

BLACK PEOPLE IN THE WEST MIDLANDS BEFORE 1807

David Callaghan

Since the Second World War when citizens of the Commonwealth, first from the Caribbean, then from Asia came to live and work in Britain at the invitation of the government, historians have taken a keen interest in the experiences of 'visible immigrants' to this country and sought to explore the roots of such immigration. They stretch back further than you might imagine ...

Courtesy National Museums Liverpool



The 'Lord Stanley' carried about 250 African slaves across the Atlantic from the Cameroons to Barbados. Almost 50 died during the voyage. This Wedgwood creamware bowl dates from 1786.

Courtesy of the Trustees of Dr Johnson's House



This portrait by James Northcote is thought to be of Francis Barber, Samuel Johnson's manservant.

Before the 'English'

As Peter Fryer provocatively declared in his comprehensive survey of Black history in Britain, published as it was in the midst of rising racial tensions in Britain during the 1980s, 'there were Africans in Britain before the English came here'. They arrived during the Roman occupation – a period which recent research has shown created a culturally diverse, cosmopolitan Britain.

There is more definitive historical evidence of a constant Black presence – understood in the literature to be those people designated as non-white – in Britain since the early Tudor period. However, research is currently being undertaken which provides evidence of a Black presence in Britain in medieval times; one example being Peter the Saracen, a crossbow maker in the employ of King John.

Early Black history as an academic discipline has incorporated all people 'of colour' since it was rare for further evidence other than skin tone to be provided in the historical record. Ascribing a more definitive ethnicity, or even nationality, is often not possible.

In the period prior to 1807, the majority of Black persons in Britain were of African descent. This, simply put, is due to the transatlantic slave trade which was the

starting point for the vast majority of Black migration from the sixteenth century until its abolition in 1807.

The first record of Black migration to the West Midlands is much later than the earliest recorded presence in Britain which, for obvious reasons, is most often located around the major ports of London, Bristol and Liverpool.

Servants and Slaves

Around 1680 records show that Edward Lloyd employed a 'negro gardener' at his estate at Llanforda, near Oswestry. Nothing else is known of this man, including how he came to be in such a remote part of Britain.

Such fragments of information are typical of much of the evidence relating to the Black population at this time. Parish records are the major source of information for the historian. In Worcestershire for instance, 'John Langley, a Niger of Jamaica about 30 years of age was baptised' in 1698.



'Here lyeth the body of Myrtilla, negro slave to Mr Tho Beauchamp of Nevis'.
Grave at Oxhill, Warwickshire.

© Robert Philpott



Map of Africa from Samuel Dunn's *A new atlas of the mundane system, or, of geography and cosmography describing the heavens and the earth*, 1774.

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In the tiny Warwickshire parishes of Idlicote and Oxhill a remarkable story unfolds where the rector of both parish churches, Nicholas Meese, baptised three Black parishioners in a fifteen-year period. Margaret Lucy, a young Black girl 'belonging to ye Lady Underhill' in 1690; Will Archus 'an adult Black male'; and Myrtilla, who was baptised and buried in 1705. Myrtilla even had a headstone inscribed in her memory by her owner and master, Thomas Beauchamp.

It can only be wondered what Meese thought of his role in the lives of these very visible immigrants, some children, a long way from their homes and families.

Judging by the presence of 'masters' in many of the records, these men and women, boys and girls, were certainly not free citizens. The plantation system of slavery, however, which was regimented, hierarchical and often ruthless was not transplanted into the slavery practised in the British Isles. Increasingly, Black slaves, often brought here as domestic servants by returning plantation owners ready to spend their new wealth in Britain, ran away from their enforced servitude.

During the second half of the eighteenth century, anti-slavery lobbies, led in the courts by Granville Sharp, tested the legality of slavery, winning the landmark *Somerset* case in 1772. This provided that no slave could be forced to return to the plantations from Britain and gave abolitionists a platform from which to launch their public revilement of the institution of slavery.

In the West Midlands, this resulted in the self-emancipation of the enslaved and, within just a few decades, Blacks are found living as free men and women in a variety of occupations and locations.

Personal Stories

The tiny fragments that we possess relating to the lives of Black people who migrated to the West Midlands before 1807 make it hard to talk of individual experiences. Occasionally, however, more evidence does exist. Two Black individuals, with very different stories, who migrated to the West Midlands during this period of change in the rights and freedoms of the region's Black population are particularly interesting: James Albert Uksawsaw Gronniosaw (c.1705 - 1775) and Jane 'Jenny' Harry (c.1756 - 1784).

