

National Ambulance  
LGBT Network



Supporting Lesbian, Gay,  
Bisexual, Trans staff,  
patients and communities

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# Celebrating LGBT History Month: Let's Not Forget

Peace, Reconciliation and  
Activism: Some important  
people remembered

Pam Brown, Alistair Gunn and Kirsten Willis  
12 February 2019



# Introduction



In 2018 we recognised the 100 year anniversary since the armistice.

It is the perfect time to think about how much the lives of LGBT people have changed over the last century.

There is very little information about LGBT people in our ambulance services but we can reflect more generally.



This years LGBT History Month theme is:

## **Peace Reconciliation Activism**

To mark this three people from the ambulance service reflect on some important biographies from the past.





## Peace

### Remembering Wilfred Owen



**Alistair Gunn** (left), Chair of the National Ambulance LGBT Network, writes about a famous name from World War One. Wilfred Owen is now remembered for his poetry about life in the trenches and his tragic death just one week before the end of the war.



# Men at War



During the war, as the British army began suffering **heavy casualties** a social emphasis on men doing their duty and aiding in the reproduction of the **dwindling male population** arose. Thereby, to enter into a homosexual relationship was not only illegal but implied you were being **unpatriotic**.





It may seem like a stupid thing to say but I never considered gay people fighting in the First World War. Being the Chair of the National Ambulance LGBT Network I have come to learn a lot about people from the past and how lives have changed.

The penny well and truly dropped whilst I was at the cenotaph in Sheffield on Armistice Day in 2018. I found the ambulance service wreath and sitting a few poppies away was a wreath with rainbow ribbon across it. The card read 'In remembrance of all the LGBT people who gave their lives so we may live ours in freedom'.

I remember going cold when I read this as the reality hit me. Back in this period the

lives of gay people would have been very different. Sexual acts between men were illegal and probably very undercover. Many of the young men who fought in the war were very young and probably never experienced the love so many of us take for granted today.

Back at home I typed in First World War and gay into the computer and instantly one name appeared before me. Wilfred Owen, a name I knew for his dark poetry about life in the trenches and the horrors so many young men faced.

I might be wrong but I don't remember my English Literature teacher at school ever telling us about Wilfred's sexual orientation. Maybe this is because it is the subject of





speculation rather than hard fact. His close friendship with fellow soldier Siegfried Sassoon, whose sexuality is confirmed, has brought people to that conclusion. Whether gay or not, Owen was killed shortly before the end of the war at the age of just 25. His legacy is witness testimony to the horrors of war and the cruel truth is he never got to celebrate the victory or know just how important his words would become.

Remembering our past is so important. It is so easy to take things we have for granted and forget many people didn't enjoy the same freedoms we have today. It's even more important to learn the lessons and try and ensure the mistakes of history never happen again. I couldn't help wonder, as I looked at Owen's photograph, if he and

Sassoon had actually found love, even for a short time. I really hope they did.



## 'The Truth Untold. The Pity of War'

These famous words, lifted from the poem Strange Meeting, are immortalised on a £2 coin issued by the Royal Mint in 2018.



# Wilfred Owen



**1893 – 1918**

Owen (top picture) was a soldier in the First World War and he wrote several poems depicting the horror of war whilst serving on the Western Front.

He was killed on 4 November 1918 exactly one week before the end of World War 1. His parents received the notice of his death on Armistice Day as the bells chimed to celebrate.

It is believed Owen was gay and had fallen for a poet Siegfried Sassoon (bottom picture) during a spell in hospital in 1917. The two had written to each other and it was this relationship that inspired Owen to compose his own poetry.

Sassoon has been associated with friends of Oscar Wilde and famously wrote; 'W's death was an unhealed wound, and the ache of it has been with me ever since. I wanted him back – not his poems.'



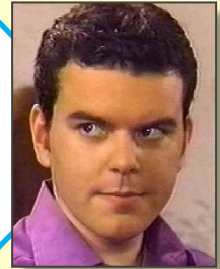
# Our Gay Icons [1]



We asked our committee who their 'gay icons' are. This is what they said...

