

March 2024



Dear Club Members,

One hundred and eighty years ago, on 30th March 1834, two women took communion together in Holy Trinity church, Goodramgate, York. They had already exchanged rings, and in their eyes the act of taking the sacrament together was the final step in making a commitment to each other before God. Some regard it as being the first lesbian wedding held in England, but in reality their union had none of the legal recognition that was usually connected with marriage. On 29th March 2014 the first lesbian and gay marriages finally took place in the UK.

The two women are now both household names thanks to the TV drama Gentleman Jack, Anne Lister and Ann Walker lived together after their "wedding" at Shibden Hall, the property owned by Lister. Sadly the story doesn't have a happy ending, Lister died 6 years later aged 49. Despite leaving Walker a life interest in the Shibden estate the Walker family had Ann declared to be insane. She was sent to an asylum in York, and died at the age of 54 in her childhood home Cliffe Hall. Ann was a rich heiress in her own right, and whilst Lister was alive had managed to resist the efforts of her controlling family, but on Lister's death her family saw the opportunity to gain control of her finances. By declaring Ann to be insane the Lister family could also reclaim the Shibden estate for themselves.

We know so much about the life of both women, but especially Anne Lister due to the survival of Lister's diary. Covering 23 volumes she writes about her daily life as a landowner, business woman and traveller, but also in her on code she discusses her sexuality and sexual encounters.

The diaries were stored at Shibden Hall, the final inhabitant, John Lister (1847-1933) decoded them, and it was at this point they were nearly lost, a friend had advised him to burn them. Instead they were hidden behind the panelling in the hall.

Researcher Helena Whitbread published some of the diaries in two volumes (1988 and 1992), initially some believed them to be faked, the graphic nature of some sections didn't conform with our rose tinted view of women in the past. Dorothy Thompson and Patricia Hughes continued work on the diaries, in the late 1980s, at Birmingham University's Department of Modern History. They decoded further sections, and published further work.

Anne Lister was a gender non-conformist, famed in the area for her "masculine" attire: her usual clothing was black. A colour not common for women in that era, though perfectly usual for a man. She became known as Gentleman Jack. To our modern eyes Anne Lister is a bundle of inconsistencies, an active landowner, pushing back against gender stereotypes, running her own businesses, and with no interest in male relationships. She travelled extensively and was highly educated. Despite this she was a committed Anglican, whose Christian faith was very important to her. She was also a fervent Tory, committed to maintaining the position of privilege as a landowning member of the aristocracy.

This month I didn't want to just send you some black fibre... instead you have a nod to Anne Lister's black hidden in your blend, combined with the colour of the Lesbian pride flag. The striped flag contains dark orange for "gender non-conformity", orange for "independence", light orange for "community", white for "unique relationships to womanhood", pink for "serenity and peace", dusty pink for "love and sex", and dark rose for "femininity".

Happy Spinning

Katie

Fibre Content- In case your parcel is missing the label

25% Jacob

13% Alpaca

12% Mulberry Silk

50% Merino

Further Reading-

Historic England video reading from Anne's diary- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H4flsECs4Ek>

The Anne Lister Story by Helena Whitbread- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HWMMdnzOibY>

An exploration of Anne's life from the National Archives-

<https://blog.nationalarchives.gov.uk/gentleman-jack-anne-lister-the-first-modern-lesbian/>

York Civic Trust has erected a Blue Plaque in York at the church where the wedding took place

<https://yorkcivictrust.co.uk/heritage/civic-trust-plaques/anne-lister-1791-1840/>

If you're in the UK both series of Gentleman Jack are available on iPlayer-

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episodes/m00059m9/gentleman-jack>

Ann Walker's life after the death of Anne- <https://insearchofannwalker.com/anns-mourning/>