

## **‘Revealing Stories’ at M Shed, Bristol**

Senior Collections Officer, Public History



Would like to share with you some of the processes, successes, panics  
and one or two comedy moments from the project.

## Key players

- OutStories – LGBT history group
- Bristol Record Office
- M Shed
- 4 local schools
- Funded by the HLF - £20,300



OutStories Bristol, a lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender history group. - Before we go further, I should address the question of the T - Transgender.

BCC now only uses LGB – on the basis that Trans people don't consider themselves gay or lesbian and therefore don't identify. I imagine many local councils are the same. However, OutStories had a very strong take on this – their co-chair was trans. Her feeling, supported by the group, was that T was the last taboo, the unacceptable part of LGBT and so – conveniently – split off. She felt a strong identity with the LGB members of the community because of a shared history of marginalisation. So the focus of the exhibition was always intended to include transgender individuals.

BRO – assigned an archivist, to the project

Museum – a member of the learning team and myself on the curatorial side and as the staff member based on site.

4 local schools

We were supported by the HLF who awarded the project £20,300



Here we all are on the exhibition launch day – not a small group!

So, we got to this very happy day but rewinding a little bit, back at the start of the project we had to ask ourselves three key questions.....

# Co-curation

- What is it?
- Why do it?
- Can it have wider appeal?



1 – or shared curation, guest curation. Interesting term – I certainly heard it a lot before this project but what does it mean? Does it literally mean sharing 50 / 50? More often it seemed to mean inviting community groups into museum stores to help choose objects for displays. The other popular option was hosting exhibitions put together by a group, often in a dedicated community space. All of these were good things as far as I could see, but we wanted to do more than the first option, and didn't have the facilities for the second, there are no smaller exhibition spaces at M shed.

So in our case, co-curation meant handing over a huge amount of the control – effectively the exhibition was curated by the group, with Museum staff member A, the archivist and myself supporting and guiding them through the exhibition development process and acting as a sort of quality control and assurance.

The OutStories Group were incredibly well organised, they had roles assigned early on. Enlisted large number of volunteers, gave enormous amount of time and professional skills for nothing. Could not have wished for better. Even so, it's amazing just how much time and effort it takes to undertake the support role!

2 – My museum colleagues and I sat down early on and one question that came up was – how are we going to do this, when we don't have direct experience of these issues? The question was really why? Why do something that we have no knowledge of when a museum is a place people trust to have exactly that information?

What we came to realise was that this is one of the best reasons for partnership working – not doing it for the sake of it, but ensuring that all parties gain something. The OS group brought something new – energy, creativity, knowledge and experience not contained within the museum. It was like having an extremely knowledgeable consultant, who then also takes on a lot of the work!

3. Clear from the very start – on both sides – that this was what we wanted.

As with any group, there was not always agreement, but overall the group committee felt strongly that the reason they wanted to work with the museum service was to spread the message more widely, to reach the audiences that the museum already had. And from the museum end we were keen to do something that would look like a part of the main displays, so visitors would view it as part of their visit and not make a decision whether to 'go into' the space or not. We also hoped it would build on M Shed's position as a people's museum, reaching new audiences and helping to gain the trust of other community groups.

## Oral Histories

- Collected by volunteers
- Very few requests for anonymity
- 42 collected and now a waiting list
- Deposited with museum



More than just the exhibition, the oral history part of the project began back in the Spring of 2012.

This is Contributor A, talking about a visit to a gay club in Bristol around 1990 when he was aged about 20.

Most, though not all, of the volunteers were from the LGBT community. We could have recruited more widely, since we were offering free professional training, but it made sense to have interviewers who would understand and empathise with their interviewees and who had a strong personal commitment to the project.

As a result interviewees were astonishingly open, with only a handful requesting any degree of anonymity, and the results ranged from the funny to the ordinary to the heartbreaking and this was where we knew the wider appeal would be.

We had so much that most of it didn't even make it into the exhibition. This is Contributor B, discussing the reactions of her neighbours in the late 70s and early 80s

## Hidden History Trail

- Re-interpreting existing object displays
- 2 local schools
- Students aged 14 – 18
- Mixed LGB and straight
- Voluntary



Museum wide trail to add new interpretation to existing displays of objects.

1 of 2 school projects.

