

YOUR ESSENTIAL GUIDE TO

# BLACK BRITISH HISTORY

PODCAST

Hannah Cusworth will discuss our growing understanding of black British history on an upcoming episode of the HistoryExtra podcast: [historyextra.com/podcast](http://historyextra.com/podcast)

Uncover the hidden stories of the black men, women and children who shaped Britain and its former empire



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HISTORICAL CONSULTANT FOR THIS MONTH'S ESSENTIAL GUIDE



## HANNAH CUSWORTH

is a historian who specialises in black British histories. Formerly a schoolteacher, she is currently completing a PhD with English Heritage looking at mahogany, race and the 18th-century Atlantic world.

GETTY IMAGES XS, ALAMY XS

# KEY MOMENTS IN BLACK BRITISH HISTORY

From African soldiers in Roman times to the *Windrush* generation, black people have always been part of the fabric of Britain – often in the face of prejudice and adversity

WORDS: CHARLOTTE HODGMAN AND JONNY WILKES

3RD CENTURY AD

The Hadrian's Wall fort at Burgh-by-Sands (known to its occupants as Aballava) becomes home to a troop of African Romans. The so-called "Aurelian Moors" hail from what is now Morocco, north Africa.

1241

An early depiction of a black person in Britain appears in an abbreviated version of the Domesday Book, in the entry for Derbyshire.

1511

▼ Royal trumpeter John Blanke – the only black Tudor for whom we have an identifiable image – plays at the celebration of the birth of Henry VIII's son (*seen below*). Blanke disappears from the records after January 1512.



1562

► Captain John Hawkins (*right*) captures around 300 African people in Sierra Leone and transports them to Spanish plantations in the Americas, where they are traded for goods. This marks the opening stages of Britain's role in the transatlantic slave trade.



1672

► The Royal African Company (RAC) is founded, led by Charles II's younger brother, James (the future James II, *pictured*). The company is granted a monopoly on British trade with Africa, including the slave trade. Between 1680 and 1686, the RAC will transport an average of 5,000 enslaved people a year.



1774

The black writer, composer and abolitionist Ignatius Sancho becomes the first known person of African descent to vote in a British general election. He will vote again in 1780, a few weeks before his death.

1807

▼ The Act for the Abolition of the Slave Trade bans the trade in the British empire, but many continue to trade illegally and hundreds of thousands of people remain in bondage.



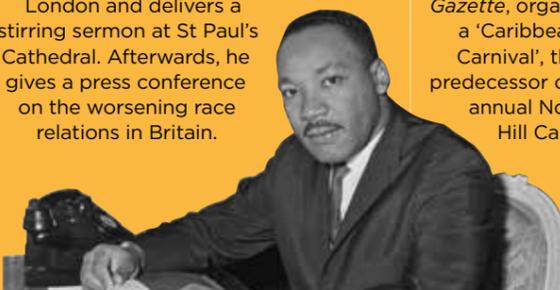
1834



▲ The 1833 Slavery Abolition Act comes into force, making slavery illegal in most British colonies. Plantation owners receive a share of £20m (around £17bn today) by way of compensation; in contrast, freed slaves receive nothing and are forced into apprenticeship schemes for up to six years.

1964

▼ On his way to collect the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo, American civil rights leader Dr Martin Luther King Jr visits London and delivers a stirring sermon at St Paul's Cathedral. Afterwards, he gives a press conference on the worsening race relations in Britain.



1959

Claudia Jones, founder of the *West Indian Gazette*, organises a 'Caribbean Carnival', the predecessor of the annual Notting Hill Carnival.



1948

◀ On 22 June, HMT *Empire Windrush* arrives at Tilbury Docks in Essex, with some 800 West Indians on board. Although not the first ship to bring black migrants to Britain, its name comes to refer to the immigration boom experienced in the next few decades.

1939–45



▲ The relaxation of a military 'colour bar' sees 10,000 Caribbean men and women join the armed forces in World War II, along with hundreds of thousands of enlistees from Britain's African colonies. Despite this, some restrictions remain: black men are banned from becoming officers, for example.

1919

Tensions over jobs, exacerbated by demobilisation after World War I, leads to race riots across Britain, with some people accusing ethnic minorities of "stealing" work. Unrest breaks out in port cities, with Liverpool seeing the worst violence, in June.

1914–18

▼ Tens of thousands of men from Africa and the Caribbean, as well as Britain's black communities, join the war effort. Among them is professional footballer Walter Tull (*left*), the first British-born black army officer and the first black officer to lead white British troops into battle.



1900



▲ The First Pan-African Conference is held in London. American civil rights activist WEB Du Bois (*above*) plays a leading role in the event.

1965

▼ Nine days before his assassination, fellow US civil rights figure Malcolm X visits Smethwick, near Birmingham, where locals have been suffering from racist abuse.



1968

Inspired by the Black Power movement in the US, the British Black Panthers are formed by the Nigerian-born writer and activist Obi Egbuna. At its peak in the early 1970s, it has around 3,000 members.

1968

▼ The Race Relations Act bans racial discrimination in housing and jobs. Tory politician Enoch Powell (*below*) reacts with his incendiary "rivers of blood" speech.



1971

► A bill to impose greater restrictions on immigration to Britain – introducing the 'right to abode' that most in the Commonwealth are not eligible for – is met with opposition and protests. It passes, forming the basis of immigration law to this day.



1975

The Black Parents Movement (BPM) forms to advance the rights of black people in Britain. Angered by the arrest of a black youth outside his school, the grassroots organisation tackles issues like jobs and housing, but primarily education.

1981



▲ Racial tensions in Brixton, south London, erupt into violence, with three days of rioting. More than 300 people are injured.

1987

Although Labour fail to take power in the 1987 general election, it is a landmark moment for the party and British politics as four black MPs take their seats. Among them is Diane Abbott, the first black woman elected to the House of Commons.

1993

Black teenager Stephen Lawrence is murdered in a racist attack in Eltham, southeast London. A public inquiry uncovers substantial failings in the police investigation, as well as institutional racism, and will eventually lead to major changes in the law.

2020

Anti-racism protests take place in Britain following the killing, in the US, of George Floyd by a white police officer. The protests also criticise the way the authorities have handled incidents closer to home, such as the Grenfell Tower fire (2017) and the Windrush scandal (2018). 📍

GETTY IMAGES/ALAMY

# EVERYTHING YOU WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT BLACK BRITISH HISTORY

Historian **Hannah Cusworth** answers key questions about the lives of black people in Britain and its former empire

**Q: What do we actually mean by 'black British history'?**

**A:** It's an important question to start with, because it's a really broad topic. In its simplest terms, we're looking at 2,000 (maybe more) years' worth of history in Britain. But we also need to think about what we mean by the word 'black', which is a term that has changed over time. When I use that word, I'm specifically referring to people from Africa and the wider African diaspora, and that is the definition that applies to the use of the word throughout this Essential Guide.

I consider myself part of the African diaspora: my dad's family are from the

Caribbean, but they were originally from somewhere in west Africa. Therefore, when I'm talking about black British history, I'm talking about people whose heritage is in Africa, but whose history is within Britain itself.

Recently, historians such as Professor David Olusoga (pictured below left) have been influential in expanding black British history to include areas of the world that Britain was involved with because of its empire. If we adopt this viewpoint, black British history also encompasses Caribbean history and the islands that Britain colonised, as well as Britain's involvement in Africa, which goes back centuries, and, of course, includes the slave trade. So

it's important that we also think about black British history in wider terms than just Britain.

**Q: When did black people first arrive in Britain?**

**A:** You could argue that there have been black people living in Britain even before the Roman conquest began in earnest in AD 43. 'Cheddar Man', a Mesolithic skeleton discovered in 1903 in southwest England, lived around 10,000 years ago and DNA analysis suggests that he had dark-to-black skin with blue eyes. It's difficult to put a precise date on it, but we know there were black people living in Britain during the Roman occupation.

BELOW LEFT: The skull of the so-called 'Cheddar Man', who lived in what is now Somerset and had dark-to-black skin

BELOW RIGHT: A black man named Jacques Francis led a rescue operation to salvage guns from the *Mary Rose*, seen here in a Tudor-era manuscript



Professor David Olusoga has helped expand the definition of black British history, says Hannah Cusworth



A 1769 portrait of Queen Charlotte, wife of George III, with two of her children. It has been argued that the consort may have had African heritage



**Q: The Netflix series *Bridgerton* depicts black people living as members of Britain's Georgian elite, including Queen Charlotte, wife of George III. Is there any historical truth to this?**

**A:** Yes, definitely, although opinion is divided about the exact heritage of Queen Charlotte. The historian Mario de Valdes y Cocom argues that she had black ancestry through the Portuguese line of her family; indeed, if we look at images of her, some of her features do resemble those we might associate with black mixed-race people. Other historians disagree.

But there are many other examples of black Georgians right through the social classes. Dido Elizabeth Belle is one of the most well-known. The daughter of a British naval officer called John Lindsay and an African woman named Maria Belle, Dido was raised by Lord Mansfield and his family at Kenwood House in London. Another example is Nathaniel Wells, the son of a sugar plantation owner and an enslaved woman, who inherited his father's plantation in Saint Kitts and a significant amount of money.

When mixed-race children were born in the Caribbean to wealthy families, they were often sent to Britain to be educated; there are several examples of such children attending schools in Yorkshire and Scotland. So, although *Bridgerton* is exaggerated in terms of its elite black presence, it's not completely in the realms of fantasy.