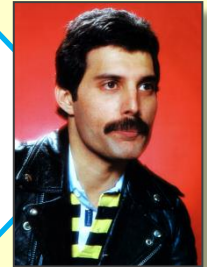
**Gareth Thomas from Welsh Ambulance Service writes:**

**Simon Raymond.** He was gay, one of the first gay TV characters I remember seeing on Eastenders. I remember how I'd question my family about their thoughts on him and what his character was doing as way of testing if it was safe to talk to them about what I was feeling!



**Ben Mudd from East of England Ambulance Service writes:**

**Freddie Mercury** was the first impactful person in my life whose sexuality was discussed. My admiration for him made his sexuality matter very little to me and that in turn made me challenge those that judged others based on their sexuality or gender identity.



**Miriam Wright who is working at Yorkshire Ambulance Service writes:**

**Whitney Houston.** Misunderstood and often treated harshly by the press for many years, it is great to see that popular culture has finally turned a less judgemental eye to Whitney and she is finally being recognised as the truly talented and beautiful individual that she was.





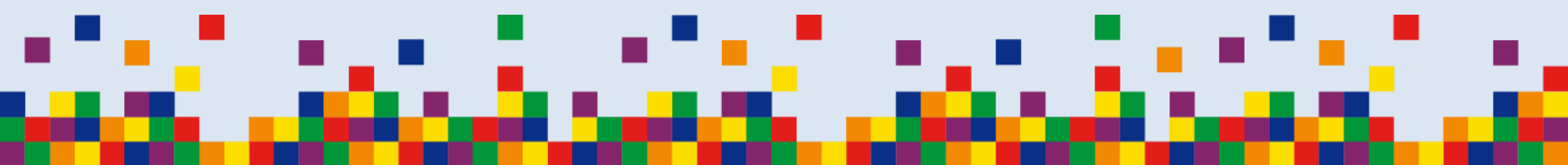


## Reconciliation

### Remembering Marsha Johnson



**Kirsten Willis** (left), Deputy Chair of the National Ambulance LGBT Network writes about the extraordinary life of Marsha Johnson, who was never far from controversy. Despite this she always managed to bring people together too and provide support to people often forgotten about.





Marsha Johnson was a true trailblazer for her time, an American Gay Liberation Activist and self-identified drag queen who championed gay rights and a prominent figure of the Stonewall Riots of 1969.

As an out gay woman it seems so alien to me the lengths Johnson and her close friend Sylvia Rivera went to in their quest to achieve equality. I am grateful for the contributions they made, so that we can experience far more integration today.

Johnson embodied her fight into her desire for change when she co-founded with Rivera the gay and transgender advocacy organisation STAR (Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries). She also opened a shelter for gay and trans street kids.

Johnson worked to provide food, clothing, emotional support and a sense of family for the young drag queens, trans women, gender non-conformists and other gay street kids. Her warmth and compassion for others is tangible and did not stop there as she also supported people with HIV and AIDS and became well known for her campaigning as part of the HIV campaign group Act Up.

Johnson's positive 'can do' attitude is something I find so empowering, I was so drawn to her response to a journalist during a gay rights rally at New York City Hall in the early 1970's. When she was asked why they were protesting, Johnson shouted into the microphone, 'Darling, I want my Gay Rights now!'





Johnson's drive and passion was encapsulated by her rise to the position of unofficial Mayor of New York's gay scene, which reflected the affection the LGBT community had for her.

Sadly Johnson battled with her own demons and her mental health would continue to be a challenge for her throughout her life. Controversy was never far from Johnson and even after her death this continued.

Shortly after the 1992 Pride parade, Johnson's body was found floating in the Hudson River. Police pointed to her fragile mental state at the time when they ruled suicide.

Johnson's friends believed that foul play was

to blame and not that she had committed suicide, as the Police thought was the case. The presence of a sizeable head injury was seemingly overlooked.

I am heartened that Johnson's friends continued to campaign for justice for her and, in 2012, the New York Police Department reopened the case into Johnson's death as a possible murder.