Undertaken by students aged 14 – 18, at two local schools. Some had identified themselves as gay, lesbian or bisexual, the majority had not. One of the schools ran the project with their GCSE history students, other sixth formers - voluntary



This is what the labels looked like.... This one is added to a display looking at football, text reads: With around 5000 professional footballers in Britain, not one has publicly come out as gay. Attitudes towards homosexuality have changed, but we think that football lags behind the rest of society in accepting openly gay people. In rugby and cricket, there are high profile internationals who are openly gay. The FA's four-year plan ('Opening Doors and Joining In') has come 22 (14) years after the death of Britain's only openly gay footballer, Justin Fashanu. Only another player publicly coming out can change the situation in football.

Another example was added to a statuette of Cary Grant, originally from Bristol:

In the 1930s the word 'gay' was not in common circulation as a term for homosexuality. However, in the 1938 film 'Bringing up Baby', Cary Grant's character was found wearing ladies clothes. He exclaimed "Because I just went gay all of a sudden!". This ad-lib was possibly the first use of the word 'gay' in mainstream media, although it may be interpreted as "Because I just went happy" or "frivolous". This was certainly a dramatic move by Grant.



Overall the students did a fantastic job, there was just one we didn't use where the students had suggested 'dungaree' was a collective noun for a group of lesbians. I googled this and could find nothing to support it. When I discussed this with the group they fell about laughing and although they were also unable to corroborate it, I think they have now adopted it!

## Exhibition

- For LGBT History Month + 50%
- Sited in one of M Shed's main galleries
- All items initially loaned
- Research / writing all done by OutStories



Originally intended to run for four weeks during LGBT history month which is February, but it was extended by two weeks.

Early on quite an issue over where would be – vacant shop in Old Market? Studio in M shed? In the end we kept returning to the question – how is this going to appeal to the widest audience? Which is why in the end we created a space where there was none by erecting temporary panels to create a gallery within Life Gallery – no doubt would not have worked so well if not in Life.

Majority of items sourced by group through personal collections, friends and contacts

Research and writing all done by OutStories. Museum role – formal loans from other institutions, logistics – access, tools equipment, proof reading.



Photograph copyright Sam Gilmore

Exhibition as it finally looked when opened in February. But back just a few weeks before that I was in the grip of December / January panic – My panic was two fold, first that promised objects I was hearing stories of would not materialise and secondly that if they did, too much of it seemed to be 2D (to the archivist's delight!) and I was concerned we would have no 3D objects to make the exhibition.

Naturally it wasn't a panic shared by group – they had it under control, knew what was out there and had the contacts to get the stuff loaned for the exhibition! Did mean that in many instances I was completing retrospective loan agreements after the exhibition was open – not something I would want to be doing again, but at least we had an exhibition!

As you can see here....



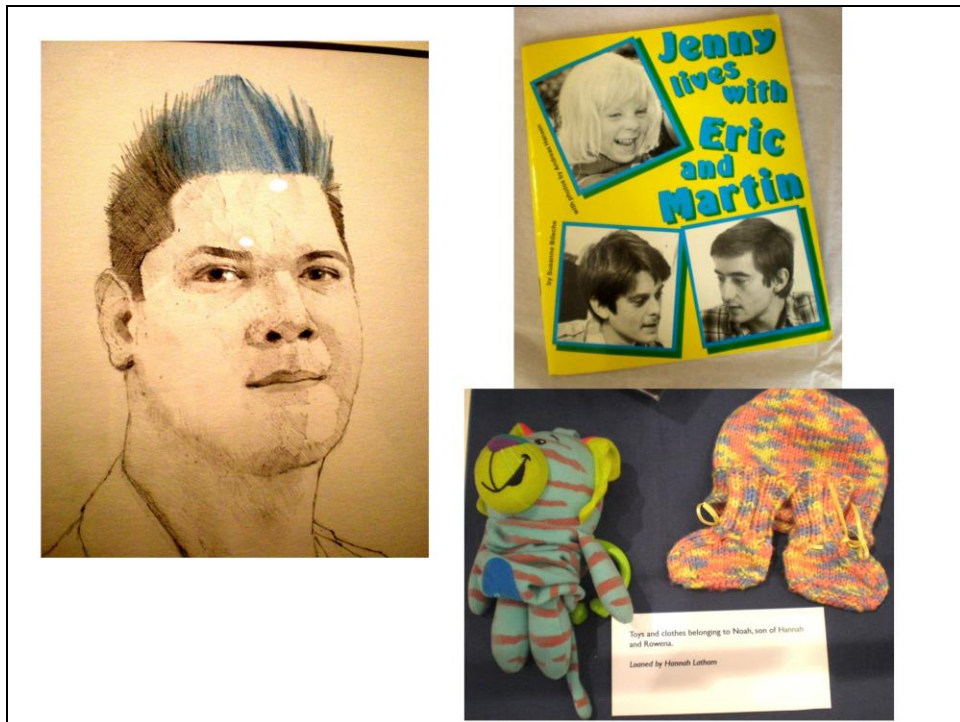
Some more views of the exhibition to give you an idea of the layout. The banners helped to create the area and the local company who produced them worked very closely with us, coming in to see the space and making lots of recommendations.



