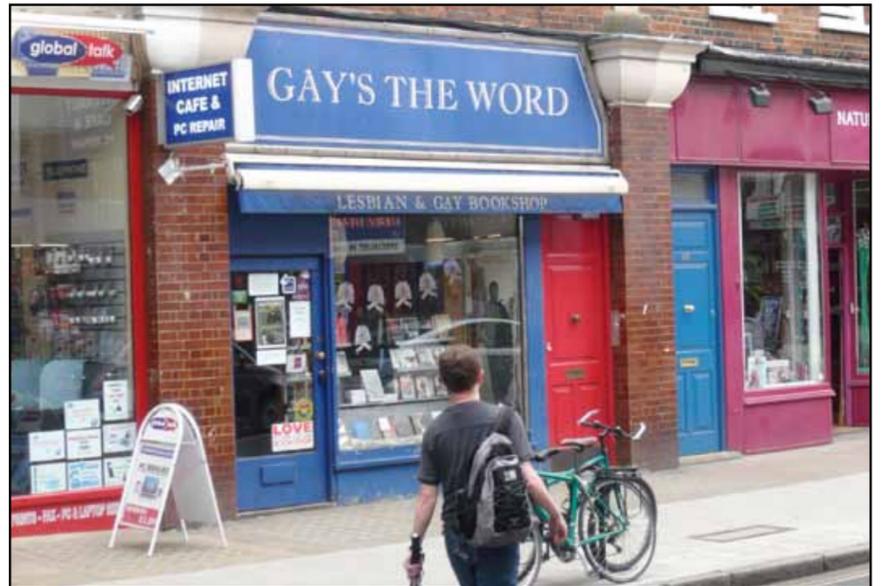


# 14. gay london

London today is a largely tolerant city – accepting of all lifestyles and cultures – and the gay scene here is out and proud. The gay centres around Vauxhall and Old Compton Street in Soho may be the obvious focal points for homosexual visitors, but there are hundreds of bars, clubs, shops and saunas all over the city targeted specifically at gays and lesbians. It hasn't always been this way. Though there has been a thriving homosexual subculture in London for hundreds – if not thousands – of years, it has traditionally been driven underground due to the constant threat of reprisals from church and state, where it developed its own codes and styles of behaviour, and even its own language. The freedom for gay men and women to openly celebrate their sexuality has been hard-won. As this journey reveals.



**Start point:** Bank tube

**End point:** Leicester Square tube

**Duration:** 3.5 hours

● Come out of Exit 1 at **Bank tube** and follow the signs to Poultry. Continue up the road before crossing over and catching the westbound **8, 25** or **242** from the **Poultry/Bank Station** stop. All these buses immediately head along **Cheapside**, the City's market district in medieval times. It was here that cross-dressing male prostitute John Rykener was arrested by constables in 1395. The record of Rykener's interrogation by the mayor and aldermen of London is the only existing medieval legal document concerning same-sex intercourse, so it's just as well its contents are fairly fruity. As well as being found 'committing that detestable, unmentionable and ignominious vice' (ie, oral sex with another man) in a public place, Rykener also admitted to having sex with a long list of scholars and priests in return for money; he preferred clergymen, though, as they tended to pay better.

● Though there are no records of what happened to Rykener after his interrogation, it is likely he received some punishment for lewd behaviour. Homosexual men were strongly disapproved of by a strongly religious society and he may well have been placed in one of the city's pillories or stocks. The Buggery Act of 1533 introduced the death penalty for anyone found guilty of having anal sex, though this sentence was rarely passed by judges. But, as you pass the site of **Newgate Prison** – to the left, on the corner of Newgate Street and Old Bailey – it's worth remembering that several cases did end with the defendant's death. The last executions for buggery took place at the prison as late as 1835, when John Smith and John Pratt were hanged after being

convicted of having sex in a house in Southwark. The act remained in force for another 25 years, though no one else proved to be quite so unlucky.

● The bus continues across Holborn Viaduct. Just after it crosses Farringdon Road – the main street beneath – look out for **Shoe Lane**, which runs parallel to it. It was on this street that 'Mother' Margaret Clap operated her Molly House in the early 18th century. Blurring the line between tavern and brothel, Mother Clap's Molly House was a place in which 'mollies' (gay men in the slang of the time) of all social classes could meet, drink and indulge in sexual activity away from the eyes of the law. The house was raided, though, in 1726 and more than 40 men were arrested along with their hostess. Clap, who was pilloried at Smithfield for her troubles, became the subject of Mark Ravenhill's play *Mother Clap's Molly House*, which debuted at the National Theatre in 2001.

● Just after the bus passes Holborn tube, look to the left for a glimpse of **The Princess Louise** pub. This Victorian tavern was one of the bars that gay serial killer Dennis Nilsen used to pick up his victims in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Specifically targeting students, the homeless or itinerant workers, he would meet men in the pub then invite them back to his homes in Cricklewood and Muswell Hill. Here he would ply them with alcohol, kill them and store the body under the floorboards. He was only caught when he called out a company to unblock his drain, and the repair man found it stuffed with human flesh.

