember that they were real people behind these and real lives and that they're being judged by the standards of the time, and hopefully that by reappraising their cases, we can restore a bit of their identities back to them.

Mark: Next, we’re bringing back Diverse Records Specialist Vicky Iglikowsky-Broad, who has used a set of records from our collection to bring to light a group of friends and lovers who created community and a chance to live authentically in the face of repressive 1920s laws.

Mark: Vicky, for your second story, we're coming back to the theme of secret queer parties. Can you set the scene for us for this story?

Vicky: We're in December 1927. It's a cold winter's evening. Imagine yourself standing on a street corner outside Fitzroy Square just near London's thriving West End. There's a basement flat there that you're going to, so you go down the stairs and tentatively approach the front door. You maybe knock and then the door, let's imagine, is flung open by your friend Bobby, dressed in his flowing gold train skirt, and you can hear the raucous laughter inside, the music, the gramophone all waiting to greet you. And you're pulled inside the venue. This is the scenario that would have met someone or multiple people potentially going to a gathering at Fitzroy Square in 1927. By going to a venue like this at the time, you would have been risking everything potentially because this was a space that particularly men meeting other men would gather at a time when society didn't approve of those kinds of relationships. So there was huge amounts of risks involved but actually, it would have been exciting, exhilarating potentially, and this was somewhere that hopefully you would have felt welcomed at the time.

Mark: Yes, that's a really vivid picture that you've painted there, Vicky. So, what was going on at Bobby's flat in Fitzroy Square? And why actually do we know about these secret queer parties that he and his friends threw?

Vicky: Yeah. So, in the 1920s, we know about a number of gatherings that were held at Fitzroy Square at this basement flat belonging to Bobby and Constance. Essentially, we know that they held these gatherings of their working-class–mainly male–friends, and there would be performances there of dances. Bobby himself was working as a dancer on the West End stage. And it was almost a subversive space at the time where people were more able to openly be themselves. But ultimately, we know about these parties and gatherings actually because of the

police surveillance at the time. These spaces were being watched and policed, essentially. So there's a contradiction there that the policing and surveillance now gives us an amazing insight into these spaces that maybe we wouldn't know about otherwise, and yet just by loving and being interested in the same sex, these people were putting their lives at risk to some extent when all they were really doing was gathering, having parties, playing music, sometimes cuddling, sometimes kissing, things like that, but really, these were consenting same-sex relationships that were being policed at the time.

Mark: So, I know that in the case of Fitzroy Square, the police collected some photographs and letters, and these give us an incredible view into queer life and desire over 90 years ago. Can you tell us some more about these records?

Vicky: So the photographs are really rare examples from raids like this where photographs of individuals in the venue actually survive. We have other records around clubs and spaces, but they tend to just show the interior without people in them. In this case, which was a private dwelling, we actually get a photograph that survives with individuals in their various party dress and in costumes that actually shows us what it might have been like a little bit to be at this space. So the photographs are incredible and unique, they are annotated by police so we have names of individuals given. And they also give us an insight into the subversive nature of the space. People are wearing quite performative costumes. Someone's wearing a swimming costume, there's a dressing gown being worn... And we can also tell a little bit about the class of the individuals, which we also know from other records about their professions, but they're also wearing quite working-class clothes as well. These photographs give an incredible insight and they also show how Bohemian the space is, that it was quite unconventional for the era, kind of slightly oriental styled.

Mark: It really is...these details are fascinating.

Vicky: So as well as photographs, there are surviving letters. These were also seized on the raid on Fitzroy Square. They were sent to some of the individuals in the venue. So Bobby and Bert, so we've already met Bobby. Bert was his nephew. And so, these letters were sent to them by individuals that weren't actually in the raid or in the venue. But what we can tell from these letters is they are letters between men. Some of them are love letters, others are letters between men who identified as queer at the time. Some of them are more about friendships between gay people and some of them are more about romantic relationships, but they're hugely insightful to what it was like at the time to be queer. And we can see some of the lovely language in the letters. So one of the individuals is in America, and he talks about having a husband, a marriage, going on a honeymoon. So he sees his relationship with another man in terms of marriage at the time even though that wasn't legally the case. And there's also some great humour and camp-ness in the records.

One of them is signed off “yours as ever, your old drunken Auntie Elizabeth, kisses and kind thought to Sister Nellie.” And I think this is interesting because they're using a lot of female personas at the time as well. There's a real interplay of gender and sexuality. Some of the forms of address are brilliant such as Lady of the Camellias, my Dearest Camping Bessie, or old Auntie Aggie, these are the kind of phrases they were using towards each other. And it strikes me as for the 1920s, quite camp, quite humorous, quite fun and I think it gives us a real insight into the gay community at the time and that despite the law and persecution at the time, actually, there was a real thriving queer community and life that was possible for people.