Some of the text panels...

Although the museum could theoretically have vetoed anything, final sign off was very much a collaborative process. Keen not to interfere too much, so for example text is longer than we would normally include – make recommendation, met in middle.





Some of the objects we were extremely lucky to have –

A professional artist offered to draw portraits of three members of the Bristol LGBT community – this is Portrait subject A. Portrait subject B, who set up the Switchboard helpline from her spare bedroom in the 1970s, and Portrait subject C a barmaid and friend to many of lesbian and gay community at a time long before gay bars were openly talked about, were other two sitters. The artist worked with the OS group to choose the three subjects.

Toys belong to Contributor C, son of Contributor D and Contributor E who share their story of becoming parents.

Copy of seminal book, pub in Danish 1981, pub 1983 in English. Lead to a ban on promoting homosexuality in schools enacted by the infamous Section 28

(of the 1988 Local Government Act. The amendment was repealed on 21 June 2000 in Scotland and on 18 November 2003 in the rest of the UK)



Other objects featured were so precious, so personal – The fact that the lenders trusted their friends and contacts within OutStories was what made it happen, even allowing us to show identities and photographs. One the right is Contributor F's long hair, cut off hair as a symbol of her rejection of traditional notions of gender

On the left is a scallop shell, which belongs to Contributor G who is transgender, and I'll let Contributor DG tell you about it's significance.

## Young People's voices

- Oral histories, additional exhibition interpretation
- Students aged 12 – 18
- Voluntary
- LGBT and straight student groups

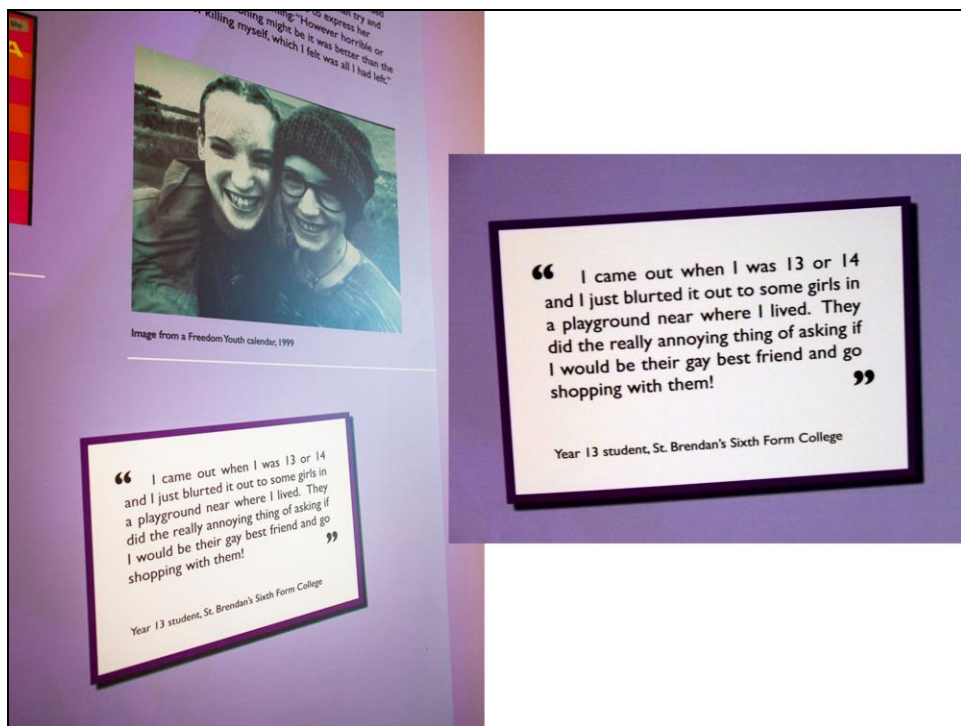


The second of the two schools projects was to add interpretation **within** the exhibition.

