

# CONNECTING HISTORIES

## Learning Package

### Commentary

#### Sources for the Study of Black History

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Amongst the many boxes of archives in Birmingham Central Library [over 64,000] there is one containing a collection of photographs depicting scenes of black life in urban Britain, amongst these images is a portrait of an elderly black man sitting in an armchair. His face is lined, his hair is white and his frame is wiry. Behind him are rows of books. There is no writing on the back of the photograph to identify him, but his face is instantly recognisable, the West Indian intellectual C. L. R. James. Walk out of the Library and across Chamberlain Square to Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery and there is a museum cabinet consisting of a set of drawers in which are carefully placed a series of coins and medals. One medal dated 1889 shows the face of Sir Sadiq Muhammad Khan, ruler of Bahawalpur. What connects these artefacts?

They are all part of the cultural heritage of Birmingham; they are locally held, but are of national significance. Cultural heritage helps us remember our local and national stories and to connect with our past histories. Each artefact in each collection has a part to play in this remembering of our collective history. Individually and collectively these artefacts also represent moments in black British history, in the stories attached to migration and settlement over centuries. In this sense, they can also be viewed as unsettling traditional ideas about what we understand to be British heritage. C. L. R. James believed that it was through black migration to Britain and white encounters with former colonial peoples that the British were forced to confront their imperial past, to abandon insularity and to look outside the myths of Empire history and to question what was familiar. The empire, as it is often put, 'came home' and challenged what it meant to be English/British. These encounters and the questions they provoked about British history, held for James and other black intellectuals, the promise of a re-imagining of the nation, its cosmopolitan history and heritage.

However, while the presence of black people in Britain in previous centuries is generally recognised the study of black British history is still a largely neglected dimension of Britain's social, cultural and political history despite the efforts of many active and committed researchers. One of the purposes of the *Connecting Histories* project is to try and increase the number of active researchers by sharing current knowledge and promote understanding of the issues around researching the black presence in British history. So what do we currently know about this history and, particularly, the stories associated with Birmingham?

Although there is evidence for the presence of black soldiers among the Roman legions stationed in Britain no traces of an African presence in the West Midlands has yet been uncovered before that associated with the development of the English slave trade and plantation slavery in the Caribbean. That said at Wall Roman site near Lichfield recent finds include a statuette of a black wrestler. Wall was the staging post for imperial messengers using Watling Street; the main route connecting London to Wroxeter and Chester, and Wroxeter, itself was the fourth largest city in Roman Britain. The history of the black presence in the West Midlands generally mirrors the history of the black community in Britain. The black population was geographically scattered

across the region, living in small towns and rural areas. The earliest reference we currently have about the black presence in Birmingham is an entry in a burial register for Ann Pinard, 'a Black', buried at St Philips, Birmingham, 12 January 1773. In the area around Birmingham there are fragments of evidence pointing to a presence dating back to at least the sixteenth century:

1575 A group of black musicians and dancers are shown in Marcus Gheeraerts' painting of Queen Elizabeth 1 and her court at Kenilworth, Warwickshire.

c1630 Portrait of William Fielding, 1PstP Earl of Denbigh, Newnham Paddox, near Rugby, accompanied by an Indian servant, by Sir Anthony Van Dyck.

1653 Samson, 'negro gardener', for the Lloyd family, Llanforda, west of Oswestry.

1667 25 October 'burial of a son of an Egyptian', Chaddesley Corbett Parish Register.

1667- An entry in Worcester County Quarter Sessions papers recording 1668 the presence of 'vagabonds or such as are called Gipsies or Egyprians in great numbers' at an alehouse in Defford.

Gypsies were originally of Hindu origin, but migrated to Persia and thence to Europe, reaching Germany and France in the 15th century and England in the 16thP. As they were first thought to have come from Egypt, they were called Egyptians, which became corrupted to Gypsians.

1680 Portrait of Captain Thomas Lucy, with a black boy wearing a metal collar and holding a horse, by Sir Godfrey Kneller, Charlecote Park. Warwickshire.