Mark: In our With Love series, we shared a beautiful letter between two men that was seized as evidence on a police raid around the same period as the Fitzroy Square raid. And in that case of Morris and Cyril, we don't really know much about them or what happened to them afterwards.

But Bobby, and there's a Bert isn't there as well? And some of their friends, they've left a paper trail. What do we know about their lives beyond this one ill-fated party?

Vicky: So we do know slightly more about Bobby and Bert due to records that do survive. We know that this particular case did go to court and Bobby was charged with keeping a disorderly house because there was a gathering in his house and so he received a sentence of 15 months hard labour. But actually, beyond that, we can see other records. We can see Bobby in the 1939 census listed as single and living in Paddington. We can see Bobby and Bert on passenger lists going to America. Some of the records that survive around letters in the venue were actually two people in America, so it would be nice to imagine that they were travelling maybe to America to see some of their other friends after this particular incident.

But even further records show that actually Bobby, who was born in 1900, lived to the age of 100. And in that period, he would have seen many changes in the law, including things like the 1967 Sexual Offences Act which partially decriminalised homosexual acts between men. So really, throughout Bobby's lifetime, he would have seen a lot of change. And we also know that he remained a professional dancer throughout his life as well.

Mark: That's interesting to reflect on...all of that change that he would have witnessed. And finally, Vicky, I wanted to ask you about the process of researching history like this. What would you say are the challenges in uncovering LGBTQ history at a government archive?

Vicky: There are some really interesting complexities to researching these kinds of lives and stories in a government archive. For a lot of our history at The National Archives, men's relationships in particular with other men were criminalised to some extent. And that makes it difficult to research these records. They're often quite negative at times. And yet cases like the Fitzroy Square case can tell us a lot of positive things around people's lives, about the defiance to still live and love, and

how people essentially evaded the law. So there's some real challenges with the records and the stories that we hold that can be negative, but can also have these insights that we possibly just wouldn't get from anywhere else because of the levels of policing and surveillance at certain points. So it can be challenging, but also rewarding using government collections to research LGBTQ history.

Mark: It's such an irony, isn't it? You know, out of the repression comes the recording. And if it wasn't for that, we wouldn't have all these insights that we do have now.

Vicky: Although I think you can flip it on its head and say, if it was normalised, would we just have the club's flyers in a normal archive, not in police records? Like it wouldn't be the same level of surveillance, but that could be just like the normal average records that survive for other gatherings. But yeah, it's hard to know, isn't it?

Mark: Was there the same level of surveillance on spaces where gay women were gathering? Have you found anything in the files concerning that at all?

Vicky: There's a really interesting focus in the records that's very much about men's experiences and that's largely because of the law at the time that really focused on men's relationships with other men. Women's relationships with other women weren't criminalised in the same way at all. And that actually leads to an absence of records around spaces where gay women would have gathered because there wasn't the same criminalisation or surveillance. But also, actually, we find that there's just less visibility in some ways to do with women in the records, particularly gay women in the records, because they weren't pushed underground in quite the same way so the spaces didn't even necessarily exist in the same way as they were necessitated to for gay men.

Katherine: Because of police surveillance and arrests, we actually have quite a few stories of interrupted queer parties and clubs in our records. If you want to dive deeper, Vicky and our other records experts have explored these venues in blog posts and elsewhere on this podcast. In our episode called “Disappointed and Forbidden Love,” Vicky shares the story of Cyril and Morris and the Caravan Club–the couple that Mark mentioned. And in our episode “Trials: Evidence of the Past,” she tells the story of the Holland Park Ballroom raid. And on our website, you can find blog posts about both those stories as well as Billie's Club and the Shim Sham Club.

[Musical transition]

Mark: Now throughout this episode, we’ve kept coming back to the fact that one of our main sources for LGBTQ history in the archives are records of criminalisation and oppression. But as we enter the last decades of the 20th century, this starts to change, as we see increased visibility and community-building for LGBTQ people in Britain.

For our last segment, we’re chatting with Tom Furber at the London Metropolitan Archives to hear more about their community collections and how they have partnered with activists and artists to recognise and preserve the last 50 years of LGBTQ history in London.