James Albert Uksawsaw Gronniosaw

Gronniosaw, known during his later life by the name James Albert, was the first ex-slave to publish an account of his experiences in England. His life coincides with the period when the transatlantic slave trade, and Britain's involvement in it, was at its peak. As many as 12.5 million African slaves were transported from the west coast of the continent to the Americas between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries. His autobiography entitled *A narrative of the most remarkable particulars in the life of James Albert Uksawsaw Gronniosaw, an African Prince, as related by himself*, was first published in Bath in 1772. It was dedicated to Selina Hastings, the Countess of Huntingdon who presumably had supported the work. At the time of writing Gronniosaw was living with his family in Kidderminster.

His remarkable story recounts how he had been born into a royal family in Bornu, modern-day north eastern Nigeria. He was enslaved by a troop of African merchants with whom he was travelling and sold on the Gold Coast of Africa to a Dutch slave ship captain. He became a domestic servant in New England where he also learned to read and became a devout Christian.

It was through his education that he came across the writings of Richard Baxter, a non-conformist religious leader in Kidderminster during and after the English Civil War. Having been given his freedom on his master's death he longed to go to the home of Baxter, and worked his way to England as, amongst other things, a privateer and a soldier in the 28th Regiment of Foot, which was campaigning in the West Indies at this time.

After meeting and marrying his wife, Betty, they moved to Colchester, then Norwich, before finally arriving in Kidderminster in about 1771. By this time Gronniosaw would have been in his sixties with three young children to support. He seemed to find some comfort with the non-conformist community at Baxter's old

church, called the Meeting House. On Christmas Day 1771 he had his children Mary, Edward and Samuel baptised there.

Gronniosaw, like other Black men and women in the West Midlands area at this time, had arrived in Britain as a result of enslavement and European colonial ties to the Caribbean and America. Although his legacy is unique, his existence, in a small rural community of the West Midlands is not.

During the last decades of the eighteenth century there were other families with at least one Black parent living in the area. The Barretts for instance, who lived in Worcester in the late 1780s. The head of the family, Lashington, had served for many years in the 29th Regiment of Foot. The Baccas family also were living in Worcester around the same time. Given their visibility they must have provoked interest. Gronniosaw's autobiography, however, is not lined with anti-slavery rhetoric or tales of racial prejudice; it is very much the story of a poor man and his family trying to survive.

It is this fact, along with his faith which brought him into the community at the Old Meeting House, where his ethnicity seems not to be considered any kind of barrier to inclusion. He stayed here for the next few years, experiencing the common heartbreak of burying a child, Samuel, in 1773, and had a further child, James, in 1774.

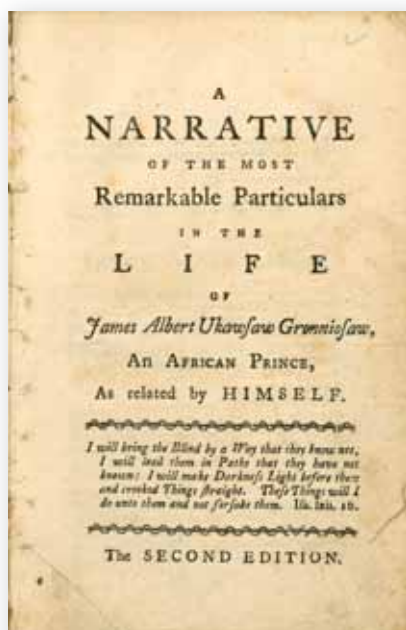
His autobiography, and also his seemingly humble personality, obviously had an impact on those around him, not only the Countess of Huntingdon, but also his neighbours. Such personalities, who could tell of experiences beyond the imaginations of most, were integral to the later anti-slavery movement. In this sense, Gronniosaw represents the first of many Black men and women, who would open the eyes of the British public to slavery.

Uksawsaw Gronniosaw died in October 1775 whilst in Chester. That his obituary appeared in local newspapers suggests he was known in the town and may well have been touring to publicise his book, as many after him did. We don't know what happened to Betty and her young family. Perhaps Gronniosaw's descendants are still around today?

Jane 'Jenny' Harry

Despite the assertion by her biographer in 1913 that her memory 'justly deserves to be rescued from the dust of the ages, for she was a woman of a thousand', Jane 'Jenny' Harry is still largely unknown today. Her story, however, provides one of the earliest histories - and certainly the most recorded - of a free, educated Black woman living and working in the West Midlands during the late eighteenth century. It has survived the passage of time because of her acquaintance with some of the region's most influential figures of the time.

'Jenny' was born the free daughter of a White judge, Thomas Hibbert, and a free Black woman known only as Mrs Harry, in slavery-dominated Jamaica. Mrs Harry was described as a 'mulatto woman', meaning to be of Black and White parentage. Jenny's life would quickly become very eventful.



