



WHEN DID BLACK PEOPLE FIRST ARRIVE?

The first record of black people in England was around 210 AD, when they were recorded among those helping to maintain Hadrian's Wall at the fort of Aballva (Burgh-by-Sands) west of Carlisle. At the time the ruler of the Roman Empire was Emperor Septimus Severus, himself an African. He was born in Libya although it is unclear if he was of Black African or Moorish descent. He visited England towards the end of his life and died at York in 211 AD.



*Septimus Severus, Emperor of Rome
(www.art.co.uk or Musei Capitolini, Rome)*



*John Blanke, extract from Westminster Tournament Roll (1511).
(Society of Antiquaries/College of Arms)*

Black people were present in Britain from time to time over the next 1,300 years, including the famous John Blanke, royal trumpeter to Henry VIII. The start of their continuous presence is thought to date from 1555 when five Africans were brought to England from Shama on the west coast of Africa by John Lok, a London merchant. Numbers grew rapidly leading to make its first

attempt to deport them in 1596. They were widely blamed for increasing poverty and hunger.

Africans were initially often employed as entertainers or musicians but, as time went on increasingly they arrived against their will as slaves. Some gained their freedom while others remained slaves.

INCREASED VISIBILITY

By the 18th century black people were a common sight in the major cities of England. The question of whether black people could be slaves here remained unresolved. Many were employed as servants; some were kept as slaves, others led independent lives. Few had come to England by choice; many had previously been slaves in the West Indies. Some, such as Jack Beef, were given positions of responsibility and were trusted to run the household. Beef, brought to England by John Baker in 1757, was well-dressed, smart and respected. He was able to acquire some savings and was eventually freed in 1771 shortly before his death; a very different life from the plantation slave. Others lived miserable lives. Small black boys were kept as 'pets' by some wealthy families; as they grew their prospects were uncertain. Many contemporary illustrations include black faces.

By 1750 estimates there were suggest 10,000 black people in England, 5,000 of whom were in London.



A Conversation between Girls, or Two Girls with their Black Servant, 1770 by Joseph Wright of Derby (1734-97) (©)Private Collection/ The Bridgeman Art Library)



Louise de Keroualle, Duchess of Portsmouth and black slave boy (1682) (National Portrait Gallery, London)



The well known eccentric, Catherine Hyde, Duchess of Queensbury fences with her slave boy Julius Soubise, May 1773. (Courtesy of The Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University)

BLACK PEOPLE AND THE ABOLITION MOVEMENT

Traditionally a few major names have been credited with abolition but in reality it was a movement incorporating people from all backgrounds. Many of them were black themselves. Perhaps the best known was Olaudah Equiano. Born about 1745 in Essaka, thought to be in Nigeria, and a member of the Igbo people, he arrived in England in 1754 as the slave of Michael Pascal, a Navy man. For several years he served Pascal on board ship. Believing himself freed by 1762, he was re-enslaved on a visit to London and sent to Montserrat. He was able to buy his freedom with accumulated savings in 1766 and returned to London, from where he travelled as a free man. By the mid 1780s he was influential enough to help black people who had fled America with the British following the war of independence. His experiences and Quaker connections made him ideal for this role. For similar reasons he was involved in the abolition campaign and in 1788 petitioned Queen Charlotte. He died in 1797.



*Olaudah Equiano
(National Portrait Gallery, London)*

Other black people influential in the campaigns for abolition and emancipation included: Ottobah Cugoano, a former slave who worked with Granville Sharp

in London and wrote a book condemning the slave trade; Phillis Wheatley, an American-based poet who wrote on the topics of slavery and racism; and Mary Prince, the first Black woman to walk away from slavery and chronicle her experiences.



*Ottobah Cugoano in the garden of Richard Cosway his employer.
(Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester)*

BLACK PEOPLE AND THE ABOLITION MOVEMENT CONTINUED



Ignatius Sancho (Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library)

Although not directly involved in the campaign, Ignatius Sancho was an influential figure. Born on a slave ship, by the 1770s he was living in London, as a financially-independent writer of music, plays and autobiography. He also earned the right to vote: living proof of the foolishness of the racist views used to justify slavery. In his writings he confirmed his strong opposition to the slave trade.