ABOVE LEFT: David Martin's famous portrait of Dido Elizabeth Belle and her cousin, Lady Elizabeth Murray, who were raised together in London

ABOVE RIGHT: Guyanese-British actor Golda Rosheuvel (seated) as Queen Charlotte in the Regency-era drama *Bridgerton*

**Q: What was the impact of the slave trade on Britain's black population?**

**A:** There's been quite a lot of work done by scholars on the black presence in Tudor England, which pre-dates Britain's involvement in the transatlantic slave trade. We know of individuals like John Blanke, who was a trumpeter for Henry VII and Henry VIII, and several other black people in the Tudor court who may have come to England with Catherine of Aragon in 1501. And we know that a Guinean diver named Jacques Francis led an expedition to salvage guns from the *Mary Rose* in 1545.

There were a variety of black people living and working in Britain before the 18th century, but the nature of that presence changed when Britain became more involved in the slave trade. In the Georgian era, we think there was a black community of more than 10,000 people in London, which was much larger than that seen in the Tudor era or before. The numbers definitely increased as Britain's involvement in the slave trade grew.



**Q: Are there any differences in England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland in terms of their black histories?**

**A:** Often when we talk about black British history, what we're really talking about is black *English* history, but the different nations all have interesting black histories of their own. For example, there's some amazing work going on at the moment looking at Scotland's involvement in the slave trade, particularly plantation slavery.

In fact, many of the plantation overseers in the Caribbean – the people running the plantations – were Scottish.

Ireland, too, has a distinct history of colonialism, both through Irish people who were forced out to the colonies as indentured servants, as well as those who were involved in the running of Caribbean plantations. There were also a lot of Anglo-Irish military leaders – one individual I've been working on is Edward Despard, a colonial administrator

TOP LEFT: Four young Somali men meet in a café in the Butetown area of Cardiff, 1950

ABOVE: Colonial administrator Edward Despard caused a scandal when he wed a mixed-race woman

who refused to prioritise white settlers when allocating land and married a mixed-race Jamaican woman.

A lot of black Welsh history is centred around Cardiff, notably Butetown – sometimes known as Tiger Bay – which has a very strong Somali community. Many Somali people who settled in the area in the 19th century were sailors who, as part of the empire, were legally allowed to settle in Britain. It's so important to bring these histories to the fore and not to assume that black people of the past only lived in London.

**Q: What do we know about the history of queer black people in Britain?**

**A:** There is a lot of work being undertaken by a new generation of black British historians who are particularly interested in queer black life, primarily in the 20th century, and are using oral histories to bring that history to light.

A favourite historical example of mine is a Jamaica-born bisexual woman called Pearl Alcock, who ran a gay bar in Brixton in the 1970s. I've heard descriptions of how people would go downstairs into the basement where there would be queer black men dancing together. To me, this is a particularly powerful example because, sometimes when we think about queer history, we often hold up individuals as being exceptional. But the story of Pearl and the kind of bar that she ran shows that there

was actually a gay black scene – albeit a small one – of ordinary Londoners coming together to dance and have fun and meet people. These are the kinds of stories that I'm hoping will come through with this new generation of historians.

**Q: Was there the same push for equal rights in 1960s Britain as there was in countries like the United States?**

**A:** When I was growing up, I had the sense that that there was a civil rights struggle in America, but nothing equivalent happened in Britain. And that's not the case at all. It was different, but black people in Britain still fought against what was then described as a 'colour bar'.

There wasn't the same full-blown segregation as there was in the US, but there were many, many instances of black and Asian people wanting to go into a pub to have a pint after work, for example, and being told that they couldn't enter, or that they had to sit in a separate room away from the white patrons. There was discrimination in housing, employment and socialising, and black people in Britain were constantly fighting against it. In 1963, when the Bristol Omnibus Company

Black British civil rights campaigners drew inspiration from the activism of Dr Martin Luther King Jr (below) and the fight against apartheid in South Africa (bottom)



refused to employ black or Asian bus crews, a bus boycott was staged, and the company ultimately backed down (see page 47). The leaders of the boycott referenced what was going on in the US at the time and said that they took some inspiration from it.

So, I think there was a real awareness of the struggle for civil rights that was going on in the US, in the same way that there was an awareness within the black British community about apartheid South Africa and the struggles there, as well as decolonisation in west Africa. And black civil rights leaders from the US were visiting Britain at this time, including Malcolm X and Dr Martin Luther King Jr.

**Q: Do you think too much attention is given to the arrival of HMT Empire Windrush in 1948?**

**A:** The arrival of the *Windrush* [which brought one of the first large groups of postwar West Indian immigrants to Britain] has become an iconic moment in UK history. But it's important to remember that several other ships arrived

in the 18 months or so prior to *Windrush*, so it wasn't the first by any means.

I think, as humans, we like to ascribe a 'beginning' to historical events, and it would be wrong to ignore the big wave of postwar migration and not acknowledge that this did effectively change the face of Britain. But it's important to remember that the black presence in Britain did not begin with *Windrush*, and actually goes back a lot further.

What I've found heartening about the last few years is that there is a growing appetite for black history that's not just centred around the *Windrush* and the stories of the people who arrived in the years after 1948. We're really starting to branch out in terms of the black history that we're telling our children, and that's a great thing. It's time to hear some new stories. 📍

INTERVIEW: CHARLOTTE HODGMAN

**HANNAH CUSWORTH** is a historian who specialises in black British histories. Formerly a schoolteacher, she is currently completing a PhD with English Heritage looking at mahogany, race and the 18th-century Atlantic world



A c1975 photograph shows men outside the Markham Arms in Chelsea – a popular pub among members of London's gay community. New research is starting to uncover queer black British history

**“THERE IS A GROWING APPETITE FOR BLACK HISTORY NOT JUST CENTRED AROUND WINDRUSH”**



Designer and creative producer Jahnvi Inness with her artwork *Black British History Quilt*, featuring the names of black people who resided in Britain between the 17th and 19th centuries

The forts along Hadrian's Wall on Rome's northern frontier were more multicultural than long believed. At Burgh-by-Sands were the "Aurelian Moors" from Mauretania



## THE AFRICAN GOVERNOR

Although his time in Britannia was brief, Quintus Lollius Urbicus changed the frontier with a wall beyond Hadrian's

When Quintus Lollius Urbicus arrived in what is now southern Scotland in the late 130s AD, he must have felt a long way from home. Born in the Roman city of Tiddis (modern-day Algeria) three decades earlier, he found himself in cooler, windier and rainier climes: the restive northern borders of the empire. And there – according to a smattering of contemporary inscriptions and the *Historia Augusta* – he made quite the impression.

That is because Lollius Urbicus was no average Roman visitor. He had been dispatched to the province as its governor, and top of his in-tray when taking up his new position appears to have been conquering the region of southern Scotland.

How exactly Britain's African governor went about achieving this is unclear. Inscriptions dated to the early 140s AD suggest that he planned the attack from the fort of Corbridge just to the rear of Hadrian's Wall. From there, it seems, he drove north and established a number of garrison forts, leading to the capture of the Caledonian hillfort of Burnswark Hill around AD 140. Perhaps most significantly of all, Lollius Urbicus oversaw the initial stages of construction of the Antonine Wall. Snaking across the central belt of Scotland, this

became the empire's new northernmost frontier.

Lollius Urbicus' stay in Britannia was a short one – by the mid-140s AD, he had returned to Rome – but his legacy remains.



This towering sculpture of a Roman soldier's head stands on the site of Lollius Urbicus' greatest achievement in Britannia: the Antonine Wall

features. Meanwhile, analysis of four Roman Londoners found that two may have come from north Africa; the same location as the 'Ivory Bangle Lady' – a high-status woman from fourth-century York, so named for the jewellery found with her skeleton (see page 36).

The finds tell us something else. The African population occupied all strata of society, from slaves to provincial governors – in AD 139, Quintus Lollius Urbicus, from modern-day Algeria, was appointed as Rome's top man in Britannia (see box, right). Even the emperor himself was part of the African presence. When Rome was plunged into civil war at the end of the second century, one man emerged victorious: Septimius Severus. Born in the city of Leptis Magna (modern-day Libya), in seizing power he became the first African emperor of Rome. What's more, for the final years of his life, Severus was primarily based in Britannia.

In his 18-year reign, he built a reputation as an accomplished if ruthless leader, who launched a series of campaigns north of Hadrian's Wall to unite the island under the Roman imperium. Incidentally, according to the *Historia Augusta*, he met during his time in Britannia an Ethiopian soldier who offered him "a garland of cypress-boughs". While Severus failed in his conquests, dying in Eboracum (York) in AD 211, his influence was profound.

African people traded, settled, married and died in Britannia for two centuries after Severus' demise. But with the end of Roman Britain and a patchwork of Anglo-Saxon kingdoms coming to dominate the former province, the evidence of an African population was all but lost from the records.

of the wall, tells us of a unit of "Aurelian Moors" hailing from the two Roman provinces that made up Mauretania in modern-day Morocco; while Birdoswald Roman Fort, Cumbria, is home to the tombstone of legionary Gaius Cossutius Saturninus, born in Hippo Regius (modern-day Algeria).

Of course, not all African people in Britannia were in the forts dotted along Hadrian's Wall; recent finds are suggesting that men and women set up home in cities, too. Between 2010 and 2015, some 83 skeletons dating to the second century were discovered in a Roman graveyard in Leicester, six of which had African cranial

# BLACK BRITANNIA

Archaeological studies show that people of African origin were living in Roman Britain – and they weren't just slaves

If you visit Arbeia South Shields Roman Fort, which once guarded the main eastern sea route to Hadrian's Wall, it will not be long before you encounter Victor. Or, at least, you will encounter a memorial to Victor: he has been dead for around 1,900 years, and time has not been overly kind to his rather grand tombstone since half of his likeness has long been destroyed.

