

ANNE LISTER

Pioneering British Lesbian Landowner and Businesswoman
(1791-1840)



In an era when women had virtually no voice or power, Anne Lister of Yorkshire, England defied the odds to become what some call the first *modern lesbian for her open* lifestyle and self-knowledge. Despite being taunted by fellow Halifax residents, who referred to her as “*Gentleman Jack*,” Lister flouted convention by dressing in black men’s attire and talking part in typically male activities, such as riding and shooting. In 1830, she became the first woman to ascend Mount Perdu in the Pyrenees and several years later completed the official ascent of the Vignemale, the highest point in the mountain range. Though she conventionally shied away identification with “Sapphists,” she declared in her voluminous 4-million-word diary “I love and in love the fairer sex and thus beloved by them I turn, my heart revolts from any love but theirs.” Obscuring the nature of her affections, the diary incorporated a special code combining Algebra and Ancient Greek to detail her intimate relationships as well as her day to day life as a wealthy “rural gentlemen”—including the operation of her family estate, her business interests, and social and national events. It has also come to be highly prized by historians who value its unique perspective on the experience of lesbians in early 19th-century England. Lister’s first great romance, with Mariana Lawton, ended when Lawton refused to leave her husband. In 1832, she met heiress Anne Walker and the two were “married” in a private declaration of their life-commitment. Great travelers, in 1839, “The Two Annes,” as they were known, embarked on a journey to Russia. While in the foothills of the Caucasus Mountains, Lister contracted a fever and died in 1840, at the age of 49. She willed her beloved home, Shibden Hall, to Walker.



Lesson Plan

Level 1: Contributions Approach

1. Activate prior experience: What do you know about Anne Lister, the landowner and businesswoman?
2. Read the biographical information (above) and explore the additional resources at <https://legacyprojectchicago.org/person/anne-lister>
3. Group Discussion: How did Anne Lister manage to “fit in” to the expected lifestyle for a woman in Halifax, England?
4. Extend knowledge: How/why did she acquire the nickname “Gentleman Jack”?

Level 2: Additive Approach

1. View this documentary at <https://youtu.be/HWMMdnz0jbY> What are some factors that built the “secret life” of Lister at Shibden Hall?
2. Anne once wrote, “I am an enigma, even unto myself.” What do you think she meant by this?
3. Review: <https://helenairfax.com/2019/07/15/who-was-the-real-annelister-a-fascinating-talk-by-experts-helenawhitbread-and-jilliddington/>. Share with your classmates how some of the experts described her.
4. Website Investigation: Do an advanced search of the Legacy Project’s database under “Business” at <https://legacyprojectchicago.org/explore/advanced>. Compare and contrast the experiences of other businesspeople with those of Anne Lister.

Level 3: Transformational Approach

1. Explore https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anne_Lister#Life. Considering Lister’s early life and education, what prepared her and motivated her to take charge of her own financial and property portfolio?
2. Listen to <https://www.missedinhistory.com/podcasts/anne-lister.htm>. Though “gender identity” was not something much talked about during her era, how did Lister define herself? What terms did she use to describe her appearance?

Review

<http://www.jeanettewinterson.com/journalism/about-anne-lister/>. Share with your group some things you learned that stood out for you. Lister created a code to obscure her relationships with women in her diary entries. Explain why.

Level 4: Social Action Approach

1. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Secret_Diaries_of_Miss_Anne_Lister. How have Lister’s diaries enhanced our understanding of lesbians during this time period?
2. Expand how you would support the inclusion of these diaries within curriculum today.