
Out and Proud

LGBTQ+ stories from Monmouth, Wales

CREU CYMRU CWIAR,
CYSYLLTU POBL
QUEERING WALES,
CONNECTING PEOPLE

ON
YOUR
FACE

QUEERING
THE WYE

INTRODUCTION

In 2023 a new initiative was started by LGBTQ+ author/historian Norena Shopland in collaboration with Cerian Wilshire-Davies, Youth Engagement Facilitator for Amgueddfa Cymru.

The idea was to encourage people, particularly young people, to engage with history in creative ways through a series of writing workshops. The original workshops consisted of four sessions in Cardiff and Swansea, but proved so popular that additional sessions were added across Wales.

In February 2024, as part of LGBTQ+ History Month a collection of writings and art were published in *Proud Writing* and made available for a free download on the LGBTQ Cymru website.

In December 2024, Queering the Wye hosted a similar writing workshop and the following stories were

submitted. On Your Face Collected commissioned the workshops as part of their Queering Wales, Connecting People's Project. A second workshop was organised by Queering the Wye at The Wilderness Centre for a day of activities and the heritage craft in the Forest of Dean and images included here are from that event.

Queering the Wye is a celebration of identity, resilience, and creative activism, weaving together the voices of LGBTQIA+ individuals in rural spaces. Rooted in the landscapes of the Wye Valley, this project reimagines belonging through poetry, storytelling, and



environmental advocacy. Each piece in this collection reflects the power of self-expression, the beauty of queer joy, and the strength found in community.



The Wilderness Centre, Forest of Dean Queer Heritage Crafts event took place in February 2025

Our thanks to everyone who took part, and especially to those who bravely submitted their work. We hope this is just the beginning and that more people will be inspired to write creatively about LGBTQ+ history!



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YESTERDAY MAN

Cath Larkin

I was at a community fayre, celebrating the rich heritage of this country I love. The wattle and daube walls. The barn now restored to former glory. Sun broke through the gaps in the trees and tourists celebrated this rare moment of sunny May, small white flowers peeping through the hedgerows and daffodils gone.

Into this haven of community, old and young playing skittles in the barn, you strode.

I'm guessing you'd spotted a photo opportunity. The chance to be the right sort of person in the right sort of place that would inspire confidence and re-election. What sweet justice to find that this was one more occasion on which you were mistaken.

First Hugh, who run Abergavenny Sanctuary tour, walked towards you. Picking apart the thin lies of your claims that bone testing on children is the only way of establishing their age, Hugh mocked your curious against seekers of asylum. Do you really think we want to send children back to war zones because you don't like the shape of their teeth? Hugh quizzes and people gathered to hear a babbled response.

"Of course, no-one wants to put a child at risk, but you have to think of the jobs that will be pit at risk," you defend.

"So you are for saving jobs, is it?" pipes up Khalid. "How about saving my job in Port Talbot!"

"Obviously, I do support industry in Wales, but these are long term issues. And we are here to celebrate our farming heritage today."

I spot a side step. You are trying to get back on track with a turn to your strength and a search for allies.

“Farming is such an important part of our heritage.” You breath a sigh of relief as Ally joins in. “Farming has been in my family got centuries,” she continues. And the smile spreads across your face.

“We’ve been farmers and harp players for four hundred years. And still you don’t let us build a house on our own land. Why is it that you want to whip up hatred against Romany communities that are more part of Wales than you are?”

Your grin continues, though it slips sideways. “I am very supportive of Gypsy and Traveller families.” You assert this with confidence that surprises me for a moment. “As it happens,” you continue, “I am on my way to a Gypsy boxing math this afternoon.”

I cannot contain my laugh. “Not to boxing defence?!” A giggle spreads around the barn. Infectious, yet you look perplexed.

“The boxing defence,” I’m on a roll, “You know, this time you are saying you are not guilty of Anti-gypsyism because you are going to a Gypsy boxing match. And last time you said you are not guilty of homophobia because you once boxed against a gay man?!”

