

Who was Alan Turing and why should we care?

Changing views about Alan Turing

Guidance Notes & Lesson Plan

Lesson Objectives

- To situate the treatment and subsequent rehabilitation of Turing's reputation in the social and cultural context of post-war Britain to the present day
- To understand the posthumous apology and pardon given to Turing
- To reach conclusions using historical sources
- To begin to consider the reasons why governments may or may not issue apologies for historical events

Introduction

Having looked at the social, cultural and legal context as they related to LGBTQ+ people in Britain in the 1950s, it is now time to apply these to the treatment of Alan Turing. Specifically, students will place the changing views and treatment of Turing, in person and in memory, within the changing social environment from the 1950s to the present day. In so doing, they will gain understanding of how and why attitudes and behaviours – whether of individuals or governments and countries – are influenced by cultural and social movements, not just “great men” and “big events”.

Starting by recapping knowledge, the first activity is designed to answer questions which students may have regarding the arrest and trial of Turing. These questions may come from two areas: why, given the legal position in the 1950s, would Turing put himself in such a risky position by reporting the burglary and, why, given the importance of Turing to Britain, would he be treated so harshly. Added into the mix at this point, is (much simplified) information about the “Cambridge Five” spy ring, in particular the 1951 spy scandal and the defection to the Soviet Union of Guy Burgess and Donald Maclean. Students should consider the effect that this would have had on British society, especially at governmental level, and the implications it had for gay men working at senior levels in science, politics and so on. The second activity points forward to the final lesson in this scheme of work.

Key Information

This lesson is designed for students aged 13 and above. It is devised for History classes.

The timings suggested are based on a one-hour lesson and may need adapting based on circumstances. Possible adaptations have been suggested where appropriate.

The lesson is designed to follow lesson three of the scheme of work: Legal and social changes in Britain that affected LGBTQ+. Prior knowledge is not needed. However, the notion that students may arrive with knowledge, ideas and preconceptions is embraced and should be utilised to explore and resolve misconceptions.

The lesson plan provides one way to navigate the content and tasks. Teachers are encouraged to use and/or adapt the resources based on the needs, abilities and prior knowledge of their classes.

As far as possible, students should remain in the same small group throughout this course of lessons.

Resources

- Lesson plan
- Lesson PowerPoint
- Starter quiz question sheet
 - To be printed one per student
- Starter quiz answer sheet (for the teacher's use if desired)
- Information cards
 - To be printed, double-sided and in colour where necessary, one set per small group
- Research worksheet
 - To be printed one per student

Lesson Plan

Starter (7-8 minutes)

Give each student a quiz sheet and allow some time to complete it. Show the answers in the presentation (slide 5). Note that the quiz questions are shown on slides 1 – 4, should the teacher wish to run the quiz from the front. When showing the answers the teacher may wish to expand on a few of them, using their copy of the answer sheet.

Activity: Research (25-30 minutes)

Now we return to Alan Turing in order to situate him, and what happened to him, in the context of social and legal attitudes towards gay men in the 1950s. Some students may have wondered how Alan Turing was ‘caught’ by the police and why he was charged. This activity is designed to answer those questions.

Begin by asking what the class can remember about how and why Alan Turing was arrested. Then explain that they are going to do some research to help them understand how and why the treatment of Alan Turing changed over time. Remind the class that Alan Turing’s life and work, and the legacy of that work, existed in a period of changing social, cultural and legal attitudes. Therefore, we need to understand how changing attitudes can influence how a person or event is seen.

Divide the class into their small groups and give each group a set of information cards, and each student a worksheet. The activity can be made shorter and/or simpler for the class or specific groups, by reducing the number of information cards given.

Working in their groups, using the information cards, students are to answer the research questions on the worksheet. The final questions are designed to help students understand how the treatment of Alan Turing, and the subsequent apology and pardon, were influenced by the cultural context of the time; particularly pertinent in the 1950s is the Cambridge 5 spy scandal.

After a suitable time (which the teacher should determine based upon the particular class they are teaching) bring the class back together and talk through their answers to the research questions, which should be shown on the lesson presentation (slides 8 and 9).

Activity: Q&A (15-20 minutes)

This activity is a question-and-answer discussion activity, aimed at checking knowledge and understanding from the previous activity. Teachers should judge how deeply their students can go and how much “thinking time” in pairs/small groups they will allow either by showing all the questions at once (slide 10) or by revealing each question after allowing a suitable time for the groups to discuss it. Students should note down ideas during their discussions. The recommended method is to show all the questions at once as there is some overlap between the questions on the slide. This should help whole class discussion to flow freely, with as many students contributing as possible, as there is no necessity for all groups to have discussed every question during the “thinking time”. Hence, if a group goes deeply into one particular question this can be encouraged. Teachers should add their own questions during the discussion where appropriate or necessary.

The focus on the apology and pardon points forward to Lesson 6, where students will consider issues linked to the vexed question of government/national apologies for historical events.

The discussion questions shown on slide 10 are:

- Why do you think there was an increase in public and political calls to pardon and memorialise Alan Turing? *(The teacher should draw out responses that focus not only on changing social and cultural attitudes, in particular to homosexuality, but also the wider knowledge gained about the work that took place at Bletchley Park and, in particular via the film ‘The Imitation Game’.)*
- Should Turing have been given a posthumous pardon. What might be the arguments against it?
- Why did the government give an apology and later the Queen gave a Royal Pardon. Was this the right thing to do?
- Look at Dermot Turing’s thoughts on the apology and pardon. What do the students think about this? **NB: clicking on the hyperlink will bring up the quotation (slide 11). Clicking on the title of the quotation will return you to the questions slide again.**
- Can you think of any other examples *(not necessarily limited to the UK)* where governments or countries have been – or should be – called upon to give apologies for past events? Do you know of any which have been given? *(Answers may include the UK or the USA apologising for slavery; the UK apologising for the Irish potato famine or ‘Bloody Sunday’; the German government apologising for the Holocaust.)*
- What is the purpose of these apologies? *(They are mostly symbolic but can lead to reparations.)*

Summary (2-3 minutes)

NB: clicking on the “Do you have any further questions?” hyperlink will take you to the Summary (slide 12) skipping the Dermot Turing quotation (slide 11).

Forewarn the class that in the next lesson they will be preparing their own museum exhibition – by way of a presentation – to Alan Turing. So, do they have any questions about what they have learnt so far? If necessary, prompt the class by checking understanding on the importance of Turing’s work, the context and consequences of his conviction and/or how and why attitudes have changed.

Tell the class that in Lesson 6, they will be looking at examples of historical and current events across the world that governments have been (or may be) asked to apologise for. To that end, they should try to find out at least one such example. Ask for ideas about where they may be able to find out such information.