When I reflect on Johnson's fight on behalf of us all who identify as LGBT, I draw on my own experiences of how her motivation has influenced so many. It is so important to tell our own stories and experiences so that we might all be free to be who we are, without judgement or prejudice.



# Marsha Johnson



1944 – 1992

There are few life stories that cover as much ground, but Marsha Johnson's story is certainly one to contemplate. Marsha was born Malcolm but her drag name is more synonymous with her identity.

Known as an outspoken advocate for gay rights, Johnson was one of the prominent figures in the Stonewall Riots of 1969. A founding member of the Gay Liberation Front, Johnson co-founded the gay and transvestite advocacy organisation Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries. A popular figure in New York City's gay and art scene, Johnson modelled for Andy Warhol and performed onstage with the drag performance troupe, Hot Peaches.

Known for decades as a welcoming presence in the streets of Greenwich Village, Johnson was known as the 'Mayor of Christopher Street'. From 1987 through to 1992, Johnson was an AIDS activist and founded Street Transgender Action Revolutionaries (STAR), an organisation that supports homeless trans young people.



# Chair's Blog



## Alistair Gunn, Network Chair, writes:

I could well be in trouble for including this but this is a fantastic opportunity to pay a tribute to Kirsten Willis, our Network's Deputy Chair who has been awarded the British Empire Medal in the 2019 New Year's Honours List. This is a little piece of our own history worth noting.

Drawing parallels with the story of Marsha Johnson, Kirsten has volunteered her time to support a number of projects that help people that could be seen as disadvantaged. As well as being a founder of the National Ambulance LGBT Network, Kirsten has volunteered an evening a week for the last 13 years offering counselling to young people at the No 5 Young People's Project in Reading.

Kirsten's award celebrates her amazing contribution to the NHS and we are very proud to work alongside her.



**Kirsten Willis**



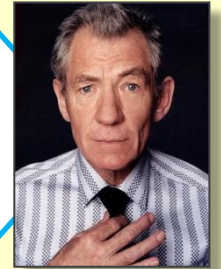
# Our Gay Icons [2]



We asked our committee who their 'gay icons' are. This is what they said...

**Asmina Chowdhury from South East Coast Ambulance Service writes:**

My gay icon is **Sir Ian McKellan** because of his work to change the LGBT landscape through campaigning and co-founding of Stonewall. His friend and fellow actor **Patrick Stewart** is a close second.



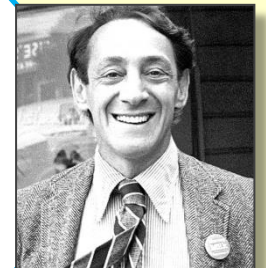
**Jules Lockett from London Ambulance Service writes:**

Not so much of a 'gay icon' but one that I feel has a gay following: **Ruby Wax**. I admire her openness, honesty, humility and bravery on speaking so passionately about well-being and her personal experiences of mental health.



**Adam Williams from North West Ambulance Service writes:**

**Harvey Milk** was a trailblazer for LGBT rights. As the first openly gay elected official in the USA he led the way for further generations of LGBT politicians and also put gay rights at the forefront of national and international politics.



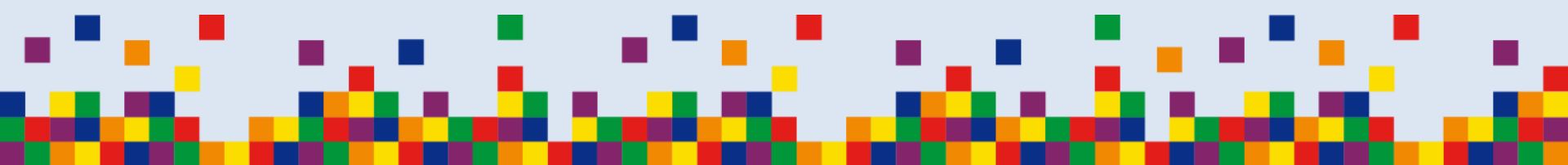


## Activist

### Remembering James Baldwin



**Pam Brown** (left) is the Diversity Manager at West Midlands Ambulance Service. She has years of experience in the field and has facilitated discussions at several ambulance service conferences. Here she reflects on her meeting with novelist and playwright James Baldwin.





