

The legacy of Llangollen

ELLA GAUCI speaks to the people keeping lesbian history alive in north Wales



Flamboyant flower boys wearing antlers. Hot pink splashed across the rural Welsh town of Llangollen. Queer readings, songs, and even a Chappell Roan medley. This is Sarah-Joy Ford's wedding at the legendary Plas Newydd, the home where the renowned Ladies of Llangollen once lived in sapphic bliss.

Eleanor Butler and Sarah Ponsonby – commonly known by their title of the Ladies of Llangollen – have provided lesbians everywhere with an abundance of queer joy since their residency in Wales in the 18th century. Living with their servant and friend, Mary Carryl, Eleanor and Sarah stand proudly as a reminder that lesbian stories have always existed. In fact, their remarkable tale of love has inspired sapphics for centuries, including Anne Lister (who actually visited the pair), French author Colette, writer Mary Gordon and more.



Left & above: Helen & Jane performing. This image: the flower boys at Sarah-Joy's wedding.

“Their remarkable love story has inspired sapphics for centuries”

When Sarah-Joy Ford (she/her) brought her girlfriend on a pilgrimage to Plas Newydd during the pandemic, as many sapphics have done over the last 200 years, she felt an immediate connection to the house. Drawn to its overflowing queer history, Sarah-Joy sent in a request to become the house's artist in residence. As if the Ladies were looking down on her, she was successful, and began dedicating her art as a “gift” back to Eleanor and Sarah.

Photos Ben Harrison Weddings



"I envision St Collen's offering a sanctuary of love, acceptance & celebration"

» "That place is so powerful and you can feel the history in the house," Sarah-Joy gushes. "It's haunted by queer joy in a really positive and pleasurable way."

Fast forward to 2024, Sarah-Joy became not only the house's artist in residence, but half of the first sapphic couple to get married in Plas Newydd. Beaming next to her partner Talin, the pair lit up the house with queer joy. Following their ceremony, they strolled over to St Collen's Church, where Eleanor and Sarah are buried, and Sarah-Joy prepared herself for the next part of her big day.

With a huge smile, Father Lee (he/him) welcomed the couple with open arms, ready to give his blessing. It was not the first time Father Lee had blessed a sapphic couple in the church. In 2021, he made the first official same-sex blessing in the Anglican Church after the Church in

Wales allowed for such. He made a posthumous blessing to the Ladies of Llangollen, celebrating their love and the poignant legacy they left behind. Three years later, he was able to give the same blessing again, this time to Sarah-Joy and Talin.

"Our church holds a special place in the hearts of many in the LGBTQIA community, and my aim is to provide a meaningful and historic setting where couples can celebrate their unions surrounded by the spirit of the Ladies of Llangollen and the welcoming community of St Collen's," Father Lee explains. "I envision St Collen's Church becoming the 'new Greta Green' for same-sex couples, offering a sanctuary of love, acceptance and celebration."

But Sarah-Joy wasn't done honouring the legacy of the Ladies of Llangollen just yet. There was one last thing she had in her hat. A top

hat at that! To celebrate their big day, Sarah-Joy invited the Ladies themselves to join the party. Well, not quite literally...

Helen Sandler (she/her) and Jane Hoy (she/her) have dedicated their careers to preserving the stories of the lesbians of the past. As part of their Queer Tales From Wales series, the pair have carefully curated a show which takes audiences through the incredible story of Eleanor and Sarah. The idea to put on a performance came after they were tired of sitting through hours of long and convoluted lectures about queer history.

"I just thought, 'There must be a different way of telling these stories,'" Jane says. "It was trying to find a more interactive way of telling historical stories without having people falling asleep on the front row."

And thus, Helen and Jane began to perform their show about the life of Eleanor and Sarah. Tracking the Ladies' departure from Ireland to escape unwanted marriages in 1778 to their popularity in later life, the show has captivated audiences – including at Sarah-Joy and Talin's wedding.

For Helen, it's vital to keep these stories alive. "When I was young, I went to Llangollen with my girlfriend at the time. Since the 70s and 80s, lesbians have been looking for that history," she tells me. "Although we have some lesbian characters on screen, we don't have what heterosexual people have got, which is that all of history is about men and women. We have to find our lesbian history. We're looking for our role models."

Seeing such a brazen celebration of both sapphic love and history in a small rural town like Llangollen is nothing short of beautiful. And for Sarah-Joy, who grew up in a little village, being able to bring queer art, history and (most importantly) joy to rural areas is vital. The connection she has to the Ladies "crosses the boundaries of even time itself". She expands: "The Ladies of Llangollen have been inspiring women for centuries. It's that relationship that you can build across generations." **D**

Learn more about Queer Tales From Wales at aberration.org.uk/queer-tales-from-wales
Find out more about Sarah-Joy's work at sarahjoyford.com/projects/#/beloved



Sarah-Joy & Talin's beautiful ceremony. Bottom-left: Plas Newydd. This image: Father Lee & Sarah-Joy.

