

## FANNY AND STELLA, 13 WAKEFIELD STREET

Ernest Boulton (1847–1904) and Frederick Park (1846–81)—better known by their stage names Stella and Fanny lived at 13 Wakefield Street between 1868 and 1870. Boulton had liked wearing female clothing from childhood, using the nickname Stella, and was reputedly encouraged by her mother to impersonate maids and other women. Park worked as clerk at his uncle's stockbroking firm and then briefly at bank, before forming a friendship with Ernest.

After they met, Boulton and Park formed theatrical double act, touring as Stella Clinton and Fanny Winifred Park, sometimes to rave reviews; Stella and Fanny also attended theatres and social events, wearing both feminine and masculine dress. On several occasions, their gender expression sparked controversy; on one occasion they were 'bound over to keep peace' after being mistaken for women dressed as men.

Sexuality studies scholar Morris B Kaplan writes that 'Fanny and Stella wandered off of the stage and outside the confines of a sexual underworld... Parad[ing] openly on the streets of central London, they challenged conventional assumptions about gender and sexuality, respectability and transgression, business and pleasure.' During the late 1860s, Fanny and Stella were placed under police surveillance.

On 28 April 1870, Fanny and Stella emerged wearing feminine outfits from this house in Wakefield Street, and took a cab to Strand Theatre, where they were later arrested and charged with 'conspiring and inciting persons to commit an unnatural offence'. They were spotted by police entering the theatre with two gentlemen. After performance, as they attempted to leave theatre, Fanny, Stella and one of other men were arrested and subjected to intimate examinations to establish whether they'd engaged in anal sex. When brought before the magistrate the next day, Boulton and Park were still dressed in feminine clothing, and attracted large crowds, who gathered to see them leave.

A year later, in May 1871, Boulton and Park were placed on trial for committing 'felonious crimes' and 'outraging decency'. The case continued to peak public interest, not least when a caseload of their dresses was brought in as 'evidence'. The arrest and trial was covered widely and salaciously in newspapers and the penny press - the tabloids of the time.

As the historian Robert Steele observes, *The Times* newspaper was explicit in their criticism and attempted to distance white middle-class British civility from Boulton and Park's gender and class transgressions. For example, *The Times* wrote:

we have been accustomed to associate such offences with the sensuous civilization of antiquity, and with the barbarism or demoralization of certain

cases in our own day. But we are not prepared to find even the suspicion of them attaching to the youths of respectable family and position.

Other men were also indicted during trial, including Lord Alfred Clifton, who reputedly lived with Stella as her 'husband' and exchanged love letters with her. Boulton and Park were eventually acquitted, due to unreliability of witnesses and physical examination by police. Nevertheless, they were subjected to public humiliation and what we might describe today as legally sanctioned homophobia and transphobia.

Furthermore, their 'not guilty' verdict is understood to have influenced the introduction of the 'Labouchere Amendment' 1885; a change in the law that facilitated the conviction of Oscar Wilde and Alan Turing, by enabling charges of gross indecency to be upheld in cases where 'sodomy' could not be proved.

Often referred to as 'cross-dressers', Stella and Fanny have also been described as men dressed as women, or female impersonators (a term used during the Victorian period and early twentieth century for performers who would be described as drag queens today.) Boulton and Parks' lives have tended to be categorised as 'Gay History', for example in Neil McKenna's semi-fictional biography, and the historical scholarship of Morris Kaplan, and Sean Brady. Yet the lines between – what we now describe as - gay, lesbian, bi, queer and trans histories are often blurry, and these overlaps are far from a historical relic. For example, leading figures in the US gay liberation movement, Marsha P Johnson and Silvia Rivera describes themselves as gay, transvestite and drag queen, and drag continues to be performed by people of all genders and sexualities.

Unfortunately, moral panics about gender and sexual non-conformity, especially the lives of trans feminine people, persist within in the British news-media, politics and elsewhere in society.