BLACKS IN BRITAIN

A GENERAL TIMELINE OF BLACK PEOPLE IN BRITAIN
Olaudah Equiano

Also known as Gustavus Vassa. He was a prominent African involved in the British movement for the abolition of the slave trade.

Sunrise: Nigeria, 1745 – Sunset: London March 31, 1797

Spouse: Susannah Cullen

Children: Joanna Vassa

The West Indies featured some of the most brutal episodes of slavery and was famed for its strictness and harshness. Equiano, who witnessed these punishments first hand quoted in his book: “These overseers are indeed for the most part persons of the worst character of any denomination of men in the West Indies. Unfortunately, many humane gentlemen, by not residing on their estates, are obliged to leave the management of them in the hands of these human butchers, who cut and mangle the slaves in a shocking manner on the most trifling occasions, and altogether treat them in every respect like brutes...”

From his book: ‘The Interesting Narrative of the life of Olaudah Equiano’
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Not Widely Known – But True...

In 210 AD, African soldiers described as a "division of Moors," were sent by Rome to defend Hadrian's Wall. The presence of these Africans predates the arrival of those who are today considered "English," since Britannia (Modern-day England) was created during Roman rule.

In 800 AD, the ancient Irish recorded the existence of "blue men" from Morocco who were captured by the Vikings and taken to Ireland.

In 1000 AD, the skeletal remains of a young African girl was found at North Elmham in Norfolk, England.

In the early 1500's, a small group of Africans, probably taken by Scottish "privateers" from Portuguese slave traders, were "attached," or enslaved to King James IV's court.

Between 1541 and the 1850's, 61 taverns were called the "Black Boy" in both London and in the provinces, (during the same period in London itself, there were 51 taverns called "The Blackamoor's Head.") African or black references were also popular for sailing vessels.

In 1550, the first English traders landed in West Africa.

In 1555, five West Africans came to London from present-day Ghana to learn English and assist traders. The Africans, although slaves, had been "borrowed," since England's slave trade did not start until 1563.

Between 1562 – 1563, Sir John Hawkins, an "unscrupulous adventurer," purchased 300 Africans from the coast of Guinea, and sold them at Hispaniola (present-day Haiti and Dominican Republic), thus beginning England's foray into the slave trade.

In the 1570's, African slaves came to England in the capacities of servants for households, prostitutes to the wealthy, and as entertainers at court.

In 1596, Queen Elizabeth I, who found blacks at court entertaining yet was disturbed by their presence throughout the realm, issued what would be the
first of two commandments, (the second was issued in 1601) that ordered English slaveholders to “have those kind of people sent out the land.” Historians speculate that England’s limited food supply and the Queen’s own religious intolerance led her to demand the expulsion of blacks.

In 1641, Frances, a "Blackymore maide" servant who joined a church, became the first recorded person of African heritage in Bristol.

In 1677 Ann Atkins, another Bristol black, would join the church and die 18 years later; and in 1687, Dinah Black would be involved in a court case, where her mistress tried to force her into plantation slavery. Dinah was prevented from being shipped abroad and, when her mistress refused to take her back, the court decided she was free to make her own living. At the time of Dinah’s case, English law was unclear on whether slaves could be compelled into plantation slavery against their will.

Between 1650 to 1800, sugar, needed to sweeten the newly-created and insatiable English appetite for tea, chocolate and coffee dramatically increased the number of African slaves in Britain. Absentee plantation "sugar barons" brought slaves as household servants. Officers from slave ships were allowed "a few 'privilege Negroes' from each cargo as perks," and later sold the Africans for profit to wealthy English in the West Indies or were brought and sold in England, or were passed on to descendants. Government officials, naval and army captains, and merchant ship officers also purchased African and Asian slaves and brought them back to England. In much smaller numbers, Africans came to Britain as free sailors, recruited to replace white English sailors who had died while at sea. Slavery brought the bulk of blacks to Britain, however, and the slave trade became, for the next 150 years, the driving force behind Britain’s Triangular Trade economy, and may have also fuelled its Industrial Revolution.

