**Migration to Britain From 1500 to 1900**

**Overview 1500-1700**

The Battle of Bosworth in 1485 ended a long period of civil wars and struggles for the throne. For over a century the Tudors ran a strong centralised monarchy in which it was dangerous to be ‘the other’, with beliefs or lifestyles that were different from what the rulers required. This applied at different times to both Protestants and Catholics, when their faith conflicted with the monarch of the time. It also applied to Romani Gypsies who had slowly migrated across Europe from northern India over several centuries and whose nomadic way of life was seen as a threat. Laws made it punishable by death to be a Gypsy or follow a similar lifestyle, and a few who refused to abandon their culture were executed...

Anti-foreigner feeling came to a head in London in 1517 in the events known as ‘Evil May Day’ when young apprentices rioted, with the anger directed especially against the many foreigners in Henry VIII’s court. The unrest was put down violently. Later in the century popular pressure led to Queen Elizabeth closing down the [Hansa](http://www.dictionary.com/browse/hansa?s=t) merchants’ Steelyards.

**From 1500-1750**

Overall, migration to England in this period was mainly affected by two major developments in England’s relationship with Europe and the wider world: the Protestant Reformation and the beginnings of English colonisation beyond the British Isles.

**The Reformation.** The rise of Protestantism in the sixteenth century led to religious wars across Europe. Following King Henry VIII’s break with Rome and especially under the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, England became a major Protestant nation with Catholic Spain and, later, France as its chief rivals. Protestant refugees fled to England seeking safety and were largely welcomed. They included Walloons from Belgium and northern France, followed by French Huguenots after the St Bartholomew’s Day Massacre of 1572.

Elizabeth’s opposition to Spain helped ensure good relations with Muslim powers in the Ottoman Empire and North Africa. The small number of Africans living freely in Tudor England followed several different trades and included North African Muslims and others from the continent’s west coast.

Towards the end of the seventeenth century there was further extreme repression of Huguenots by the regime of French King Louis XIV and large numbers of refugees crossed to England (see: [‘The plight of the Huguenots’](http://www.ourmigrationstory.org.uk/oms/thomas-papillons-advertisement)). Many brought a wide range of new skills and their treatment varied: some were accused of undercutting the work and pay of the English, but most thrived (see: [‘Huguenot silk weavers in Spitalfields'](http://www.ourmigrationstory.org.uk/oms/huguenot-silk-weavers-in-spitalfields)). They and their descendants would have a major impact on all aspects of life in the country – from the banking system to the armed forces, from silk weaving to clock making. They played a key role in Britain’s transition to an industrial and capitalist economy.

Another group was less fortunate. After the government announced that all Protestant refugees would be welcome, large numbers of very poor Palatines from the German Rhine valley arrived in the Thames Estuary (see:[‘Palatines in exile'](http://www.ourmigrationstory.org.uk/oms/palatines-in-exile-german-refugees-on-the-fringes-of-britain)). Initial welcome changed to resentment and repression: they were housed in refugee camps and those who did not return home or move on to North America were deported to Ireland.

**The East India Company.** In 1600 the East India Company set up a trading post in northwest India. Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries its power and influence expanded across the country. The Company eventually exerted military and political control over most of India and dominated trade between Europe and most of Asia. Its ships bringing textiles, porcelain, furniture and spices needed seamen and they were hired in ports such as Shanghai, Singapore, Calcutta (Kolkata) and Surat. Working for low wages in often terrible conditions, these *lascar* seamen began to arrive in our ports (see: [‘The lascars’](http://www.ourmigrationstory.org.uk/oms/the-lascars-britains-colonial-era-sailors)). Some were then abandoned to fend for themselves so far from home. Meanwhile several East India Company administrators returning from time in India brought with them Indian women as nannies (*ayahs*) for their children as well as Indian children to work as servants (see: [‘A home for the ayahs'](http://www.ourmigrationstory.org.uk/oms/a-home-for-the-ayahs-)). The first record we have of an Indian child in England is a Bengali boy who was baptised in London in 1616.

**The American colonies and the Triangular Trade in enslaved Africans.** In 1660 the Royal African Company began buying and transporting women, men and children from the West African coast to work as slaves on English plantations growing mainly tobacco in North America and sugar in the Caribbean. Increasing numbers of Africans appear in paintings, parish and court records and other documents including advertisements for runaway servants. It is likely that many, but not all of these people depicted had originally been enslaved: they may have arrived directly from Africa or been brought from the Caribbean by their owners (see: [‘African freedom in Tudor England’](http://www.ourmigrationstory.org.uk/oms/african-freedom-in-tudor-england-dr-hector-nuness-request)). Black child servants were, like Indian children, seen as highly fashionable and appear in many portraits of the rich and powerful.