I had the honour of meeting my hero, James Baldwin in my last year of my undergraduate degree at university. I had studied American History, Literature and Politics and Baldwin represented the embodiment of what I thought a leader should be, so when I found out he was coming to the university I quickly worked out where he was staying and sought him out. Unbelievably, he agreed to see me, and we met at the Queen's Hotel in Hull and drank gin and tonics whilst he essentially talked. I gawped in wonder!

In this month of LGBT history Baldwin returned to my memory as someone who embodies the theme for me. He was born in 1924 in Harlem and was an openly gay black author and activist. Having said that he would probably disapprove of the description

as he despised arbitrary labels.

'If one's to live at all,' he said in 1965, 'one's certainly got to get rid of labels.' But Baldwin wasn't so serious that he couldn't have a bit of fun with people over labels. In an interview he was once asked if whether being gay, black and born in poverty had had an impact on his career. He responded, 'No. I thought I had hit the jackpot! It was so outrageous, you had to find a way to use it!'

During the same period, Eve Auchincloss and Nancy Lynch asked Baldwin if he thought homosexuality was a disease, to which he replied, 'Everybody's journey is individual. If you fall in love with a boy, you fall in love with a boy. The fact that Americans consider it a disease says more







about them than it says about homosexuality.'

Baldwin continued to comment on being gay on behalf of gay rights. He also spent much of his time in the deep south of the USA commenting on civil rights issues, as well as speaking out against the Vietnam war. He worked alongside the great Dr. Martin Luther King Jr; participated in debates with the charismatic Malcolm X and others prominent in the civil rights movement.

His overtly political writing and his support of the Black Panther Party and Communist Party activist Angela Davis gained him another label - that of radical. But for me I just want to applaud the man whose gems of wisdom stay with me and for

the intellect that still challenges my thinking and thank him for the comment he wrote in my copy of his book Another Country 'Keep on keeping on'.



**Black and gay, James Baldwin challenged labels.**



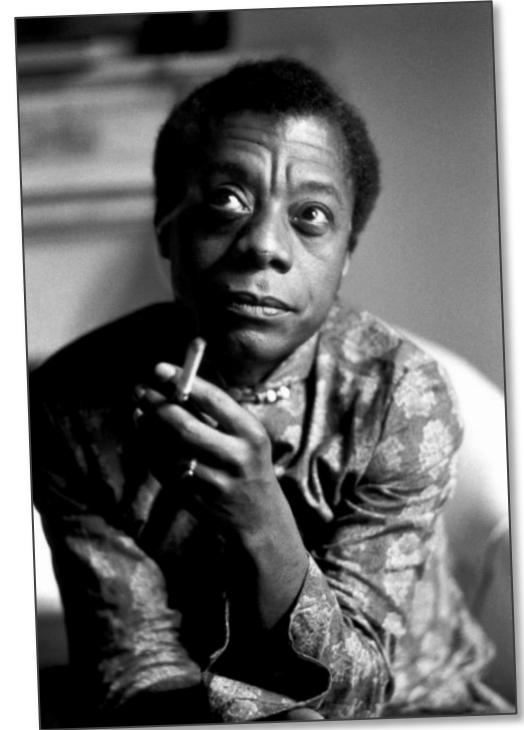
# James Baldwin



1924 – 1987

Baldwin was an American novelist, playwright, and activist. His essays, as collected in *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), explore intricacies of racial, sexual, and class distinctions in Western societies, most notably in mid-20th-century America. Some of Baldwin's essays are book-length, including *The Fire Next Time* (1963), *No Name in the Street* (1972), and *The Devil Finds Work* (1976).

