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**MIGRATION STORIES:  
THE MAKING OF MODERN BIRMINGHAM**

# **Migration Stories: The Making of Modern Birmingham**

## ***Contents***

**Introduction: Whose History, Whose Heritage?**

**The Emergence of a Jewish Community**

**Tracing Irish Histories**

**The Early Asian Presence**

**Racism and Riots in the Early Twentieth Century**

**Summary of Key Themes**

**Sources from Birmingham Archives and Heritage Collections**

**Secondary Reading**

*Written by Dr Andy Green and Dr Kevin Searle, 2008.*

[www.connectinghistories.org.uk/birminghamstories.asp](http://www.connectinghistories.org.uk/birminghamstories.asp)



Ackermann's panorama of Birmingham, 1847.



The Illustrated Midland News, 1869.

### 1774

A Church of England parish record mentions the burial of a 'black bachelor,' George Pitt Charry, St Martin's, Birmingham. [DRO34/5]

### 1778

Jacoba Swellengrebel (died 1796) lived in Handsworth from about 1778. Her father was Dutch and her mother was Indian. Her husband was a relative of Matthew Boulton's partner, John Fothergill. [MS3782]

### 1790

Letter by Olaudah Equiano, expressing 'grateful Acknowledgments' to the town. [Aris's Birmingham Gazette]

### 1821

Baptism in of Levi Baldwin, born 1770, North America, a musician and 'man of colour', St Martin's. [DRO34/12]

## Migration Stories: The Making of Modern Birmingham

A church warden pays for a 'poore man comeing oute of Arabia' to gain passage back to his 'owne country' in 1734

[Sutton Coldfield Borough 78/111]

### Whose History, Whose Heritage?

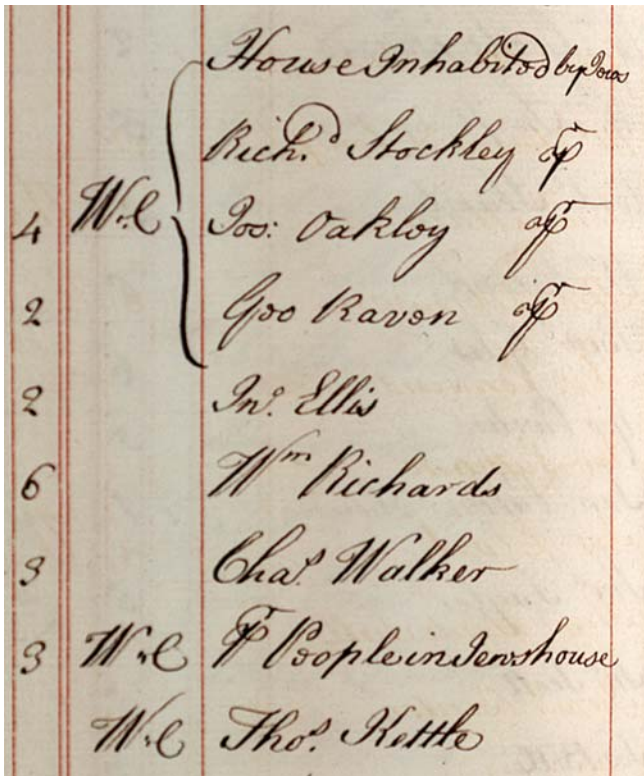
The subject of migration has always had an important presence in Birmingham's history. Migration stories in the West Midlands long predate the narratives of the settlers who came to live in the region in the post-war period. City archives identify that the black presence has been part of Birmingham for hundreds of years. These stories demonstrate that many of the issues that surround migration today were also pertinent in earlier periods. The repatriation of an Arabian man in 1734, and the deportation of 'failed asylum seekers' and refugees in the present, arguably provides one such link.

The following pages introduce the reader to a range of migration stories which have contributed to the making of modern Birmingham. Evidence of the first Asian, Irish, Jewish and black migrants in Birmingham allow us to broaden a sense of shared histories. They also allow us to ask to what extent are the debates about migration and settlement in the past linked to present concerns about identity, race, class and gender?