**The return of a Jewish community.** During the Protectorate that followed Parliament’s victory in the Wars of the Three Kingdoms and the execution of King Charles I, Oliver Cromwell allowed a small number of Jews to settle in England, over 350 years after they had been expelled. His reasons were mixed: partly because they faced persecution and partly for commercial, political and religious reasons. There was a lot of opposition to their arrival so they came quietly, settling first in a small part of London and then in other towns. The community grew to about 8,000 by the year 1700 and, while there is evidence of prejudice against them, many began to prosper.

**Emigration.** This was also a period of mass emigration. Large numbers of  people left the British Isles to live elsewhere, particularly in North America and the Caribbean. They included refugees from religious and political persecution, dispossessed Irish peasants and Scottish Highlanders and thousands of the poor who signed up as[indentured](http://www.dictionary.com/browse/indentured?s=t) labourers hoping that, after tied work on plantations, they might find a better life.

**Migrant acceptance in Early Modern Britain**

It is very difficult to know to what extent immigrants were accepted in this ‘Early Modern’ period. It was always easier for wealthy immigrants than the destitute like the Palatines or Romani Gypsies. What little evidence we have suggests that ‘difference’ in the sixteenth century was defined by faith and class rather than skin colour: it may have been much easier to be an African basket maker than a Catholic priest in Elizabethan England. By the later seventeenth century, however, with the growth of empire and the trade in enslaved Africans, deep divisions were developing between coloniser and colonised and were being defined in racial terms.

## Overview 1750 to 1900

The mass immigration of this period was a result of Britain’s wealth and power, achieved by the exploitation of the world’s resources and its people through imperial expansion, the slave trade and industrialisation. Britain needed workers on plantations, in merchant ships, building transport links and keeping the factory system going. Forced by poverty, famine, enslavement and unemployment, people came, settled and, over time, intermixed with those already here. One outcome of imperialism, however, was that immigrant communities had to endure the rise of racist ideology that portrayed colonised people as inferior and even subhuman. Meanwhile, Britain’s economic freedoms attracted foreign entrepreneurs and its growing political freedoms enabled a safe haven for refugees and political exiles from across the world…

## From 1750 to 1900

This period was one of rapid, seismic change, with old relationships and arrangements in society shifting in the face of a modernising, globalising economy. At the same time many groups, from the working class and women of Britain to those who were enslaved, were involved in battles for increased rights.

**Black Britons at the time of enslavement and emancipation, and in the industrial age.** We know from a wide range of sources that black people lived and worked at all levels of society in all parts of the country. Of the few whose backgrounds we know, many were brought from enslavement in the Caribbean by their owners, while others may have been descended from long-standing African residents. In the case of those enslaved, their rights in Britain were  ambiguous: although slavery was legal across the Empire, within Britain the law neither permitted nor banned slavery. Some black people were kept in conditions of enslavement by their owners, who posted advertisements for their recapture when they ran away. On the other hand, black people worked in a number of different trades, their ranks including a publican, a lighthouse owner, an Old Bailey constable and large numbers in the army and navy. Ignatius Sancho, born on a slave ship, became a Westminster shopkeeper, classical composer and property owner eligible to vote in elections.

The 1772 Somerset court case ruled that a formerly enslaved man was free while in Britain but not if he returned to Jamaica. The Sierra Leone project aimed to resettle in Africa the ‘Black Loyalists’ – former slaves who had fought for Britain in the American War of Independence and who were subsequently freed, but ended up destitute on London’s streets. Some supporters saw the resettlement project as a humanitarian attempt to right the wrongs of slavery, while others saw it as an opportunity to get rid of the black poor: it ended up spoiled by corruption, exploitation and disaster. Most black residents clearly shared the lives of the other local poor with its few freedoms and many hardships. They also lived in the shadow of the violent trade in enslaved Africans and the rising tide of racist ideas that accompanied it.

Some black immigrants, formerly enslaved, were instrumental in [abolition](http://www.dictionary.com/browse/abolition?s=t), either through writing, such as Mary Prince and Ukawsaw Gronniosaw (see:[‘From slavery to freedom’](http://www.ourmigrationstory.org.uk/oms/from-slavery-to-freedom-the-narrative-of-james-albert-ukawsaw-gronniosaw)), or activism (Olaudah Equiano and Ottobah Cugoano). Others – such as Robert Wedderburn and the Cato Street conspirator William Davidson – saw themselves as fighting for the liberation both of enslaved Africans and the British working class. Following emancipation in the 1830s, the tradition of black radicals continued with, for example, William Cuffay the Chartist leader and the anti-colonialists of the late nineteenth century. After abolition, official records tended no longer to note whether someone was black and it is harder for us to identify the number of black people in the Victorian working class. Bearing in mind how widely spread across the country black people were, and the frequency of intermarriage, it is likely that considerable numbers of ‘white’ British people today have black ancestry.

