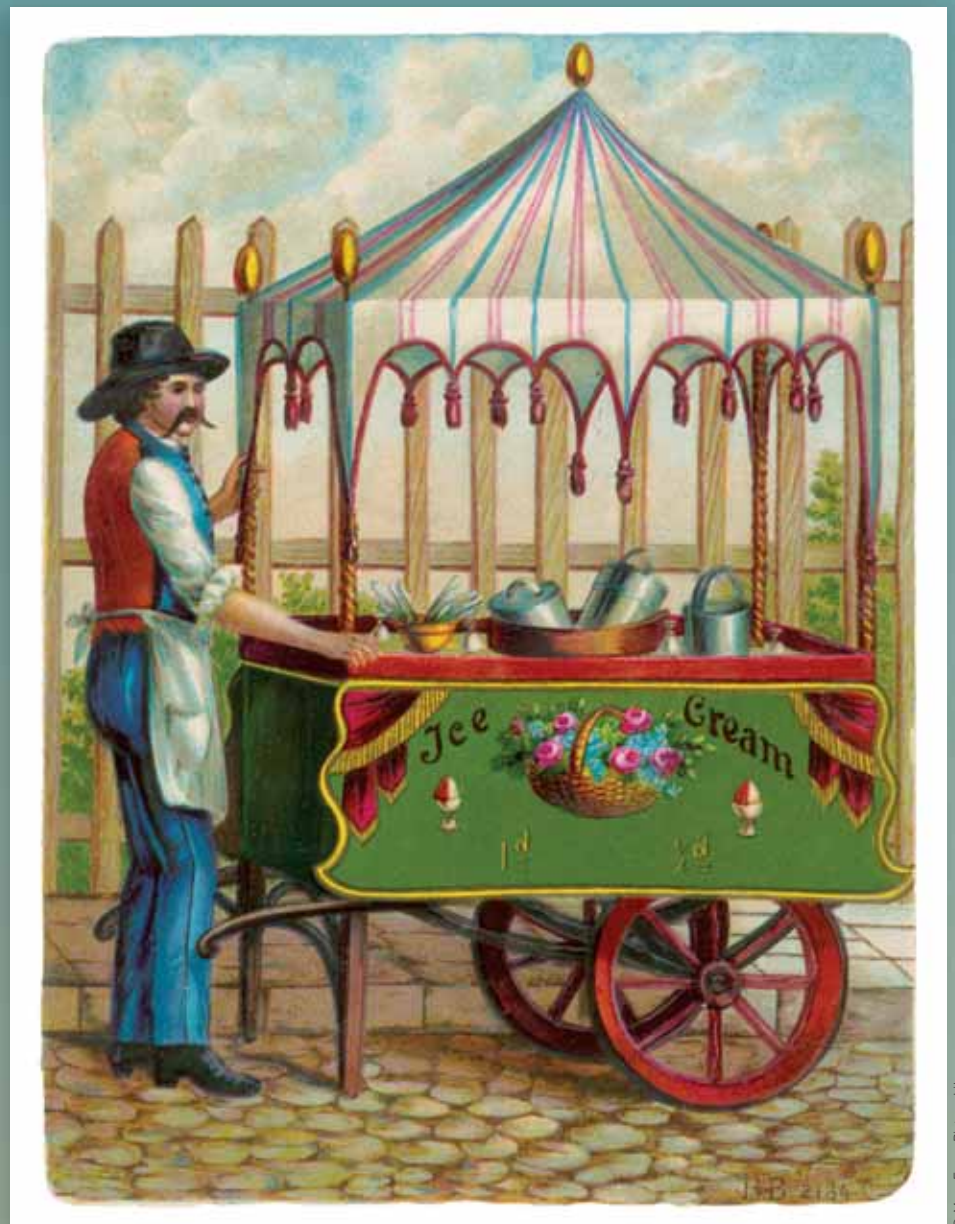


HURDY-GURDIES AND HOKEY- POKEY MEN:

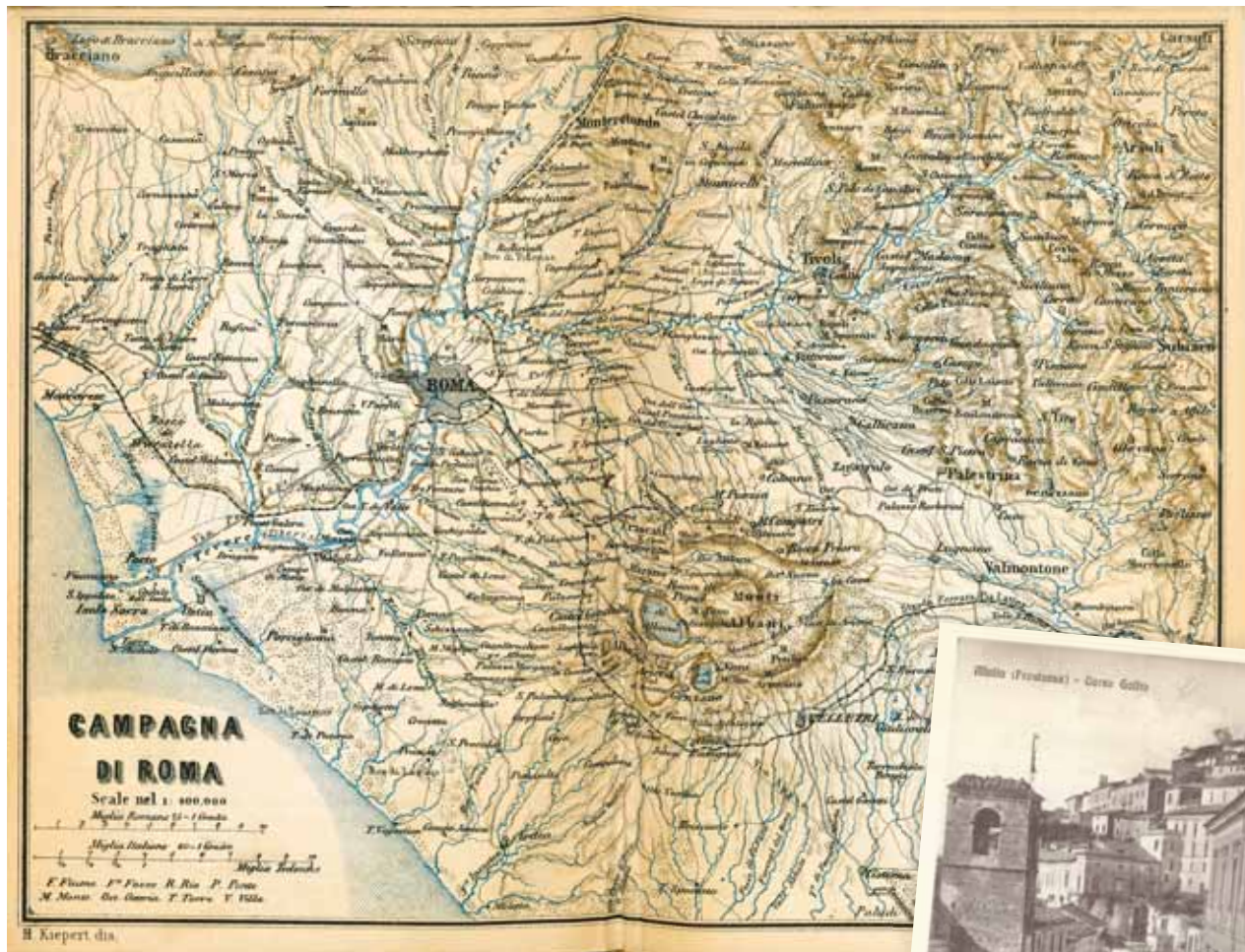
ITALIANS IN THE WEST MIDLANDS

Doreen Hopwood

Italian merchants were established in London in medieval times, but Italian settlement in the West Midlands is much more recent. Initially, craftsmen who specialised in the making of optical and scientific instruments and looking glasses travelled between Midlands' towns, staying only as long as their skills were needed, and then returning to Italy. The latter half of the nineteenth century was when an Italian presence became visible and audible on the streets of West Midland towns.



A traditional Italian ice cream seller.



The Lazio region of central Italy. *Italy: handbook for travellers*, 1872.

Music and Ice Cream

Rightly painted ice cream carts were pushed to the cries of “Gelati! Ecco un poco” (‘taste a little’), which earned them the title of ‘Hokey-Pokey Men’, whilst the music of the barrel organs (hurdy-gurdies) attracted the crowds – or was it perhaps their handsome young operators?

Italian-run lodging houses in Birmingham provided accommodation for seasonal workers who came in the hope of earning enough to tide them over the winter, and by 1861, John Spinetto had a dozen Italian-born lodgers, all of whom were shown as musicians on the census return. Communal living seemed to be the norm amongst Italian and other European immigrants in all towns. In 1879, a Birmingham newspaper described a lodging house as “...where the children of the sunny South cling together in musical expatriation”.

Economic Necessity

The report on the 1861 census showed that the Italian-born population of the West Midlands was 358, only 66 of whom were female. However, by the 1880s, this imbalance was redressed, when the indication of a permanent settlement was evident by the numbers of wives and other female relatives.

Some three-quarters of a million people emigrated from newly-united Italy in the 1870s, the majority of whom went to America.

Postcards from Alvito in the Lazio region of Italy.