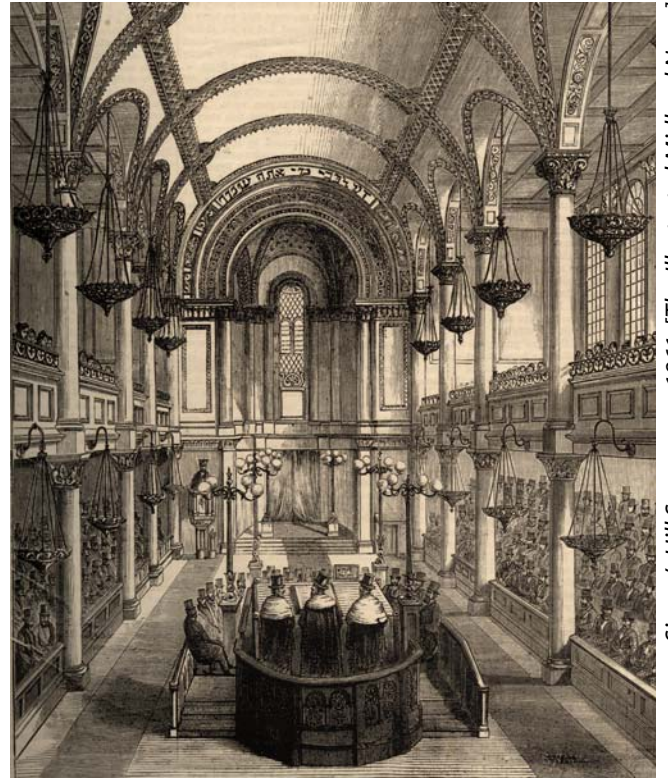
# Migration Stories: The Emergence of a Jewish Community

## First Migrants

Leading up to the industrial revolution, Birmingham started drawing in people from the surrounding countryside to find work in a range of local trades: from buttons and buckles in the eighteenth century to iron and brass in the nineteenth century. Among the varied people who sought employment and lodgings, Jewish migrants also arrived from Europe and Russia, often seeking to escape social persecution because of their faith.



Levy Book of Birmingham, 1750.

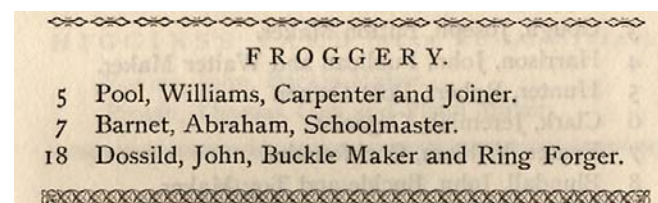


Singer's Hill Synagogue, 1861. [The Illustrated Midland News]

A History of The Jewish Community of Birmingham (1956) states 'the generally agreed date of our first community is 1730'.

## Building Synagogues

William Hutton's 'A History of Birmingham' (1780) suggests that the first synagogue in Birmingham was located in an area called the 'froggery' (now lies beneath New Street Station). More would be built as the community grew, often being attacked and vandalized in times of social unrest. In response, many Jewish migrants often lived in shared space as a way of protecting and reasserting their faith, in a country which often regarded them as 'heathen' or 'alien'. In 1856, the community built Singer's Hill synagogue (still standing today), designed to hold 1,400. It was an important symbol of cultural pride.



Birmingham Trade Directory, 1775. [Trade Directories]

## Integration and Conflict

Despite facing many social barriers, Jews in nineteenth century Birmingham would play an important role in developing key local industrial and jewellery trades. Gaining civic acceptance, the Birmingham Hebrew Congregation archive shows a community which organised, educated and provided for itself. However, with many new Eastern European arrivals to Birmingham into the late nineteenth century, fears over the Jewish culture carried over into the twentieth century.

### Key Debate:

what other sources of information

could we use to find out more about the early Jewish Community of Birmingham?

# Migration Stories:

## Thomas Finigan, an Irish Town Missionary

### Early Voices

Using archival evidence we can glimpse the Irish presence in eighteenth century Birmingham. The 'Memoirs' of William Hutton include the description: 'March 1742. Thomas Buften (?) remarked, it was his birthday, and that he was 46; a sensible Irishman, and like many of his countrymen, (he) spoke with great elocution, and like them, rather given to the wonderful.'

### Nineteenth Century Struggles

Hutton's description contrasts with how the Irish were routinely viewed as 'backward' and 'inferior'. By the nineteenth century, Irish migrants became caught up in destructive cycles of poverty and industrialisation rooted in a long history of exploitation by the English. With a series of famines that reached a peak with the 'great hunger' of 1845 to 1849, one and a half million people died of poverty and ill health, forcing a further million to emigrate abroad.

Powerful evidence of the conditions facing Irish people arriving in Birmingham can be found in the journal of Thomas Finigan, who worked as a town missionary in 1837. His account of Birmingham paints a vivid picture of the poverty, overcrowding, disease and unemployment facing working class people from different backgrounds.

