BLACK TUDORS

THE UNTOLD STORY

MIRANDA KAUFMANN
In April 1645 Sir John Wynter burnt his home to the ground rather than see it fall into Parliamentary hands. White Cross Manor, built at the zenith of the Tudor age, had been destroyed by the Civil War that marked the nadir of the following century. The Wynter family featured the sorts of characters that traditionally appear in Tudor history books: Sir William Wynter commanded the Vanguard in the fight against the Spanish Armada and his son, Sir Edward, sailed with Sir Francis Drake. The Reformation unleashed by Henry VIII had forced the family to practise their Catholic faith in secret. But White Cross Manor was also the scene of an unknown episode of Tudor history. For it was there, in the last decade of Elizabeth I's reign, that a Black Tudor, known as Edward Swarthye, alias 'Negro', whipped an Englishman named John Guye.

Despite the insatiable appetite for all things Tudor, from raunchy television series to bath ducks modelled as Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn, the existence of the Black Tudors is little known. The popular concept, as dramatised in the Opening Ceremony of the London Olympics in 2012, is that people of African origin first arrived in England when the Empire Windrush docked at Tilbury in 1948. It's quite a jolt to consider that there could have been Africans in the crowd gathered at those very same docks when Elizabeth I galvanised her troops to face the Spanish Armada three hundred and sixty years earlier. There were Africans present at the royal courts
of Henry VII, Henry VIII, Elizabeth I and James I, and in the households of famous Tudors including Robert Dudley (Earl of Leicester), Sir Walter Raleigh, Sir Francis Drake, William Cecil (Lord Burghley) and his son, Robert; and across England from Hull to Truro. Black Tudors played fascinating roles in the famous stories of the *Mary Rose* and the *Golden Hinde*, as well as in a host of other untold stories, like the whipping at White Cross Manor.

Once people learn of the presence of Africans in Tudor England, they often assume their experience was one of enslavement and racial discrimination. This attitude is neatly summarized by the only three entries in the *Guardian* Black history timeline for the period: ‘1562: First English slave trade expedition,’ ‘1596: Elizabeth I expels Africans’ and ‘1604: Shakespeare and Othello.’ It is true that John Hawkins masterminded the first English transatlantic slaving voyages in the 1560s, but he was, in an awful sense, ahead of his time. After his final voyage returned in disarray in 1569, the English did not take up the trade again in earnest until the 1640s. Elizabeth I did not ‘expel’ Africans from England in 1596; rather her Privy Council issued a limited licence to an unscrupulous merchant named Caspar Van Senden, who was only allowed to transport individuals out of England with their masters’ consent: a consent that he utterly failed to obtain. And although much has been written on the question of racism in Shakespeare’s *Othello*, we mustn’t forget that it was a work of fiction designed to entertain, and so must be set alongside archival evidence of how Africans were treated in England’s churches, households and law courts.

The misconceptions surrounding the status of Black Tudors are part of a wider impression that any African living outside Africa before the mid-nineteenth century, be it in Europe or the Americas, must have been enslaved. When most of us think of a slave, the image that appears in our minds is of an African. There is more than enough visual material to draw upon, from films such as *12 Years a Slave* and television series such as *Roots*, to the exhibits at museums such as the *International Slavery Museum* in Liverpool and the ‘London, Sugar and Slavery’ gallery at *Museum of London, Docklands*. Often the first and only mention of Africa in the school curriculum is when children are taught about the slave trade. They
see Africans reduced to one of a series of commodities traded in a triangle, packed into ships in chains. Equal attention is not given to the extensive history of Africa before the Europeans arrived there and to examples of collaboration between Europeans and Africans, or to the free Africans living in Europe.

Not all slaves were African. The word ‘slave’ itself comes from ‘Slav’, referring to the Slavonic peoples of Eastern Europe, who were enslaved in great numbers by the Holy Roman Emperor Otto the Great and his successors from the tenth century onwards. And more than a million white Europeans were enslaved in North Africa between 1530 and 1780, having been captured from the shores of England, Ireland, France, Spain and Portugal by the Barbary pirates.

Contemporary concerns naturally shape the questions we ask about our past. It is difficult for us in the twenty-first century to push aside the nationalist myth of the Tudors created by nineteenth-century imperialists and imagine an England before the emergence of the British Empire. Tudor England was a small, relatively weak kingdom on the edge of Europe, which had not yet experienced the full horrors of the transatlantic slave trade and colonial plantation slavery. These abominations, alongside the imperialism and scientific racism that followed, cast their shadows across almost every discussion of the history of Africans in Britain. Today, immigration and the question of whether institutional racism is endemic to society bedevil political discourse. These issues may be the source of our questions, but they cannot be allowed to shape our conclusions about the past.

The answers are complex, but the questions that most commonly spring to mind about the Black Tudors are simple: why and how did they come to England? How were they treated? What were their lives like?

To understand how and why Africans came to England, we must look to the dramatic developments going on in the wider world. In a century dominated by the Spanish and Portuguese, England was small fry on the global stage. Following Columbus’s discovery of the Americas in 1492, the Iberian powers carved up the world between them in the Treaty of Tordesillas in 1494. Spain laid claim to the New World of South America and the Caribbean, while
Portugal looked to Africa and the East Indies. Their empires were united from 1580 under the rule of Philip II. Strangely enough, it was the death of the young Portuguese King, Don Sebastian, on African soil, at the Battle of Alcazar in 1578, that allowed Philip of Spain to annex the Portuguese crown and become the dreaded ‘universal monarch’, establishing a global dominion ‘on which the sun never set’.

