



BLACK FACES OF TUDOR ENGLAND

From the court musician who persuaded Henry VIII to give him a handsome pay rise, to the family man who profited from high society's passion for silk stockings, **Miranda Kaufmann** profiles six Africans who called England home in the 16th century

ILLUSTRATIONS BY ROSE WILKINSON



Henry VIII's "black trumpet"

*The Tudor king lavished gifts on his long-serving musician, **John Blanke***

The popular perception that people of African origin first arrived in England aboard the *Empire Windrush* in 1948 is misplaced – by at least 400 years. Scores of black men and women set up home in England as early as the 16th century – many arriving from Iberia, as the Spanish and Portuguese laid claim to swathes of Africa.



Africans could be found in the houses of prominent Tudors, such as Robert Dudley and Francis Drake, and in the royal court. Unfortunately, we have a portrait of just one. His name was John Blanke, and he can be seen (above) in the Westminster Roll of 1511, sounding his trumpet at the festivities marking the birth of a short-lived son to

Henry VIII and his first queen, Catherine of Aragon.

Blanke also performed at Henry VII's funeral and Henry VIII's coronation (both 1509), plying his trade at the English court from at least 1507.

Blanke may have sailed to England with the Spanish princess Catherine of Aragon in 1501, when she came over to marry Henry VIII's older brother, Prince Arthur. While many of the Africans in Spain were enslaved, Blanke – like all Africans in England – was a free man. He received 8d a day from Henry VII (twice the figure most servants would expect to earn), before successfully petitioning Henry VIII for a pay rise, doubling his wages to 16d.

Another indicator of Blanke's free status is the fact that he married in January 1512. Henry VIII showed his esteem for his "black trumpet" by giving him a generous wedding present: a gown of violet cloth, a bonnet and a hat.

The warrant describing the king's gift is the last mention of Blanke in the records. Perhaps he died in the fire that struck the Palace of Westminster in 1512, or at one of the two battles fought that year: at Spurs and Flodden.



The landowner's enforcer

***Edward Swarthy's** role in a vicious family feud landed him in court*

In 1596, a black man called Edward Swarthy whipped John Guye, the future first governor of Newfoundland. They were both servants in the Gloucestershire household of Sir Edward Wynter: Guye managed the iron works, while Swarthy was the porter. This was considered shocking and "unchristian like" at the time, but not for the same reasons we might assume today. It was the fact that such a high-status, educated servant as John Guye had been publicly humiliated that upset the onlookers, not the colour of Swarthy's skin.

Swarthy had likely been brought to England by Wynter after he captained the *Aid* on Francis Drake's Caribbean raid of 1585–86, one of many Africans who fled their Spanish enslavers to join the English.

The whipping was just one incident in an ongoing family feud between the Wynters and their neighbours, the Buckes. (Guye had recently married James Bucke's daughter Anne, thus dividing his loyalties). Bucke accused Wynter of a raft of crimes, from enclosing the common land to having had him assaulted. Edward Swarthy appeared as a witness in the ensuing court case of 1597, his testimony confirming that he, a black Tudor, had whipped a white man before a crowd assembled in the Great Hall at the Wynter's home, White Cross Manor.

The fact that Swarthy was allowed to testify in court demonstrates that he was viewed as a free man in the eyes of the law. Enslaved people have been prevented from giving evidence throughout history: the Romans would only accept such testimony if it had been obtained using torture, while in 1732 the state of Virginia declared that black men and women were "people of such base and corrupt natures that their testimony cannot be certainly depended on". By contrast, Swarthy's testimony was taken by the Court of Star Chamber without demur.

The prosperous silk weaver

Reasonable Blackman made a good living from a booming new industry

Reasonable Blackman was a silk weaver based, by the end of the 1570s, in Elizabethan Southwark. He had probably arrived in London from Antwerp in the Netherlands, which had a sizeable African population and was a known centre for cloth manufacture. Around 50,000 refugees fled to England from the southern Netherlands between 1550 and 1585, as war raged between Dutch rebels and Spanish forces occupying their country.

Blackman had a family of at least three children, named Edward, Edmund and Jane, and as none of them were recorded as bastards in the parish register, we can assume he was married to their mother, about whom we sadly know nothing. As with John Blanke's wife, however, she was probably an Englishwoman.

That Blackman was able to support a family is a sign of his prosperity as a silk weaver (in fact, he may have named himself Reasonable in order to draw attention to his 'reasonable'

prices). The silk industry was new to England and its products were the height of fashion. Once Queen Elizabeth I received her first pair of silk stockings in 1561, she concluded: "I like silk stockings well; they are pleasant, fine and delicate. Henceforth I shall wear no more cloth stockings." The queen's courtiers followed suit, and such was the demand that imports of raw silk increased five-fold between 1560 and 1593.