In 1663 The Royal Adventurers became the first English company chartered to take part in the African slave trade. Their prospectus declared the company was formed from economic necessity that:"...that the English plantations in America should have a competent and a constant supply of Negro-servants for their main use of Planting, and that at a moderate rate." The Royal Adventurers reflected the "cream" of English aristocracy - twenty-five per cent of the company's stock was owned by the King and Queen of England, a prince and assorted dukes, earls, lords and knights and other members of the upper-class. The Royal Adventurers soon collapsed and were replaced by The Royal African Company.
In **1668** *Oroonoko*, Aphra Behn’s popular story of the life of an enslaved African Prince was published.

In the **1700's** the "black presence" in England had become a reality. Slavery, "the trade in black people and the fruits of their labour" became a lucrative trade, and its fruits were widespread and easily visible especially in London and in the port cities. Read more here...

In September **1700**, the *Liverpool Merchant* sailed from its namesake port to Barbados, delivered 220 slaves and began Liverpool’s participation in Britain’s slave trade. One month later, the *Blessing* duplicated the process. Prior to this discovery, 1700 may not be Liverpool’s first date of entry in the slave trade, since merchants would falsify records to avoid paying export duties. 1709 was believed to have been Liverpool's first venture into slave-trading, followed by non-activity until 1730. But in 1718 the owners of the *Imploy* sued its ship’s doctor when 64 of the 123 Africans on board died in the middle passage (which cost the owners £1900). Slave ships also departed from Liverpool in 1720 (the *Farlton* and *Filsby*), in 1724 (the *Elizabeth*), and with a probable fifteen sailings in 1726.

In **1713** the signing of the Treaty of Utrecht turned the tide for Britain. It was a formal *asiento* or the right to provide Spain and its colonies with slaves. In the port of Bristol, the South Sea Company was awarded the right to supply Spanish colonies with 4,800 African slaves yearly. After the Treaty of Utrecht, the British quickly became the world's pre-eminent slavers, increasing its market share in the lucrative slave trade from one-quarter in 1791 to more than one-half by 1806.

In **1729**, the concepts of "slave" and "slavery" were shrouded in legal ambiguities. Britons traditionally maintained that Africans were enslaved because they were heathens. Questions arose surrounding the status of baptised slaves: "...were they automatically free, or could Africans become enslaved Christians?" The Crown’s Law Officers ruled that: "a slave did not become free either by coming to Britain or Ireland or being baptised." Nevertheless, the belief that Christian baptism freed the enslaved remained popular and caused many contradictory court rulings. Most slaves responded to the legal confusion by simply freeing themselves - the numbers of runaway slaves increased throughout the eighteenth century.

In **1731** Job ben Solomon, an non-European educated African whose father had descended from Muslim royalty, was captured in Gambia and sold to a Maryland slave owner. In a letter written to his father in Arabic, ben Solomon pleaded for his release. A British general took the letter to Oxford for
translation and was so impressed by the writer's level of education; he ordered
that ben Solomon should be taken to England. There, ben Solomon became
the darling of Britain's intellectual set, was "'lionized and feted by polite
society,' "and the elite fought over which lucky ones would have "
'the unusual spectacle of [having] a scholarly African in their midst.'"

Between 1738 and 1739 Liverpool's slave-trading peaked when its vessels
travelled 52 times to Africa. While Bristol transported 16,640 slaves in 47
sailings, by the 1750's, Liverpool had overtaken it as the chief British slave-
trading port. This switch eclipsed Bristol's historical record as England's slave-
trading capital: from the eleventh century it had claimed that right, and as late
as 1685, Bristol's traders had trafficked in white slavery.

The 1750's – While Liverpool was to become the "King" of Britain's slave
trade seaports, even surpassing Bristol, London's contribution to the trade
cannot be ignored. By the 1750's, London had become a critical partner in the
slave trade: It was the London Commission Agents that greased the wheels by
financing the entire system. By 1750, London merchants were handling
almost three-quarters of the sugar imported into England. They had become
money-lenders of a highly specialised kind. 'Acting in the dual capacity of
broker and banker, 'they' reaped lucrative commissions and interest for
accommodating the peculiar needs of planters and slave merchants.'

