



Leading a ‘hidden histories’ walk: seven top tips

Introduction

As part of Living Streets’ commitment to engage with more diverse audiences, we have partnered with Dr Kit Heyam to create this hidden history guidance for the LGBTQ+ community. Dr Kit Heyam (they/them or he/him) is a Leeds-based freelance writer, heritage practitioner, trans awareness trainer and academic, who helped us to deliver a hidden history walk of Leeds for our National Walking Summit in 2023. This guide offers Kit’s insight, considerations and advice for groups or individuals who want to run their own hidden history walks for their LGBTQ+ community. While the focus is LGBTQ+ history, Kit highlights that “these tips will be transferable to any walk leader who wants to bring marginalised histories to light.”

Living Streets are keen for the marginalised voices to be given the opportunity to express their perspectives in their own words, so to avoid disrupting Kit’s narrative we have added some commentary at the end of the guidance to assist local groups further.



Kit's introductory note:

As a historian of the queer past – the history of people and experiences which disrupt established categories of gender and sexuality – the history I work with is often hidden. This might be because the people whose experiences it relates to have had to hide evidence of their lives as a way of avoiding legal or social oppression or have chosen to create a safe space for their community. It might be because this evidence has been suppressed by authorities. It might be because it's been there in plain sight, but not considered valuable enough to highlight or to keep.

I use the word 'queer' to reflect the way it is used politically, academically and (by many) personally today: a term describing identities, behaviours and experiences that actively defy and disrupt normative categories of gender and sexuality. For me, this is a more useful term to use about the past than more specific acronyms such as 'LGBTQ+', since it allows me to capture more ambiguous histories which can't be adequately described by specific labels like 'lesbian' or 'gay', but still show us that people have always been challenging and reshaping categories of gender and sexuality. Importantly, however – as I discuss further in [point 4](#) – I refer to 'the queer past' rather than to 'queer people in the past', choosing not to impose a label on a historical person who didn't use that label themselves. This is an important point for all identity terms, but particularly for terms which have been historically used as slurs, such as 'queer' and 'gay'. It's always important to ask people what language they are comfortable with while speaking about them, and to respect their choices about self-definition even if they differ from our own.

Much of [my work](#), from books to heritage projects, has centred around making these hidden queer histories visible. As part of this, I lead walking tours of hidden queer history for organisations including English Heritage, queer bookshop [The Bookish Type](#), and now – for the 2023 National Walking Summit – Living Streets. Here, I share my top tips for organising a 'hidden histories' walk. While my focus is queer history, I hope these tips will be transferable to any walk leader who wants to bring marginalised histories to light.

Kit's Seven Top Tips:

1. Know why it's important



Former Guildford Hotel, Leeds, where a social was held the evening before *Transsexualism and Transvestism in Modern Society*: the UK's first ever national trans conference, organised by [The Beaumont Society](#)

Marginalised histories of all kinds are, for the reasons I've shared above, often invisible: you can move through a space, or past a building, without any awareness of its rich or diverse history. Of course, simply revealing more information about the history of a space is valuable in itself and can enrich everybody's knowledge and experience. But there's also particular value in making visible the history of a marginalised group that's embedded in a particular location. Marginalised people often face [barriers to feeling like we truly belong in a particular place](#) – whether that's the threat of violence, microaggressions like staring, or physical barriers like the lack of accessible toilets for disabled or trans people – and we're also often more likely to feel isolated in our everyday lives. Knowledge that a particular space has a history that resonates with us can help us to feel more connected and embedded in that space. It becomes a place where people like us have been, have belonged and thrived; a place where we can build a home and a community on the foundations of the past.

More broadly, history can provide marginalised people with a sense of community that we may lack in the present and can have a powerful impact on wellbeing. And since many of these histories are often denied or erased by political opponents – arguments against trans rights, for example, often start with the claim that trans identities are a new phenomenon or a modern trend – revealing hidden histories can also help to combat these false narratives.

2. Know how to find hidden histories

Most importantly, you don't need to reinvent the wheel. Many local areas have existing projects or organisations working to uncover and record marginalised histories – in Leeds, for example, the histories on my tour are drawn from oral history interviews carried out by [West Yorkshire Queer Stories](#) – so your first step should always be to reach out to these organisations to collaborate.

If no one is running a project like this at the moment, it's still essential to engage with people from the communities whose histories you want to tell – both because you can learn from their expertise and experiences, and because these groups are your key stakeholders, whose stories it's important to tell with sensitivity and respect. So reach out to local community groups: build links, make plans, and co-develop a history-finding project. Create a space where personal histories are valued just as much as more far-reaching political events: community members could, for example, be invited to bring along objects, newspaper clippings or memorabilia that speak to their personal history. With all marginalised groups, make sure the process of developing a project is truly collaborative: rather than just aiming to benefit from their knowledge and labour, think also about what you can do for them. Be open to change and compromise and take time to co-construct a project that will work for everyone.