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A narrative of the most remarkable particulars in the life of James Albert Uksawsaw Gronniosaw, an African prince as related by himself, c. 1800.



© Birmingham Museums Trust

Jane 'Jenny' Harry taught the children of Sampson Lloyd III at their country home, Farm, in Sparkbrook. *View of the exterior of Lloyd's Farm, Sparkbrook, 1854.*

When she was still a child Jenny and her sister, Margaret, were sent by their father to live in England with the family of Nathaniel Sprigg in Surrey. Shortly after their arrival, Jenny sadly lost her younger sister. She soon developed a friendship with Molly Knowles, a 'celebrated literary Quakeress' and began painting portraits, winning the gold medal of the Society in London for the Encouragement of Arts and Commerce for one painting.

Much to the dismay of the Sprigg family, and indeed her father, Jenny converted to Quakerism in her early twenties, leaving her residence with the Spriggs and taking up with the Knowles. She had apparently, until this point, also enjoyed the friendship of Dr Samuel Johnson, but after her conversion he would not 'deign to speak to her' for a time. It is at this point in her life that Jenny came to the West Midlands to be employed as governess to many of the fifteen children of Sampson Lloyd III, a fellow Quaker and friend of Mrs Knowles. This was about 1778-1779 when Jenny was no more than twenty-five.

The Lloyd family at this time were significant bankers and held a town house in Old Square, Birmingham, but the family spent most of its time at the country residence, affectionately known as 'Farm' which was in Sparkbrook. This is where Jenny taught the Lloyd children.

Through either the Lloyds, or a Quaker meeting, Jenny soon met Joseph Thresher, a surgeon from Worcester. After exchanging letters of courtship, and Joseph taking the unusual step of asking Jenny's mother in Jamaica for permission to marry her (Thomas Hibbert having died), the two made their union on 26 November 1782. She left the employ of the Lloyds and moved to Worcester with her new husband.

Jenny Thresher's marriage unfortunately was short-lived and marred by tragedy as her first child, Edwin, died just months after birth in 1784 and his mother survived him by only three months.

One of the most interesting historical notes which help us to understand the complex nature of racial attitudes at this time can be found in her obituary in the *Gentleman's Magazine*. It states that Jenny had, prior to her death, resolved to return to Jamaica to procure the freedom of her mother's slaves. That her mother owned slaves whilst having a free Black daughter demonstrates the enshrined culture of slavery in the Caribbean in the late eighteenth century. Her reported commitment to free those slaves is a rare moment when we can see personal struggles with its existence from those who could easily have become prey to it.

The Lloyd family themselves had employed a Black slave to work in their Birmingham Iron works in 1749 and, just 30 years later, employed a Black woman to educate their children. Jenny's assertion that her mother's slaves should be freed came at a time when a tide of anti-slavery feeling was beginning to swell, to which the Quakers, including the Lloyd family, would pledge their support.

Pioneers

Like Gronniosaw then, Jenny Harry was a pioneer of anti-slavery, whether by design or not. As Gronniosaw produced the first of what would become a series of slave narratives, arguably made most famous by Olaudah Equiano, Jenny recognised the injustice of slavery before many others, and had the strength of purpose to do something about it. Whether she succeeded or not is unknown, but that she was coveted by influential people suggests she was herself influential, and it is hard to believe that Jenny did not share her strong views on her mother's slaves more widely, or elaborate on them further.

To date, more than sixty Black people have been 'found' living in the West Midlands counties of Warwickshire, Worcestershire, Staffordshire and Shropshire before 1807. Sadly, the paucity of sources makes it impossible to judge how representative Gronniosaw's or Jenny's experiences were, except for saying that the stark difference between the two provides an important clue.

Gronniosaw had been a prince, but as a slave in the 'New World' had been denied the privilege of freedom. In Britain his religious faith and fortitude clearly endeared him to many. Jenny had never endured enslavement and at no point seems to have been judged or held back in England by the colour of her skin. In the short period between the demise of slavery in Britain at the end of the eighteenth century and the empire-building years to come, Black people in the West Midlands appear to have been judged apart from, not within the context of, the colour of their skin. ●

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Further Reading

David Callaghan, 'The Black Presence in the West Midlands, 1650-1918', *Midland History* 2011, **36**:180-94.

Kathleen Chater, *Untold Histories: Black People in England and Wales during the Period of the British Slave Trade, c. 1660-1807* (Manchester University Press, 2009).

Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (Pluto Press, 2010).

Connecting Histories: www.connectinghistories.org.uk
Sources for Black and Asian History:

www.worcestershire.gov.uk/cms/records/online-exhibitions/black-and-asian-sources.aspx