

LGBTQ+ History Month

A Brief History of Rainbows and Flags.

Rainbows! If you're in the NHS undoubtedly you've seen more rainbow-coloured anything over the last two years than you've probably seen in your life.

Unless you've been to a few Pride parades, that is.

The rainbow flag has become an international symbol for LGBTQ+ people and causes. Starting off as a hand sewn one-off flag for the Gay Freedom Day Parade in 1978, it is now something we see in shop windows, homes, pedestrian crossings, badges and all over the hospital in our lanyards.

It was first devised as a challenge for designer Gilbert Baker by famous American politician and gay leader Harvey Milk, who asked Baker to come up with a new symbol for the gay community. Up until this point, the most commonly used symbol was the pink triangle, a symbol that had been used to designate gay men in concentration camps during World War 2. Influences for Baker's choosing the rainbow are said to have included the hippy movement of the 60s and Judy Garland's "Somewhere Over The Rainbow."

The first flag had eight coloured stripes, with each colour representing a different idea.

Hot pink		<i>Sex</i>
Red		<i>Life</i>
Orange		<i>Healing</i>
Yellow		<i>Sunlight</i>
Green		<i>Nature</i>
Turquoise		<i>Magic/Art</i>
Indigo		<i>Serenity</i>
Violet		<i>Spirit</i>

After Harvey Milk's assassination that same year, demand for the flag greatly increased, and between supply issues with pink fabric and a desire to simplify the design, we eventually got the classic six colour flag that we commonly see today.



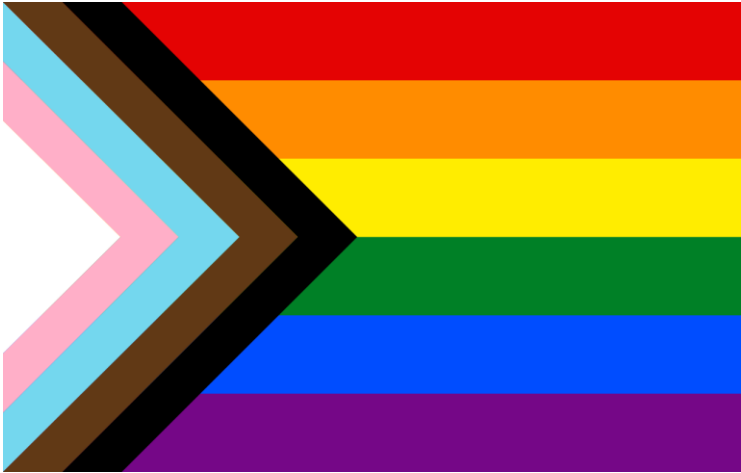
In the years that followed the rainbow became a go to symbol for LGBTQ+ events and Pride parades, spreading all over the world. For many people, rainbow symbolism means safety. It's a way of letting people know you might be LGBTQ+ or an ally without shouting it out loud. Seeing a rainbow in a shop window or a public service lets LGBTQ+ people know that they are safe there. We have seen it spread to Pride events well outside of North America, and it has become an almost universal symbol beyond language and culture.

In 2017, we started to see new features for the classic flag design, aimed at highlighting those people within the LGBTQ+ facing particular discrimination.

The city of Philadelphia began using a pride flag with additional brown and black stripes, to highlight the issues faced by people of colour in the LGBTQ+ community. People of colour face racism in the LGBTQ+ community, and experience discrimination based on their race, ethnicity, sexuality and gender in a different way than white LGBTQ+ people, or straight and cisgender people of colour would. The LGBTQ+ movement has historically overlooked the issues of people of colour, even within the community, and it is important that we try to elevate and amplify the voices of the people who face the most discrimination. By adding the black and brown stripes to our flags, it is hoped that we can try to bring the issues facing people of colour to the forefront of our movement.



In 2018, we saw the addition of pink, white and blue stripes, the colour of the transgender Pride flag. In the same ideal of promoting the voices of the most challenged in our community, now the colours of the trans flag alongside people of colour are highlighted in the symbol of our community. Trans people are still disproportionately affected by a number of issues including poverty, healthcare, discrimination and more. The Pride Network's main goal is to improve the experience of trans people in the hospital, and we will be working hard to see that achieved.



Most recently in 2021, we saw the inclusion of the intersex symbol in the pride flag by Valentino Vecchiotti of Intersex Equality Rights UK. Intersex is a broad term used for a variety of conditions where a person is born with anatomy that doesn't seem to fit the typical definitions of female or male. Intersex people face a variety of challenges, often from birth, with a lot of discrimination, stigma and misinformation surrounding being intersex. Along with LGBTQ+ people of colour and transgender people, intersex people will be having an article dedicated for them later on in the month as these topics demand more than a few lines.



Ultimately, whatever flag you choose to fly, I hope you fly it with pride, and with the knowledge that the rainbow colours have a rich history and meaning to people all over the world.