**"I went to the Gullet again -  
I find as many openings - dark passages  
back courts in this Gullet, as probably there is  
in the Gullet of a Shark. In one of these I  
entered a house - I saw six females  
at card playing, and all of them  
almost in a statue of nudity - Oh!  
How serious, and how responsible is the work  
of a town missionary"**

In many cases, Birmingham's nineteenth century urban problems were unfairly associated with Irish settlers. This issue was aggravated further by the 'Murphy Riots' in 1867. In reality, the labour and skills of ordinary Irish families were vital to the growth of the city.



Punch Magazine, 1881.



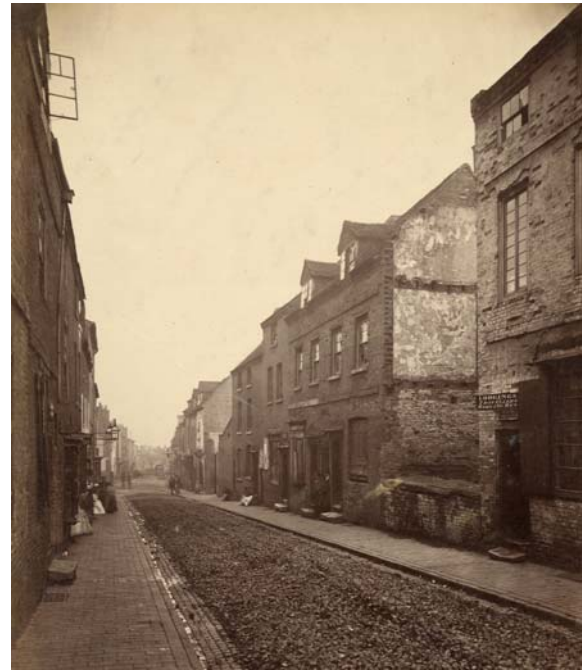
The 'Gullet', 1870s. [Birmingham Improvement Scheme Photographs]

**Key Debate:**  
what other popular stereotypes have been associated with the Irish,  
and how is the community viewed today?

**“On visiting Birmingham, the gospel of the Redeemer was proclaimed, and its claims urged on the Orientals of that town...**

**Dada Bhai is one of three who keep lodging houses for their countrymen in Birmingham... the last time I read the scriptures in his house, he told me there were others of his country men sleeping upstairs, whom he should like to hear the word; they were called down, and listened with much attention”**

*[Joseph Salter, The Asiatic in England: Sketches of Sixteen Years' Work among Orientals, 1873. British Library: T 8683]*



Thomas Street, 1870s. [Improvement Scheme Photos]

Asian migrants into Birmingham had also started arriving by the nineteenth century. The above quote may give us a fleeting insight into how some of Birmingham's earliest Asian population lived in a small number of lodging houses. However, those Salter included in his use of the stereotypical term 'Oriental' is not clear. Salter was a missionary who believed that such 'Orientals' and 'Asiatics' needed to be redeemed from their more primitive status by Christian values.

## Migration Stories: The Early Asian Presence

1861 Census of Lichfield Street.

Emanuel H. Floris	Male	Inde	70	4	Servant	Calcutta
"	"	Inde	15			Bombay
Samuel	"	Inde	13			Liverpool
John Casson	Male	Inde	35		Factor	East Indies
Ellen	"	"	33			Barin
Mary Ann Smith	"	"	40			Bombay

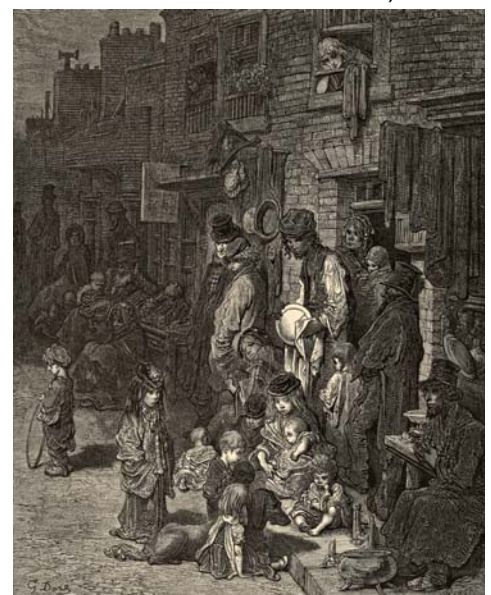
'The Princes of Oude', 1857.



