# Roger Butler’s hidden bravery paved the way for UK gay rights reform



In the vibrant backdrop of 1950s London, Roger Butler, a young man from the tranquil Oxfordshire countryside, navigated a world rich with glamour yet fraught with personal challenges. Working at a high-end property lettings agency, he encountered movie stars like Raquel Welch and Robert Mitchum, yet it was his burgeoning awareness of his sexuality that truly captivated him. The cultural milieu of the time was one of stark contrasts—while the city pulsed with energy and modernity, homosexuality was still criminalised, punishable by severe penalties. For Butler, the excitement of exploring his identity was tinged with the potential for profound risk.

Butler's formative experiences in this landscape were marked by the complexities of navigating sexual desire in secret. Despite forging a close friendship with Bryan, a police constable who was about to join the RAF, it was an unexpected encounter with another officer that led him to his first sexual awakening. While he described this encounter as thrilling, he remained painfully aware of its legal and social implications. He had yet to uncover the larger movement advocating for change that would soon envelop him.

A year later, driven by a desire for both connection and authenticity, Butler discovered the Homosexual Law Reform Society (HLRS). His decision to join this underground group was transformative, securing him a place within a burgeoning gay social scene filled with both challenges and joys. In time, however, his journey would lead him to become an emblematic figure of bravery in the fight for LGBT rights, ultimately culminating in a groundbreaking public declaration.

At a critical juncture in gay history, inspired by Peter Wildeblood's book *Against the Law*, Butler came to a powerful realisation about his own identity. The cultural outrage following the infamous Montagu trial had sparked widespread discussion about the legal treatment of homosexuals, culminating in the 1957 Wolfenden Report, which recommended decriminalising homosexual acts between consenting adults. This societal backdrop emboldened Butler to take the courageous step of publicly declaring his sexuality.

In May 1960, alongside two fellow activists, Butler drafted a letter addressed to prominent British newspapers that began, "Sir, we are homosexuals." This bold initiative aimed to destigmatise homosexuality and assert the existence of gay individuals in society. Despite the risk of persecution, the letter eventually found publication, catalysing a broader discourse about homosexual rights and paving the way for future activism.

However, the road to legal reform was fraught with obstacles. Despite the initial momentum generated by the Wolfenden Report and the ensuing public support for reform, societal attitudes remained largely entrenched. Striking testimonies emerged from individuals who shared their harrowing experiences of police persecution, underscoring the urgent need for change. Roger Butler's conviction that homosexuals must present themselves as relatable and ordinary individuals stood at the core of his activism, a sentiment that resonated deeply within the movement exploring the socio-legal landscape of homosexuality.

As the years progressed, the tireless work of groups like the HLRS bore fruit in the form of the 1967 Sexual Offences Act, which partially decriminalised homosexual acts in England and Wales. Celebrations of this landmark achievement, however, arrived too late for Butler, whose battle with glaucoma had rendered him completely blind by the time the law changed. He faced the painful irony of having fought for a revolution that he could no longer partake in fully.

Following his vision loss, Butler transitioned into a life of academia, earning a history degree while still contributing to the LGBTQ+ community as a tutor. Despite finding fleeting moments of companionship, including a significant but ultimately unreciprocated relationship with a younger college friend named Luke, Butler wrestled with feelings of being unloved and unwanted. His nuanced reflections on love reveal the deep ache of a man who longed not just for companionship but for profound connection.

