

TORCHWOOD

the

QUEEREST

show on

TV

A decade ago Torchwood changed television. You might not think that a show about people fighting aliens in Cardiff would be revolutionary, but it was. In the world before Torchwood, mainstream drama series didn't really do gay characters – or, if they did, it'd be in a single episode about sad gays in the military. Torchwood changed all that.

Created by Russell T Davies as a spin-off from Doctor Who, Torchwood was a science fiction series where all the regular cast were unashamedly pansexual. Queer characters were never portrayed as victims, and it never judged or punished them for their sexuality. It is also – to date – the only action TV series with an unquestionably bisexual leading man. Torchwood was a world where queer people weren't the hero's best friend – they

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were the heroes. And no one was more heroic than Captain Jack.

Before Torchwood, the best fans had been offered was Xena: Warrior Princess' feelings for best friend Gabrielle – and that was, however mighty, still a subtext. Star Trek, for all its talk about "Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combinations" remained the straightest show on television – even its one "gay" episode was about an asexual character coming out as heterosexual.

But then Captain Jack happened.

Jack first turned up in Doctor Who in 2005. A decade before, the Doctor had briefly kissed a lady – fans were still upset (we're Doctor Who

fans, we're like that). Yet, Captain Jack snogged the Doctor and suddenly all bets were off.

When Captain Jack got his own show, there was a lot of smirking and winking in the tabloids. Would it be about gay people investigating gay things? Would it be camp? Actually, it wasn't. It was about people fighting aliens, people who incidentally happened not to be straight. And, although you could point out they put a Cyberwoman in high heels, Torchwood was, for the most part, really not camp. It was about grim nightmares on the dark wet streets of Cardiff. It was about nightclubs and fights and kebabs.

Torchwood also managed that rare thing of never having a "gay" episode or a "coming out" story. A few years before Ultraviolet (1998) had managed to be a vampire show that



TORCHWOOD'S queerest moments

Owen's sex spray

Eyebrows were raised when Torchwood's sleaze-in-residence, Owen Harper, took an alien perfume to a club. A single spray of it made people fancy him. He used it not just to seduce a hot lady but also her outraged boyfriend. A lot of people missed Owen's cheerful bisexuality, preferring instead to argue that a main character gleefully using a "rape spray" made him look a bit of a shit. They were rather missing the point that that's exactly what Owen was.

Toshiko's butterfly girlfriend

Everyone was mildly surprised when Torchwood's shy scientist Toshiko Sato became telepathic. But they were stunned when she turned out to have a girlfriend. Yes, the girlfriend was an alien. And a psychopath. But also, really hot.

Jack on Jack action

When Captain Jack got trapped in the past he met the man whose identity he stole. This being Torchwood, they got off with each other.

Gwen and the sex cloud

When an alien sex cloud crashed on Earth and became trapped in the body of a young Welsh girl, Gwen helped capture her. Gwen's attempts to comfort the girl soon get out of control, and all of Torchwood watched the CCTV.

Owen's fight club

A group of Cardiff estate agents got together at night and beat up aliens. Owen joined the group and discovered

they were Not At All Homoerotic.

Gay Satan

The Earth was nearly destroyed by Bilis Manger – a Cardiff antiques dealer and immortal dance hall manager who may also be the devil. Although we never found out the real identity of Bilis, he was played by gay icon Murray Melvin.

Captain John

Fans were thrilled when James Marsters (Spike from *Buffy*) turned up as Jack's nemesis. They were even more thrilled when the two of them immediately made out. Then tried to kill each other. Then made out some more.

Jack and Angelo

People worried that Torchwood's US version would be somehow toned down were answered firmly by an entire episode devoted to Jack's 1920s fling with a man called Angelo who kept falling out of his clothes. In trying to save him, Jack nearly ended the world. Shirtless.

Jack and Ianto

AND FINALLY... Less will-they-won't-they and more oh-God-they're-shagging-in-the-pot-plants-again, the romance between Captain Jack and Torchwood's butler gripped viewers. From its unique beginnings (Jack shot Ianto's cybernetic girlfriend) to its stunning conclusion (Ianto dying in Jack's arms), the relationship was at the heart of Torchwood. It managed to be both understated and deeply kinky – what did they get up to with a stopwatch?! ●



never used "the V word". Torchwood pulled off a similar feat. A search of transcripts shows that the number of times the word 'gay' was used in 41 episodes was 12 (five of those in a Miracle Day scene where two secret service agents argue about the word). Torchwood showed that you could talk about sexuality without putting a label on it.

There was no better demonstration than in the story of Ianto Jones (Gareth David-Lloyd). Torchwood's butler ended up in a relationship with Jack which played out across three complicated years. There was no question that they loved each other, but it was the opposite of a traditional relationship. To be blunt, poor Ianto had to put up with a lot. When Jack's exes weren't turning up, Jack was flirting with and shagging anything that moved. But he always came back to Ianto. Ianto accepted this, telling his family, "It's not men – it's just him."

If you're reading this and going "big deal" imagine a *Star Trek* series with the captain in an open bisexual relationship. Then imagine that series refusing to do an episode just about that. That's how clever Torchwood was.

Even more so when you realise it allowed the writers to have their cake and eat it – Jack could be romantically entangled with an episode's guest star and still return to Ianto. And fans would be both delighted to see Jack snogging Captain John and horrified about how that made Ianto feel.

Fans really loved Ianto, which was where the show made its boldest move. During the five-part epic *Children of Earth* arc in 2009, Ianto died in Jack's arms. "Why?" screamed the fans (and some of them are still screaming). It was a moment of pure drama – *Children of Earth* was about how, in order for Jack to win, he had to lose everything. And it had to hurt. But it also felt like Torchwood had somehow died.

Following the acclaim thrown at *Children of Earth*, Torchwood moved to America. It avoided giving Jack a replacement for Ianto – although it continued breaking boundaries. In the middle of one episode, Jack wanders off, gets laid, and comes in giggling the next day. It doesn't add anything to the plot, but shows that, even when saving the world, Jack has a life. Also, let's face it, if you looked like Captain Jack, you so would.

Among some Doctor Who fans, it's fashionable to write Torchwood off ("except *Children of Earth*, of course, I liked that"). This is ridiculous. Torchwood started on BBC Three, was so successful it moved to BBC Two, then to BBC One, and then got snapped up by American TV. It was a mainstream series in which two of the leads were in a bisexual relationship. They shot really big guns and shagged a lot. Torchwood's spent ten years never apologising for that.

And it never will. ●