

ANNE LISTER

b. April 3, 1791

d. September 22, 1840

PIONEERING FEMINIST

"I love and only love the fairer sex."

**She is widely
considered the first
notable out lesbian
in history.**

A pioneering 19th century English feminist, industrialist and landowner, Anne Lister is widely considered the first notable out lesbian in history. She kept extensive diaries—23 volumes over 34 years—documenting her life and same-sex relationships.

Lister was born into an aristocratic English family. She received formal schooling, a rarity for a girl of that era.

In 1826 she became the sole owner of the family manor, Shibden Hall, located near Halifax in West Yorkshire. She inherited the 400-year-old 400-acre estate, now a public historic site, after the death of her aunt.

Desiring whatever a man could have, Lister also wanted a wife. She engaged in a series of passionate lesbian love affairs before establishing a relationship with Ann Walker, another wealthy single woman. Though homosexuality was taboo and same-sex marriage unheard of, in 1834 the couple swore their love on the Bible, exchanged rings and consecrated their union by receiving communion at the local parish, Holy Trinity Church. Considering themselves married, they moved into Shibden Hall.

Lister began meticulously chronicling her life and same-sex liaisons as a 15-year-old schoolgirl desperate to express her innermost feelings. She referred to her sexuality as her "oddity." The term "lesbian" had yet to enter the language. For secrecy and her own safety, she concocted an elaborate system of codes and symbols to convey erotic or sensitive passages. Her intimate journaling continued after she and Walker wed.

In decoding Lister's diaries, scholars not only uncovered the explicit details of her sexual relationships, but also a complete, vivid portrait of the woman herself: a tough-minded maverick who openly defied norms during a time of strict gender roles and female oppression. Confident and educated, she traveled extensively, managed her own estate and finances, and operated coal mining pits. Lister dressed in black, often in men's clothing. "The people generally remark, as I pass along, how much I am like a man," she wrote. Dubbed with the slur "gentleman Jack," she provoked gossip and taunts.

In 2018 the York Civic Trust in England awarded Holy Trinity Church a permanent historical marker, known as a blue plaque. In 2019 its wording was updated to read: "Anne Lister 1791-1840 of Shibden Hall, Halifax / Lesbian and Diarist; took sacrament here to seal her union with Ann Walker / Easter 1834."

In April 2019, HBO and BBC One premiered "Gentleman Jack," an eight-episode dramatic series about Lister, written and directed by BAFTA-winner Sally Wainwright.

Lister died as the result of an insect bite she sustained while traveling in Russia. She was 49.



lgbtTM
HISTORY
MONTH

www.lgbtHistoryMonth.com

Copyright © 2019 – A Project of Equality Forum