

The Trial of Oscar Wilde

Relevant to

Modules about nineteenth and twentieth-century British history. This lecture and film are also of interest to students interested in LGBT+ history.

Background

In 1895 Oscar Wilde was put on trial for “gross indecency” – in other words, for having sexual relations with other men. In 1960, Granada Television's On Trial series recreated the trial using documents from the time, to produce a docu-drama. You can watch Dr Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite give an introductory lecture to the film, in which she sets out the background to the passage of the 1885 law which criminalised all sexual acts between men, as well as to Wilde's trial, here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=su3lsmv61sA>.

And then watch the 1960 film here: <https://player.bfi.org.uk/free/film/watch-the-trial-of-oscar-wilde-1960-online>.

Questions

- The film goes to great lengths to convince the reader that it is a strictly factual rendering of the trials. How does it do this?
- What do you think this film tells us about attitudes towards homosexuality in Britain in 1960?
- What is Wilde talking about when he describes, in one of the most famous passages from the trials, ‘the love that dare not speak its name’?
- Why do you think Wilde was convicted?
- Look out for language relating not only to sexuality but also to gender – when is language about masculinity or femininity used in the trial, and what do you think is the significance of this?
- Wilde has often, in the later twentieth century, been seen as a tragic gay icon, or a gay martyr. What do you think of that way of understanding Wilde?

Further resources

The BFI has many more historical films relating to LGBT life in Britain available to watch for free here: <https://player.bfi.org.uk/free/collection/lgbt-britain>.

‘Pride of Place’ is a collaborative, crowd-sourced project led by historians Alison Oram, Justin Bengry and others, mapping sites with LGTB histories attached to them around England. (It's funded by Historic England.) Click through to look at some of the places tagged:

<https://www.historypin.org/en/prideofplace/geo/52.481403,-2.808347,5/bounds/37.734181,-42.6228,63.537755,37.006106/paging/1>.