In 1752 Liverpool's ships carried 25,820 Africans crammed into holds 'like
books on a shelf,' with each person allowed less than half the space granted, in
the same period, to a transported convict. The business of trafficking lives
proved profitable. The estimate of the profits Britain gleaned from the African
slave trade was £12,000,000, based upon the transportation of 2,500,000
slaves, with perhaps half of the estimate collected between 1750 and 1790.

In 1759, two Africans, one a Prince, recently rescued from slavery attended
the May 9, 1759 showing of the play Oroonoko, adapted from Behn's 1688
book. The Prince, William Ansah Sessarakoo from Annamaboe (modern-day
Ghana), had been sent to England to receive an education by his father. While
in transit to England, the captain of the ship captured Sessarakoo and sold
him into slavery, but was later rescued by the English for obvious diplomatic
reasons. The English public was enraged by the unjust enslavement of a
member of Africa's "exotic nobility," but except for those within the anti-
slavery community, general indignation did not extend to the legions of lesser
enslaved Africans, nor to those who would soon face enslavement.
In 1783, black North American soldiers, who fought alongside British soldiers against the colonies in the American Revolutionary War, arrived in London to reap the "Freedom" they were promised for their service. But what they received was immediate access into British poverty. In 1731, the Lord Mayor of London had proclaimed that no blacks could be taught trades, and neither black slaves nor servants were entitled to poor law relief or wages. Homelessness and starvation, or kidnapping and re-enslavement became new harsh realities. Some blacks found their way in St. Giles or other areas along the Wapping River. There, they lived alongside poor whites in abject poverty and misery.

1815 – Many black women found creative ways to combat the poverty caused by race and gender. Charles Dickens relays the story of a black woman, whom the Annual Register of 1815 for the ship Queen Charlotte listed as "William Brown." Brown dressed as a man, had surreptitiously served for eleven years as a British sailor after leaving her husband during an argument. While serving in the Royal Navy, Brown distinguished herself as "able on the books of the above ship, "and also" served as captain of the foretop highly to the satisfaction of the officer." A woman who liked to drink grog with other sailors, Dickens described her as a "smart figure, about five feet four inches in height, possessed of considerable strength and great activity; her features are rather handsome for a black, and she appears to be about twenty-six years of age." Brown was to share an award with her fellow shipmates, for Dickens relayed that "her share of prize money is said to be considerable.” However, it is unknown whether she ever collected the money, because her husband had "entered a caveat against her receiving her prize money."

From 1914 to 1918 the first substantial numbers of Afro Caribbeans arrived in Britain to fight in World War I.

In 1918, Walter Daniel Tull, a famous black footballer who became the first black man commissioned into the British Army in World War I, died on a battlefield in Favreuil, France in the second battle of the Somme, March - April 1918.

From 1918 to 1939, public outcries mounted for immigrant restrictions, particularly in seaport towns where whites feared competition from black seamen during recessions and unemployment. Whites also voiced concerns over "inter-racial liaisons" and poverty.

In 1919, race riots occurred in seaside towns.
In 1922, the African Churches Mission was founded by Nigerian Pastor G.D. Ekarte in Liverpool, and was formally opened in 1931 for unemployed and "stranded" African seamen. A London branch was created in 1942.

In 1931, a West Indian doctor Harold Arundel Moody founded the missionary and welfare League of Coloured Peoples in Merseyside Liverpool. Read more about Harold Moody here...

Between 1939 – 1945, the second (and larger) wave of Afro-Caribbeans arrived in Britain to fight in World War II. In all, several thousand workers migrated as volunteers to fight in the RAF and other branches of the armed forces, and to serve as military technicians. Many others were also recruited by Britain to work in its Merseyside (Liverpool) munitions plants.

1940 – The Passage of the Colonial Development and Welfare Act was launched in Parliament.

Also in the early 1940's, the British Colonial Office began welfare work for black seamen and their families in seaport towns. The Colonial Office aligned their work with the missionary work of the League of Coloured Peoples. (L.C.P).

In 1941, The British Ministry of Labour opened a welfare hostel, the West Indies House in Liverpool.

Also in early 1941, 110 Jamaican workers (plus ten stowaways) arrive on the HMS Ormonde.