Students were aged 12 – 18, mixed LGBT and straight, and again, voluntary.

Students were encouraged to work in pairs or small groups to record each others stories. They then wrote the labels from their recordings.

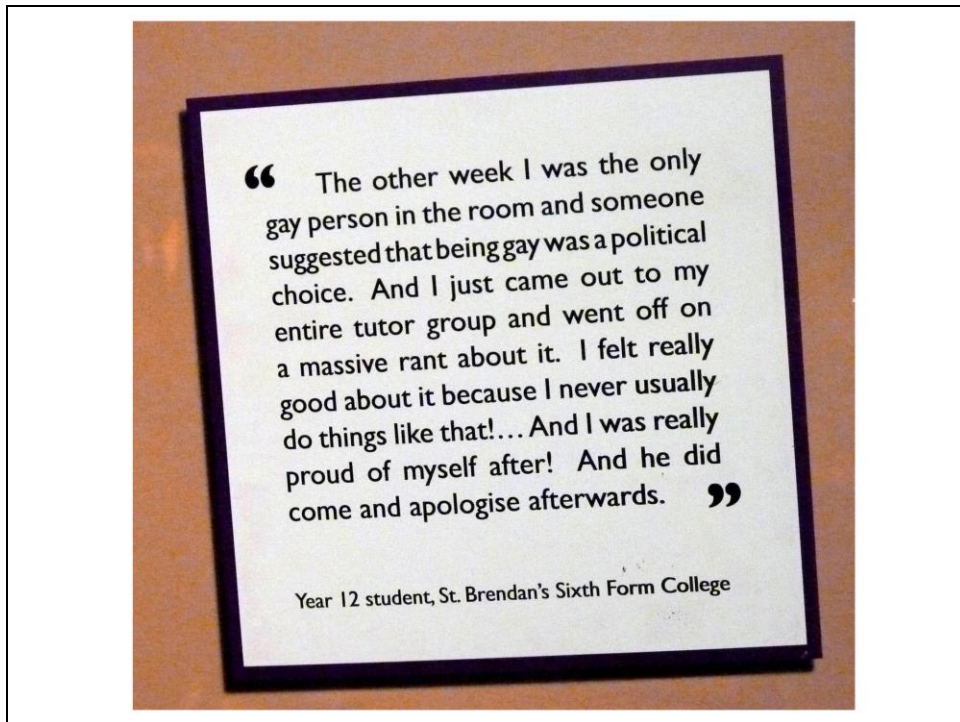




Followed same design as those in galleries on the Hidden Histories trail. This one reads: “I came out when I was 13 or 14 and I just blurted it out to some girls in a playground near where I lived. They did the really annoying thing of asking if I would be their gay best friend and go shopping with them!”

Year 13 student, St. Brendan’s Sixth Form College

One discusses how technology has made it easier but much less exciting to work out who else is gay. And another came out on Facebook.



Most were positive experiences and really helped to highlight the differences between today's and previous generations of teenagers.

"The other week I was the only gay person in the room and someone suggested that being gay was a political choice. And I just came out to my entire tutor group and went off on a massive rant about it. I felt really good about it because I never usually do things like that!... And I was really proud of myself after! And he did come and apologise afterwards."

Adding the experiences of young people coming out today ended up being one of the strongest, and in many ways most poignant parts of the exhibition. We received so many pieces of feedback from older members of the LGBT community outlining their relief in how far society has come for young people to be able to do so (and their regret that it was not so for them).

*Brilliant exhibition. Very interesting, charting the change of attitudes since I was young. Particularly moved by the testimonies from younger people who have a freedom of expression I could never have had.*

## Exhibition Feedback

- “Fab exhibition. It made me well up with many emotions; sadness, nostalgia as well as huge love and admiration”
- “Absolutely beautiful, thought provoking exhibition, there should be more like this”



Overwhelmingly positive, including these:

“Fab exhibition. It made me well up with many emotions; sadness, nostalgia as well as huge love and admiration”

“Absolutely beautiful, thought provoking exhibition, there should be more like this”

Based comments, questionnaires and observing people’s behaviour in the gallery.