The Portuguese had been the first Europeans to visit Africa, en route to India, in the fifteenth century. They brought the first enslaved Africans to Europe in 1444. From then, a substantial black population developed across southern Europe, with smaller numbers appearing in the more northerly parts of the continent. By 1502 the transatlantic slave trade had begun, and over the next century more than 370,000 Africans would be transported to the Spanish Americas. With people of African origin scattered across the early modern world, Black Tudors could arrive in England not only directly from Africa, but also from Europe, the Americas and places in between. The fact that they had often travelled through the Iberian world is reflected in names such as Catalina or Diego.

Understanding the world of the Black Tudors means becoming familiar with the sixteenth-century mind-set and its ideas about religion, politics, life and death, so very different from our own. When the Black Tudors encountered Tudor Englishmen, they found a people who, though certainly xenophobic on occasion, were deeply curious about the world beyond the seas. Most English men and women knew little or nothing of the world beyond their parish boundary. A ‘stranger’ was simply someone from outside the parish. Tudors were far more likely to judge a new acquaintance by his or her religion and social class than by where they were born or the colour of their skin, though these categories did on occasion intersect.

How Africans were treated by the church tells us a lot about where they stood in Tudor England. This was a deeply religious society, in which life after death was no abstract ideal but the foundation of daily life. Death was impossible to ignore; high child mortality rates and a range of gruesome, incurable diseases conspired to impose an average life expectancy at birth of just
thirty-eight years. Was a Black Tudor's acceptance into a parish community through the rituals of baptism, marriage and burial an effacement of African identity, or was the promise of eternal life the greatest gift a Christian society could bestow?

Many of the hundreds of Africans in Tudor England are only recorded in tantalizing one-liners, such as this 1630 burial record for 'Anthony a pore ould Negro aged 105', from the parish register of St Augustine's Church, Hackney.

Social class governed society. Everyone, from the King (who ruled by divine right), through the aristocracy, to the gentry, yeomen and husbandmen, down to the lowliest vagrant, occupied a particular place in the 'Great Chain of Being'. When Africans arrived in England as ambassadors, they were treated as such, but when they arrived aboard a captured ship, they found themselves at the bottom of the pile. Those who had skills, such as musicians, sailors or craftsmen, fared better. In many ways, their lives were
no worse than those of the vast majority of Tudors: ‘nasty, brutish and short’, but this was the result of having no social standing, not of having dark skin.³

In 1772, Lord Chief Justice Mansfield heard the landmark case of James Somerset, an African whose former master wished to transport him forcibly to Jamaica for sale. One of the lawyers defending him cited as precedent a court ruling from 1569. In the same year that Hawkins’s final slaving venture returned, it had been pronounced that ‘England was too pure an air for a slave to breathe in’. Somerset’s lawyer argued that ‘the plain inference from it is, that the slave was become free by his arrival in England’.¹⁰ The idea that setting foot on English soil conferred freedom was so widespread in the Tudor period that it reached the ears of Juan Gelofe, a forty-year-old Wolof from West Africa, enslaved in a Mexican silver mine belonging to one Francisco Ginoves. In 1572 he told an English sailor named William Collins that England ‘must be a good country as there were no slaves there’.¹¹ His conclusion, like the knowledge that Edward Swarthyte whipped John Guye in Elizabethan Gloucestershire, confounds modern assumptions about the lives of Africans in Tudor England.

For all who thought they knew the Tudors, it is time to think again . . .
Notes to Text

Abbreviations

Bethlem Royal Hospital Archives, http://archives.museumofthemind.org.uk/BCB.htm
CSPD: Calendar of State Papers, Domestic series, of the reigns of Edward VI, Mary,
Calendar of State Papers, Domestic series, of the reign of James I, ed. M.A.E. Green (5
Calendar of State Papers, Domestic series, of the reign of Charles I, ed. J. Bruce (23 vols.,
1858–1897).
CSPS: Calendar of Letters and State Papers relating to English Affairs preserved in or
originally belonging to the Archives of Simancas, ed. M.A.S Hume (4 vols., 1892–9).
Hakluyt: R. Hakluyt, The Principall Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques and Discoveries of
the English Nation (12 vols., Glasgow, 1903–5).
The History of Parliament: The History of Parliament Online, Member Biographies,
L&P, Henry VIII: Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII, ed. J.S. Brewer,
LMA: London Metropolitan Archives, 40 Northampton Rd, Clerkenwell, London EC1R
0HB.
TNA: The National Archives, Kew Richmond, Surrey, TW9 4DU.

Introduction

1 Bennett, G., 'Black history: the timeline', Guardian; Kaufmann, M., ‘Elizabeth I
Chapter 1

5 Kisby, 'Royal Minstrels in the City and Suburbs of Early Tudor London', p. 201; Stevens, Music and Poetry, p. 307.
6 TNA, E 36/214, f. 109. The document can be viewed online at: http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pathways/blackhistory/early_times/docs/blanke_payment.htm
7 Lowe and Earle, Black Africans in Renaissance Europe, pp. 12, 252.
8 Records of English Court Music, ed. Ashbee, VII, pp. 185–188.
9 Thirk, Chapters from the Agrarian History of England and Wales, I, p. 18; Woodward, Men at Work, p. 172.