

# triumphs Show

## Teaching black Tudors as a window into Tudor England

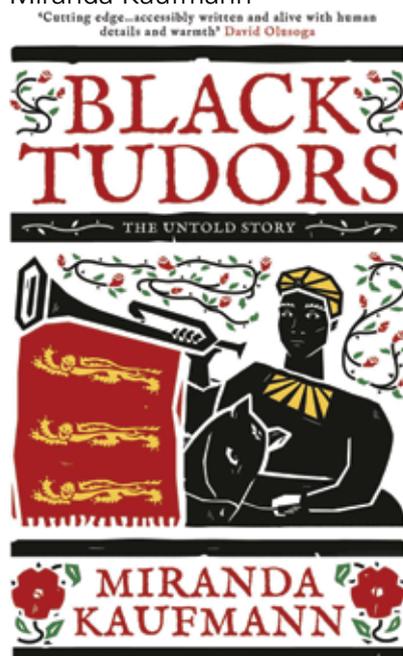
I am ashamed to admit that, until recently, my teaching of black history did not go beyond schemes of work on the transatlantic slave trade and the civil rights movement in the USA. This all changed in November 2017 when I heard Dr Miranda Kaufmann on the 'BBC History Extra' podcast talking about black Tudors.<sup>1</sup> I was immediately hooked, read her book *Black Tudors: the untold story*, and am proud to say I am now collaborating with Dr Kaufmann and a group of fantastic people to introduce black Tudors into classrooms across the country.<sup>2</sup> On 29 September 2018 we met at a workshop in Oxford to share our ideas and aims for the project. Jason Todd has written a valuable blog post summarising the aims and outcomes of the day.<sup>3</sup>

Inspired by Kaufmann's book, I set about constructing a short enquiry to introduce my pupils to life in Tudor England using four individuals from *Black Tudors* as the core of the scheme of work. I shared these lessons at the workshop and a summary of the lessons can be found in the accompanying 'Cunning Plan' in this edition of *Teaching History*.

My rationale when planning the enquiry was, first, to take a bottom-up approach by exploring the experiences of individuals and linking them to a wider historical narrative. Second, and most importantly, I was very conscious that I wanted to avoid tokenism. I wanted my pupils to come away with the understanding that black Tudors were very much part of Tudor society. My lessons, therefore, needed to present these individuals in such a way that focused first and foremost on their experiences in Tudor England while treating their race as a secondary concern.

The enquiry question was 'What was life like in Tudor England?'. My objectives for the sequence of four lessons were for my pupils to be able to describe the key features of life in Tudor England, explain why the Tudor period is significant, and apply their knowledge to analyse the usefulness of sources from

Figure 1: *Black Tudors* by Miranda Kaufmann



the sixteenth century. The lessons centred around Jacques Francis, Diego, Mary Fillis and Cattelena of Almondsbury from Kaufmann's *Black Tudors*. I deliberately did not

tell the pupils that these individuals were black Tudors until Lesson Three in the sequence. The reason for this was to focus on their experiences rather than on their identities and to try and embroider black Tudors into a wider narrative instead of simply bolting them on.

Over the sequence of lessons, pupils learnt about the importance of religion, the agricultural basis of the Tudor economy, Henry VIII's desire to be viewed as a strong military king, the start of exploration, Drake's circumnavigation of the world, and the tension between Elizabeth and Spain. The pupils were able to acquire this broader overview by investigating the lives of these four black Tudors, which highlights the extent to which certain aspects of these people's lives were representative of the essential features of Tudor England. When I revealed that one thing connecting these individuals was that they

Figure 2: Example of pupil work

were all black, it set up a fantastic discussion on the importance of status and religion in Tudor England. My revelation also led to pupils questioning why they had not heard of black Tudors before and where racism comes from. Their response in turn led to me being able to encourage the classes to consider how history is recorded.

Another rewarding aspect of teaching these lessons was the connection between the students and a published historian. Not only did Kaufmann's book provide a wealth of wonderful material to bring into the classroom but when I told the pupils that their work would be shared with the author at a workshop in Oxford their enthusiasm was a delight to see. Even the most reluctant writers in the class were excited about their letters in which they explained to television producers why Dr Kaufmann should be commissioned to make a documentary on black Tudors (Figure 2). They even made me promise I would ask if they could be in any resulting documentary!

Overall, I believe I was successful in teaching that black Tudors were embedded in the wider historical context. It was clear from pupils' verbal answers and written work that they understood that skin colour had little impact on how these individuals were treated in Tudor England. The bottom-up approach gave pupils a good knowledge of life in Tudor England and they have been able to recall key points and individuals in later lessons. It has been rewarding to see pupils looking at information from 'actual history books', declaring that they are historians, and feeling pride that an historian they have learned from in class has looked at their work. Dr Kaufmann was kind enough to look at pupils' letters and film a video message for them following the workshop and they still talk about this during most lessons. While I am aware that it is not possible to collaborate directly with historians on every scheme of work, one of the things I have taken away from this sequence of lessons is the power of

Dear the BBC

You should let Dr Kaufmann make a documentary about black Tudors because it would reveal a lot about life in Tudor England. One thing it would reveal is that racism was not a problem back then and you were only treated differently if you were not religious. It is important we remember this because it shows black people have their own history and achievements we should respect. Another aspect of Tudor England the documentary would reveal is you only got judged for your status in Tudor England.

The most useful image for learning about the Tudors is source A because it shows that people in Tudor England were not racist. This can be seen in the source by John Blanke (a black trumpeter) playing at an important event celebrating the birth of a new prince. Further evidence to support this is that there were over 200 black Tudors. This makes it useful because it shows that if you were rich you would go to big events to show off your wealth and power. Another reason it is useful is because it shows the Tudors valued the work of black and white people.

engaging pupils with the language and research of historians, not just discussing the odd quotation.

What I am most pleased about is that pupils' preconceptions about the history of black people in England have been challenged. Pupils were shocked to learn that immigration is not something that only started recently. In addition, pupils were able to consistently link the experiences of these individuals back to the enquiry question, which suggests to me they were seeing black Tudors as part of a wider historical narrative. The main discussions around race have been questions on the origins of racism in England which is a theme I plan to return to in later lessons.

For example, I am currently planning an enquiry on the story of Diego in the wider context of the origins of England's involvement in colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade under Elizabeth I. In this enquiry my aim is for my pupils to understand England's relationship with Africa in the sixteenth century so that once the pupils study the later expansion of the transatlantic slave trade in more depth they will be better placed to assess its effects: not just in socio-economic terms but also in regards to British

attitudes toward Africans. In this respect, I intend to enable my pupils to evaluate change and continuity of such racial attitudes across a broad overview of all the topics the pupils study in Year 8 from the Tudors to World War I to the present day.

Following on from teaching these lessons and working with Dr Kaufmann and the team in September I am determined to include more black Tudors, more black British history, and more world history in my lessons. In short, I want to decolonise the historical narratives we teach. This is very much a work in progress and I hope to share what I develop through the project with Dr Kaufmann in future *Teaching History* articles and at the Historical Association Conference.

#### REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup> Kaufmann, M. (30/11/2017) 'Black Tudors' *BBC History Extra* podcast [www.historyextra.com/period/tudor/black-tudors/](http://www.historyextra.com/period/tudor/black-tudors/)
- <sup>2</sup> Kaufmann, M. (2017) *Black Tudors: the untold story* London: Oneworld.
- <sup>3</sup> Todd, J. (16/10/2018) 'Black Tudors – Part 1' One Big History Department <https://onebighistorydepartment.wordpress.com/2018/10/16/black-tudors-part-1/#more-415>

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