Tom Furber: My name is Tom Furber, and I'm an Engagement Learning Officer at London Metropolitan Archives. That means I work across schools’ programs and formal adult education programs and community programs as well. It's my job to help people use the collections that we have here, get them involved in the archive and build the kind of people that see themselves in a place like London Metropolitan Archives.

Mark: Great. So Tom, how would you say that the London Metropolitan Archives collections differ from The National Archives? I mean, here at The National Archives, it's very much to do with records from the running of the central government. Is there a difference in the type of material that is collected by the LMA? And what type of stories get preserved there?

Tom: As our name suggests, our collection has a very London focus. We see it as our mission, our remit to tell the story of London and Londoners, so our collections go quite far back in time, back to 1067 and that's your kind of classic archival document and medieval charter. We have one of those back to 1067 and many more besides. And as we take that journey through to the modern-day, our collections get broader and broader and tell the story of London, Londoners in different ways. So we're very strong on what you might think of institutional London, so that's things like the various municipal bodies that have run in London–Greater London Council, London County Council–but also hospital records, court records, businesses, and particularly as we get close to the modern-day, community collections as well. So that's the records of Londoners as told not through institutions, but as told by individual Londoners or Londoners that got together as a group in some way. That's how I think of community collections, as people that have come together through some shared interest or shared identity and entered the historical record that way.

Mark: If someone's interested in researching LGBTQ history in London, where in the LMA's collections would you advise that they should start looking? And what can they expect to find?

Tom: To answer the question with a question–sorry to do this–it depends very much what part of LGBTQ+ history that they're interested in. So I think we're very fortunate at LMA that we have a relatively speaking broad selection of LGBTQ+ materials.

So if you're interested in contemporary oral history, we have a very important collection called the speak out collection, which is a little over 50 oral histories that are collected quite recently, and this project was designed to collect contemporary LGBTQ+ voices, both in the form of oral histories, but also in the form of ephemera and personal effects as well. If you're interested in maybe history of religious identities, you might be interested in the Rainbows Jews collection, which is part of the Liberal Judaism collection we have here. If you're interested in activism, you might be interested in some of the records from the Peter Tatchell collection or the Gay Liberation Front. If you're interested in culture, you might be interested in the Lesbian London collection or the Rukus! collection. So it very much depends what your interests are.

I should also say that there's those community collections, but there's another layer of LGBTQ+ collections that are quite important to consider, but can be a bit more difficult to work with. So, of course, for most of our history, LGBTQ+ people have been marginalised even persecuted one way or another. And that persecution took many forms, but one way we can think of that persecution is along legal lines, along medical lines, and what we might call moral lines as well. So, therefore, that persecution is reflected in things like local government records, court records, hospital records, and church records. So those records are a very valuable source of LGBTQ+ history, but they need to be searched in quite a sensitive way. They need to be searched in quite an astute way. Actually, you need to sometimes steel yourself to work with those records as well because these are not records that are kind, shall we say, to LGBTQ+ people.

But within those records, both the community and the non-community–the records I sometimes think of them as records about LGBTQ+ people and records by LGBTQ+ people–you can piece together a very vivid picture of London as a very important center of LGBTQ+ life throughout history. It’s the nature of big cities, it's the nature of capital cities that they draw different people

together, they allow people who might be isolated in more provincial or rural parts of the country to get together and share their identities and build an identity together. So that's one of the stories of many that you can tell and honour through our collections.

Mark: Yes, some really good points you were making there, including the point about maybe you need to steel yourself sometimes for what you might find in the archives. But that's not to put anybody off, of course, because the material you have, I think it's very rich. Let's now talk a little bit more about the Rukus! archive that you mentioned. What records does that hold? And how did that material end up at the LMA?

Tom: So the Rukus! archive, the formal catalogue description we have on this is “Rukus! Black, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Trans BLGBT Cultural Archive,” and that’s rather formal archive speak. So what does that mean? The Rukus! Federation archive was founded by Ajamu X, a photographer, artist, and activist and Topher Campbell, a film and theatre maker and activist as well. And Topher describes it as an art project that became an archive. So what the Rukus! collection is it started as an art project back in the year 2000 and it started with Ajamu and Topher collecting the ephemera of their lives as part of their cultural scene, their cultural moments, and seeking ways to collect that and present that and frame that and preserve that for the world. And Topher is always very keen to stress the art project element because it was never intended at first to become an archive, but through a very organic process of speaking to people, of realising that the kind of material that they had around them was a great kind of cultural and historical significance, it grew and grew and grew with a snowball effect. Today, it's a very significant part of our LGBTQ+ holdings and it's a very broad and a very deep collection.