Baldwin's novels and plays fictionalise fundamental personal questions and dilemmas amid complex social and psychological pressures; thwarting the equitable integration of not only African Americans, but also gay and bisexual men, while depicting some internalized obstacles to such individuals' quests for acceptance. Such dynamics are prominent in Baldwin's second novel, *Giovanni's Room*, written in 1956, well before the gay liberation movement.



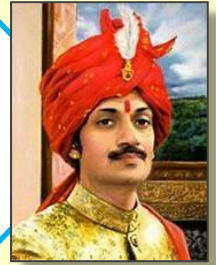
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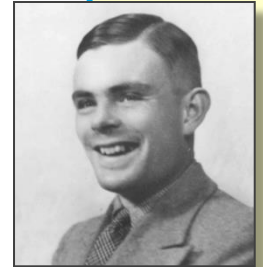
**Pam Brown from West Midlands Ambulance Service writes:**

**Prince Manvendra Singh Gohil**, India's only openly gay prince who has come out and turned his pink palace into a centre for at-risk LGBT people in western Gujarat.



**Leigh Jones-Keyte from West Midlands Ambulance Service writes:**

Mine is **Alan Turing**. Without him and his mathematical genius, life wouldn't be as it is today. Yet, he was penalised for his sexuality, taking chemical castration as a punishment for his homosexuality instead of prison. Thankfully he has been posthumously pardoned along with other men criminally convicted because of their sexuality.



**Alistair Gunn from Yorkshire Ambulance Service adds:**

**Alan Turing** was the deserving winner of the BBC Icons programme, for creating the first computers and deciphering German code. It is scary to think where the world would be now without him and it is a tragic irony that the nation he saved has his suicide on its conscience.

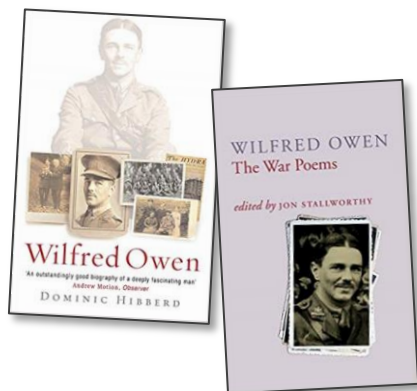
# Further Reading



## Wilfred Owen

A number of books have been written that celebrate Owen's life and poetry. Two worth noting are:

- **The War Poems**  
By Wilfred Owen  
Published in 1994
- **Wilfred Owen:  
A New Biography**  
By Dominic Hibberd  
Published in 2003



## Marsha Johnson

You can find a wealth of information about Marsha Johnson online. A history of her life and her legacy can be found on the Marsha Johnson Foundation website at:

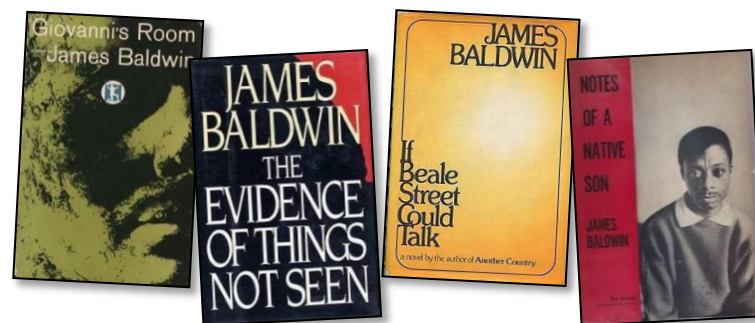
- <https://marshap.org>

An interesting biography can be found at:

- <https://www.biography.com/people/marsha-p-johnson-112717>

## James Baldwin

James Baldwin wrote a catalogue of novels and plays and you can find full details online.



## Further Information

This article was written by Pam Brown, Alistair Gunn and Kirsten Willis in February 2019 as part of the LGBT History Month celebrations. Other resources linked to LGBT History Month, and a range of other subjects, can be found on our website at:

[www.ambulanceLGBT.org/resources](http://www.ambulanceLGBT.org/resources)

Please note that the inclusion of anyone's name in this document is not indicative of their sexual orientation.

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