In April 1941, Labour Minister M.A. Bevan argues that Britain should "dismiss the idea" of bringing West Indian labourers to Britain "from the start." The idea had also been rejected two years earlier by then Labour Minister George Isaacs. At that time, the problems of "shipping and accommodation" were given as hindrances to the scheme. Although the 1941 arrival of the Ormonde had proven Isaacs wrong, the possible arrival of additional West Indians caused fear within official circles that a "colour racial problem" would arise in Britain.

In 1944, the Education Act combined church, state, and charitable schools that had once been separate under the control of local education. At the centre was a system of "checks and balances" that would mediate between funding at the national level, the schools general autonomy, and the termination of educational policies at the local level. Detractors in the 1960's and 1970's would later maintain that the system institutionalized religious and class
differences and, from its inception, automatically shuttled most Afro-Caribbean children into programs for "under-achievers," and declared most Asian children inferior due to cultural and language differences. The concept of an un-unified education system would remain so until the Thatcher years and the Education Reform Act of 1988.

1948 – Nearly 500 people arrived in Britain on board the Empire Windrush; check out the book here... Though some of the arrivals had already had already been in Britain during the war, over 100 Afro-Caribbeans also entered Britain on the S.S Orbita. The Windrush's inhabitants were detained on board, interviewed, and most were placed in agriculture, the iron foundries, railways, and in other industries that needed labourers.

Merseyside (Liverpool), one of the oldest black communities in Britain, already had over 8,000 inhabitants. Motivated by the anti-black "colour bar" used the National Union of Seamen to discriminate against black sailors, whites attacked scores of black people.

Prior to 1948, Britain cultivated an official "laissez-faire" policy toward black immigration during its post-war need for reconstruction labourers. By 1949 however, opposition to unrestricted West Indian immigration began to grow in government circles. The importance attached to the citizenship right of British subjects became the obstacle to tightening controls on the numbers of black migrants to Britain.

1949 – The first colonial black football team from Lagos, Nigeria played at Merseyside, home of Britain's largest and oldest black community, and defeated the Marine team 5 - 2. The Nigerian victory cheered Merseyside's black inhabitants who, after fighting for Britain in World War II, had suffered numerous racist attacks from whites (reference 1948 entry). The touring Nigerian team was the first of many colonial teams from Africa and the Caribbean who, from 1949 - 1959, would be used to prove that Britain's economic and political system was far superior that any offered in Africa. Through "sport politics", British leaders hoped that "smooth decolonization could be enhanced by closer fraternization between the 'old masters' and 'new inheritors', thereby allaying the fears of European capital about the removal of protection of the colonial state for capital's economic activities."

1950's – Britain or the "Mother Country" as referred to by West Indians, requested West Indian immigrant workers to help in the reconstruction of Britain's post-World War II economy. While Britain depended upon large numbers of cheap labour, the political, economic and social needs of Britain always outweighed those of the Caribbean. Various industries such as British
Rail, The National Health Service, and London Transport, directly recruited black West Indian workers from Jamaica and Barbados. By the mid-1950s, most of the West Indies had lost one-third of its workforce.

By 1950, there were over 30,000 "'coloured British subjects'" in Britain, and 5,000 had migrated since 1945. Most were from West Africa and the West Indies.

A conflict regarding black seamen in Britain developed between the British Home Office, concerned with maintaining "law and order", and the Ministry of Labour, who pointed to the low numbers of unemployed blacks to allay fears. In Merseyside and Liverpool however, high rates of black unemployment since 1948 had concerned citizens. A 1950 meeting voiced desires for the deportation of unemployed blacks as well as possible black unrest if deportation resulted. The meeting resulted in the decision that local seaman’s unions should negotiate on how many blacks were needed at each port, while the Colonial Office and the Ministry of Labour would interview those whose labour was no longer needed.

1951 – 1954 - Britain’s labour shortages increase the numbers of West Indian nursing and labour recruits from pre-1951 figures of less than 1,000 persons per year to 2,000 per year in 1952 and 1953, and 10,000 per year in 1954.