1690 Baptism of Margaret Lucy 'belonging to ye Lady Underhill', 1st January, Oxhill Parish Register, Warwickshire.

1700 Baptism of Will Archus, 'an adult male Black', 29 December, Oxhill Parish Register

1704 Charles Hector, black servant of Charles Mason, Shropshire MP, baptized aged 10 years, Churchstoke Parish Register.

1705 'Here lyeth the body of Myrtilla, Negro slave to Mr Thos. Beauchamp of Nevis. Bap Oct ye 20th. Buried Jan ye 6th , Oxhill Parish Churchyard.

Baptism '29 July John, an Ethyopian boy, page to Lady Pye', St Martin's Parish Register, Tipton.

1729 'Baptiz'd Bartholomew, son of Tho Ruford (a Black and a Drummer) & of Catherine his wife', 29 August, Hereford St Peters Parish Register.

1731 'Batizd Evan son of Henry Moor (a Blackmoor Belonging to the Regiment of Colonel Evans) and of Mary his wife', 4 September Hereford St Peters Parish Register.

1735 'The Churche warden of Sutton Coldfield. You are heirby ordered to give a poore man comeing oute of Arabia towards paiying of his passage in to his owne Contery as other places have done and it shall be alaid againe'.

1735 Philip Lucy, a black child, baptised at Charlecote.

1741 Burial '14 Mar a Drummer's child, a Black in Tam[worth]', St Editha Parish Register, Tamworth.

1752 'July 4: Cato & Anthony, two West Indians, baptised', Sheinton Parish Register, Shropshire.

1756 Baptism of Pulford Power, '14 years of age, a negro', 14 April, Alcester Parish Register

1759 The Worcestershire Regiment 'got its first Black drummers' when 'Admiral Boscawen being at the surrender of Guadeloupe in 1759 ... procured eight or ten boys; whom he brought home and gave to his brother who commanded the 29<sup>th</sup> Regiment. Colonel Enys recorded in a manuscript that 'His Majesty's permission was obtained to retain them in that capacity, and when I joined the regiment in 1775, there were three, if not more, of the original Blacks in the corps, who were remarkably good drummers.'

1766 Benjamin Prioleu, a black servant of Mr Austin of Aston, baptized 16 May, Shifnal Parish Register.

1768 Charlestown, 'a negro servant' of Mr Walter Mansell, baptised, July 20, Shifnal Parish Register

1770 Publication of the autobiography of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, a former slave, living with his family in Kidderminster.

1771 'A Negroe Boy from Affrica, supposed to be about ten or eleven Years of Age, he is ... well proportioned, speaks tolerable good English, of a Mild Disposition, friendly, officious, sound, healthy, fond of Labour, and for Colour an excellent fine Black' Notice for a slave auction in Lichfield, *Birmingham Aris's Gazette*

Reading through this evidence of the early black presence in the West Midlands two things in particular are worth noting: first, it is possible to discern a range of stories and themes which connect the various fragments across time and also indicate the social status of black settlers – we know that black residents of the region were slaves, ex-slaves, servants and military bandsmen; second, there is a clear sense of the different types of historical evidence which hold relevant information - baptism registers, portraits, tombstones etc.. If we look forward to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and the evidence for the black presence that can be found, the type of activities engaged in significantly expands and the volume of source material increases, but generally relates to similar types of sources namely written, visual, physical [material remains] and, as we research the twentieth century, oral evidence.

### **Written in the Record**

Autobiographies, such as those produced by Olaudah Equiano (1789) and the Reverend Peter Stanford (1889) are rich in detail and tell us about lives 'as lived', but can also expand our horizons by taking us beyond the boundaries of city stories to the wider world of politics, travel and networks. Sometimes, the writers of these life stories include other documentary material in their texts, such as correspondence, and this too can lead us into other fruitful avenues of research.

Official records produced for local purposes or in response to national requests – reports, registers of births, marriages and deaths, the census – often contain valuable data on the black presence. Nineteenth century censuses never classified residents by 'race', but they did request place of birth and sometimes this information linked to a name can allow individuals to be identified, such as in the case of John Patanpally,