Still, there he is in sandstone form: reclining gracefully on a couch in a beltless tunic, holding a drinking cup in one hand and a garland in the other. Its size suggests he was a person of importance when he died in the second century AD, his age being given as 20.

Or, if not that, Victor must have been held in great affection by whoever commissioned the tombstone.

The former is not the case, since the inscription at the bottom tells us that Victor died a freed slave, but the latter is clear to see. The memorial was constructed by a local cavalry commander named Numirianus, the previous 'owner' of Victor, who came from "natione Maurum", "land of the Moors".

For many years, the revelation that a man from north Africa lived and died in Roman Britain would have come as something of a surprise. It shouldn't. Over the past decades, a growing body of evidence, from inscriptions to human



A bronze bust of Septimius Severus (r193–211 AD), who was born in Leptis Magna – making him a north African emperor

remains, has emerged to challenge the widely held assumption that Roman Britain was exclusively populated by white Europeans. In fact, it appears the province attracted migrants from across the known world, including Africa.

And perhaps nowhere in all of Britannia would have been more multicultural than the place Numirianus and Victor called home: Hadrian's Wall. This 73-mile-long fortification on the northern frontier was garrisoned by troops from all over Rome's vast empire. That is not to mention the merchants, wives and children living and working there, too. A third-century AD inscription at Burgh-by-Sands, at the western end



TOP LEFT: The damaged tombstone of freed slave Victor, at Arbeia South Shields Roman Fort

LEFT: The ruins of the theatre of Sabratha, a Roman city in modern-day Libya. North Africans made their way to Britannia and settled there

That didn't mean they vanished. A north African cleric, Hadrian, would see to that. In the late 660s AD, he and his colleague Theodore of Tarsus were tasked by Pope Vitalian to educate the people of the "outermost edge of the world". It was a mission that, over 40 years, Hadrian – this "man of African race", as described by the historian Bede – embarked upon with enormous skill and determination. What he achieved was nothing less than a renaissance in learning that made England a cultural hotbed of Europe.

As archaeology is making abundantly clear, African people have been making Britain their home for millennia. But not many had a greater impact on the nation's trajectory than Hadrian. **WORDS: SPENCER MIZEN**

# SOURCE SECRETS

**Hannah Cusworth** discusses the fascinating array of documents and techniques that researchers can use to study black British history

## SCIENTIFIC ANALYSIS OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL FINDS

▼ Much of the evidence of a black presence in Britain before the 1500s comes from a range of rapidly improving scientific techniques. By extracting and sequencing DNA samples from a skeleton, then comparing it to modern profiles, it is possible to determine skin and eye colour. Isotope analysis of the enamel from a skeleton's teeth can help work out where that person grew up, too, as well as their diet and whether the water they drank when they were younger matches the water found where they were buried.

Using methods like these, a team at the University of Reading concluded

that a skeleton found in York (the 'Ivory Bangle Lady', so named for the jewellery she was buried with) was likely a high-status Roman woman, who had grown up somewhere warmer than northern England, with one parent likely from north Africa.

Similarly, bioarchaeologists at the Museum of London recently studied the skeletons of 14th-century victims of the Black Death buried in a cemetery in East Smithfield, London. Using a form of forensic archaeology, it was concluded that four of the female bodies were likely to be of mixed heritage, and three were of African descent.



Black people are more easily identifiable in Tudor documents than earlier sources thanks to the introduction of more stringent record-keeping practices

## CHURCH RECORDS AND LEGAL DOCUMENTS

▲ The parish records and official documents being kept by the Tudor era provide insights into the lives of black British individuals. Historians have argued that it was during this time that modern ideas of race were beginning to develop, and many documents give us an idea of someone's skin colour.

The descriptors used change over time. In Tudor times, for example, "blackamore" and "Ethiophe" were more common, before generally being replaced with "negro" or "black" by the Georgian and Victorian periods. Parish registers also recorded the baptisms, marriages and burials of black Britons in major cities and in villages, from Cornwall to Lancashire.

In the British Caribbean, where racial slavery underpinned everything, the recording of a person's race was much more systematic. From inventories (lists of someone's possessions at their death), it can be determined that free people of colour – some who were born free, and some who became free in their lifetime – occasionally died wealthy. Susannah Augier, the 18th-century daughter of a planter and an enslaved woman in Jamaica, died owning fine mahogany furniture, silver plate, and even enslaved people herself.

The skull of the 'Ivory Bangle Lady', alongside items found with her remains. Scientific analysis has shown that she had north African heritage

## PAINTINGS AND PHOTOGRAPHS

▼ The Westminster Tournament Roll – depicting a joust held in 1511 by Henry VIII – features two images of a black trumpeter. Surrounded by other (white) trumpeters, the man is dressed in yellow and grey livery, and the royal standard hangs from the instrument. Other records reveal him to be John Blanke, a "Blacked trumpet" who petitioned for higher wages (and received them), and was given a wedding gift of a violet velvet gown and hat.

Within 100 or so years, another way of depicting black people had become common. When having a portrait done, it became fashionable

for wealthy white sitters to be shown alongside a black servant or attendant, who, in many cases, were essentially enslaved people. For example, in Sir Peter Lely's portrait of Elizabeth Murray, Lady Tollemache (pictured, below left), an unnamed black individual holds a dish of roses. This was part of a wider practice for those who made their money from plantation slavery to parade black people as fashion accessories.

Victorian records don't always state a person's race, so historians such as Caroline Bressey have used photography when researching black British history in this era. By the late

19th century, institutions such as asylums, children's homes and prisons utilised new technology and included photographic portraits in their case files. These provide invaluable evidence of everyday black lives, although many were likely taken without consent.

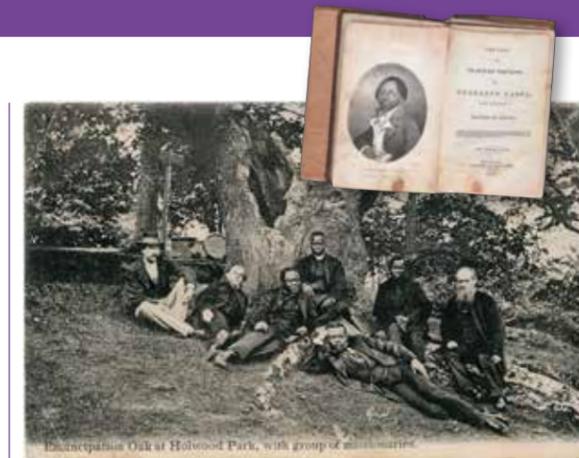


LEFT: Sir Peter Lely's painting of Elizabeth Murray, c1651, shows her alongside a young black servant or attendant

BELOW: A Victorian gentleman takes a stroll along Morecambe promenade – a snippet of black British life thanks to the advent of photography



**"PHOTOGRAPHY IS A VITAL SOURCE FOR BLACK BRITISH HISTORY DURING THE VICTORIAN PERIOD"**



MAIN: Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther (centre) with missionaries in 1873  
TOP RIGHT: The frontispiece and title page of Olaudah Equiano's 1789 memoir

## THE WRITINGS OF BLACK BRITONS

▲ From the Georgian period onwards, the voices of black Britons themselves enter the list of available historical sources. For instance, for researchers investigating the fight for freedom and abolition, both Olaudah Equiano and Mary Prince's autobiographies (see page 42) give first-hand insights into the horrors of slavery.

We also have access to personal letters, particularly from more privileged black Georgians, such as Catherine Despard, a mixed-race Jamaican woman. As part of her campaign against the imprisonment of her husband, Edward, an Irish radical, she wrote numerous protest letters, one of which was read out in parliament.

Another key voice is Samuel Ajayi Crowther, the first African Anglican bishop in west Africa. Freed from slavery in 1821, he was resettled in Sierra Leone and briefly educated in England. He later authored several books, mostly focused on the Yoruba language and history.

By the 20th century, a rich textual archive had been left by black Britons, from speeches against racism to accounts of everyday life. ◉

**HANNAH CUSWORTH** is a historian who specialises in black British histories. Formerly a schoolteacher, she is currently completing a PhD with English Heritage looking at mahogany, race and the 18th-century Atlantic world

# SLAVERY'S PAINFUL LEGACY

Teni Gogo reveals why the British empire's role in transporting millions of African people overseas not only changed what it meant to be 'black', but also 'British'

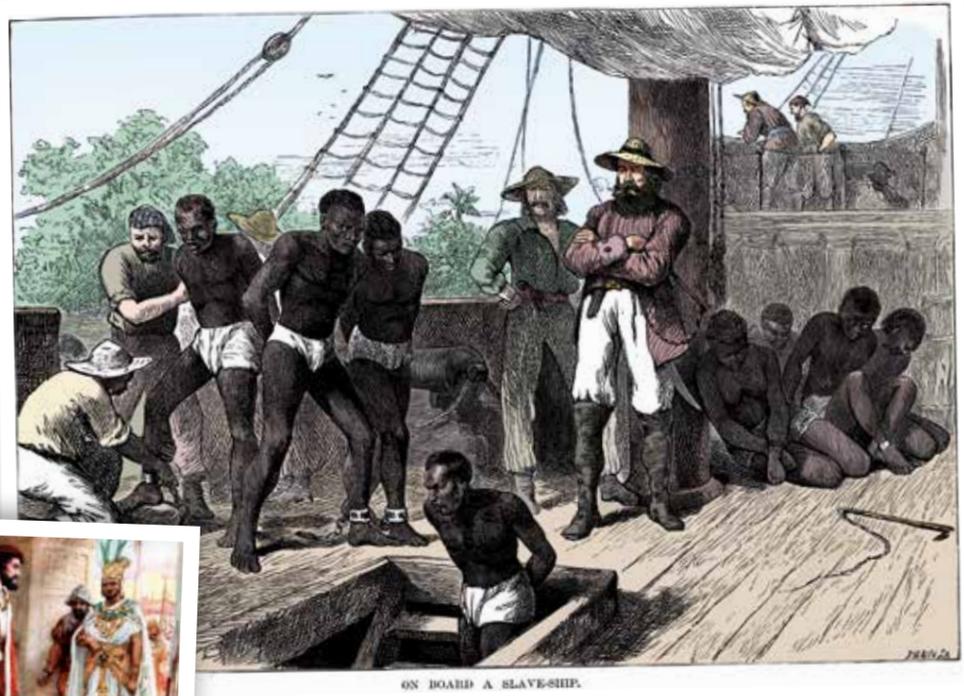
For centuries, the British empire was one of the major European powers leading the largest forced migration of any people group in history: the transatlantic slave trade. Among the most immediate consequences was, of course, the African diaspora that spread across both the Americas and Europe, and, in the aftermath of slavery's eventual abolition, the empire's colonisation of whole sections of Africa. Until the 1940s, migration from Britain's Caribbean and African colonies would be slow but steady, before rising sharply in the years immediately after World War II.