The giggle explodes to a barn full of chuckles and I rise to the expectation of my audience.

“What is going on in your head that you have to pretend to pull punches when actually you are striking out at some of the hardest hit members of our rich Welsh history? Are you trying to be light on your feet. You don’t want people to know where you stand? I think we can tell. And any moment now the knock out bell will ring. And these walls will still be standing. Built and rebuilt by the queerest of us and the straight. And you time is out.”

I first realised I was gay in 1998. I had no-one to talk to about it. I didn't know anyone who was gay. I thought it was really rare. I thought 'why me?!' I thought I wouldn't be able to have children. In 1998, only three out of 2000 approved adoptions were by gays. In 1999, there had been an increase in hate crime in South Wales. There was legislation described as "a Shield for homophobic bullying in schools," and "legitimises discrimination against an easily demonised section of society." There was no social media. I had grown up poor, I didn't want to be discriminated against and remain poor. I was afraid. I decided that I wasn't going to be gay. I buried it so well that by the time I married I had completely forgotten. Fast forward 25 years and 2 weeks after my 40th birthday it hit me out of the blue. One minute I was an average 'heterosexual' wife and mum, the next minute I knew what had happened.

Everything came crashing down in an instant.

But I was happy, grateful and relieved to have a second chance. I'm still working on making new friends and reorganising my family life but I'm happy to be on the right path now.

Nerys



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Human Is a Social Construct

Charlie Barton

Species, a noun referring to a taxonomic group made up of individuals deemed similar enough to be related to each other. A scientific category held to be completely objective and totally immutable.

The category of species is treated like this, yet how that property is conferred is a mystery to me. Why is it that we abide by species being an all defining construct? Why is it that we are told we are all the same because we are human? Yet, in spite of that so many of us are treated as if we are some disgusting imitation of humanity. We do not fit the socially constructed idea of what it is to be human; so in the view of society at large, we are not.

I am the sun, and I am the moon. I am the sky, and I am the grass. I am the land, and I am the sea. I am the predator, and I am the prey. I contain multitudes and more than you could ever possibly know. I am more.

You treat me as less because you don't understand. For this, I pity you. You fear what you are unable to understand, it is human nature to do so after all. Your fear what I symbolise. You fear my freedom.

I reject the expectations placed upon me due to my shared attributes with humanity. I reject the notions of how I must behave. If I am to be treated as non-human due to others' perceptions, then I accept this. I accept this not because I am sub-human like my detractors would like to claim. No, I accept it because I am so much more than the confines of humanity could ever allow.

All week with wind and grey rain skies

Broken with sun and snowdrops.

Treading wet mud-smelling steps

And smiles brighter than laughter

Into an old house with an old history.

We cut blank lino

Into visions of nature and pride

And pressed onto paper

Our visions in ink and smudged fingers

Our smiles, our nature, our pride.

Nina



HisStory is MyStory

Kathryn Berry

Hello. The voice repeats

It is me. Woman.

Oh yes, the answer comes

That's nice

Tell me your story

He feigns.

You answer with a whisper

A quiet roar.

My story is a thousand years

A single tear.

You sing him a song

A low chorus.

Go on, he instructs for more.

Your harmony

Breaks the soul —

Repairs a generation.

My story is a thousand words

A million fears.

Your sing him a song;

A guttural scrawl.

I'll tell you my story

You mouth.

A stream of milk, a hiss of steam —

A spewing, a spatter, a shout.

My story

Is a million voices.

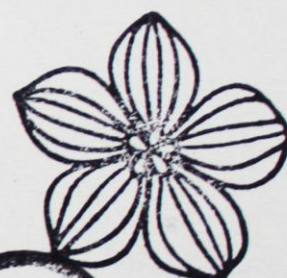
My story

Is me.