living in Lichfield Street, Birmingham, in 1871. However, official records can sometimes be misleading. A record of burials at St. Mary, Whittall Street, Birmingham, found in the registers of St. Philip's Church, includes the burial register of 'Joanna D. Cruz, spinster, a Black woman' on 19 October 1808. It is interesting that in the actual burial register of St. Mary's, Whittall Street, no mention is made of the fact that Joanna Cruz was black. From the late nineteenth century onwards educational records – school log books (such as St Paul's Girls School, Benson Road School, and Mary Street School), registers and photographs sometimes provide details of black visitors to schools and increasingly evidence of black pupils experiences of schooling. Although the records of many schools are held at Birmingham City Archives, some of these records are still held by the schools themselves, and all of them generally have some restrictions on access as their coverage enters the twentieth century. Sometimes the records produced by local government relating to local services – such as 'Problems of Coloured People in the United Kingdom, 1952' for example – contain ideas and language which would not be acceptable today, but are nonetheless important for documenting the attitudes in circulation in the past which shaped social relations.

Details gleaned from official records can sometimes be elaborated upon through the use of pamphlets, surveys and newspapers produced at, or near, the time the record was created. The area in which John Patanpally lived in 1871 was visited in the 1870s by Joseph Salter as part of his travels around the country recording the experiences of 'the Asiatic in England'. His published account presents a picture of lodging houses and people on the move. Such written sources also contain their own important small stories, such as that of John Thompson 'a man of colour' reported in the *Birmingham Journal* in June 1864.

Fragments of individual working lives are also to be found in the archives of organisations, in the reports, minutes and personnel records generated by them. For example, biographical details of nurses, and of attitudes towards them, can be found, in the registers of nurses kept by hospitals. Such registers can be found in Birmingham City Archives and include details of a nurse from Ghana who joined the Birmingham Children's Hospital in 1951, returned to Accra in 1960 and whose practical and theoretical work was described as 'consistently good' and was 'hardworking at all times', but 'seemed to feel "inferior" and relationships with colleagues strained'. Another black nurse from South Africa joined in 1962 and was described as 'Happy, cheerful, well-liked. Capable Staff Nurse – interested in patients and helpful to students'. Nursing as a career was not limited only to African and Caribbean born women in the 1950s and 1960s, the Birmingham registers also give details of an 'Asian, a Buddhist from Penang, Malaya' and of 'a Mohammedan from Tehran, Iran', both of whom worked at the Children's Hospital in the 1950s. Such records, like any documents relating to living people deposited in local and national archives, normally require permission to consult them, and cannot be reproduced here for the same reason.

Many references to the black population, as can be seen, are often single line entries in parish registers, court records, and newspapers. We are given a fleeting glance of individuals now lost in time, yet each of these fragments has the potential, with time and research, to grow into a richer story. These single lines in records also help to build a corrective to a version of black British history dominated by individuals, usually black males or travellers from the United States and the Empire, who had privileged access to elite society and the public sphere. The more these single line references are collected the clearer the picture will be of black settlement, and collective life stories can be written for cities and regions as well as for the country at large. Particular attention is needed to rescue the hidden stories of black women in these narratives of the past – as communities became established, as new generations were born, more documentary evidence has been produced from within communities and this may one of the keys to finding these particular hidden stories.

## Images of black life

The Birmingham MP and amateur photographer Sir Benjamin Stone systematically collected images recording people and places from the 1860s and later actively pursued photography as an interest. Seven years after his death in 1914, the trustees of his estate presented a collection of 22,000 photographs, 600 stereographs, 2,500 lantern slides, 14,000 glass negatives, and 50 albums of collected prints to Central Library. The size of this collection reflects Stone's era and the Victorian desire to capture and catalogue 'all' knowledge. In this desire to record knowledge pictorially Stone photographed and collected images during his travels in the West Indies and in Southern Africa. The images from these travels are of unnamed sitters, selected and posed by Stone. These images visualised the Empire and represented a 'view of the world'. Stone also traded in images and amongst the collection of photographic albums are 'Types and Races of Mankind' which include captions by Stone: 'The Negress of the West Indies', 'Trinidad Coolie', 'Trinidad Hindoo from Madras'. Stone's concern here was with documenting 'race' typologies and we know very little about any of the people captured by the camera lens.

Jumping a hundred years and we find a generation of black British and Asian photographers - Vanley Burke, Ingrid Pollard, David A. Bailey, Maxine Walker, Claudette Holmes and Zarina Bimji – beginning to use photography as a tool to document their lives and to explore issues around 'race' and identity. Sitting, both in time and style, between Stone and these black and Asian documentary photographers, are the studio portraits of new migrants to urban centres produced in studios such as that run by Ernest and Malcolm Dyche in Moseley, Birmingham, between the 1950s and the 1970s. These were portraits taken to send home, to celebrate settlement and to show success in the 'Mother Country'.