As such, the face of Britain in the age of empire was ever changing. The small, but significant black population would grow to become a defining feature of British culture, making contributions to everything from legislation and the economy to food, music and culture. Therefore, any understanding of black British history requires a clear understanding of the impact of the empire.

## RICHES AND RACE

By the early 20th century, the British empire ruled over 400 million people, making it the largest empire in history. However, in considering its origins centuries earlier, there is ongoing debate among historians about the motivations behind the empire. Britain's desire for financial gain is unanimously accepted, but it is the magnitude of this desire that is up for continued discussion. Regardless, this desire would shape the actions of British authorities from the 17th century onwards.

By the 16th century, Spain had built a thriving empire, colonising much of South America and controlling around 80 per cent of the world's supply of



ON BOARD A SLAVE-SHIP.

silver. The British envied the Spanish success and were willing to go to

great lengths to match and surpass their wealth. Be it for protection, international reputation, monetary gain, or the proposed intention to see those in other lands converted to Christianity – the British sought their own grand version.

The pursuit of this goal was inevitably going to have enduring ramifications for the indigenous peoples of the lands targeted by the British. To justify the seizing of land and colonising of the settled peoples there, a narrative needed to be entrenched not only in the minds

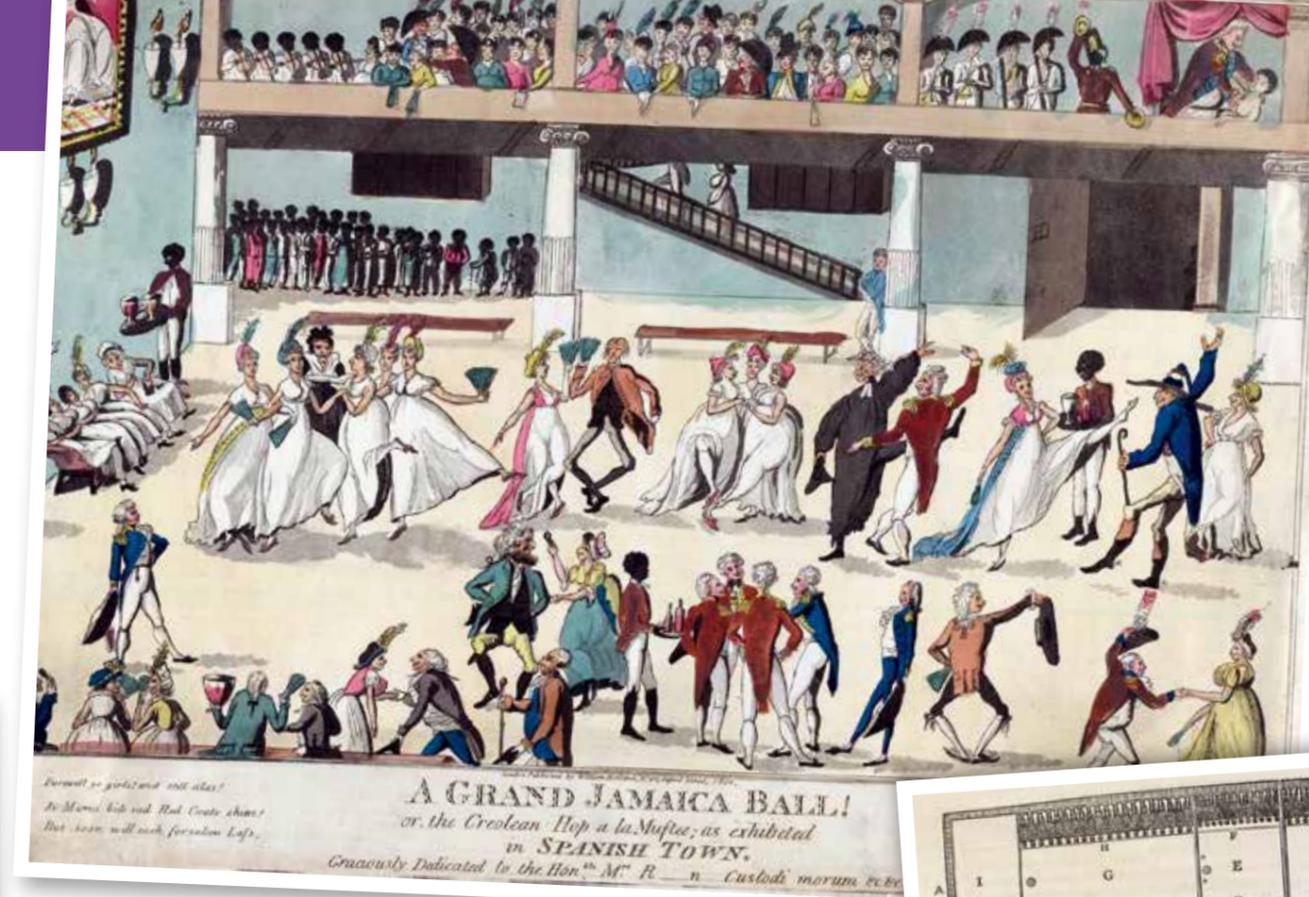
of those leading the expeditions, but also in the minds of those at home, so that they would fully support Britain's international ventures. This narrative was one of racial superiority.

While such views were far from new in the 17th century, they took on a more aggressive form in the race to control lands across the Americas, Asia and Africa. The European belief in their racial superiority would define attitudes towards the black communities – and other ethnic groups – that they encountered for centuries to come. Across the empire, indigenous people were often characterised as 'uncivilised', simply due to the fact that their ways of life were different to what was known

and acceptable in Europe. The main mark of difference was the complexion of their skin. The British presented themselves as the 'superior' race looking to share their own civilisation with these 'inferior' indigenous groups. As a result, building an empire, and making fortunes in the process, could be done in the name of acting as a civilising force.

**THE JOURNEY FROM HELL**  
The goal of civilising the peoples of Africa took on an even more inhumane form in the transatlantic slave trade. As tens of millions of Africans were forcibly transported to the Americas, Europeans developed an unerring belief in their racial superiority. This manifested itself in the appalling treatment of enslaved people and later in genocides and legislation that would continue to oppress black communities long after slavery had been abolished.

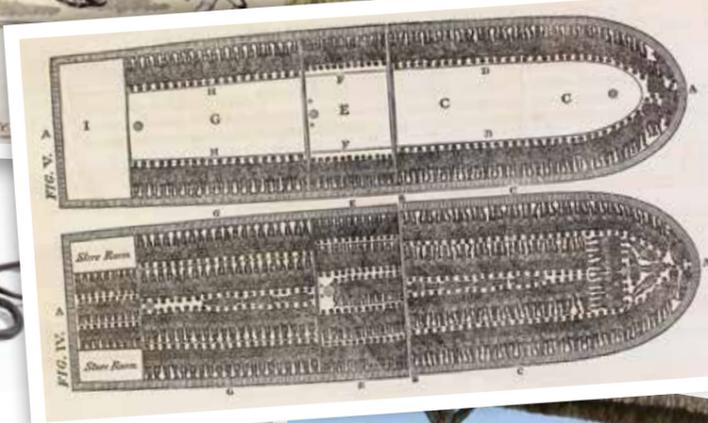
It is thought that around 2 million died in the horrors of the 'middle passage', the journey from the west African coast to the colonies in the Americas and the Caribbean. Many perished during the months held in dark cellars in coastal forts waiting for slave ships, or from the squalor and rampant diseases experienced on board, where those being transported were shackled and packed into the hold for the duration of the weeks-long voyage. Others chose to jump overboard for fear of what lay ahead, many succumbed to the brutality of the slave traders, and many died resisting enslavement. Around one in 10 ships experienced a revolt.