Economic necessity was the main reason for this mass exodus, due to bad harvests, an archaic agrarian system and demographic pressures, all of which seriously affected the mountainous southern regions which were dependent on agriculture.

Young, single men left the Lazio region to find work in other Italian towns or further afield, and many of those who arrived in England initially

Courtesy the Volante family



St. Michael's Irish Dance Team.



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John Devoti selling ice cream in Victoria Square, Birmingham in 1908. Warwickshire Photographic Survey.

spent some time in the large Italian community in the Hatton Garden district of London – the area made famous (or infamous) as home to Fagin's den in the Dickens novel *Oliver Twist*. It was probably here that many of them heard about the job opportunities in the factories of the industrial Midlands, and also where many of them learned how to make ice cream.

Once a young man had settled in his new home, he returned to Italy where he may have married, and then brought his wife and other relatives to his Midlands home. These formed the nucleus of an Italian community, and it is no coincidence that virtually all of the Italians who settled in Birmingham came from villages within a 30-mile radius of each other in the Comino Valley (adjacent to the Abruzzi mountains) of Lazio (the administrative area around Rome), where word spread through the extensive kinship networks.

Some young musicians had no say in where they settled. These were the ones who arrived through a business arrangement, whereby an employer (padrone) paid a fixed sum to the boy's parents for a given period, during which he would teach him to play an instrument, and feed, house and clothe him. On completion of the contract, the boy would be returned home. However, many of these young men remained in the Midlands where they married and raised their own families.



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Flower sellers and an ice cream barrow in the Bull Ring, Birmingham, 1897. Warwickshire Photographic Survey.

'Little Italy'

The St Bartholomew's area of Birmingham, close to the city centre, became known as 'Little Italy'. The nearby Bull Ring markets and places of entertainment provided both the ingredients for the manufacture of ice cream and opportunities to sell their goods, and the barrel organ grinders had 'captive' audiences on the nearby streets. There was plenty of low-rental housing, much of which had a yard where their work could be undertaken, and St Michael's Roman Catholic Church on Moor Street already had a thriving (mainly Irish) congregation to cater for their spiritual and social needs.



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The St. Bartholomew's area of Birmingham. Davies's new map of Birmingham, street directory and stranger's guide, 1859.



Courtesy the Verrecchia family

Verrecchia's ice cream van in Ladywood, Birmingham, 1948.

Until it was bombed in the Second World War, the children of the area attended St Michael's School, whose clubs, along with those of the church, were the centre of community life. According to Beattie Eastment (née Volante), there was intense (but friendly) rivalry for places in the Irish dancing team, which often comprised equal numbers of girls of Irish and Italian descent.

An Entrepreneurial Spirit

Italian and other European immigrants had to find their own occupational niche and adapt their rural skills to those needed to make a living in an urban environment. Whilst there was plenty of unskilled work available in factories, where language skills were not required, the majority of Italians made their mark in feeding and entertaining the local population.

Midlanders had probably had their first taste of Italian ice cream whilst on a seaside excursion, and some of Birmingham's ice cream makers had initially settled in Devon or coastal towns. At first, ice cream was manufactured in the brew houses or other buildings in the back-to-back courts, but health scares in the early twentieth century meant that most of the businesses transferred to purpose-built manufactories. Each family's recipe was a closely-guarded secret, and one descendant was disappointed that her father would not pass it on to her, simply because she was a girl.

Entrepreneurship played a major role in the success of Italian businesses. Enrico Facchino was a boot maker in his native Sora, but became one of the leading ice cream makers before turning to the manufacture of biscuits and wafers. There were

numerous Italian cafés which served English, not Italian, food and many fish and chip shops were run by Italians, such as the Taviolieri family. By 1916, John Devoti had several confectionery shops in Birmingham city centre, and several of his nephews and nieces came from Italy to work for him. Other Italian businesses initially catered for the specific needs of their compatriots, like the Mattiellos who made and repaired ice cream carts, but soon found customers coming from all over the area. Plaster figures and terrazzo work were visible signs of Italian craftsmanship, and many churches have statues made by the Panicali Brothers, some of whom had settled in Hereford as well as Birmingham.

Bonds of Kinship

By the 1930s, much of the housing in the St Bartholomew's district was being demolished, at which time the *Birmingham Evening Mail* (30 October 1934) reported "They cling together in a compact community, held close by race, language and religion, but not clannish, and continually introducing into their midst English wives and husbands..."

Although this signalled the end of living in close proximity, the descendants of many of those young pioneers remain in contact with each other, and many are linked through bonds of kinship. ●

Doreen Hopwood was formerly the genealogist for Birmingham City Council and is a regular contributor to family history publications.

Further Reading

Doreen Hopwood & Margaret Dilloway, *Bella Brum* (Birmingham City Council, 2008).