The photographs of Stone, Dyche, Burke and Holmes are among the two million images which form Birmingham Central Library's nationally designated collection of photography. The collection also includes documentary images of inner city black life and politics produced by the collective of freelance photographers who published the magazine *Ten 8*. In 1993 Claudette Holmes brought some of these collections together in an exhibition *From Negative Stereotype to Positive Image* which as the title suggests juxtaposed images to illustrate very different photographic practices.

There are also other images that are rarely found in any public archive, the thousands of 'snaps' housed in boxes and albums which capture personal moments and family histories. These images, together with those held in archives, are an important historical resource for black British history, they are open to research and interpretation, offering as they do evidence of changing representations of black identities past and present. They are also powerful triggers for remembering forgotten moments, as Leela Taheer commented in an article in the *Independent* newspaper on seeing an exhibition in 1996 of photographs from the Dyche studio: 'Its very exciting. Its part of my history that I had almost forgotten'.

The black academic Stuart Hall characterised the vast collections of studio portrait photographs taken in the 1950s and 1960s as standing for the 'democratization of portraiture. They are poor person's "portraits". The camera did what painting could not, do for the poor'. Studio photographs documented where people were at a moment in their lives, that they had arrived safely and were doing all right. That said black people do appear as subjects in Western art from at least the fifteenth century onwards. Go into any museum, art gallery or country house around the West Midlands and it is possible to find paintings in which black people are portrayed as slaves or servants, as eroticised individuals in 'Eastern' fantasies or, in religious paintings, as the Black Magi – one of the three kings who visited the Christ Child at Bethlehem.

Representation is not limited to paintings. In architectural ornamentation, as in the vestibule of Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, it is not unusual to find carvings where a black figure or head is used to personify a place – Africa or the Indies. Black subjects are captured on coins and medallions, usually as anti-slavery tokens, in pottery famous individuals, either real or fictitious, were manufactured for sale as popular ornaments – the American boxer Thomas Molineux, the Turkish Commander in Chief in the Crimea War, Omar Pasha, Othello and Uncle Tom were amongst portrait figures produced by Staffordshire potteries in the nineteenth century.

Collectively, these paintings, carvings, medallions, coins and pots offer insights into how the black population in Britain and Europe was perceived by white society in the past. Each representation has its own story to tell who made it, why, who purchased it and so on? Black artists who in their own work have questioned and challenged received notions of blackness have addressed such issues in recent years.

### **Words and Memories**

In *The Land of Money* (1992) personal testimonies by black migrants to Birmingham in the 1950s and 1960s are collected under a series of themes: departure, arrival and first impressions; housing and work; arrival of wives and children, social gatherings and problems; problems at work, changes, and identity. These stories reflect, amongst other things, the diversity of origin of post 1945 migrants to Britain, the rich cultural traditions and heritage which were brought into new settings, the struggles to establish new communities, the importance of a sense of 'home' and the desire to belong. Sometimes, such material has been used in radio programmes. Charles Parker produced several such programmes for BBC Radio in the 1960s and 1970s. These oral records collectively testify to the importance of popular memory in rescuing black British history from the enormous condescension of posterity.

### **Memories and Landscape**

Memories, both personal and social, help to shape our sense of who we are. The personal memories of where we have come from, where we have lived, and the social memories that connect us to family, friends, neighbours, and communities. Many of these memories are framed by the urban landscape, places which have witnessed people's everyday lives, where they have worked hard to make a living, to raise a family and to participate in community life: the family home and backyard, the roads and streets, schools and churches, factories and hospitals, parks and allotments. They are all sites of memory associated with successes and failures, with struggles won and lost, with sweet and bitter memories. Particular buildings have become landmarks in a community history – a gurdwara in an old Baptist Church (Graham Street, Birmingham); a mosque in a converted school (St Edmunds Church of England School, Dudley); a meeting place in an old cinema (the Ritz Cinema, Coventry); a local corner shop.

