

The Legal Context for Gay Men in the UK & Alan Turing's Story

Card 1: Homosexuality and the Law in 1950s Britain

Homosexuality was illegal.

Same-sex relationships between men were criminalised, leading to arrests, forced medical treatments, and ruined lives.

- **The Criminal Law Amendment Act 1885** banned "gross indecency" between men, even in private, making it impossible to legally live as a gay man.
- Convictions could result in **imprisonment** or **chemical castration**, a form of medical treatment designed to suppress sexual urges.

Other laws were used to punish LGBTQ+ people.

The government had multiple ways to criminalise same-sex relationships.

- The **Offences Against the Person Act 1861** removed the death penalty for sodomy but still imposed long prison sentences.
- The **Vagrancy Act 1898** allowed police to arrest men suspected of soliciting same-sex relationships, even without direct evidence.

Thousands of men were prosecuted.

The government actively sought out and punished LGBTQ+ individuals under these harsh laws.

- Convictions didn't just mean a criminal record; they led to **job loss, family rejection, and lifelong stigma**, making it nearly impossible for men to recover.
- Police often used **entrapment** (when police pretended to want a same-sex relationship in order to trick someone into breaking the law, then arrested them).

A government crackdown made laws even harsher.

Between 1951-1954, Home Secretary **Sir David Maxwell-Fyfe** led efforts to harshly police male homosexuality.

- He called for a '**new drive against male vice**', leading to increased arrests and prosecutions.
- Between the **1950s and 1960s**, nearly **30,000 men** were convicted for 'gross indecency'; one of the biggest spikes occurring during Maxwell-Fyfe's tenure.

The Legal Context for Gay Men in the UK & Alan Turing's Story

Card 2: Alan Turing's Conviction (1952) & Its Consequences

Turing was arrested in 1952

His relationship with another man, Arnold Murray, was discovered after a burglary at his home led to police questioning.

- Murray was a 19-year-old man whom Turing had met in December 1951. They had begun a relationship, which was illegal at the time.
- When Turing's house was burgled, Murray admitted that he knew the burglar. Turing reported the crime to the police, but during questioning he openly admitted to his relationship with Murray, leading to his arrest. The police made him sign a five-page statement admitting this.

He was forced to undergo chemical castration.

This involved taking medication that severely affected his body and mind. Murray, on the other hand, was 'bound over' and only received a suspended sentence.

- The drugs led to **weight gain, depression, and mood disorders**, making day-to-day life extremely difficult.
- Despite these challenges, Turing continued working, but **his ability to conduct research was severely hindered** by the treatment's side effects.

His career suffered due to his conviction.

It meant that he lost his government security clearance, preventing him from contributing to classified projects.

- Turing had been working on **early artificial intelligence**, but after his conviction, he was no longer trusted with sensitive research.
- Britain lost the expertise of one of its greatest minds at a critical time for technological development.

He died in 1954.

His death was ruled a **suicide by cyanide poisoning**, though some believe it may have been accidental.

- He was found in his home next to a **half-eaten apple**, leading some to speculate that he may have accidentally consumed cyanide during an experiment.
- Others argue that the pressure and isolation caused by his conviction played a role in his tragic death.

The Legal Context for Gay Men in the UK & Alan Turing's Story

Card 3: The Government's View on Homosexuality

Gay men were seen as a 'security threat'.

Officials believed they could be blackmailed into spying for enemy nations.

- This idea was particularly strong during the **Cold War**, when Britain feared infiltration by spies from the Soviet Union (now Russia).
- As a result, many LGBTQ+ individuals were **dismissed from government jobs**, losing their careers even though they had done nothing wrong.

Homosexuality was considered a disease.

It was even given a number in the International Classification of Diseases – **302.0**. Many believed it could be "cured" through therapy or medication.

- Doctors prescribed **hormone treatments and electroshock therapy** to try and change people's sexual orientation.
- These treatments often caused serious side effects, leading to depression and physical illness instead of any "cure."

The Legal Context for Gay Men in the UK & Alan Turing's Story

Card 4: Growing Resistance & The First Steps Toward Change

Some men began speaking openly about being gay.

This was incredibly rare and dangerous in the 1950s and 1960s, but a few voices pushed back.

- In **1963**, a writer using the name **Douglas Plummer** published *Queer People*, openly declaring his identity. His words challenged the idea that homosexuality was shameful, inspiring others to demand legal reform.

The Montagu Trial (1954) became Britain's biggest homosexual scandal of the decade.

Three socially elite men were convicted of 'gross indecency.'

- **Lord Edward Douglas-Scott-Montagu**, his cousin **Michael Pitt-Rivers**, and journalist **Peter Wildeblood** were sentenced to 18 months (12 for Montagu) prison for 'gross indecency'. The trial was widely publicised, reinforcing the government's crackdown on homosexuality but also sparking public debate about whether the laws were fair.

Peter Wildeblood's book *Against the Law* (1955) was groundbreaking.

He openly declared his identity as a gay man, something almost unheard of at the time.

- Writing from his prison cell, Wildeblood described the injustice of his conviction and the cruelty of Britain's anti-gay laws.
- His book became a key text in the fight for LGBTQ+ rights, influencing future activists and legal reformers.

Wildeblood's testimony helped shape the Wolfenden Report (1957).

He was one of only three gay men to give evidence to the committee.

- The **Wolfenden Committee** was set up shortly after the Montagu Trial to review laws on homosexuality and prostitution.

The Wolfenden Report recommended partial decriminalisation.

It argued that private relationships between consenting adults should no longer be criminalised.

- Although published in **1957**, its recommendations were not enacted until **1967**, when homosexuality was partially decriminalised in Britain.
- The report was a turning point, showing that legal reform was possible, even if change was slow.

The Legal Context for Gay Men in the UK (1950s) & Alan Turing's Story

Card 5: Alan Turing's Posthumous Recognition & Justice

The UK government apologised in 2009.

After decades of silence, the government officially acknowledged the injustice done to Turing.

- Prime Minister **Gordon Brown** called Turing's treatment "appalling" and praised his wartime contributions.
- While significant, the apology came far too late for Turing and thousands of men who had suffered under discriminatory laws.

'Turing's Law' was passed in 2017.

This law pardoned thousands of men convicted under anti-gay laws from the past.

- It was a major step toward recognising historical injustices, legally erasing convictions from records.
- Some critics argued that an apology alone was not enough and that true justice would have been preventing these convictions in the first place.

Turing's legacy is now celebrated.

His contributions to computing, codebreaking, and artificial intelligence have shaped modern technology.

- His theories laid the foundation for **artificial intelligence**, influencing how modern computers process information.
- His face appears on the **£50 banknote**, ensuring his achievements are never forgotten, even though history had once tried to erase him.