The lasting impact of Roger Butler’s journey resonates today, as the societal freedoms he longed for have allowed subsequent generations to live openly and authentically. His legacy is a testament not merely to the struggles faced by earlier activists but also to the strength found in vulnerability. His story, marked by moments of heartbreak and resilience, serves as both a personal journey and a pivotal chapter in the broader narrative of LGBTQ+ rights in the UK. Ultimately, the advocacy that flourished during Butler's time has laid the groundwork for the modern rights landscape, showcasing the enduring power of courage and the importance of living one's truth.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/home/books/article-14754161/blind-man-nursed-bombshell-secret-bravery-locked-life-CHRISTOPHER-STEPHENS.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[2]](https://www.hachette.com.au/book/the-light-of-day-the-first-man-to-come-out-at-the-dawn-of-gay-liberation)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/home/books/article-14754161/blind-man-nursed-bombshell-secret-bravery-locked-life-CHRISTOPHER-STEPHENS.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490)
* Paragraph 3 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/home/books/article-14754161/blind-man-nursed-bombshell-secret-bravery-locked-life-CHRISTOPHER-STEPHENS.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[3]](https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/private-lives/relationships/collections1/sexual-offences-act-1967/homosexual-law-reform-society-pamphlet/homosexual-law-reform-society-letter/), [[4]](https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/1966-02-11/debates/5c1edae6-ae13-45f4-9bea-941fd3099aae/SexualOffencesBill)
* Paragraph 4 – [[5]](https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/1958-11-26/debates/13df61db-2254-4b8b-8ec4-489ec95b16a8/HomosexualOffencesAndProstitution%28Report%29), [[6]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wolfenden_report)
* Paragraph 5 – [[2]](https://www.hachette.com.au/book/the-light-of-day-the-first-man-to-come-out-at-the-dawn-of-gay-liberation), [[3]](https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/private-lives/relationships/collections1/sexual-offences-act-1967/homosexual-law-reform-society-pamphlet/homosexual-law-reform-society-letter/)
* Paragraph 6 – [[3]](https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/private-lives/relationships/collections1/sexual-offences-act-1967/homosexual-law-reform-society-pamphlet/homosexual-law-reform-society-letter/), [[7]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antony_Grey)
* Paragraph 7 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/home/books/article-14754161/blind-man-nursed-bombshell-secret-bravery-locked-life-CHRISTOPHER-STEPHENS.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490)
* Paragraph 8 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/home/books/article-14754161/blind-man-nursed-bombshell-secret-bravery-locked-life-CHRISTOPHER-STEPHENS.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[2]](https://www.hachette.com.au/book/the-light-of-day-the-first-man-to-come-out-at-the-dawn-of-gay-liberation)
* Paragraph 9 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/home/books/article-14754161/blind-man-nursed-bombshell-secret-bravery-locked-life-CHRISTOPHER-STEPHENS.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[3]](https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/private-lives/relationships/collections1/sexual-offences-act-1967/homosexual-law-reform-society-pamphlet/homosexual-law-reform-society-letter/)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/home/books/article-14754161/blind-man-nursed-bombshell-secret-bravery-locked-life-CHRISTOPHER-STEPHENS.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.hachette.com.au/book/the-light-of-day-the-first-man-to-come-out-at-the-dawn-of-gay-liberation> - This book, 'The Light of Day: The First Man to Come Out at the Dawn of Gay Liberation', delves into the life of Roger Butler, the first man to publicly declare his homosexuality in the UK. In June 1960, Butler, along with two others, sent a letter to British newspapers beginning with 'Sir, we are homosexuals...', a bold move seven years before the decriminalisation of homosexuality. This act marked a significant milestone in the fight for gay rights, inspiring future generations to embrace their identities openly.
3. <https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/private-lives/relationships/collections1/sexual-offences-act-1967/homosexual-law-reform-society-pamphlet/homosexual-law-reform-society-letter/> - The Homosexual Law Reform Society (HLRS), established in 1958, campaigned for the decriminalisation of homosexual acts in the UK. In 1960, they organised a public meeting at Caxton Hall in London, attended by over 1,000 people, highlighting the growing support for reform. Their efforts contributed to the passing of the Sexual Offences Act in 1967, which partially decriminalised homosexual acts between consenting adults in private.
4. <https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/1966-02-11/debates/5c1edae6-ae13-45f4-9bea-941fd3099aae/SexualOffencesBill> - In 1966, during the debate on the Sexual Offences Bill, discussions centred on the decriminalisation of homosexual acts. The bill aimed to implement recommendations from the Wolfenden Report, which had suggested that homosexual behaviour between consenting adults in private should no longer be a criminal offence. The debate highlighted the complexities and societal attitudes towards homosexuality at the time.
5. <https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/1958-11-26/debates/13df61db-2254-4b8b-8ec4-489ec95b16a8/HomosexualOffencesAndProstitution%28Report%29> - The Hansard record from 1958 captures parliamentary discussions on the Wolfenden Report, which recommended the decriminalisation of homosexual acts between consenting adults in private. The report acknowledged the suffering caused by existing laws and the opportunities for blackmail they presented. It also highlighted that imprisonment was an unsuitable medium for the rehabilitation of homosexual offenders.
6. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wolfenden_report> - The Wolfenden Report, published in 1957, was a pivotal document in the UK advocating for the decriminalisation of homosexual acts. Chaired by Sir John Wolfenden, the committee recommended that homosexual behaviour between consenting adults in private should no longer be a criminal offence. This report laid the groundwork for future legal reforms, including the Sexual Offences Act 1967.
7. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antony_Grey> - Antony Grey was a prominent British gay rights activist who played a significant role in the Homosexual Law Reform Society (HLRS). He became the Society's Honorary Treasurer in 1960 and its Secretary by the end of 1962. Grey's leadership and advocacy were instrumental in the campaign for the decriminalisation of homosexual acts in the UK, culminating in the Sexual Offences Act 1967.