F R O M

T H E



E A R T H

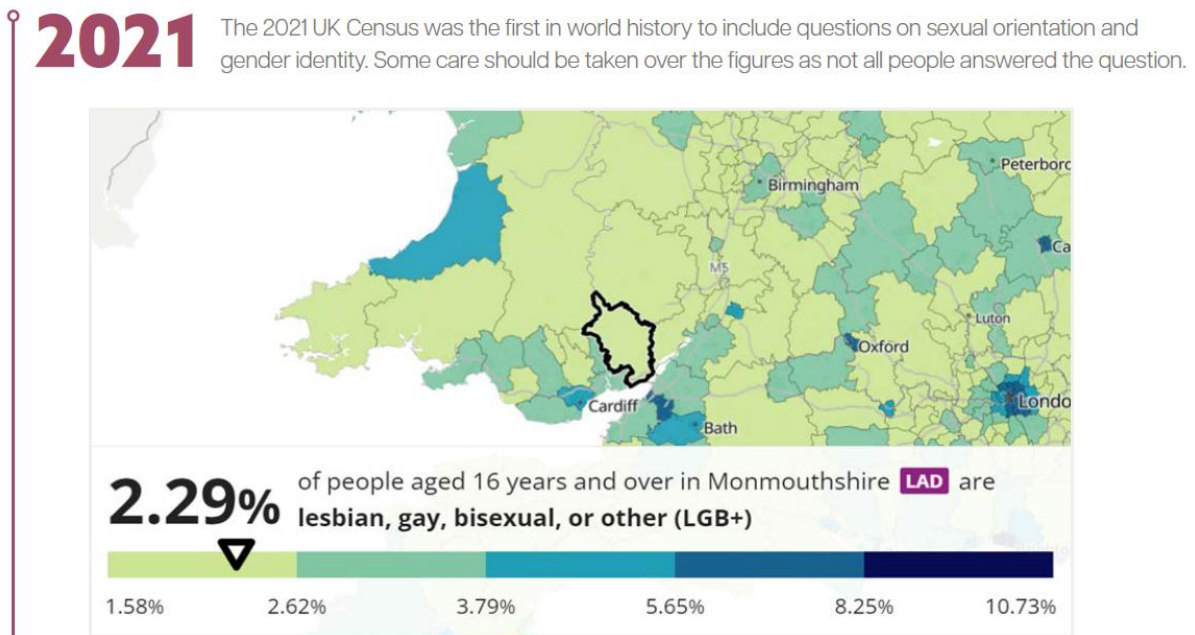


W E

G R O W

2.29

Emma Drabble



I'm focussed on the 2.29%. It's not what I know to be true. I acknowledge that I still can't openly share my 'different' family, my 'different' child. I am perhaps the hidden part of that statistic.

Why and how has 2.29 come to be. I know that for me those lined, drawn and marked out questionnaires mark the start of the process of understanding difference, I acknowledge my orientation, sometimes. It's the plus in the LGBTQ label, but it's the label that I don't want to wear. The label that is the sticker that divides, marks the other and separates., Like a Jewish star on the sleeve. That information, digitised and catalogued, is now binary, catalogued in a non-binary world. Where does that information go? What I mean to say is: Where does that information really go? How is that information used for now and into the future?

Information creates algorithms. Algorithms generate contemporary propaganda. Do we keep actually keep our children safe by filling out these forms? Does providing data about our lives expose them to harm?

How to change the 2.29%? The safety and freedom to name ourselves? In my timeline, I'm 50 years old. The church and my family changed their views over the years. Inclusivity has changed thanks to awareness. Organisations, like Stonewall that have come through adversity to deliver change. For others, their communities rose up, spoke and defended.

All the while politicians use statistics. Their populist led votes are curated by algorithms which in turn are led by and lead the culture of social media, held in the palm of each of our hands. Some incredible humans stand up and face oppressors and suppressors as direct protective shields. All divided communities are also using the same social media as their own superpower to advocate change. BUT, the majority of the LGBTQ plus community stays in its own space. Each to its own. Distrusting of legislation and its whimsical ideological thoughts of acceptance. Behind the lines which are shadowed by a history that says 'let's not become a statistic'.