[The London Illustrated News, Vol. 31]

Early colonial representations of the so-called 'asiatic' traveller were often shown as poor, out-cast 'heathen'. In contrast, the Princes of Oude visited the city in 1857. Similar visitors facilitated the uneven trade between the 'Mother Country' and India. The wealth that they accrued, greatly contrasted with the means of the majority of whom Salter described as 'Asiatics' present in Britain. The level of poverty in the colonies was the main factor which drove the settlers to migrate to Britain.

Gustave Dore, London.



[Birmingham Fine Arts Collection]

**Key Debate:**  
how can we interpret  
the story revealed in the above census entry?

# Migration Stories: Racism and Riots in the Early Twentieth Century

## *Race, Law and the Case of George Edalji*

The local story of George Edalji shows how fears of the 'outsider' would frame the start of the twentieth century. Edalji (1876-1953) was the son of Reverend Shapurji Edalji, a Parsee who came to England in the 1860s, and Charlotte Stoneham, whom he married in 1874. Between 1887-1891 George was a pupil at the Rugeley Grammar School and Mason College. He was articled to the Birmingham solicitors Messrs King and Ludlow between 1892-95 and began practicing law in the city in 1899.

In August 1903 he was arrested for butchering a pit pony belonging to the Great Wyrley Colliery Company, the latest in a long succession of mutilations accompanied by mocking and threatening letters sent to the police. Edalji was found guilty and sentenced to seven years in prison. The evidence was circumstantial and turned on the testimony of handwriting expert Thomas Gurrin. George's father never ceased to proclaim his son's innocence and produced a 70-page booklet arguing his innocence in 1905. In 1906 George was paroled. With his legal career in ruins he contacted Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, who took up his cause and investigated the case. Doyle concluded that Edalji was innocent, wrote to the Daily Telegraph claiming that Edalji had been made a scapegoat for the killings because of his colour, and called for a retrial. The case was reopened by the Home Office, who eventually pardoned Edalji. The concern that followed Doyle's investigations led to the formation of the Court of Appeal.



*Edalji's trial. Reproduced courtesy of Staffordshire Record Office. [SRO 93/9]*

*Notice of race riots, Birmingham Post, 7 June 1919.*

**SERIOUS RIOT AT LIVERPOOL.**

**NEGRO TAKEN FROM THE POLICE AND DROWNED.**

A serious riot took place in the foreign quarter of Liverpool on Thursday night, in which West African negroes, Russians, and Danes were involved. In attempting to quell the disturbance four policemen were injured.

Police-constable Brown was shot through the mouth, the bullet passing through the neck and wounding a sergeant. The constable lies in hospital in a serious condition. Another officer was slashed with a razor, and a fourth had a wrist fractured.

One of the negroes engaged in the affray was taken from the police by the mob, thrown into the Queen's Dock, and drowned.

Ten other people are stated to have been injured.

A sequel to the disturbance was witnessed in Liverpool Police Court yesterday, when 13 coloured men were charged with attempting to murder three police-officers and with riotously assembling. Many of the accused were bandaged.

Only evidence of arrest was offered, and the prisoners were remanded.