LEFT: An 1802 print depicts British men and women attending "a grand Jamaica ball" while surrounded by enslaved people

BELOW LEFT: Slaves were transported across the Atlantic while bound in shackles, like those shown here

BELOW RIGHT: This 1787 diagram, showing the crowded conditions of the British slave ship *Brookes*, was used by abolitionists to highlight the cruelty of the trade



RIGHT: As soon as they landed in the Americas, captured Africans were sold to the highest bidder. Most ended up working on plantations

LEFT: A c1900 image shows British colonial administrators issuing a proclamation in the Nigerian village of Akano, c1900, pledging to restore "peace and law and order"

the Spanish and Portuguese colonies in South America. The dehumanisation continued and, in many cases, worsened. The first slave code, passed in Barbados in 1661, defined the enslaved as "a heathenish, brutish and uncertain dangerous pride of people", confirming their status as legal property. The US Constitution – written in 1787, nearly 80 years before slavery was abolished in that nation – branded them as "three-fifths" of a person when it came to counting





A c1765 painting of the 3rd Duke of Richmond out shooting with his "servant" – a young black boy



LEFT: *The Captive Slave* (1827) by John Philip Simpson was first exhibited in Britain at the height of the abolition debate

BELOW: Descendants of slaves, such as the men of the British West Indies Regiment, would go on to fight for the empire during World War I



**"BLACK CHILDREN BECAME A SIGN OF WEALTH, TO BE GIFTED TO ELITE FAMILIES IN BRITAIN"**

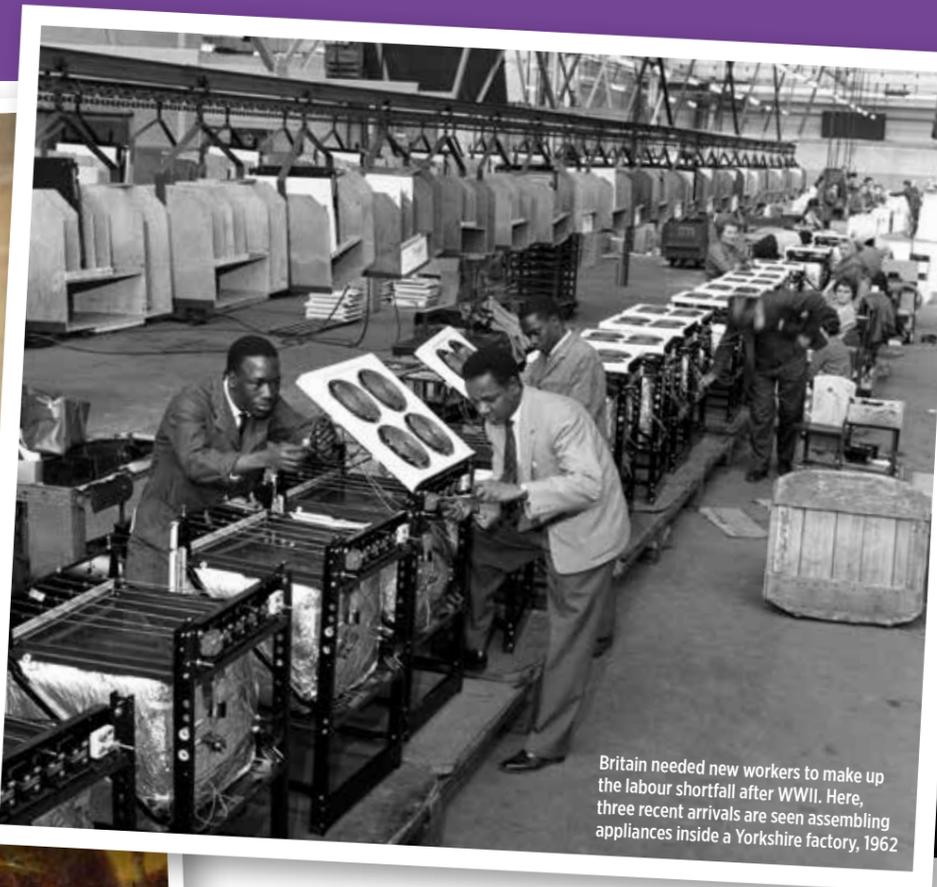
◀ the population or determining taxation and electoral representation.

Although the vast majority of enslaved people never set foot on British soil, they are an integral part of black British history. And there were those who were brought back across the Atlantic. Their experiences were often less violent, but in many cases more complicated than those on the plantations. Young black children became a sign of wealth, to be bought and gifted to elite families in Britain. As slavery was never technically legal there, they lived as servants and attendants. They would not have been exempt from the physical and sexual abuse faced on plantations – they were not dissimilar from a 'house slave' in the Caribbean, enslaved in all but name.

**ACROSS THE ATLANTIC**

That said, there were some fortunate enough to enter families who saw them as humans, to be educated and cared for. Occasionally, black Britons were embraced by their white families, a notable example being Dido Elizabeth Belle, raised as a freewoman by her great-uncle William Murray, 1st Earl of Mansfield (see also page 31). She was a rare example, for she was also written into Lord Mansfield's will. Most black Britons, if released from service after a death, ended up fending for themselves on the streets.

By 1772, Britain was transporting approximately 42,000 Africans to the



Britain needed new workers to make up the labour shortfall after WWII. Here, three recent arrivals are seen assembling appliances inside a Yorkshire factory, 1962



TOP RIGHT: A 1950 photograph by Bert Hardy, part of a series of images depicting the diverse community of Butetown, Cardiff, shows a trio of young children at play

ABOVE RIGHT: Another Bert Hardy image shows Lena and Olive Thornhill reading a newspaper with fellow Butetown resident Edward Cousins

Americas each year. Meanwhile, around 15,000 black people lived in England. That year, the Somerset case – judged by Lord Mansfield – ruled it illegal to forcefully remove an enslaved person from the country. This case came to symbolise freedom for black Britons as it was taken to declare slavery illegal as a whole. Many in servitude were able to live free lives and become successful entrepreneurs, such as George Africanus and Cesar Picton.

Yet, the nature of ideas like that of racial superiority does not distinguish between one black community and another. Neither does it disappear with new legislation, even something as significant as the abolition of slavery across the empire. As such, descendants of enslaved people and members of the Afro-Caribbean communities had to battle against British authorities and citizens still entrenched in imperial notions of their own racial superiority. It is no surprise that the most influential black Britons of this period were abolitionists: a symbol of perseverance and determination against enduring oppression that would be passed down through the generations to Britain's civil rights movement.

In 1834, the Slavery Abolition Act came into effect across the empire, with the apprenticeship system that followed ending in 1838. The process was far from smooth; it was a culmination of centuries of slave revolts and decades

of intense protesting by abolitionists, both black and white. But while it was a moment celebrated by those no longer to be enslaved, the slave owners had reason for their own celebrations, since the government paid out £20m (around £17bn today) in compensation for the "loss of property".

These massive payments served to cement the belief that it was right to regard enslaved people as property, if their loss needed to be accounted for financially. This was exacerbated by the fact that nothing was paid to freed people, either. It would be a long and continued struggle before the same British authorities would outlaw discrimination on the basis of race.

**A DIVERSE SOCIETY**

Slavery may have come to an end in the empire, but the colonisation of west Africa was in full swing. As colonies were established, there was an increase in the migration of people from them to Britain. Descendants of enslaved people in the Caribbean were also part of this slow but steady migration in the 20th century. Many men would go on to fight for the British in both world wars.

The enduring legacy of the British empire has been felt by many people around the world, and in myriad ways. Through the lens of black British history, it is possible to see that it shaped and reinforced ideas of racial superiority that enabled Britain to play a leading role in the transatlantic slave trade; to colonise the land of more than 400 million people; and to leave a legacy of racism that is pervasive in society today. It provides the context for the activism of many key black Britons in history.

However, the empire also provides a deeper understanding of the black British community and the richness and complexities of its culture, the results of which can still be seen. London, for instance, is brimming with streets full of Caribbean cuisine and west African delicacies, and every summer Notting Hill spills over with explosions of music, food and festival celebration to commemorate the work of various individuals.

These individuals persevered against colour bars in Bristol (see page 47) and race riots in Brixton so that today we might be able to look back at black British history and acknowledge the hardships, but also celebrate the diversity of society. ◉

**TENI GOGO** is a history teacher who has spent much of her career exploring black British history. She is currently a postgraduate student at the University of Oxford as an action research fellow for the Empire, Migration and Belonging Project

# 13 INFLUENTIAL BLACK BRITONS YOU MAY NOT HAVE HEARD OF

We delve into the lives of more than a dozen pioneering politicians, performers and public figures who deserve to be better known

## OLAUDAH EQUIANO (c1745–97)

▼ The title may be wordy by modern standards, but *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, Or Gustavus Vassa, The African* was a literary sensation in Georgian Britain. With multiple editions printed in its author's own lifetime, the memoir tells an extraordinary story of childhood enslavement – and of emancipation and activism. It was a key text in helping to secure the passing of the Slave Trade Act 1807, which outlawed the slave trade in the British empire.

Equiano's life began in the Kingdom of Benin (in modern-day Nigeria), where he was captured prior to being transported to the Caribbean. Having purchased his own freedom in 1766 and travelled extensively, Equiano permanently settled in London. Here, he became active in the Sons of Africa, a group of freedmen who campaigned for the abolitionist cause. Equiano was a central figure in telling the world about the *Zong* massacre, the mass killing of more than 140 Africans aboard a British slave ship.



The only known portrait of Olaudah Equiano, which appeared on the title page of his landmark 1789 autobiography



## MARY PRINCE (c1788–after 1833)

▲ Born in Bermuda, Mary Prince composed the first memoir of a black female slave to be published in the United Kingdom. Like Olaudah Equiano's earlier autobiography, *The History of Mary Prince* (1831) helped to galvanise support for the abolitionist cause, and was important in the run-up to the passing of the Slavery Abolition Act in 1833.

From a 21st-century perspective, it seems remarkable that Prince ever got the opportunity to share her experiences so widely. Over an eventful life, she was sold multiple times, and spent time working in the salt ponds of the Turks and Caicos Islands, where conditions were notoriously bad.

Salvation came when Prince's fourth owner, John Adams Wood, took her to London in 1828. Here, Prince left the Wood family after meeting abolitionist Thomas Pringle, who edited her memoir. Little is known of her later years, although she may have died in Antigua after returning to the Caribbean to be with her husband.