I have hope and pursue change. My home, the place from which I work. Its high street bustling with its fair share of queer shopkeepers and I assume some of their 'different' customers too. Coffee shops, libraries, museums, schools and young people's places are beginning to knit, stitch confidence into a community.

My own manifesto is to grow 2.29 in my work, my community, my family, my way, my voice. To be inspired by queer champions, like Aimee who raise confidence to share stories. Acknowledge the conversation. Let's change 2.29.

The Only Ones

Nina

I moved from London, the hustle, the bustle, the noise, and the in-your-face-life.

To a village where the school and the post office, the train and the shops had gone.

The buses, you could count them in and count them out, on just one hand.

The semi-empty pub, the once-a-week used football pitch.

Surrounded by green, by trees and quiet.

We were the only gays in the village.

Then there was a court case.

A man, taunted with words and laughter.

And poof! We were no longer the only gays in the village.

He won his case.

We won our space.



Lino block cutting at the Queer Heritage Craft weekend at the Wilderness Centre



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Being trans and living in the UK can be defined by loss. Loss of time, loss of a childhood, loss of dignity, loss of family, loss of friends, and loss of your own sanity.

Your life carries on around you, yet you're stuck losing time waiting to finally be allowed to live as yourself. For doctors to agree and give you access to the lifesaving medications that you need, and yes HRT is lifesaving.

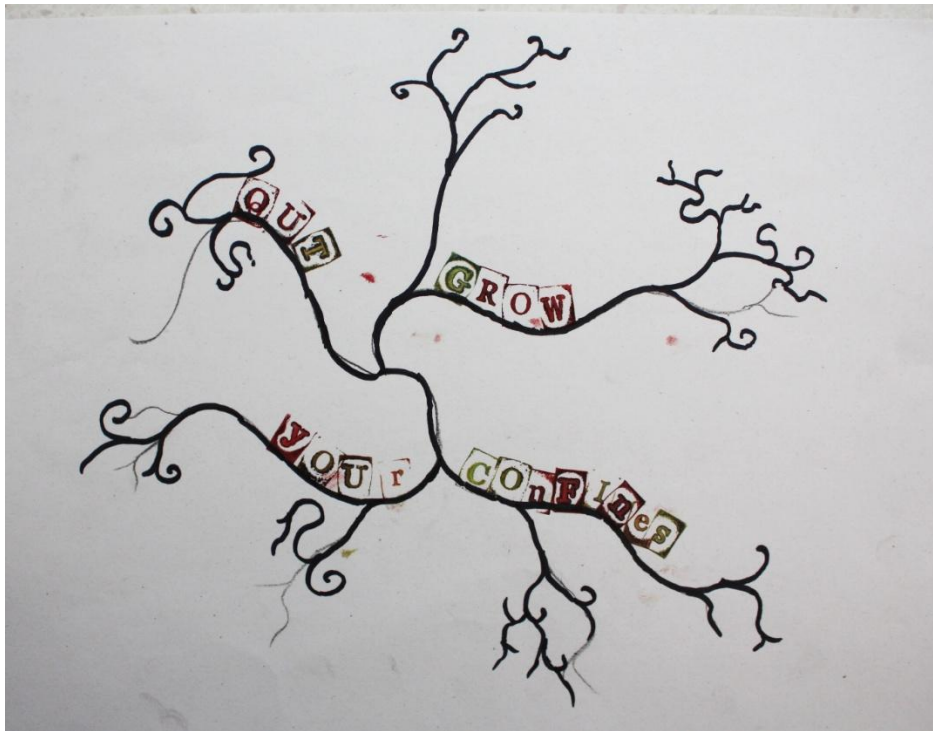
You lose your childhood too, not knowing why you can't just be like everyone else. You lose it to the endless bullying. To memories tarnished because you were forced to experience them as someone who isn't you.