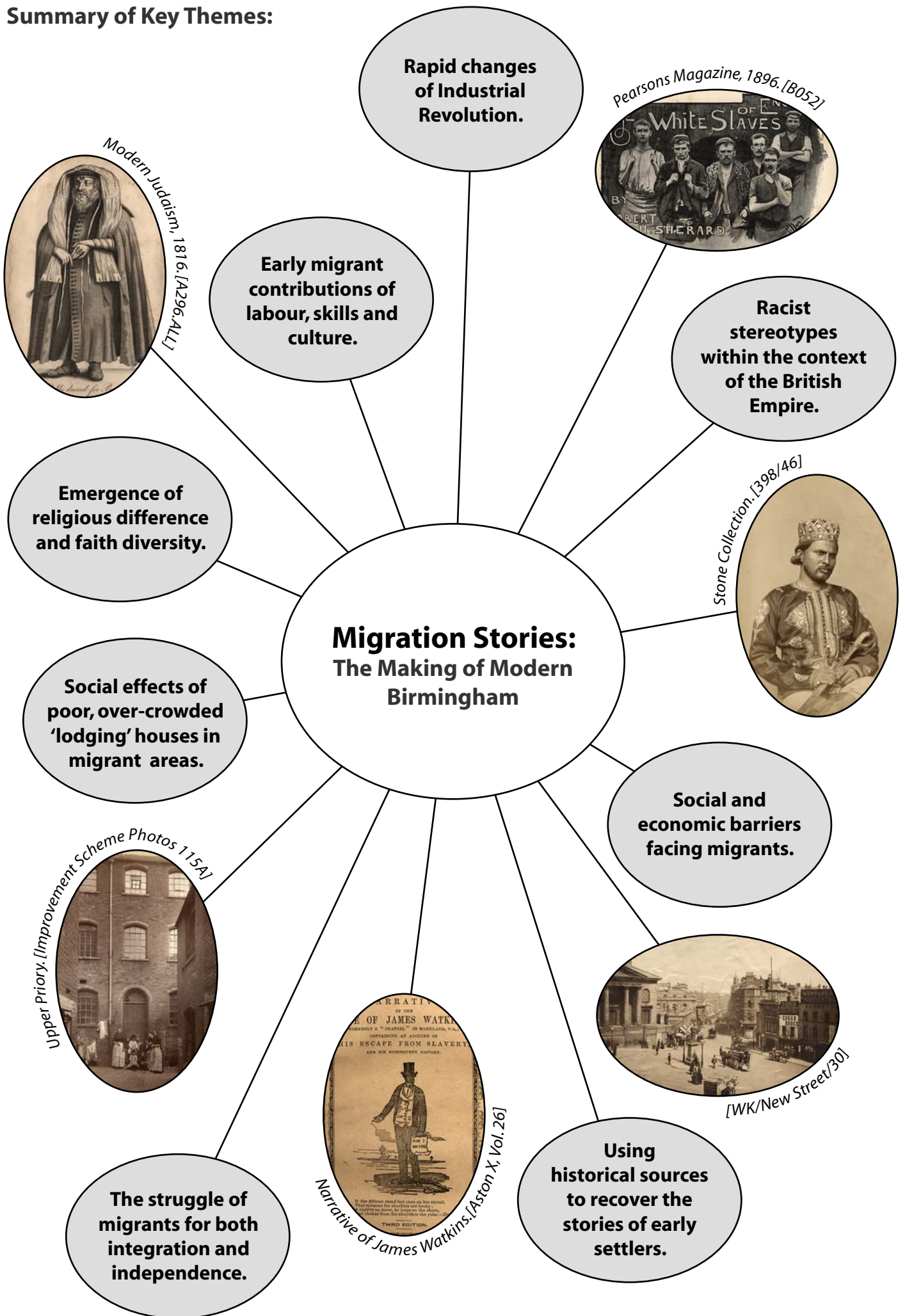
*Advert in Birmingham Mail, 29 June 1919.*

The coastal cities of Tyneside, Liverpool and Cardiff were the site of anti-black riots in 1919. Any attempts by the journalists to use neutral language in their reports, were clearly marred by racist adverts that appeared in the same newspapers.

The case of Edalji, and the events of the 'race riots' of 1919, show how in early twentieth century Britain, a racist attitude was not merely a lapse from otherwise widely held liberal views. It was an ingrained feature of British society, deeply connected to colonialism. This was the Britain that post-war migrants entered.

**Key Debate:**  
to what extent can racism said to be institutionalised in British culture by the early twentieth century?

# Summary of Key Themes:





# Migration Stories: The Making of Modern Birmingham

## *Sources from Birmingham Archives and Heritage Collections*

### **Archives:**

Journal of Thomas Finigan [IIR 28]  
The Galton Papers [MS3101]  
The Boulton and Watt Papers [MS 3147]  
Birmingham Rate Book, 1736-1745 [Microfilm RB1]  
William Hutton, *Autobiographical "Memorandums from Memory" 1796* [IIR 13]  
Helen Caddick Diaries, Vols 1-11 [MS 908]  
Birmingham Hebrew Collection [JA]  
Birmingham Jewish Literary and Arts Society [MS 2520]  
Birmingham Youth Council [MS 2522]  
Young Israel Council [MS 2523]  
Birmingham Hebrew Educational Aid Society [MS 2539]  
The papers of Zoe Josephs [MS 2524]  
The personal papers of Dorothy Gillman [MS 2525]  
The papers of Constance Davis [MS 2526]

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The Birmingham Census 1851/ 1861/1871/1881/1891/1901 [Microfilm]  
The Illustrated Midland News [Aston X 307]  
The London Illustrated News [BF072]  
Punch Magazine [Q 052]  
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Harry Levine, *Singer's Hill Centenary History 1856-1956* [LF19.8]  
Dhani Prem, *The Parliamentary Leper. A History of Colour Prejudice in Britain (1965)* [L21.85]

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Warwickshire Photographic Survey  
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The Helen Caddick Diaries [MS908]

# Migration Stories: The Making of Modern Birmingham

## General Sources

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[www.24hourmuseum.org.uk](http://www.24hourmuseum.org.uk)  
[www.museums.co.uk](http://www.museums.co.uk)

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