Expected more mixed reaction



Only criticism – and I have to put this in – relates to the audio, which was delivered through PenFriends shown here (those of you giggling have already guessed this!)

- ... “Surely there’s an alternative to having a load of dildos hanging around?”
- “Not many people are using the audio pens, do they need more signage, or is that they look JUST LIKE VIBRATORS?”



... “Surely there’s an alternative to having a load of dildos hanging around?”

“Not many people are using the audio pens, do they need more signage, or is that they look JUST LIKE VIBRATORS?”

We did add more signage, there wasn’t much we could do about how they looked!

## Collecting



Collecting was one of my big aspirations for this project. I knew from work on developing M Shed just how difficult it could be – after all, what do you collect? It could be any object, it's the story that makes it significant.

Once the exhibition was open I wrote to every lender asking if they would consider donating their items permanently and I'm pleased to say that many did so. Again, I firmly believe we would not have had them at all if it weren't for OutStories.

This Champagne bottle, opened after the first edition of Shout Out, a local LGBT radio show, and signed by every member of the crew and guests, was one such donation.



Another was this table, from which Portrait subject B ran the Swichboard helpline in her spare bedroom in the late 1970s  
Both are so Bristol specific, but the significance is much wider



## Public Programme



Photograph copyright Matt Seow

We held a number of events at M Shed, linked to events all over the city for LGBT History month, and also promoted as part of the city wide programme, so all were extremely well attended.

Including an inspirational, though admittedly quite graphic talk by Contributor H, the Transgender co-chair of OutStories about Contributor I, perhaps the first transgender op – with an audience including several family groups with teenaged children. Also observed similar in exhibition

The launch event exceeded all our expectations, to the point where I was starting to worry about numbers of people in the room! It started off as invite only but a one point was put on the OutStories FaceBook page so was incredibly busy.



## What would we do differently?

- More time (as ever)
- Improved communication
- Written guidelines
- Future steps....



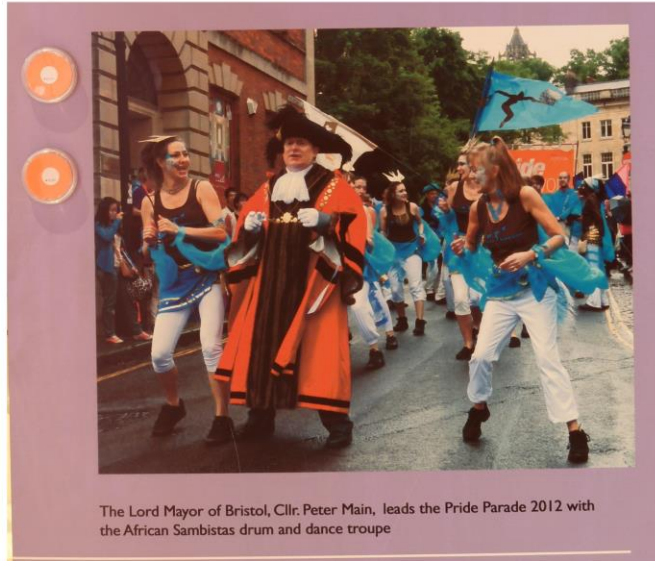
More time -There was a naïve sense at the beginning that being in the support role we (the museum staff) might not have so much to do. What I now know is that it takes just as much time as any other exhibition – it's just a different way of working.

Communication was good - we had regular meetings and almost daily email / telephone contact but could still be better – e.g. being clearer from the very start could have saved me worry over empty exhibition, and filling in lots of retrospective loan agreements!

One of the things we have taken from both the evaluation docs produced is that next time we will write everything down – eg exhibition design guidelines, what equipment is available, how and when to access buildings. It isn't enough to have covered this verbally because so many different people need to have that information.

If were to happen again, the thing we were very aware was missing was the BME element of the Bristol LGBT community. While homosexuality may be legal today, it's important not to forget the individual context that every person experiences, and the particular issues that religious and cultural backgrounds can place on individuals. It was an aspiration we discussed during planning and several contacts were followed up but for different reasons were unable or unwilling to get involved.

