

BIRMINGHAM'S FIRST ASIAN COMMUNITY: THE YEMENIS



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where many Yemenis lived. He established the city's first *zawiya* or centre for prayer in Edward Street and became the leader of the community for nearly sixty years. The *zawiya* was Birmingham's first mosque. When he died the brother of the President of Yemen attended his funeral.

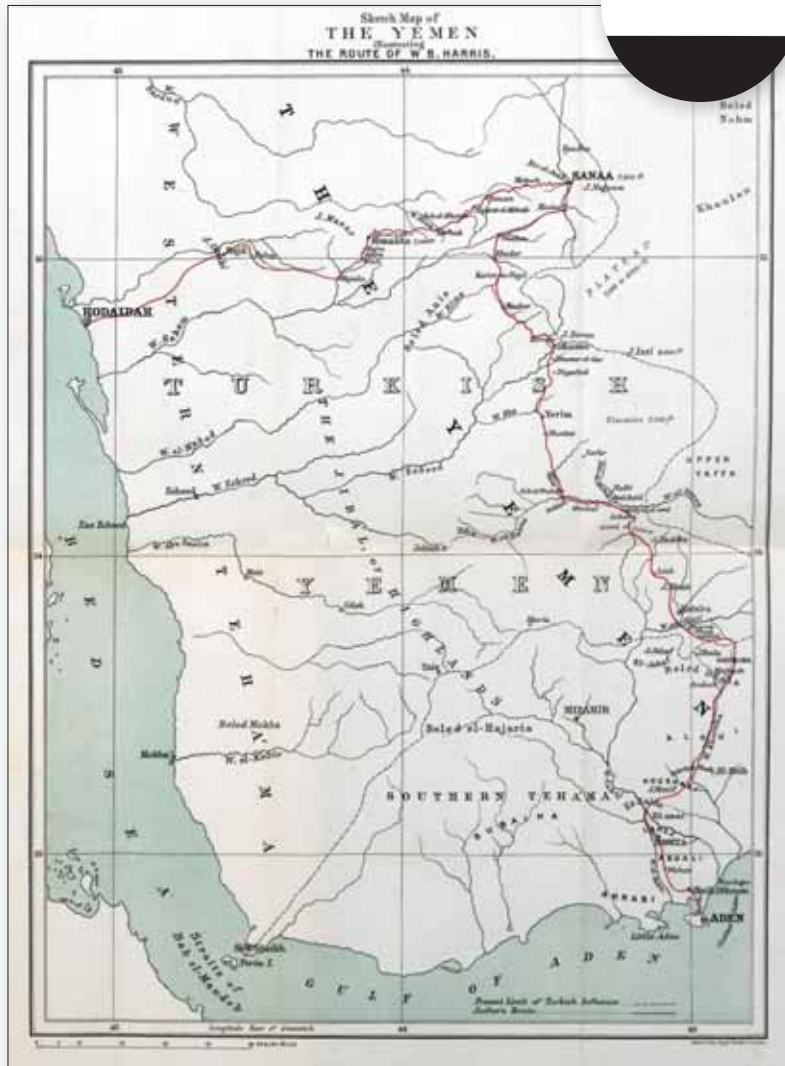
This migrant's story reveals ways in which Britain's history connects with the wider world. Yemen and its major port, Aden, was annexed by Britain in 1839. For many years the country exported labour and the first Yemeni settlers in Britain served on British merchant ships or as soldiers in the army. After World War I the ports of Cardiff and South Shields became the first places of settlement in the UK.

Yemenis migrated to Birmingham to work in the metal trades where there was a labour shortage. Migration grew in the 1950s and 1960s, but in the 1970s industrial decline led to unemployment and many left the UK. Most Yemenis arrived as single men and there is still a significant population of elderly single men in the city who have lived locally for decades. It is difficult to estimate the size of the population as census figures and other records do not provide this information, but in 1998, a survey estimated that between 5,000 and 7,000 people of Yemeni origin lived in Birmingham, mainly in Small Heath, Balsall Heath, Sparkbrook, Highgate and Edgbaston.

Locally the community has several characteristics. Though Yemenis speak Arabic and are Muslims, there are divisions as many see themselves as either from the south or the north of the country or members of a tribal group. Despite the long-term presence of the Yemenis, which predates migration from South Asia and the Caribbean in the 1950s and 1960s, they remained an invisible minority for decades. Since the 1990s organisations such as the Yemeni Women's Association, the Mu'ath Welfare Trust and the Yemeni Development Foundation have provided self-help support to members of the community and enhanced its social profile. ●

Further Reading

Makhdoom Chishti (ed.), *Lok Virsa - Cultural Voyage: Exploring the Muslim Heritage* (Brewin Books, 2008).



The Yemen in the late nineteenth century. *A journey through the Yemen and some general remarks upon that country, 1893.*

In 1999, Shaikh Muhammad Qassim al'Alawi died in Birmingham at the age of ninety. As a boy he looked after sheep in Yemen in the south of Arabia, but in 1925 he joined the British merchant navy. After seeing the world he settled in Cardiff and dedicated the rest of his life to religion and public service.

By the 1940s, Birmingham possessed a small Yemeni community and many men married local women. There were few opportunities for Yemenis to practise their Muslim religion and they lost contact with their roots. In 1941 Shaikh Muhammad moved to Balsall Heath in Birmingham