You lose your dignity to doctors asking you how you masturbate- as if that has anything to do with your identity. To getting a funny look whenever you get your ID asked for. Then when you walk out the bog in a bar on a Saturday night, some bloke calls out to you to tell you you're in the wrong toilet, no matter which you use.

Some of your supposed friends abandon you when you finally bite the bullet and come out. You wonder what happened to the days you would say to each other you would always be there for one another. Then suddenly, they aren't anymore.

Then you meet your people. Then you have to watch them go into that endless void, and you wonder why you're still here, and they are gone and never coming back. You wonder why you're so different that you're still here and you can keep going and keep carrying on even when you're not certain you want to. You see everything that killed them. The hate from folks on the street, their family turning their back, the endless waiting list for help. And there's nothing that you can do about it.

Charlie Barton



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The images below are from participants who came the Queer Rural Connections workshops in 2024. The designs were used to make banners for Pride marches along the Wye River.



God/Religion/Core/Love/Pease/Who/Why

Kathryn Berry

If upon the knave you sit

Looking at a lamb

Does not that creature look back

To what?

To tell you who I am

My lord, you say

I can just be me, or you

Or him, or they

But how can I fit that mould

But why?

To be what you say I am

Yet loath you are to know

The truth of the lamb

To you

Is who they say they are

For Church, for pew, for you

The creature that you made

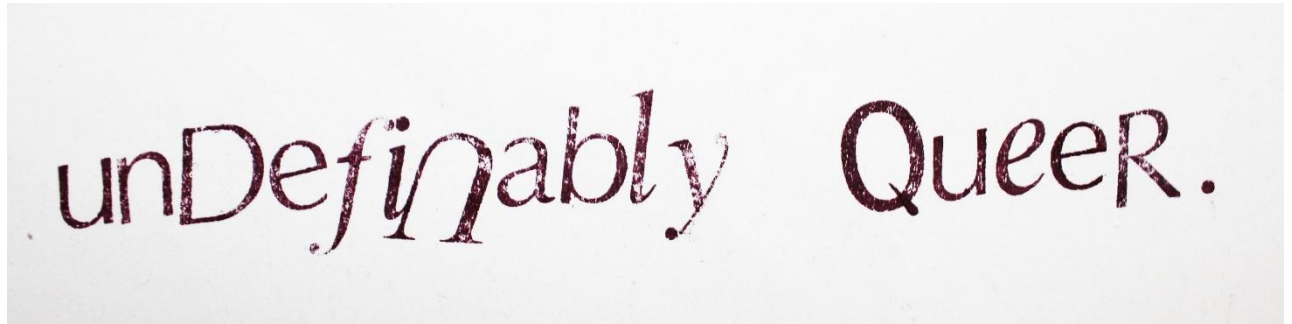
For you

For them

For us, that creature is us all



Peaceful end of day at Queer Heritage Craft workshop in the Forest of Dean



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Queer Nature

I ran from you all my life. That shame, internalised, took me on paths of illusion

You: 'QUEER, ABSTRACT, "UNNATURAL", ODD'

Me: longing to belong to the norm.

And homophobia, or transphobia... is that the norm?

It was in nature that I found solace.

My sanctuary of freedom: away from the glances, the questions, the fear,

Away from the reality that I am different.

In nature, you see, I feel more connected with you, with queerness and rich diversity.

I saw you, you saw me.

My reflection in every raindrop,

My footprints in the earth,

My voice echoing through the valley, loud and confident,

My spirit, entangled with yours in deep authenticity.

It has taken 40 years to learn the truth,

Through navigation within my community - HIDDEN.

You came to me.

QUEER IS RECLAIMED

And all of a sudden it clicked

Not just a word, it's a way of life, a community of difference, that fits, like my old trusted walking boots.

With nature as my ally I stand stronger than ever before.

With every rainbow, hazel tree, gay swan or worm, I SEE ME.

I am natural.

I rise.

We rise...

By Aimee Blease-Bourne