ABOVE: A plaque commemorating Mary Prince, erected close to the site of her former home in Bloomsbury, London. No images exist of the 19th-century author

RIGHT: Prince's groundbreaking 1831 memoir has been published numerous times – this edition dates from 2005



## BILL RICHMOND (1763–1829)

▼ Despite not finding fame as a bare-knuckle pugilist until he reached his 40s, welterweight Bill 'The Black Terror' Richmond was one of his era's most famous boxers. So tough was he that, aged 51, he took on 27-year-old Tom Shelton and overcame an eye injury to best the younger contender over 23 rounds.

It was a late-blooming career that owed much to the soldier Lord Hugh Percy, who saw the teenage Richmond, then enslaved, fight a New York tavern brawl during the American War of Independence. In 1777, Percy arranged for Richmond's freedom, and Richmond emigrated to England, where he was educated and apprenticed to a cabinetmaker.

Richmond was charming and witty, which helped him move in high society.

He was an usher at George IV's coronation and, in the 1820s, ran a pub, where he dispensed boxing advice to the likes of Lord Byron and essayist William Hazlitt. Boxer William Mondrich in the Netflix series *Bridgerton* is based on Richmond.



An illustration depicting Bill Richmond in 1810, at the height of his boxing career

## OLIVE MORRIS (1952–79)

► In November 1969, the Nigerian diplomat Clement Gomwalk parked his Mercedes-Benz outside Desmond's Hip City, the first black record shop in Brixton, south London. Police pulled Gomwalk from his car and assaulted him. A crowd had gathered to protest and several people were arrested, including teenager Olive Morris.

This was a watershed moment in her life as, Morris later recounted, she was threatened with rape, beaten, and subsequently convicted of assaulting a police officer.

Radicalised, Morris joined the youth section of the British Black Panthers, a prelude to founding the socialist-feminist Brixton Black Women's Group. She was active in the squatting movement and, after getting a degree in economics and social sciences, worked at the Brixton Community Law Centre.

An inspirational figure who died tragically young of non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, Morris was commemorated on the £1 note of local currency the Brixton Pound. In 1980, poet Linton Kwesi Johnson dedicated *Jamaica Lullaby* to Morris.

Despite her premature death, aged just 27, Olive Morris is remembered as one of the most influential black British female activists of the 1970s

## OTTOBAH CUGOANO (c1757–after 1791)



◀ After being captured on the Gold Coast (modern-day Ghana), Ottobah Cugoano, baptised John Stuart, was transported to

Grenada as a teenager. Freedom arrived when his owner, Alexander Campbell, brought Cugoano to England.

Working as a servant for artists Richard and Maria Cosway, Cugoano came to the attention of poet William Blake, and even the Prince of Wales learned of his story. Active in the Sons of Africa, Cugoano became a writer, and played a key role in freeing a kidnapped man, Henry Demane, who was due to be shipped to the Caribbean.

## ARTHUR WHARTON (1865–1930)



◀ In 1875, Arthur Wharton left the Gold Coast to attend school in London, where he also later trained as a missionary. But his true calling was as an athlete. In 1886, he ran 100 yards in 10 seconds, later ratified as a world record.

Despite his sprinting prowess, it was as a goalkeeper that Wharton found fame, becoming part of the Preston North End team that reached the FA Cup semi-final in 1887. He is believed to have been the world's first black professional footballer.

## HAROLD MOODY (1882–1947)



◀ In 1910, Jamaica-born Harold Moody, who finished top of his class at King's College London, qualified as a doctor. Because of

prejudice he was unable to find a job, so he set up his own practice in Peckham.

These experiences played into his decision to found The League of Coloured Peoples (LCP) in 1931, an organisation whose earliest members included future Kenyan president Jomo Kenyatta. The group campaigned against the 'colour bar' in an era when black Britons faced overt prejudice in the workplace, in their social lives, and when trying to find housing.

## SAM BEAVER KING (1926–2016)



◀ In 1947, Sam Beaver King returned to his native Jamaica from Britain after serving as an RAF engineer. But he couldn't settle into

civilian life, and so, when he saw an advert for tickets aboard the *Empire Windrush*, he returned to the UK in 1948.

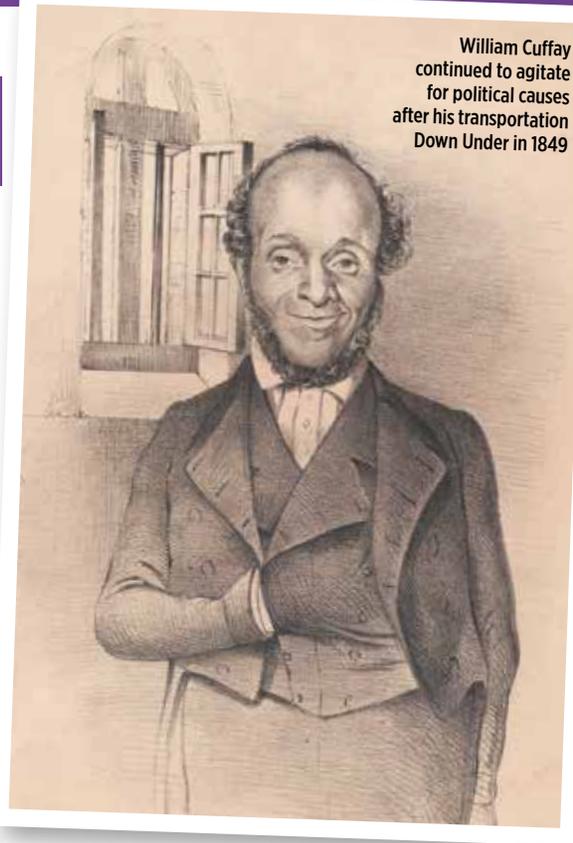
King became a key figure in London's Caribbean community and was elected mayor of Southwark in 1983. Later, he co-founded the Windrush Foundation and called for the date of the *Windrush's* arrival to be marked by a public holiday.



## WILLIAM CUFFAY (1788-1870)

► To those in power in the 1840s, William Cuffay was a dangerous radical, a man who would be banished to Van Diemen's Land (now Tasmania) after being tried for "conspiring to levy war" against Queen Victoria. So notorious was Cuffay that William Makepeace Thackeray dubbed him a "pore old blackmore rogue" in the poem *The Three Christmas Waits* (1848).

So what made the authorities so nervous of a 4ft 11in-tall, Kent-born tailor? It was because Cuffay was a leading light in the Chartist movement, which campaigned for voting reform. In 1848, he helped to organise a massive rally on Kennington Common. Moreover, Cuffay was among Chartists who thought violence might be needed to achieve the movement's aims.



William Cuffay continued to agitate for political causes after his transportation Down Under in 1849

NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY LONDON XI, ALAMY X2, MIRRORPIX XI, GETTY XI



## MARGARET BUSBY (1944-)

▼ It's difficult to overstate the importance of *Daughters of Africa*. Published in 1992, it ran to more than 1,000 pages, and collected pieces by more than 200 women from Africa and the African diaspora, including oral poetry and works from ancient times.

Few would have had the knowledge to assemble such a collection, but the book's editor Margaret Busby drew on experience accumulated over a trailblazing career. Born in Accra, Gold Coast (now Ghana), she was educated in England and, with her business partner Clive Allison (1944-2011), set up the publishing company Allison and Busby in 1967. She was the UK's first African woman book publisher and also its youngest.

In a career that has also encompassed writing for radio and the stage, she has, in the words of novelist Zadie Smith, "been a cheerleader, instigator, organiser, defender and celebrator of black arts... shouting about us from the rooftops, even back when few people cared to listen".

Margaret Busby pictured in 1971, four years after founding the publishing house Allison and Busby with her husband

## IRA ALDRIDGE (1807-67)



◀ Opportunities for black thespians in the 19th-century US were limited. So it was that, in 1824, having gained some acting experience

in New York, Ira Aldridge decided to emigrate. In Britain, he became a star, renowned for his appearances in Shakespeare plays and becoming the first African-American to manage a British theatre (the Coventry Theatre).

Around the time of his death, it was reported Aldridge had planned to tour the US. Although this never happened, he was an inspiration to many African-Americans, and his name was adopted by several amateur acting troupes when news of his passing was circulated.

## BETTY CAMPBELL (1934-2017)



◀ Growing up in working-class Butetown, Cardiff, Betty Campbell was determined to become a teacher. Top of her

class, Campbell won a scholarship to the Lady Margaret High School for Girls, but latterly had to overcome huge hurdles to achieve her ambition – not least falling pregnant during her A-levels.

Ultimately, though, as the first black headteacher in Wales, Campbell became a nationally important figure, someone who pioneered teaching children about black history, slavery and apartheid. In 1998, Campbell met Nelson Mandela on his only visit to Wales.

## IGNATIUS SANCHO (c1729-80)



◀ Born on a slave ship, the life of writer, composer and abolitionist Ignatius Sancho began in dire circumstances. Aged

two, Sancho was taken to England, where he was gifted to three sisters in Greenwich. Here, he encountered the Duke of Montagu (1690-1749), who encouraged him to become educated.

Working as a servant for the Montagu family, Sancho gained a foothold in society and became a friend to Thomas Gainsborough, who painted his portrait. He then became a shopkeeper in Mayfair, which gave him time to write the works that cemented his reputation. 📍

WORDS: JONATHAN WRIGHT

# MULTICULTURAL BRITAIN IS BORN

**Sonia Grant** charts black Britain in the 20th century, through the early settlers, war, the arrival of the *Windrush*, and beyond

**F**eatured on the same page of the edition of *The Sphere* dated 3 July 1948 were two striking but juxtaposing images: the first showed the arrival of hundreds of West Indian migrants to Britain aboard HMT *Empire Windrush*; the other was of the P&O liner *Ranchi* as it set sail with English emigrants bound for a new life in Australia. In the aftermath of World War II, Britain haemorrhaged more than 2 million people as they escaped the bleakness of austerity and the hardships of rationing.

