

COMING TO

In recent years, heritage organisations have played a particularly important role in capturing and representing the experiences of migrant communities. The Herbert Art Gallery and Museum has undertaken a number of history projects, enabling it to chronicle the stories of individuals who have settled in Coventry and present them to a broad audience.

Alison Taylor and Stacey Bains

A Culturally Diverse City

Coventry has long been a city of migrants. Its population increased rapidly in the late 1800s and early 1900s as people flooded in from across the UK in search of work. Today it is a culturally diverse city with a population of 317,000, a quarter of which are from minority ethnic communities. More than 12 per cent have South Asian roots, while others come from Caribbean, African, Middle Eastern, Irish and other European backgrounds. These individuals range from those who arrived before the Second World War and their descendants, to much more recent migrants.

'Moving Here'

In a project called 'Moving Here', the Herbert and other museums in the region worked with Somali groups, young refugees, African poets, and elders from Caribbean, Chinese and Polish backgrounds to uncover people's motivations for leaving their home countries. An ambitious initiative, led by the National Archives, 'Moving Here' was particularly effective in capturing diverse migration stories.

Interviewees spoke about the factors that had pushed them to leave their home countries, – war, economic pressures and political change – and those that had attracted them to the UK – educational and employment opportunities and political freedom. Participants recorded their migration stories for the national 'Moving Here' website, where they now sit within a digitised archive of migration material and curriculum-based resources for teachers and pupils.

'Journey to the West'

The life left behind and the struggle to adapt to a new home was the focus of the 'Journey to the West' project undertaken in 2009, which explored traditional festivals in China and Hong Kong. Students from the Coventry Chinese School interviewed community elders who had migrated to the West Midlands between the 1950s and 1970s. In recording these memories, the young people developed a much greater understanding of their cultural heritage and also of the hardships endured by the original settlers, most of whom were members of their own families.



An intergenerational project captured the memories of Chinese elders.



The Hall family can trace their arrival in Coventry to the early 1900s.

COVENTRY

Settling In

Another project involved working with South Asian migrants who arrived in Coventry from the 1940s to the 1960s, seeking economic opportunities and an escape from the upheaval following the partition of India. Interviews addressed the actual experience of migration, but also explored the development of the community within the city. More than 60 interviews were filmed and although most of the interviewees were able to speak English, the majority chose to be interviewed in their first language to express themselves more fully. The interviews were translated for archiving and publication. Many interviewees had photographs of their early years in Coventry which were digitised for the project.

This work resulted in a book, *Coming to Coventry*, to emphasise the Asian community's contribution to the history of Coventry as a whole. Subjects included first impressions of Coventry, working and social life, family relationships, and sporting and cultural activities.

The 'Coming to Coventry' exhibition, shown at the Herbert, followed the same approach. It explored shared experiences as much as differences, and documented the friendships which many Asian migrants had with White colleagues and neighbours. Although primarily aimed at the South Asian community the exhibition provided anyone interested in local history with the opportunity to learn about a neglected subject. It underlined the importance of oral testimony in supporting intergenerational understanding and a sense of belonging. One individual said: 'I went into the pub and there was everyone looking at a copy of the book, putting faces to names and saying I was there, I knew him, I remember that. Even every house you go and visit people have got a copy of the book, everyone loves it!!'



Clockwise from top left: Chuhar Singh (top row, fourth from left) at an Indian Youth Club football match, about 1964-65; Passport photograph of Sumetra Dharmgir Gosai when she travelled from Gujarat to join her husband in Coventry, 1954; Darshan Singh and Chhanan Kaur Sandhu in a picture taken specially to send to relatives in India, 1957; Gurbachan Singh (bottom left) and family, before his children came to Coventry, 1954; Ragini Gosai-Patel with her father outside the family shop, Queen Mary Road, 1965-66.



Coventry's Indian cinemas were a focus for Asian community life.



Some migrants came to Coventry after serving in the Second World War.



Singer Ray King.