**Lascar and other merchant seamen.** With the demise of the East India Company after 1857 and the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, increasing numbers of private shipping lines brought raw materials and traded goods from Asia to Britain, hiring men – known as ‘lascars’ – to work on their ships. These Bengali, Chinese, Malay, Yemeni, Gujarati and Somali seamen were hired on low wages to work in very difficult conditions. On arrival in British ports they were often abandoned and found it hard to find employment for a return trip because of opposition from the seamen’s union, which saw them as taking white workers’ jobs and undercutting their wages. Forced to survive as best they could, often living in boarding houses, many married white women and, slowly, multiracial working-class communities developed near the docks in Cardiff, Liverpool, Glasgow, Hull, South Shields and East London. Negative racial stereotyping of these areas as ‘sinister’, ‘dangerous’ and ‘criminal’ was common and forced families to develop a resilience in the face of hostility.

At the same time, Indian and Chinese women ('ayahs' and 'amahs') continued to be brought as nannies and housekeepers for wealthy white families (see:['A home for the ayahs'](http://www.ourmigrationstory.org.uk/oms/a-home-for-the-ayahs-)). British rule in India also enabled many of the Indian upper classes to come to Britain for education or business. They included doctors, lawyers, restaurateurs, sportsmen, aristocrats, Britain’s first female law student, Cornelia Sorabji, and politicians – two of whom were elected to Parliament by mainly white constituencies.

**European immigrants to industrial Britain**. Britain’s industrial economy depended on the factory system centred in the northwest, and this in turn demanded mass labour. Forced by poverty to leave home, migrant workers came in their hundreds of thousands from rural England, Scotland and especially Ireland. Forced to leave home by agricultural decline, the lack of employment opportunity and aggressive, often English, landlords, Irish families emigrated in their millions to North America and to Britain. Here they dug canals and docks, laid railway tracks and roads and worked the machines in the Lancashire textile mills. Irish migration reached its height during the horrors of the potato famine of the 1840s, many arriving on the ‘coffin ships’ in a state of starvation and forced to live in extreme conditions in the slums of cities such as Liverpool (see: ['The Irish in early industrial Britain](http://www.ourmigrationstory.org.uk/oms/the-irish-in-early-industrial-britain-diversity-and-differing-opinions)'). Anti-Irish racism – mixed with anti-Catholic feeling, resentment of terrorist acts by some Irish nationalists, and tensions with English workers over pay and strike actions – was common and stoked up in the Press. Irish migrants also included writers such as Oscar Wilde and George Bernard Shaw, and Thomas Barnardo, the founder of the children’s charity.

Poverty was another key factor in mass migration by families from southern Italy to cities such as Manchester, Glasgow and London. While many became factory workers, Italians also thrived in the food business, particularly the ice-cream trade, and in street entertainment. They too faced discrimination and negative publicity, including health scares about the dishes in which ice-cream was sold, but they settled permanently in areas such as London’s Clerkenwell and Ancoats in Manchester, which became known as ‘Little Italy’.

By 1900 the largest immigrant community in Britain was of German origin. While Germans existed at all levels of society they were particularly prominent as food traders for their bakeries and the delikatessens, which helped introduce sausages to the British breakfast. There were also several German entrepreneurs – some of them Jewish – who took advantage of Britain’s business opportunities. The firms they started – including Reuters, ICI, Schweppes and General Electric – became world famous.

**A place of safety.** Although none of Britain’s poorest men – and no women – yet had the vote, greater political freedoms  had been won in Britain than in most other countries. Many political activists in danger in their homelands came to Britain as asylum seekers for short or longer periods. They included the Italian nationalist Giuseppe Mazzini, German communists Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, and African-American antislavery activists Ellen Craft and Frederick Douglass.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century there was a new mass migration, this time of Eastern European Jews fleeing anti-Semitic pogroms. They settled first in the cheaper areas of larger cities, many working in the garment trade, which could employ whole families as tailors and seamstresses, often working long hours in sweatshops. Many became politically active, playing a key role in working-class action such as the tailors’ strike. The Jewish clothing trade in East London, Leeds and other cities enabled poorer British families to afford new clothing for the first time, and some small businesses established by Jewish migrants grew to become household names such as Marks & Spencer and Burton. One legacy of this influx of Jewish migrants is now seen as typically English: fish and chips.

Meanwhile mass emigration to the USA and Canada from the British Isles continued, in many cases following the same trajectory (fleeing poverty and seeking a better life) as those coming in.

## Migrants building Britain

As in previous centuries, immigrants brought considerable economic benefit to Britain. As described above, its factories, transport links, food and clothing businesses were transformed by their contributions. Because of the need for labour there was very little immigration control. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, anti-immigrant feeling was again rising, once more stirred up by sections of the press and some politicians. Antagonism – particularly against Asian seamen and Eastern European Jews – led to growing calls for laws restricting immigration, setting the scene for the century to come.