So it contains things like diaries, letters, minutes, papers, magazines, also a great focus on ephemera: things like pamphlets, flyers, posters, but also, newspapers, magazines, those sorts of

things. And it tells a story both of British history, so important aspects of British history, things like records of Justin Fashanu coming out. It has records relating to the first Black UK same-sex civil partnership. But also, very kind of tender community moments as well, so letters from a younger Ajamu trying to be networked into this burgeoning Black UK LGBTQ+ scene.

One of the significant things about this collection is that it represents an intersectional view of LGBTQ+ history. It is described in the catalogue as a Black LGBTQ collection. We need to be a bit careful with that because we don't want to bound the collection in that way, but that gives you an idea of the things that you will find. It has a strong emphasis on the club scene, so both club promoters, DJs, the kind of the artwork and plots and family that went along with that. So Topher talks about that being part of his “growing up” in those spaces being a club kid and wanting to record those spaces just for himself through his own journey through life, but also with an awareness that these were ephemeral spaces that could come and go, but actually had great cultural-political significance as well.

Mark: Tom, can you just tell us some ways in which researchers and activists and other members of the public have already used the Rukus! archive to tell stories and to make change?

Tom: I think the very existence of the archive is a point of change already. I'm going to paraphrase Topher again here when he said, one of the politics behind the Rukus! collection was that because of this collection, because these records exist and because these records exist in a place in London Metropolitan Archives, it's indisputable that the Black LGBTQ+ culture exists. So that's a really important point of change. And it's also probably worth talking a bit about not just how the collection started, but how the collection grew. Because I've talked about it being an arts project, and it grew as the result of a series of discrete projects with this bigger arc of the Rukus! archive. So there were various events and projects–Family Jewels, Outside Edge, just to name a couple–

where events were held around the collection, events were held to draw attention to the collection, and you get this really positive snowball effect of bringing people together around their collections and those things then come becomes slowly added to the collection. So I think its existence is a form of change already.

And then at the risk of going even more into the archive weeds. I think another really important thing about the collection is the way that it was catalogued and the way it's been looked after at LMA. When it did come to LMA, the collection was catalogued not by paid staff at LMA, instead, it was catalogued by Ajamu and a whole cohort of around 30 volunteers who either had some direct experience of the things that they were archiving or– again to use Topher's words–saw themselves in the collection in some way. And I think that's really very important as well. Because to go back to some of the themes that we talked about right at the start: who's creating these records? And also, who's describing these records? What's the process for the researcher? So actually, people who are really part of that world, creating that archive part of that world, then cataloguing that archive means that that research journey does something different than if people are slightly outside of that world and have a degree of professional detachment are the ones cataloguing it and making it available.

Mark: Yeah, thanks, Tom. And I believe that the LMA is doing a podcast episode that will go into even more depth into the Rukus archive. Tell us about that.

Tom: So this spring 2022, we're going to be releasing a five-part series called Londoners Archived, and a conversation with myself and Topher Campbell, one of the founders of the Rukus archive will feature in one of those episodes, so it's a good chance to hear it from Topher rather than from me. He puts it much better than I do.

Mark: So again, that new podcast from the London Metropolitan Archives is called “Londoners Archived, and you’ll be able to find that wherever you get your podcasts.

Now, before we finish, I’d like to say one final thing about LGBTQ collections at The National Archives. It’s true that right now, most of our LGBTQ stories represent moments of oppression and criminalization, BUT this may change in the future. As new records are released into our care, we expect to see more and more records about positive changes in the laws as well as documentation of campaigns lobbying the government for LGBTQ rights.

[Outro Music plays]

Katherine: Thanks for listening to On the Record, a production of The National Archives at Kew. To find out more about The National Archives, follow the link from the episode description in your podcast listening app or visit nationalarchives.gov.uk. To discover more of Dr Thomas Mc Grath’s research, visit his blog at ifthosewallscouldtalk.wordpress.com.

If you’re interested in using our collection to research LGBTQ history, start with our research guide, “Sexuality and gender identity history,” which you can find by going to our home page, and clicking “Help with your research” at the top of the page.

Mark: Listeners, we need your help to make this podcast better! We need to know a bit more about you and what themes you’re interested in. You can share this information with us by visiting smartsurvey.co.uk/s/ontherecord, that’s [repeat]. We’ll include that link in the episode description and on our website. You can also share your feedback or suggestions for future series by emailing us at OnTheRecord@nationalarchives.gov.uk.

Katherine: Thank you to all the experts who contributed to this episode. This episode was written, edited, and produced by Hannah Hethmon for Better Lemon Creative Audio.