The Evolution of Asian Cinema

One project involved exploring the history of Asian cinema in Coventry since the 1940s. By collecting oral testimony it built up a picture from the early years when a fledgling Indian community in Coventry organised film screenings in hired halls, through to the 1970s when Asian businessmen and shareholders took over two failing mainstream cinemas and transformed them into centres for community life. Interviewees spoke of the importance of dressing fashionably for cinema outings and the role of Indian film in cementing a sense of community in Coventry while maintaining ties with the home country. The project resulted in an exhibition called 'Kabhi Ritz Kabhie Palladium'. It was not just an exercise in nostalgia. Several interviewees explicitly described the cinema as a form of escapism from the hardship of everyday life, and spoke of the importance of having their own community spaces at a time when many mainstream venues in Coventry operated colour bars.

Caribbean Contribution to the Music Scene

Similar issues were addressed in another project exploring the life and career of Vibert Cornwall, a singer who came to Coventry from the Caribbean island of St Vincent in the 1960s and gained a national reputation under the name of Ray King. Vibert's interviews provided a wealth

of archival material and created a fascinating film. His memories recorded the liveliness of the Coventry music scene and the glamour of his career as he performed at London's Playboy Club and played with stars like Tina Turner. His recollections also gave an insight into the early days of Coventry's Black community. Interviews with other local people brought back memories of late-night Caribbean blues parties and the Coventry police ballroom which played host to local performers. Vibert also influenced the development of Two Tone music in Coventry during the 1970s which fused elements of ska, punk rock and reggae.

Migrants in the Second World War

One of the defining moments in Coventry's history was the experience of the Blitz. On 14 November 1940 an air raid killed more than 500 people and left most of the city centre, including the Cathedral, in ruins. Over seventy years later it still exerts a powerful influence on Coventry's identity. The experience has previously been presented as an exclusively White British one and there is a risk of other Coventrians being excluded from this story. There were, for example, more than 800 Indians working in the city at that time.

The 'Empire at War' project sought to redress the balance. It included not only memories of the Blitz, but also the experiences of civilians in former British colonies and people on active service. Oral history interviews were filmed with contributors from Caribbean, Malaysian and South Asian backgrounds. They told of fighting in Syria and East Africa, fleeing from the Japanese advance into Burma, and of blackouts and famine in Calcutta. One Indian man made tanks in a Coventry factory,



The Herbert's History Centre contains significant collections relating to migration.

while another recalled his father's experiences of the Blitz and contribution to local civil defence. The project showed the connections between different communities and a critical episode in Coventry's history.

Accessing the Herbert's Collections

The Herbert's History Centre houses the interviews and photographs collected as a result of these projects, where they can be accessed by interested visitors. The Centre has also acquired artefacts and documents.

In 2004 the Herbert acquired papers relating to the Indian Workers Association (IWA), photographs, British Asian publications, and a wide variety of items documenting the general activities of the community. The Virk Collection offers a fascinating insight into the establishment of South Asian migrant communities in Britain, and their increasing involvement in economic and political activity. The IWA material has particular significance for Coventry as in 1937 the city was the birthplace of this organisation, which subsequently developed branches across the country.

The acquisition of material from minority ethnic communities has enabled the Herbert to present a rounded picture of local life in its permanent galleries. A small section of the History Gallery explores migration as a specific theme, but the experiences of people from migrant backgrounds principally feature in general displays exploring topics such as leisure, women's lives, politics and work, where they emphasise the contribution that these communities have made to the city. This integration mirrors the reality of life in Coventry.



Many new migrants sent studio portraits to their families back home.

Shared Histories

A focus on stories of migration and settling might be thought to emphasise difference, but has in fact often underlined shared experiences between communities. First-generation settlers often have similar stories regardless of their ethnic origin and have faced comparable challenges in maintaining their cultural identity while integrating into British society. In delivering these projects, the Herbert has kept as its underpinning message that whatever their origin, Coventry people are united by living in a city whose population has largely been created by migration. ●

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Further Reading

For projects from The Herbert see: www.theherbert.org and www.youtube.com/user/HerbertArtMus.

Moving Here – 200 Years of Migration in England: www.movinghere.org.uk.

'Coming to Coventry' is at www.coming2coventry.org and is also available as a book from The Herbert, as is the *Empire at War* CD-Rom.

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