

York's minorities have been hidden from history

Gary Craig

Published York's Alternative History blog, 1st July 2012

Did you know that almost one in eight of York's population were non-white British i.e. from ethnic minorities?¹ You probably don't and you certainly wouldn't know it from the policies and practices of local policy organisations. The so-called Fairness Commission, established by York City Council, for example, talks a lot about disadvantaged people but barely mentions ethnic minorities despite the fact that all the available evidence suggests that ethnic minorities disproportionately suffer from poverty, poor housing, poor education opportunities and poor health. I commented in a response to the report published by the Fairness Commission late last year that there was virtually no serious discussion of the question of ethnicity amongst the population of York. If you read the executive summary of their report, you might be led to believe that York is an almost entirely white British city. The JRF report referenced below showed how most public bodies in the city failed to take the issue of race equality seriously, even to the basic level of ethnic monitoring. Another example: a few months back, a spokeswoman for the Clinical Commissioning Groups in the area (these are the bodies who will be delivering most health care to the citizens of York) admitted at a public meeting that the CCGs had not considered the issue of ethnicity at all as they developed their plans for the future health care. Yet the delivery of health care is critical for minorities, for example for Muslim women who find it difficult to accept consultations with men, and for those who do not have a good grasp of English, where GPs fail to make use of interpreters. This is a situation which can lead to misdescription, misdiagnosis and misprescription.

This would be worrying enough if the population were not already facing increased difficulties. York, for many people, is a city which appears to have a relatively untroubled history of race relations. Yet we know from police data, which usually understates the issue, that the number of racist attacks and abuse has been increasing in the past few years. The North Yorkshire police force (which covers York, where most of the minorities within its remit live) data reported to the Home Office shows that there were 215 racist incidents in 2010-2011, a 9% *increase* over the previous three years. Bear in mind again that this is likely to be a significant understatement of the size of the problem. A study a few years ago of the first two cohorts of Asian origin students entering the York-Hull Medical school found that one quarter of all such students experienced or witnessed racist abuse or attacks: and there was no significant difference between the experience of students at York and those at Hull. A study by a reporter from the Observer (who visited the city twice in the past ten years) also demonstrated how the level of racist abuse and violence was seriously understated in public figures.

¹ The precise figure is 11.8%, calculated in the report *Mapping rapidly changing ethnic minority populations* published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation in 2009 and confirmed by an estimate published shortly afterwards by the Office of National Statistics.

² He features in the book *Black personalities in the era of the slave trade*, by Paul Edwards and Jim Walvin, Macmillan.

³ *The experience of forced labour*, available from www.jrf.org.uk

⁴ The city council clearly found this difficult: a formal invitation to minorities to attend a lunch at the Guildhall a few years ago offered sandwiches but only of ham or beef: Muslims of course do not eat ham, and Hindus do not eat beef.

⁵ Yorvik is perhaps the only museum in the city which has addressed this issue and might be regarded as

This contemporary picture is merely a specific example of how minorities (or any other unpopular group: women, for example!) gets written out of history. If you read the official history of York you will find virtually nothing about the contribution of minorities to the life of York, except for slightly sanitised tourist attractions. Yet, minorities have been in York since the Roman legions first brought Black Nubian (South Sudanese) slaves to the city as part of their army of conquest two thousand years ago. Some descendants of these early migrants were later seized by Vikings and transported elsewhere, including Ireland. Successive waves of invaders - Romans, Angles, Saxons, Danes, Vikings and Normans - themselves constituted minorities until assimilated into the 'British' nation. Invading Anglo-Saxons (from present-day Germany) and Vikings (Denmark and Norway) added extensively to the European ethnic mix. Descendants of the Vikings remained within North-Eastern Britain long after most of the original invaders had returned home. For example, there was a small settlement of what would now be called Danes living in Thirsk in the 12th century; the names of East Yorkshire villages such as Skirpenbeck and Fangfoss also testify to the early settlement of Scandinavians. The present 'White British' majority population in York is thus constructed substantially from successive migrant minorities, with diverse ethnic, cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and the notion of Britishness is simply a construct which builds on this mongrel mix. Yet, over time, particular new minorities have been objectified and constituted as the 'other', subjected to different forms of exclusion and discrimination by those who by then had regarded themselves as native British people. The truth is that we all – as citizens of the UK and residents of York – are all descended from migrants. I have Scots, Irish and Indian blood in my veins. And this makes the country's hostility to migrants particularly noxious.