● Get off the bus at the **High Holborn** stop and walk back towards Holborn tube. Turn right down Kingsway and catch the northbound **59, 68, 91, 168** or **188** from the **Holborn Station** stop. Get off the bus at the **Russell Square Station** stop, walk back and turn left

into Coram Street. Turn left at the end of the road and walk up Marchmount Street to **Gay's The Word** – the capital's best-known gay and lesbian bookshop, which has been selling everything from cutting-edge queer theory to gay erotic fiction here since 1979.

- Continue up Marchmount Street then turn left onto Tavistock Place. After a minute or so, turn right into Tavistock Square and catch the southbound **91** from the **Tavistock Square** stop. This bus heads down Kingsway and around Aldwych onto the Strand. Get off at the **Bedford Street** stop and walk back along **the Strand**, which was something of a cruising ground in the 18th century. Pause for a moment at **Savoy Court** on the right. As the brown plaques attached to the pillars inside the alleyway state, this was the location of the Fountain Tavern – one of the most notorious gay pubs of the Georgian era.

- Continue back along the Strand and catch the southbound **59** from the **Aldwych/Somerset House** stop, which is in front of King's College. This bus takes you over Waterloo Bridge and into the south London district of Kennington. Get off at the **Kennington Church** stop, then walk back up the road, turn right onto Camberwell New Road and catch the northbound **36** from the **Kennington Park** stop. After passing The Oval cricket ground, the bus starts making its way through Vauxhall gay village. While village is too grandiose a term – even 'hamlet' doesn't really do it justice – there are a few gay bars, clubs and shops situated beneath the railway arches. The area's crowning glory, though, is the **Royal Vauxhall Tavern**, which is on the right-hand side. This nightclub-cum-cabaret venue has been a gay hangout since the 1940s and was a favourite of Freddie Mercury during the 1970s. Its legendary Saturday-night Duckie event has been running for 14 years now.

- Once you've recrossed the River Thames, get off the bus at the **Grosvenor Gardens** stop, continue along the road and then turn left into **Ebury Street**. At the bottom of the road, on the right, you'll see the house in which Mozart wrote his first symphony. Of far more interest to lesbian tourists, however, is **number 182** next door. This is where author, poet and gardener Vita Sackville-West had her famous affair with Virginia Woolf in the late 1920s, as well as several other liaisons with women on the fringes of the Bloomsbury Set.

- At the bottom of Ebury Street, turn right along Pimlico Road and then right again up Lower Sloane Street. When you reach Sloane Square, turn right and catch the northbound **C1** from the **Sloane Square Station** stop. When the bus heads up Sloane Street, look to the left for the **Cadogan Hotel**, which is on the corner of Pavilion Street. It was here, in 1895, that Oscar Wilde was arrested for 'committing acts of gross indecency with other male persons' following the collapse of the libel trial he had brought against the Marquis of Queensberry. He was sentenced to two years hard labour in Reading Gaol for the crime.

- Get off the bus at the **Knightsbridge Station/Harrods** stop, cross the road and turn right. Catch the northbound **14** from the **Knightsbridge Station** stop. **Piccadilly**, which the bus enters after passing Hyde

Park Corner, was well-known as a street frequented by male prostitutes in the 19th century. Indeed, Morrissey used this subject matter for his 1990 song *Piccadilly Palare*. The 'palare' or – as it's more usually known – 'polari' he refers to is the secret language used in London's gay subculture from the 1600s until the late 1960s. This slang, which incorporates elements of Italian, Cockney, Yiddish and Romany, was essential for communication at a time when homosexuality was punishable by death. Certain polari words – most notably 'naff' and 'camp' – have now become incorporated into standard English.

- Just after the bus passes Green Park and The Ritz hotel, look left for **Albemarle Street**. This is where Oscar Wilde's Albemarle Club was located (at number 13), and where the Marquis of Queensberry (father of Wilde's supposed lover Alfred Douglas) left a card stating 'For Oscar Wilde, posing sodomite [sic]' – the slander which began the events that led to Wilde's downfall.

- As the bus heads up Shaftesbury Avenue, look to the right for a glimpse of **Haymarket** at the other end of Great Windmill Street. As at other sites across London, most notably at Charing Cross and on Floral Street in Covent Garden, Haymarket was the location of a pillory. And it was here, in 1810, that six members of the Vere Street Coterie – a group of men arrested for sodomy in a Holborn molly house – were placed in a stocks-like contraption in front of a particularly vicious crowd, which hurled dead cats, rotten fish and vegetables at them over several hours. They were the lucky ones. Two more members of the coterie were hanged at Newgate Prison six months later.

- Get off the bus at the **Denmark Street** stop, walk back down Charing Cross Road and turn right into **Old Compton Street**. You are now walking along the road that marks the centre of modern gay London. Almost every business along this street is aimed exclusively at a homosexual clientele, and those that aren't are gay-friendly to the point of getting a bit over-familiar. Rainbow pride flags hang in most windows, men and women openly hold hands and kiss in the street, and high-end coffee bars stand next to low-rent sex shops. There is even a dedicated Gay Tourist Office on the corner of Frith Street, which provides information for gay visitors to the capital. Finish your journey at the iconic **Admiral Duncan** pub, about halfway along the street on the right. This was the pub in which a nailbomb was detonated by a neo-Nazi terrorist in 1999, killing three customers. The pub reopened nine weeks later following a ceremony attended by hundreds, and now incorporates a chandelier that features three candles to commemorate the dead and 86 twinkling bulbs to remember the injured. It's the latest significant monument in the city's long and turbulent gay history.