## What worked well?



Make the most of lucky coincidences / contacts within the group –

It was perfect timing that the Lord Mayor – shown here dancing in the street at Pride 2012. Was extremely supportive all through.

Equal marriage debate was taking place in the H of C – Stephen Williams (Bristol west –LD) mentioned the exhibition in parliament. Social media took up the cause and suddenly we had gone from being a brilliantly supported local exhibition to having national interest, including a visit from Culture Secretary Maria Miller.

Finally, we actually underspent by about £2000!

## Outcomes

- Relationship with the LGBT community
- Audience widened
- Collections
- School relationships



Handing over the curation allowed the service to do something we could never have achieved without the OutStories group. The Investment from the museum side of three members of staff, and a free venue opened up many hundreds of hours of volunteer time, and the chance to reach out to new audiences, not just from the LGBT community but from other groups in the city who might previously have felt that the museum service did not represent their lives and interests.

Collections – opportunities from this exhibition have improved the balance of the collections, which can only be a good thing for all our visitors

Working with the school students has not only brought the organisations closer (M Shed, schools, CYPS, Stonewall) but reached the friends and families of the students too. Several of the older students have fed back that they have discussed the project in their university interviews – and that interviewing panels are extremely interested in the work done by the students as part of the project.

All help to raise profile of M Shed and of service, but particularly among some of the groups we most wanted to reach, such as young people. Around 14 – 20,000 visitors over six weeks.

## Beyond the exhibition

- Locally touring show
- Oral history project
- Pride display
- LGBT History Month 2014

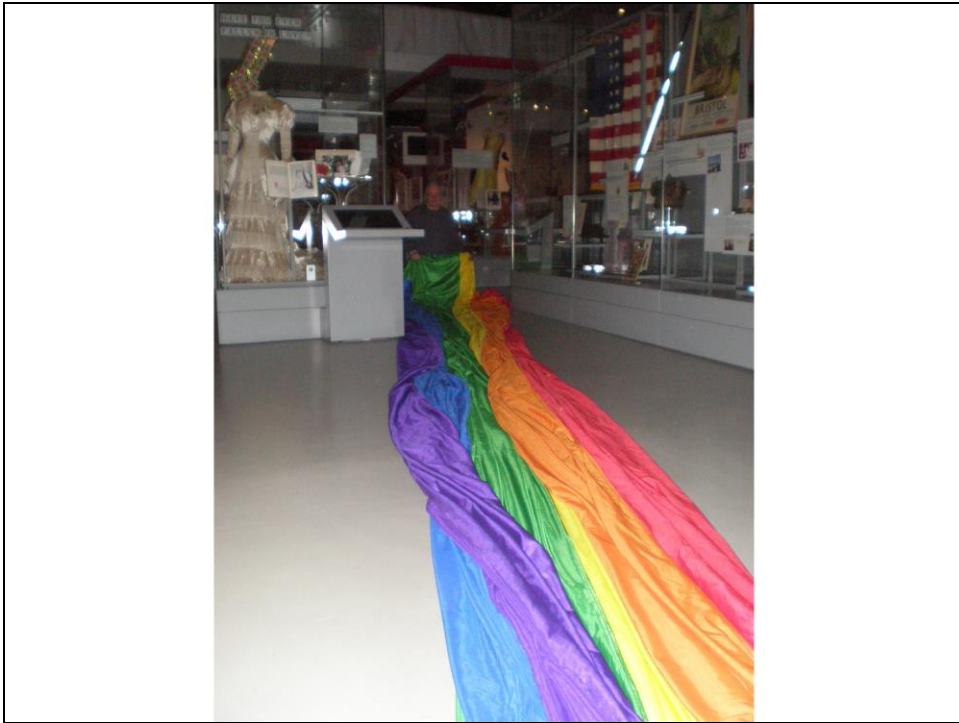


OS now have a set of display banners to tour around local libraries as a pre-planned part of the project. However, there have also been enquiries as to whether this part of the exhibition could also tour some local schools.

The oral history project now has a waiting list of interviewees. All interviews will continue to be deposited with M shed.

The new collecting means that we can add new displays to the M Shed permanent galleries almost certainly including something on Pride celebrations

And we're all looking towards LGBT History month next year and what events we might collaborate on.



Leave you with this shot of the end of the Rainbow, or at least of the exhibition.

Overall it was a fantastic learning experience for all involved and I would do all of it again!