Tragedy struck the Blackman family in October 1592 when his daughter, Jane, and one of his sons, Edmund, died of the plague that struck London that year.

Nothing more is known of Blackman after the death of his children, but there is a tantalising record that suggests his son Edward carried on his father's trade. On 6 March 1614, when Edward Blackman would have been 27, a certain "Edward Blakemore of Mile End, silkweaver" was married in Stepney.



A servant who switched faiths

Mary Fillis was one of at least 60 Africans who were baptised in Tudor England

Mary Fillis was born in 1577, the daughter of Fillis of Morisco, a Moroccan basket weaver and shovel maker. She arrived in London in c1583–84, working for John Barker, a merchant and sometime factor for the Earl of Leicester. She was not the only African servant in the Barker household; Laying Mouea, "a blackamoor of 20 years", and "George a blackamoor" were also working there by the early 1590s.

By the time of her baptism in June 1597, Mary Fillis had moved to the household of a seamstress from East Smithfield named Millicent Porter. The parish clerk of St Botolph's Aldgate reported that "now taking some hold of faith in Jesus Christ [Fillis] was desirous to become a Christian". Millicent Porter encouraged her faith and spoke to the curate on her behalf. Fillis's conversion was not unusual – hers is one of more than 60 known baptism records of Africans from this period. Although she was likely born into a Muslim family in Morocco, Fillis was so young when she came to England that she may not have retained much of that faith. In London, baptism was mandatory if she wanted to fully participate in the highly religious post-Reformation Tudor society.

Fillis's mistress, Millicent Porter, died on 28 June 1599 but we do not know what became of Fillis herself. She was, however, present in London during a period that saw a succession of ambassadors arriving in England from her native land in order to negotiate alliances against the common enemy: Spain.

The soft-skinned prostitute

Men were willing to pay four times the going rate “to lie” with **Anne Cobbie**

Anne Cobbie was a prostitute who worked in the bawdy house of Mr John and Mrs Jane Bankes in the parish of St Clement Danes, Westminster in the 1620s (when England’s Tudor dynasty had been replaced by the Stuarts). It was said that men would rather give her a “piece” – a gold coin worth 22 shillings – “to lie with her” than another woman five shillings “because of her soft skin”. Mary Hall, another prostitute from the Bankes’ establishment, described Anne as a “tawny moore”. This suggests she had relatively light skin, and so perhaps was from one of the ‘Barbary States’ of north Africa, or even, given her English surname, the mixed-race child of a black Tudor and an Englishman or woman.

Cobbie’s activities were illicit, since Henry VIII had closed down the last legal brothels in 1546, and she duly found herself in Westminster Sessions Court – one of 10 women cited when the Bankes were charged in 1626 with “keeping a common brothel house”. The action was brought by one Clement Edwards, a former rector of Witherley in Leicestershire, whose wife had left him to work in the Bankes’ establishment. Although the Bankes were briefly incarcerated in the Gatehouse Prison, close to Westminster Abbey, Anne Cobbie evaded punishment (which could include carting, flogging, a fine, banishment from the city or imprisonment in Bridewell prison, where inmates were forced to beat hemp and spin flax).

Cobbie’s story is unusual, in that there is actually more evidence of African men visiting English prostitutes than vice versa at this time. In December 1577, “Jane Thompson a harlot” was whipped because “she had consented to commit whoredom with one Anthony a blackamore”, and they were caught in bed together “the door locked to them”.



A single woman in rural England

Cattelena of Almondsbury sold butter and milk from her most prized possession, a cow

Cattelena was an independent, unmarried, “singlewoman” who lived in the small Gloucestershire village of Almondsbury, not far from Bristol, until her death in 1625. Her Hispanic-sounding name suggests that, like many others, she had arrived in England via the Spanish or Portuguese-speaking worlds. She may have originally come to Almondsbury via Bristol or as a servant to one of the local gentry families, such as the Chester family of nearby Knole Park.

Cattelena was one of a number of Africans living in rural England. Parish registers record the baptisms and burials of Africans, or the children of Africans, in villages in Cornwall, Cambridgeshire, Devon, Dorset, Gloucestershire, Kent, Northamptonshire, Somerset, Suffolk and Wiltshire. The earliest of these is the burial of “Thomas Bull, niger” in Eydon, Northamptonshire in 1545.

An inventory survives of the goods Cattelena owned. These included bedding, pots and pans, a pewter candlestick, a tin bottle, a dozen spoons, clothing and a coffer. Her most valuable possession was a cow, which not only supplied her with milk and

butter but allowed her to profit from selling these products to her neighbours. No furniture is listed, which suggests she may have shared her home, perhaps with Helen Ford, the widow who administered her estate.

Cattelena’s possessions, – from her cooking utensils to her table cloth – each tell us something of her life. But the fact that she had them at all tells us even more. Africans in England were not owned, but themselves possessed property. **▶**

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