3. Consider your interpretations

Our interpretation of the past is, like everything in our society, always affected by **heteronormativity** and **cisnormativity**: the assumption that everyone in the past is heterosexual (straight) and cisgender (the opposite of transgender, describing people whose gender is the same as the one they were assigned at birth) unless explicitly stated otherwise. Try to be aware of this, as well as other biases that might affect your interpretation of history and approach the past with an open mind. Were those two Victorian men who lived together really just friends – is there anything to say they weren't in a relationship? Was that eighteenth-century person who changed their name from Hannah to James to join the army really just seeking adventure, or might they have identified as male and used their time as a soldier to express their true self? If you're not sure, don't be afraid to be open about all the possible interpretations. Remember, your walking tour audience live in a heteronormative and cisnormative society too – so if you don't point out the less-common interpretations, they might not occur to them.

4. Consider who's included

It's often easier to find histories of some groups than others, and this can lead to bias in the way 'hidden histories' tours are put together. For example, when researching a queer history tour, you might find that it's easiest to uncover histories of relationships between men, who have been made more visible in the historical record by criminalisation. Keep this potential for bias in mind when finding material for your tour – you might need to reach out more proactively to specific groups to uncover their histories – and be open to pointing out sites that no longer exist, or example sites like houses from a particular period, to make your tour more balanced.

5. Consider your language

Throughout history, the concepts and terms we use to talk about identity have constantly shifted. For me, showing respect to a person in the past means only describing them using the words they used themselves. This means not calling someone 'queer' or 'trans' if they didn't use those terms – but also not using words like 'man' or 'woman', 'he' or 'she', if I don't have evidence that those are accurate. Instead, I describe people's behaviour ('he fell in love with a man'; 'this person was gender-nonconforming'), use neutral nouns ('person', 'soldier') and if needed, use they/them pronouns (just as we use 'they' today to refer to a person whose gender we don't know). For periods before our modern terminology came into use, I refer to 'queer history' or 'trans history' rather than to 'queer or trans people in the past'.

We also need to show respect to people in the present – including, but not limited to, the people on our tours. For me, this means avoiding using words that are considered harmful by many today (like 'hermaphrodite') even if they're historically accurate for the period I'm talking about; explaining my choices of language, as I did with the word 'queer' at the start of this piece, to account for the different relationships individuals might have with different terminology; and letting groups know at the beginning of a tour if I'll be discussing something particularly upsetting. It also means being mindful of how I address my groups on

walking tours, choosing neutral terms like ‘folks’ or ‘everyone’ rather than gendered addresses like ‘ladies and gents’.

6. Consider the context

While leading the tour, be particularly mindful of any spots you visit that relate to more painful histories – especially histories of oppression, histories that might be associated with grief for some community members, or sites where human remains are held. Explaining the route at the start of the tour and discussing how to behave sensitively at these sites (such as not taking photos), will help to make sure the tour remains a respectful and comfortable experience for everyone.

7. Consider what’s next



Cardboard rainbow plaque commemorating hidden queer history in York: ‘In the 1930s (on), LGBT people were known to occupy the first floor flat of 124 Micklegate, and had many wild parties.’

A walking tour doesn’t need to be the end of the story. In the short term, you could increase the impact of a ‘hidden histories’ tour on the wellbeing of its participants by recommending ways for them to connect in the future: could the group move on to visit a local business run by marginalised people relevant to the tour (such as a local LGBTQ+ café or bar)? Could you recommend more spaces of relevant historical significance which you haven’t been able to include on this tour, or places the participants could find out more about the history you’ve uncovered?

You might also decide you want more people to be able to experience the benefits of making hidden histories visible. Since 2015, I’ve co-led a project called [Rainbow Plaques](#), which empowers LGBTQ+ people to make temporary cardboard plaques marking places they feel are significant to queer history – including places with personal significance as well as wider significance. Some people have also chosen to erect more permanent memorials to figures from queer history or other marginalised histories, creating a lasting reminder that marginalised people have always belonged in a particular space, and continue to belong today.

Kit Heyam, April 2023

Notes from Living Streets for application from our Local Groups

- Kit talks about their preference for the term “queer”, and we encourage communities to use this term if it is the most comfortable option. Our internal approach is to use “LGBTQ+”, and we would expect the majority of our Local Groups to use this terminology.
- We recognise that some of our groups may need assistance with identifying the local community that they need to engage with for this type of work. Community centres (places of worship, libraries, supermarkets) are always a great place to start looking for any marginalised groups. You could ask a member of staff or check noticeboards for details. Online platforms like Facebook or Twitter are also useful, but should be used with caution: not all groups will have an online presence as a self-preservation measure. If you are using these platforms, start with a small geographical area and then look to broaden if this is unsuccessful. For example “LGBTQ+ York” may not deliver a return, but “LGBTQ+ North Yorkshire” or “LGBTQ+ Northern England” may be more successful. It’s also worth drawing on the people that you know – take time to ask around your contacts and build a local picture.
- If your group wants to go further with supporting the LGBTQ+ community then we would thoroughly recommend reading Arup’s report [Queering Public Space](#), which contains some recommendations to consider for making public space more LGBTQ+ friendly.