1951 – 1959 - Several remains of Roman-era (third-century AD) African soldiers were exhumed in an archaeological dig at York in 1951. While the early 1950s saw increased demands in both British society and government for restrictions on black immigrants, also in 1951 the Society of Friends met at Toynbee Hall to discuss promoting racial harmony through increased welfare programs and changing the restriction policies used by British labour unions.

1952 – The Wales Establishment Office, responsible for providing British-owned ships with labourers, reported that black males could only find employment on foreign-owned ships, and that black women had been forced from jobs as domestics and shop girls, relegated to working for "mainly rag and bone merchants in the docklands area." In a memorandum to the Trade Union Congress, written by the British Ministry of Labour Staff Association (a group which represented employment exchange workers), only half of the 152,000 job vacancies for that year would be open to black men. The reasons given reveal the depth of anti-black immigration sentiments voiced during the era: black males were to be barred from jobs where white women also worked; many employers objected to hiring blacks; the existence of job quotas; a perceived "lack of skill" among black workers; and other racist stereotypes.
1955 – 1962 - The number of West Indian nursing and labour migrants increased to an average of 32,850 per year.

1956 – As the need for workers fell, a substantial number of West Indian migrants returned home.

1958 – Racial clashes between whites and black West Indians occurred in August in Nottingham in the Midlands, and also at Notting Hill in London. The Conservative Macmillan government, strong on law and order, found any direct governmental response to the riots difficult, outside of supporting police, punishing offenders, and reassuring West Indian officials of their continued concerns. Civil liberty groups denounced the atmosphere of violence encountered by black people, "threatened to divide and disrupt the democratic life of this country." Politicization of black immigration issues and the escalating violence against black people eventually aided Conservative restrictionists in their fight for immigration controls. By this year, the segregation of blacks into manual jobs had given these occupations the "taint" of racial inferiority. In a Ministry of Labour brief presented to the House of Commons, it was revealed that "white unemployed people are 'not suitable for the kind of jobs held by the coloured people.'"

1959 – Rumoured pending restrictions to immigration laws result in a dramatic increase in West Indian migration. The stabbing to death of Kelso Cochrane, a West Indian, by a white assailant, magnified concerns in the black community in Notting Hill that the police were still far from racially impartial. Although no police were at the scene when the crime was committed, "a police sergeant was authoritatively reported to have said 'a nigger was stabbed to death by a white man.'"

1960 – Birmingham Immigration Control Association - a fascist far right-wing political cell was created. Its inception was heralded in the British press and the group lobbied MP's who were against further black immigration.


1962 - Britain passed the Commonwealth Immigrants Act to restrict the entry of non-white Commonwealth citizens to Great Britain.

1963-1966 - Due to the Commonwealth Immigration Act, the numbers of West Indian immigrants fell to an average of less than 14,000 a year; by the 1970s, the number would further decrease to less than 3,000 a year. In 1963, the Black West Indian Association complained that although brutal attacks by
the police had escalated after the Act had passed, few people had paid attention. Brixton (London) police in particular, plagued blacks with a series of attacks they termed "nigger-hunting". In 1966, Joseph A Hunte published *Nigger Hunting in England?* (Read more here...), issued to the West Indian Standing Conference on police brutality. The general public paid little attention to the book.

1970s – By the 1970s a generation of Britons of African heritage existed: two-fifths of the blacks in Britain were second generation.

1971 – Leeds police officers were acquitted of manslaughter charges against David Oluwale; (read about it here...), a Nigerian vagrant. Police Sergeant Kenneth Kitching received a prison sentence of 27 months, and Geoffrey Ellerker, former police inspector, was sentenced for three years. According to witnesses, the two officers: "the guardians of law and order" kicked and beat Oluwale; Sergeant Kitching then urinated on him while he lay dying.

1972 – The West Indian Standing Conference delivered a memorandum to Parliament's committee on relations between blacks and police. Upon delineating racist police attacks against the black community, the parliamentary committee was stunned, almost to "disbelief". The committee's chairman told the West Indian Conference that "The memorandum which you have submitted to us does present a case almost akin to civil war between West Indians and the police."

1971 – 1973 – Emigrating West Indians outnumbered new immigrants: only 9,000 West Indians entered Britain, while 14,000 left. Selective Commonwealth immigration policies resulted in larger numbers of white-collar workers and their families migrating to Great Britain.