Some buildings can have special significance because of the meetings which took place there or because they are associated with individuals who were active in campaigning for equality and social justice (Avtar Jouhl at the Saheed Udam Singh Welfare Centre, Birmingham). Other buildings will have changed their function, but a particular moment in their history conjures up memories of a whole decade (The Hummingbird Night Club and the Handsworth Cultural Centre in the 1980s). Festivals, religious parades and political protests go along streets and into local parks. In turn, the parks become public spaces associated with the celebration of distinctive cultural

practices, intermixing elements of the new with the old, and important community events (Perry Park). Memorials and gravestones can connect present lives with past individuals Gardens and allotments in terms of how they are planted, and what is grown signal the presence of a particular community and stand as an indicator of landscape change and enrichment.

History is embedded in this urban landscape. Stories of how places are inhabited, of how buildings change, and the local landscape celebrated are part of a heritage awaiting reclamation. There is a need to record these sites of memory that have given physical shape to black British history, to explore their social and political meanings and place these alongside the stories and memories of individuals. Sites need to be identified, researched and interpreted in order that other narratives of town and urban life are recorded, remembered and shared. As Stuart Hall noted: 'national heritage is a powerful source of meaning: those who can't see themselves reflected in the mirror are therefore excluded'. The images included here capture some of the sites, some of the memory places, which are valued by different communities and need to be recognised as part of a common heritage.

### **A never-ending story?**

History exists through people, places and objects. The evidence for black British history is to be found in archives, museums and historic houses. It is to be found within different communities and in the buildings and sites which create a sense of place and belonging. C.L.R. James' re-imagining of the nation requires this history to be unearthed. Stories still need to be collected and told, the details gathered and recorded, and the narratives of the past changed. While putting together this commentary two new stories surfaced. The first was a report in the *Birmingham Gazette* in January 1952 under the headline 'Moslems Start a Campaign' and recounted how 7,000 Muslims 'from Liverpool, Cardiff, Hull and other cities' came to Birmingham at the invitation of the British Empire Society for the Blind to launch a campaign to help the blind in Aden. Birmingham was the chosen meeting place because it had the 'largest population of Aden Moslems'. The meeting was described as 'a unique conference of exiles'. The second story relates to a financial account found amongst the papers of Matthew Boulton (1728-1809), the Birmingham industrialist and entrepreneur. The account, reproduced below, details payments made and include several for items for 'your Black'. The date is 1760 thirteen years before our current earliest reference to the black presence in Birmingham, that of Anne Pinard. Did Boulton, who was sympathetic to the anti-slavery cause, but also did business with West Indian planters have a black servant? Is this what 'your Black' suggests. What do you think? How could we find out more?

## Transcript

### **Bill from Babbington to Boulton June-Nov 1760**

This is a transcript of the document. Some of the words are hard to read, but not all documents from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries present as many difficulties.

June ye 21st 1760 Mr Bolton inDeted to me Zechrh Babbington

	£	s	d
June ye 21st your Boy 1pr of Shoes	0	4	2
Ye 22 your Black 1 pr of Shoes	0	4	2
Agust 16			
Ye 16th your Black 1 pr of Spla[?]rd ashes	0	4	6
Ye 16 your Boy 1 pr of Shoes	0	3	2
Ye 16 your Black 1 pr of pomps	0	4	2
Ye 21st your Boy 1 pr of Shoes	0	3	2
Sept			
Ye 8 your Black 1 pr of Boots straps	0	1	2
Ye 12 your Black 1 pr of pomps	0	4	4
Ye 21st your Boy 1 par of Shoes fore & haft	0	1	3
Ye 21st your Selfe 1 pr of Shoes mended	0	0	2
October			
Ye 8 your Boy 1 pr of Shoes	0	4	6
Ye 8 your Boy 1 pr of Shoes fore & haft	0	1	3
November			
Ye 3 your Selfe 2 prs of Shoes fore & haft	0	3	0
Ye 3 Mrs Bolton 1 pr of shoes heellpeced	0	0	3
Ye 3 your Boy 1 pr of Shoes for & haft	0	1	4
Ye 10 your Selfe 1 pr of Boots for & haft	0	2	0
Ye 24th your Self 1 pr of Sengell Chanels & 1 pr of Goloshess	0	12	6
Ye 24 your Boy 1 pr of Shoes	0	3	4
	2	18	5

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