The unprecedented scale of the exodus caused Winston Churchill to plea: "I say to those that wish to leave our country... Do not desert the old land. We cannot spare you." Yet people still left in droves, and soon, labour shortages were being filled

by those arriving on ships such as the *Windrush* – whether they had come with the specific intention of finding new work opportunities, or simply wanted a chance to travel to the "mother country".

But although *Windrush* is regarded as signalling the advent of mass immigration – with its arrival at Tilbury Docks on 22 June 1948 – that does not tell the whole story. Around half a century earlier, there was a visible black presence already to be found in Britain, mainly around the port cities of London, Liverpool and Cardiff. The latter, for instance, was known to have at least 50 different nationalities overcrowded around the dock area of Butetown (also known as Tiger Bay).

**ABC Merriman-Labor, a barrister from Sierra Leone, wrote a satire in 1909, *Britons through Negro Spectacles***



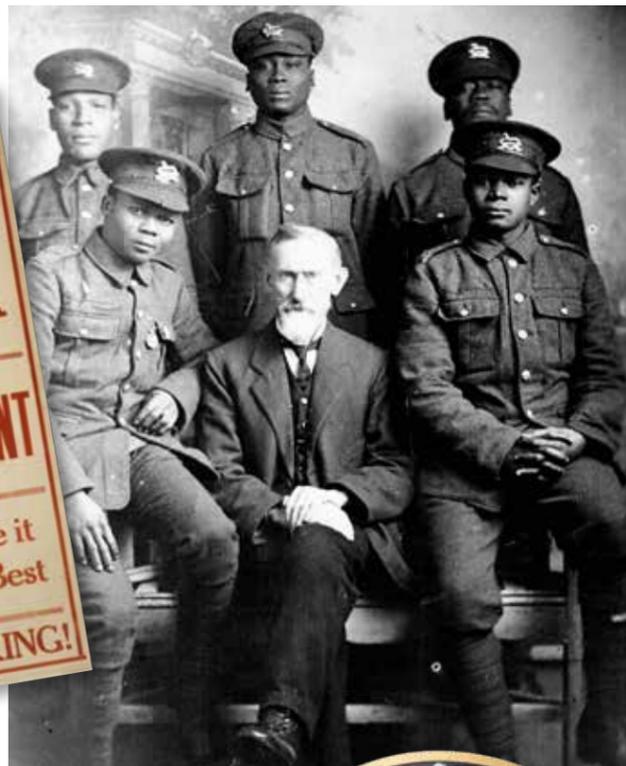
Although merchant seamen represented the largest contingent of black British subjects, there were also pockets of students, businesspeople and professionals joining these well-established communities. They were not welcomed with open arms but faced discrimination through unofficial 'colour bars', which led to political mobilisation in 1900 with Trinidadian lawyer Henry

Sylvester organising the First Pan-African Conference in London. Invariably, there were different expressions of dissatisfaction, such as by fellow barrister Augustus Boyle Chamberlayne (ABC) Merriman-Labor. Arriving from Sierra Leone in 1904, he grew disenchanted by the discrimination he experienced and, in 1909, ▶



Butetown in Cardiff has been home to a diverse community since the early 1900s

A World War I recruitment poster encourages men from the Bahamas to enlist in the British West Indies Regiment



*Old Man Trouble* how he escaped injury “by the skin of his teeth”, but a friend, Charles Wotten from Bermuda, was not as fortunate. Chased by a mob to the docks in Liverpool, he either fell or was pushed into the water and, after being pelted with stones, drowned.

Part of the government response to the riots was to escalate its repatriation scheme for subjects of colour; on offer was a small sum of money and passage on the first available ship, if they chose to leave voluntarily. Nevertheless, once order had been restored many chose to remain – having built their own lives in Britain – and, over the following decades, the black population increased. Organisations were established to meet their needs. In the 1930s, for instance, Barbadian activist Arnold Ward founded the Negro Welfare Association, which campaigned on both domestic and international issues.

**GRASSROOTS ACTIVISM**

The need to organise only intensified in the years after the arrival of the *Windrush* in 1948. The new arrivals faced many challenges and, despite being granted citizenship by the recent British Nationality Act and holding British passports, were not made to feel welcome by all. Many experienced widespread prejudices: when Mary McLachlan visited her local church and was asked not to return the following Sunday as her presence might upset parishioners, she took it upon herself to start what became the Church of God in Christ in her living room. Accommodation was also difficult to obtain and when faced with banks refusing to grant loans for mortgages or exploitative slum

landlords, most notoriously the Notting Hill-based Peter Rachman, informal community banking systems – known as *pardners*, or *susu* – sprouted up to raise funds so people could buy homes.

Such examples of grassroots activism and participation were common among black communities. In 1959, however, Dr David Pitt took the leap into electoral politics, becoming a pioneering candidate of African descent when he ran for parliament. Standing for Labour in Hampstead in London, he later recalled how a man approached him during his unsuccessful bid saying that if he did not withdraw, “We will get you and your family”. The intimidation went beyond threats: violent disturbances broke out at a hustings when members of the White Defence League gate-crashed and shouted chants of “Keep Britain white”.

As for the children of the ‘Windrush generation’, they faced their own unique challenges growing up in Britain. In his 1971 work, *How the West Indian Child Is Made Educationally Sub-normal in the British School System: The Scandal of the Black Child in Schools in Britain*, Grenadian teacher Bernard Coard criticised the disproportionate number of black children being “dumped” in Educationally Subnormal Schools (ESN) – a term derived from the 1944 Education Act to characterise young people deemed to have limited intellectual ability. He

argued some of the reasons given were spurious, such as the teachers’ inability to understand West Indian accents.

Coard’s book was met by outrage by the establishment, but inspired black communities and galvanised in the Black Education Movement, a collective which fought for equality and mitigated against injustices by organising supplementary or Saturday schools across the country.

**PLACE IN SOCIETY**

From the 1980s onwards, black Britons forged their own identity and place in society. The first Black History Month took place in 1987; the achievement of Akyaba Addai-Sebo, a special projects officer at the Greater London Council. Black entrepreneurs also came to the forefront, epitomised by the likes of Doune Alexander. With no business training, she brought her homemade remedy ‘Gamma’s Herbal Pepper Sauces’ to market; got her products on the shelves of Fortnum & Mason and Harrods; and, in 1990, opened her first factory.

In countless ways, people who came to Britain from Africa or the Caribbean, or were born to immigrant parents, changed and defined British multicultural society, and still do so. Dub poet Linton Kwesi Johnson – described as “the pulse of black British activism” – has chronicled black British history over five decades with his work. His million-selling albums of



Dr David Pitt, from Grenada, became the first person with two black parents to run for parliament. Although he never became an MP, he was appointed a life peer in the House of Lords in 1975

spoken word mixed with dub and reggae music have charted everything from sus laws (a precursor to ‘stop and search’) and the 1981 uprisings (clashes between black youths and police) in Toxteth and Brixton.

Throughout it all, Jamaican-born Johnson remained an optimist, saying at the end of the 20th century: “It’s absolutely critical that we have a historical perspective. There’s an entire generation of young blacks who have no understanding of how we got to where we are now, so no idea of how to move forward into the 21st century.”

**SONIA GRANT** is a historian, writer, researcher and photographic exhibition curator, specialising in black history

published *Britons through Negro Spectacles*, a satirical critique of life in Britain from the eyes of an outsider.

**MOBILISED AND MOBBED**

Yet with the outbreak of World War I, black British subjects and men from across the empire rallied to the cause. Nearly 16,000 volunteers enlisted with the British West Indies Regiment (BWIR), which served in supporting roles on the Western Front and saw combat in Mesopotamia (modern-day Iraq, Kuwait and parts of Iran, Syria and Turkey). By the end of the war, soldiers of the BWIR were awarded 81 medals for bravery.

