In the days of single and LP records, when an electronic turntable and diamond-sharp needle could produce a quality of sound unsurpassed today, my parents would occasionally unsleeve, dust and play a vinyl disc, reminiscing about ‘the good old days’ of the 1960s, when music (Beatles, Stones, Dusty etc.) was ‘proper music’ and life was good. I was born in late 1969 – at the very end of the decade, and too late to have experienced it. But sometimes, if I tried, I could feel a time otherwise only glimpsed in family photos and in the shaky cinefilms my parents occasionally reeled out.

Many years later, when considering issues of sex, sexuality and the place of homosexual men in history, my thoughts turned back to that time, and the question formed in my mind: What was it like for gay men in the so-called ‘swinging sixties’? Of course, I knew and had read about the 1957 Wolfenden Report and the 1967 Sexual Offences Act. But there was scant information about gay men’s lives between those dates. The 1950s and 1960s were largely glossed over as a time of slow but inevitable legal change, accompanied by a gradual tolerance of, and freedom for, gay men. Despite a crop of books on gay history published in the 1990s and early 2000s, there was a dearth of material on the subject. This prompted me to find out more about the British gay male experience in the mid-twentieth century.

Odd Men Out covers the years 1953 to 1971, from the circumstances leading to the appointment of the Wolfenden Committee on Homosexual
Preface

Offences and Prostitution in 1954 to the emergence of the Gay Liberation Front in the early 1970s. Chapter 1 reveals something of the lives of gay men in the early to mid-1950s. It looks at the social, legal and personal challenges they faced, and at perceptions of homosexuals among contemporary observers and commentators. Chapter 2 delves into the Wolfenden Report, analysing its main recommendations and casting an eye over some of its lesser-known points. It also looks at the development of a distinct homosexual ‘type’ – what I have called the ‘Wolfenden Man’ figure, whom law reform campaigners presented as the socially acceptable face of homosexuality. Chapter 3 looks at the medical treatments meted out to gay men, and at the medical theories that underpinned them. Chapter 4 examines the everyday lives of gay men in the early to mid-1960s, tracing the development of a proto-‘gay scene’, and considering the extent and severity of legal repression. Chapter 5 pays attention to representations of gay men in the broadcast media, films, theatre, literature and the press, and assesses the contribution of these portrayals to a growing public understanding of homosexuality. Chapter 6 examines the law reform process between 1960 and 1967, the shift in public attitudes towards homosexuality and the emergence of a ‘gay’ identity. Chapter 7 takes the story forward to 1971, examining the limited freedoms granted by the 1967 Act, and asking to what extent gay men’s lives had improved at the start of the new decade.

I hope to show that, contrary to traditional narratives of gay history, there were significant variations in degrees of repression and liberation during the 1950s and 1960s. Repression was not always as concentrated or as severe as has often been assumed. Likewise, eventual liberation was minimal and, in many respects, more conditional and restricted than before. I also try to show that the construction and adoption of a gay identity was a necessary means of achieving a measure of social and legal acceptance, but that the establishment in the public mind of a recognisable (but still only partially understood) homosexual ‘minority’ resulted in new dangers and dilemmas. Some gay men found themselves more exposed and vulnerable to exploitation and abuse than before. Others grappled with the question of where, how and with whom they fitted in.

xiii
Preface

By the early 1970s traditional concepts of ‘odd’ and ‘normal’ had, in some respects, been reversed. The ‘obvious’ homosexual of the 1950s and early 1960s had become the recognisable, legally sanctioned and normalised sort of gay man who one might ordinarily encounter in the street, in the community or in the workplace. On the other hand, the once seemingly ‘ordinary’ man who had sex with other men but concealed (or at least did not display) his sexuality became a non-conformist, difficult-to-place and somewhat suspect odd man out, distrusted by gays and straights alike.

*Odd Men Out* makes some interesting discoveries which I hope will clarify and reset some aspects of gay history. The first ever mention of the word ‘homosexuality’ in the broadcast media, for example, was on the *Behind the News* radio programme in 1953, not on *Woman’s Hour* in 1955, as has previously been claimed. The lord chamberlain’s lifting of the ban on depictions of homosexuality on stage in 1958 was not prompted by the publication of the Wolfenden Report. Instead, a change in the rules had been under consideration for some time and was finally hastened by the dilemma of what to do about drag queens in a show called *We’re No Ladies*. An in-depth analysis of medical cures in the 1950s and 1960s reveals that many hundreds of men were the victims of appalling treatments which doctors knew were ineffective and, in some cases, lethal. This remains a scandal that has never been fully acknowledged or investigated. Just as scandalous was the government’s underhand reintroduction of oestrogen therapy in English and Welsh prisons in 1958. An examination of opinion polls and surveys, as well as anecdotal evidence, also shows that the British public was never decisively hostile to homosexual law reform – despite what politicians said. Sympathetic views on the issue were frequently expressed, especially by women. Large sections of the British establishment were also in favour of legal change. If the Conservative government had not lost its nerve, limited decriminalisation of homosexual behaviour might have occurred in 1958 rather than 1967. The Sexual Offences Act, when it did come, was no landmark of permissive legislation. Rather, it was a grudging (and already out-of-date) tidying-up of legal anomalies highlighted by the Wolfenden Report a decade earlier. Coupled with the
police reforms of the late 1960s, the Act opened the door to a new era of injustice and oppression.

It is interesting to note that at this time homosexual law reform was not a left/right or party-political issue. Rather, it was an open question, and politicians were left to decide for themselves how to deal with it. For some, such as Roy Jenkins, it was a question of justice, humanity and turning Britain into a civilised, modern European society. It is significant that in the parliamentary debates of the mid-1960s comparisons with countries such as France, Sweden and Norway were often made, while fears of what the United States or Commonwealth nations might think were brushed aside. Politicians’ personal experiences also informed their approach to the issue. One can only speculate what convinced the likes of Enoch Powell, Nicholas Ridley and Margaret Thatcher to support homosexual law reform – although a belief in the right of the individual to responsibly practise what they wished to do in the privacy of their own homes, free from state intervention, doubtless had much to do with it. Lord Arran and Leo Abse had personal contacts with homosexual men. Norman St John-Stevas and Humphrey Berkeley were both gay. John Page learned about the cruelties of the law the hard way when he was arrested for importuning and attempted gross indecency in 1956. He was acquitted, buried that part of his past and went on to vote four times for Abse’s and Berkeley’s reform bills.

I hope that readers of Odd Men Out will encounter moments of humour and compassion, as well as surprise and even shock. I have tried to preserve the voices of a generation of gay men and others who are beginning to disappear from our lives and our collective memory. Recording and remembering their words and deeds is vital to educate younger generations, who are often woefully ignorant of the not-so-distant past. We need to know our history if we are to preserve our liberties and guard against old and new forms of prejudice, discrimination and persecution. As Antony Grey, the long-serving secretary of the Homosexual Law Reform Society, pointed out in 2008 (at about the time I started my research): ‘I think it’s very important that people should remember how it was and how it could
Preface

be again in the future, because I think things can go backwards as well as forward. The price of liberty is eternal vigilance."

Notes

1 The BBC and the Closet, BBC Radio 4, 29 January 2008.