1973 – The international oil crisis of 1973 heralded the end of Britain’s need for post-colonial labourers. Sociologist Maureen Cain published *Society and the Policeman's Role*, in which she posited that racism now coloured all relations between the police and the black community. Stereotypes and racial epithets were part of the standard equipment police used to "control" blacks, whom Cain believes the police saw as "different, separate, and incomprehensible. There was, therefore, no good reason for not being violent if the occasion arose."

1974 – 1976 – Between 1974 and 1976, four "Political and Economic Planning Reports" were published, which outlined the levels of discrimination faced by West Indians and Asians. In conclusions written in the "coldly objective language of the statistician and the scholar," the reports maintained
that most of the two-million people of African heritage in Britain were subjected to discrimination in employment, housing, education, and areas of law enforcement.

1975 – After discovering in 1974 that official statistics charting the emigration of Commonwealth subjects were inaccurate, only the number of immigrants have been recorded after this date.

Late 1970's – A huge wave of the Jamaican middle-class emigrate to Britain due to governmental unrest in their homeland.

1979 – Another account of police brutality, Police Against Black People, was submitted to the Royal Commission On Criminal Procedure. Again, listeners to the complaints turned "largely deaf ears." The evidence, taken from "lawyer's case files, legal and advisory centres, black self-help groups, and personal interviews," argued that Britain's police "no longer merely reflected or reinforced popular morality: they re-create it - through stereotyping the black section of society as muggers and criminals and illegal immigrants." By the end of the decade, black communities believed that despite the efforts of groups to provide documented proof of police brutality against blacks, few whites had listened. The presence of white people in black neighbourhoods became that of an "army of occupation charged with the task of keeping black people in their place." Ironically, instead of tightening controls on blacks, "crisis management" tactics and police abuse only solidified the black community, resulting in an increased militancy. By the beginning of the 1980's black youth swore they were not going to take any more abuse from police officers.

1981 – By 1981, the number of British persons born in the West Indies had increased from 15,000 in 1951 to 172,000 in 1961 to 304,000 in 1981. At the time, the total population of persons of West Indian ethnicity was between 500,000 and 550,000 depending upon the official source used.

The Education Act of 1981 gave parents the legal foundation to choose which schools their children could attend - local authorities could only resist when there were "clear grounds of economy and efficiency in the overall provision of education in their areas." This Act paved the way to race-based educational segregation, where white parents removed their children from predominantly black or Asian schools that didn't reflect proper "British Culture." Read more here...

1985 – A British Home Office study reported that over 70,000 racially-motivated attacks happened in Great Britain yearly.
1988 – The 1988 Education Reform Act, driven by the so-called "market system", built upon the new freedoms given parents in the 1981 Education Act to choose (within limits) their children’s schools. In the new Act, residual powers still retained local education to affect the distribution of children in schools within their areas, and the ability to prioritize finding to schools in "educationally and socially disadvantaged” areas, were eliminated.

1992 – John Patten, the secretary of state for education, published a White Paper that made it possible for more schools to "opt out" of local education control. This move made local education authorities powerless. Also, they were at the mercy of educational associations or "hit squads of retired head teachers and inspectors” whose purpose was to take over the management of inner-city schools.

Further reading in detail:

AN EDUCATIONAL GUIDE TO THE HISTORY OF BLACK PEOPLE PAST AND PRESENT

By Azumah Kwartey Titus-Glover

BA (Hons) MSc

Read it here...

Frederick Douglass (1818 – 1890)

“Though the colored man is no longer subject to barter and sale, he is surrounded by an adverse settlement which fetters all his movements. In his downward course he meets with no resistance, but his course upward is resented and resisted at every step of his progress. If he comes in ignorance, rags and wretchedness he conforms to the popular belief of his character, and in that character he is welcome; but if he shall come as a gentleman, a scholar and a statesman, he is hailed as a contradiction to the national faith concerning his race, and his coming is resented as impudence. In one case he may provoke contempt and derision, but in the other he is an affront to pride and provokes malice.” Frederick Douglass – September 25, 1883.