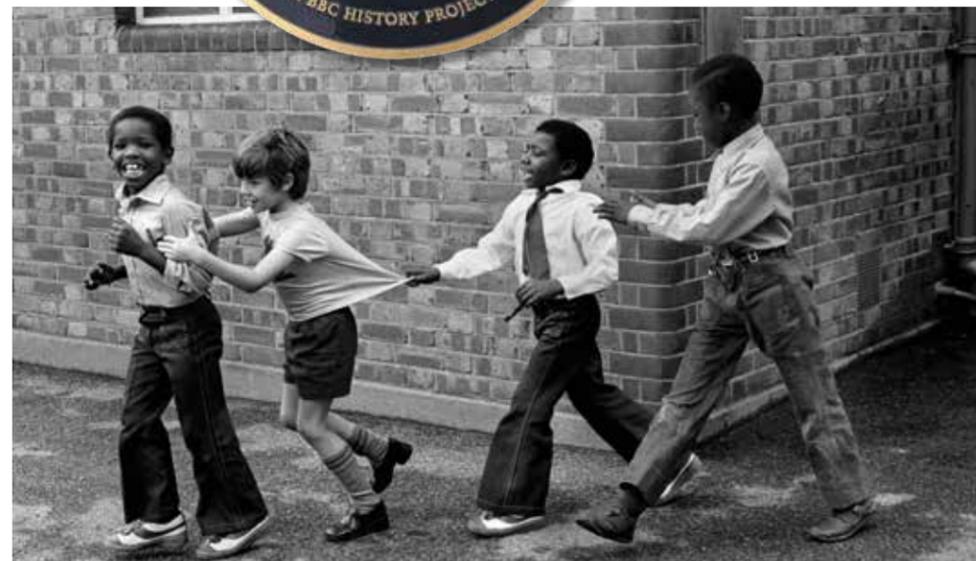
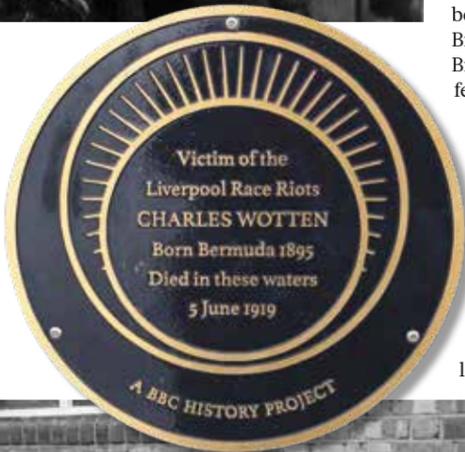
Postwar Britain, however, turned out not to be the promised “land fit for heroes” for returning troops, and high unemployment and housing shortages were blamed on “coloured foreigners”. Tensions erupted in a series of race riots from January to August 1919, breaking out in Glasgow, South Shields, Salford, London, Hull, Newport, Barry, Liverpool and Cardiff – where black communities were concentrated. Racial violence and mob rule was rife. Some 700 black residents in Liverpool had to be held in police stations for their safety, while in Whitechapel, London, Reverend Thomas Jackson of the Working Lads’ Institute sheltered some 600 former soldiers, many of them demobbed from the BWIR.

Earnest Marke, a Sierra Leonean seaman, later wrote in his biography

ABOVE: Reverend Thomas Jackson offered shelter to former West Indian soldiers in London after World War I

RIGHT: A memorial plaque for Charles Wotten, a victim of the 1919 race riots

BELOW: Black boys play with a white schoolmate, 1975



ABOVE: On a wall in Bristol is this mural honouring Roy Hackett, a leading figure in the 1963 bus boycott

RIGHT: British-born youth worker Paul Stephenson, son of a west African, was the WIDC’s charismatic spokesperson



**BRISTOL’S BUS BOYCOTT**

Inspired by Dr Martin Luther King Jr’s protest in Montgomery, Alabama, black Britons fought racism on public transport

In 1955, the Bristol Omnibus Company unofficially agreed to uphold a resolution by the local branch of the Transport and General Workers Union that no “coloured” workers should work on their buses. Even amid staff shortages, it refused to employ people of colour as drivers or conductors. By the 1960s, the West Indian Development Council (WIDC) had formed to fight this discrimination.

Led by Jamaicans Owen Henry, Roy Hackett, Audley Evans and Prince Brown – and with 26-year-old Paul Stephenson as its spokesperson – the WIDC organised a bus boycott, announced in April 1963. It gathered widespread backing: marches were held, bus depots picketed, and figures such as local MP Tony Benn and cricketer Sir Learie Constantine (by then the high commissioner for Trinidad and Tobago) voiced their support.

After four months, the Bristol Omnibus Company agreed to employ its first non-white conductor: Raghbir Singh. In 1965, the first Race Relations Act was passed, banning racial discrimination in public places, with a further Act in 1968 banning racial discrimination in housing and employment.

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HANNAH CUSWORTH ON BLACK BRITISH HISTORY TODAY



Knowing history is important, but so is taking action in the present



**B**lack British history spans thousands of years, several continents and innumerable stories. As the historian David Olusoga states in his landmark book, *Black and British*, “The black history of Britain is by its nature a global history. Yet too often it is seen as being only the history of migration, settlement and community formation in Britain itself.”

However, this history of migration and settlement, sometimes described as the black presence in Britain, is a vital part of black British history. To date, proving that black people lived, struggled and contributed to Britain has been the primary focus of historians’ work.

Thankfully, it is now much rarer than it once was to hear the refrain that there weren’t any black people in Britain before the arrival of the *Windrush* in 1948. It is due to the tireless work of scholars such as Onyeka Nubia, Gretchen Gerzina, Hakim Adi, Marika Sherwood, Miranda Kaufmann and David Olusoga that this myth is dying. Their archival digging, and powerful writing, means we now hear the histories of black Tudor trumpeters, Georgian aristocrats and World War I soldiers. The evidence is irrefutable, even if it is still challenged by a minority who refused to recognise it.

As well as a wider range of stories (some reaching back to the Roman era), as Olusoga argues, historians are increasingly recognising that black British history exists outside of Scotland, Northern Ireland, England and Wales. As Britain was an empire, many black British subjects lived beyond these shores, and so black British history is also the history of parts of the Caribbean and Africa. Increasingly, scholars are also exploring the nuances between the four nations, rather than the focus being primarily on England.

The more I study the topic, the more I realise that British history is black history. It is impossible to tell a full account of our nation’s past without acknowledging the role played by black people. Slavery, the wealth generated from it and its legacies continue to shape British life. Things that are central to our national psyche, from the Industrial Revolution to the NHS and the Commonwealth, are intricately linked to a global black British history. The way black communities have organised against injustice makes us re-examine what Britain is and was.

The theme of Black History Month 2022 is ‘Time for Change: Action Not Words’. Knowing our history is incredibly important, but so is taking action in the present and building for a better future. If you enjoyed reading this Essential Guide, share it with someone. Many of us didn’t learn about black British history in school, but I hope this collection of articles has given you a sense of how important knowing this history is to understanding Britain’s past and present. 📍

**HANNAH CUSWORTH** is a historian who specialises in black British histories. Formerly a schoolteacher, she is currently completing a PhD with English Heritage looking at mahogany, race and the 18th-century Atlantic world



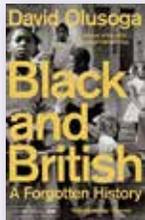
Institutions such as the NHS are intricately linked to a global black British history, says Hannah Cusworth

GETTY IMAGES XI

# GET HOOKED

If we've whetted your appetite for black British history, why not explore the topic further with our pick of books, podcasts and TV and radio programmes?

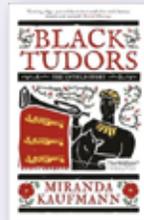
## BOOKS



### Black and British: A Forgotten History

By Prof David Olusoga  
(Pan Macmillan, 2016)

Black British history cannot be separated, or marginalised, from British history, says Prof David Olusoga in this compelling and comprehensive account, encompassing everything from Roman times to the Windrush scandal.



### Black Tudors: The Untold Story

By Dr Miranda Kaufmann  
(Oneworld Publications, 2017)

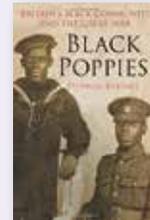
Dr Miranda Kaufmann delves deep into the archives to piece together the stories of 10 black people who lived and worked in Tudor England: from a royal trumpeter to a sailor who went on a circumnavigation of the world.



### African and Caribbean People in Britain: A History

By Prof Hakim Adi  
(Allen Lane, 2022)

This major and wide-ranging new history relates the experiences of African and Caribbean people in Britain – not just since the mid-20th century, but over the last couple of millennia. The result is a goliath achievement.



### Black Poppies: Britain's Black Community and the Great War

By Stephen Bourne  
(The History Press, 2014)

In WWI, black Britons and men from across the empire signed up to serve the 'mother country'. Their often-overlooked tales of heroism, in the face of prejudice, are brought to life here through first-hand accounts and photographs.

## ON THE BBC



### ► Britain's Black Past

[bbc.co.uk/programmes/b07wfp5v](http://bbc.co.uk/programmes/b07wfp5v)

Prof Gretchen Gerzina explores the lives of famous black figures in 18th and 19th-century Britain, from Dido Elizabeth Belle to Ignatius Sancho (pictured).



### ► The Amazing Life of Olaudah Equiano

[bbc.co.uk/programmes/m0017kj4](http://bbc.co.uk/programmes/m0017kj4)

This documentary tells the remarkable story of Olaudah Equiano: the former slave whose memoirs helped promote the abolitionist cause.



### ► Archive on 4: The British Black Panthers

[bbc.co.uk/programmes/m0007b0y](http://bbc.co.uk/programmes/m0007b0y)

Prof Kehinde Andrews (pictured) meets members of the British Black Panthers, and – with the help of numerous contributors – assesses their legacy.

## ONLINE AND AUDIO



► For podcasts, features, quizzes, interviews and more on black British history, visit our website: [historyextra.com/topic/black-history](http://historyextra.com/topic/black-history)

### ► Wartime Britain's mixed-race babies

Professor Lucy Bland discusses the childhood experiences of babies of African-American GIs stationed in Britain during World War II. Listen at [bit.ly/3quthFN](http://bit.ly/3quthFN)

### ► Black radicalism with Kehinde Andrews

Prof Kehinde Andrews offers his opinions on issues including Black History Month, reparations for slavery and history education. Listen at [bit.ly/3d8uijJ](http://bit.ly/3d8uijJ)

### ► The great British civil rights scandal: the Bristol bus boycott

Three leading figures in 1963's Bristol bus boycott talk about how their crusade changed the face of civil rights in Britain. Read at [bit.ly/3TV2GPL](http://bit.ly/3TV2GPL)

## WATCH



### Black is the New Black (streaming on BBC iPlayer)

Sir Trevor McDonald and Naomi Campbell are just two of the personalities relating their experiences of being black and British, across four illuminating episodes.



### Salt, by Selina Thompson (streaming on BBC iPlayer)

Performance artist Selina Thompson retraces the route of the transatlantic slave trade in a deeply moving and personal piece about race, colonialism, collective grief, identity and family.