The history of cultural diversity in London

London has always been a culturally diverse and cosmopolitan city. From its foundation by the Romans around AD50, the city has always attracted people from all over the world. Some early settlers came as invaders, seeking land and wealth. Some came involuntarily, as enslaved people or servants. Others have been drawn to London as an economic centre or driven to the city by persecution.

Today nearly 50% of Britain’s black, Asian and minority ethnic communities live in London. Research has revealed there are over 300 languages spoken in London’s schools. Immigrants continue to have a strong influence on the city’s development, from its economic growth to its cultural life.

Who were the first Londoners?

Long before London was founded, the Thames Valley was inhabited by hunters from southern Europe, the descendants of prehistoric people who had migrated from Africa. After AD50 it seems likely that local people moved into the new town. They were joined by merchants and traders from all over the Roman Empire.

During the early medieval period (410–1066) the development of London was shaped by invaders from Germany, Scandinavia and northern France. Each of these groups brought their own languages, cultural traditions and skills.

*Shepperton woman, Caroline Wilkinson, 1901–2000.* A facial reconstruction of the earliest known woman in Greater London. The skeleton, dated between 3640 and 3100 BC, was found in Shepperton in 1989. Forensic examination reveals that she was a migrant to the area. Deposits of lead found in her teeth suggest she spent her childhood in either Derbyshire, the Mendips or the Pennines.
What brought immigrants to London before 1666?

Immigrants during the later medieval period (1066–1485) were mainly drawn to London as an economic centre. Jewish financiers played a key role in London’s economy until they were expelled from England in 1290. Merchants, financiers and skilled craftworkers from the Netherlands, Germany, Italy and Spain settled, helping to develop London as a centre of finance, trade and industry.

In the Tudor period (1485–1603) there were a growing number of black people in London. Some were free people, such as the black trumpeter who was employed by Henry VII and Henry VIII. From the 1570s England’s involvement with slavery led to Africans being brought to London against their will, usually as servants.

Brass hanging lamp, unknown, 1101–1200. This lamp is similar to the traditional shape of a Jewish ‘Sabbath lamp’. A number of medieval lamps of this type have been found in England – all in towns that had Jewish communities before 1290 – and elsewhere in Europe.

Lombard Street, in the City of London, is named after the Lombards who introduced banking to London in the 1200s. They were so-called after the region in northern Italy where they came from.

Why did French refugees come to London?

Huguenots (French Protestants) fled to London in the 1680s because of religious persecution in France. Many settled in Spitalfields and set up business as silk weavers, creating an important industry that survived until the early 1900s. Other Huguenots were skilled in fine metalwork and engraving.

Right: Court dress traditionally thought to have been worn by Mrs. Ann Fanshawe when her father, Crisp Gascoyne, was Lord Mayor of London. This dress is made from a Spitalfields woven white silk, 1752–1753.

Brick Lane, in London’s East End, was home to the Huguenots in the 1700s. In the 1880s it was transformed by Jewish refugees from eastern Europe who established synagogues and kosher butchers. Today migrants from Bangladesh have created Bangla Town with its mosques and curry houses.
How did London become more cosmopolitan in the 1700s?

By the late 1700s there were up to 15,000 people of African origin living in London. Most had liberated themselves from slavery. Some worked as musicians, waiters or servants, others as shopkeepers or writers. Many, including Ottobah Cuguano (born c.1757) and Olaudah Equiano (1745–1797), actively campaigned against slavery and helped to abolish the trade.

Jewish people from western Europe had been returning to London since 1656, when they were officially readmitted by Oliver Cromwell. These were mostly wealthy financiers, merchants and businessmen who played an important role in the economic growth of the city. In the late 1700s, Daniel Mendoza (1764–1836), a member of the Portuguese-Jewish community, won fame as boxing champion of England.

During the 1700s London welcomed many overseas visitors. In 1774, Omai was the first Tahitian to visit London. He was introduced to the king and queen and went to the state opening of parliament. In 1793, Bennelong and Yemmerranwie were the first indigenous Australians to visit London.
Why did so many immigrants come to London in Victorian times?

The expansion of Britain’s trade network into a global empire drew people from all around the world. Students and professionals arrived from Africa, the Caribbean and India. Chinese sailors settled in the docks area leading to the development of Limehouse as the first Chinatown. In the mid 1800s the Irish community grew due to famine in Ireland. Irish migrants often worked as dockers or labourers. Polish and Russian Jewish refugees, arriving in the 1880s, brought with them their tailoring and woodworking skills. German and Italian communities also flourished with an Italian quarter, known as ‘Little Italy’, growing up in Clerkenwell.


Who came to London in the early 1900s?

People flowed into London from all corners of the world. These included the Cypriot community who settled in the West End in the 1920s and 30s. During World War II, London also became home for refugees fleeing from Nazi persecution, many of them Jewish. A number of Polish soldiers, who fought alongside British troops during the war, settled in London afterwards.

Right: Indian suffragettes on the Women’s Coronation Procession, 17 June 1911, unknown.
Why did people come to London after the Second World War?

A steel drum player in a local festival at Belsize Park, Henry Grant, 1975.

After World War II (1939–45) Britain was short of workers. Recruitment campaigns drew migrants from the British Commonwealth, including the Caribbean, India and Pakistan. Many became actively involved in the Campaign Against Racial Discrimination, founded in 1963. In 1968 the Race Relations Act was passed making racial discrimination illegal in Britain.

In the 1970s, a number of South Asians, forced to leave east Africa, settled in London. Since then London has also become home to refugees from across the world including Somalia, Ethiopia, Turkey, Colombia, Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan. These different communities have all helped to make London the exciting, vibrant, cosmopolitan city it is today.

On 22 June 1948 the steamship Empire Windrush arrived at Tilbury docks bringing with it 492 passengers, the first large group of African-Caribbean immigrants. The Windrush has come to symbolise the enrichment of London’s cultural and economic life through the diversity and skills of different groups.
Key points of interest at the Museum of London

The Huguenots in the multimedia installation in Expanding City: 1660s–1850s in the Galleries of Modern London. This brings to life the theme of immigration and the growing diversity of Londoners through sounds, images and contemporary style ‘newsflashes’.

The London’s Communities section in People’s City: 1850s–1950s in the Galleries of Modern London. This includes objects, photographs and ephemera illustrating the diversity of London’s neighbourhoods.

The Portraits film in World City: 1950s–present in the Galleries of Modern London. This brings together interviews with Londoners from diverse cultures and backgrounds, from the 1950s to the present day.

London, Sugar & Slavery gallery, Museum of London Docklands

Suggested reading

www.movinghere.org.uk

The UK’s largest database of digitised photographs, maps, objects, documents and audio items recording 200 years of migration to England


See also

London’s Black History: a selection of resources to support the teaching of London’s black history

www.museumoflondon.org.uk/thinkblackhistory

Black history outreach performance: a pack to support teachers who have booked our black history drama

www.museumoflondon.org.uk/blackhistorymonthoutreach


http://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/English/Collections/OnlineResources/X20L/Themes/1364/

The African Community in London: an essay exploring the settlement of people from Africa in London

http://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/English/Collections/OnlineResources/RWWC/Themes/1078/

The Asian Community in London: an essay exploring the settlement of people from Asia in London

http://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/English/Collections/OnlineResources/RWWC/Themes/1084/

Cultural diversity: what’s in the term? An essay exploring what is meant by the term ‘cultural diversity’

http://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/English/Collections/OnlineResources/RWWC/Essays/Essay2/Lola2CulturalDiv.htm