Some readers may be familiar with the story of Clifford's Tower, perhaps York's publically most historically shameful episode. Jewish people had come to the city at various times, from neighbouring countries including France, Belgium and Spain. Relatively large-scale Jewish immigration occurred during the 5th-15th centuries, seeking opportunities for financial gain through lending, but also resulting from their harassment and expulsion from other countries, a pattern continuing through early 20th century East European pogroms and the Nazi holocaust to the present day, creating the Jewish diaspora. Their financial resources proved useful for monarchs, military and land-owning supporters, to finance military adventures at home and abroad, English Kings borrowing extensively from money-lenders from 1164 onwards. King Henry II had protected Jews but, as elsewhere, despite the usefulness of their financial services, and substantial tax revenues, the stereotypical Jewish moneylender became targets of persecution (generated by Crusaders arguing that Christians should deal with the killers of Christ in their midst before freeing Jerusalem from the hands of 'infidel' Musselmen). Pogroms against Jewish people occurred at the end of the 12th century, most notably at the coronation of Richard I, at Norwich and Lincoln in 1189/1190. In York, the small Jewish community gathered within Clifford's Tower both for protection and to celebrate the feast of Shabbat ha-Gadol. The Tower was torched by a mob, incited by a Christian monk; many Jews took their own lives, others were burnt to death, those fleeing were massacred. Alongside similar attacks, severe taxation was then imposed on Jewish moneylenders under pain of torture and death. A small Jewish population slowly emerged in the city again over the years and continues to have a presence, though it is not large enough to sustain a synagogue.

For much of York's history, minorities were, however, hidden from view. We know that the first Muslims came to Britain in the 12th century and it is likely that some found their way to York, as a major city. We know little about the contribution of Black slaves who were forcibly brought to the

city although the economic contribution to the country as a whole was immense. We only have to travel twenty miles to the west to Harewood House to see what the profits of slave-resourced sugar plantations in Barbados and Jamaica brought to a few major industrialists. There are two references to black slaves and ex-slaves in York in the public domain but there must be a history there to be told. One reference is to the 18th century Black boxer Richmond ² in York, the other to a Black woman in York c. 1832 in the book *Black and White*.

Knowing more about migrants to the city is important, particular so when every political party now regards migration as 'a problem'. The facts (as opposed to myths) are that migration has been of enormous benefit to the country, a benefit which is very rarely acknowledged in public debate. Most media and political coverage suggests that immigrants 'take our houses, steal our jobs' and so on. Yet the evidence shows that immigration has no impact on unemployment, and indeed is largely associated with job creation. Take the Uganda Asians and those elsewhere from East Africa, expelled by 'Africanising' leaders such as Idi Amin, some of whom came to York to live and work in the early 1970s. This group has been responsible for the creation of more jobs per head than any other group within the UK. And as for East European migrants who have come since the 2004 EU Accession, (about 750 of whom are now in and around the city), the myth that they are 'taking our houses' is just that – a myth. Across the UK, less than 1% i.e. one in a hundred of all social lettings have gone to these A8 migrants. The work they do, difficult, dangerous and dull, is usually work that no one else will do; and, as the recent JRF report on forced labour³ shows, they often end up in the most exploitative and unpleasant conditions as a 'reward' for doing so.

The history of York's minority communities has yet to be written although occasional pamphlets and lectures have focused on specific groups. Looking at the past fifty years, probably the first minority ethnic people migrating to the city in recent times were those of Chinese (Hong Kong) origin; some arrived in the city around the time of the Second World War to establish the archetypal Chinese laundry, in the Lowther Street area. By the mid-1950s, as individual families were able to purchase washing machines, the need for laundries began to diminish and the slowly growing Chinese community turned to food production, opening the first Chinese restaurants and, later, take-aways, as demand for this kind of food began to emerge. This has been the main basis of the expansion of the Chinese community ever since; the UK Chinese community, although relatively small (about 0.25M) by UK BME standards, is significant because, as a result of its focus on restaurants and take-aways, it is spread across every local authority within the UK with a presence in every local authority and virtually every small or medium-sized town, often being the only food outlet open late at night. More recently, Chinese or 'oriental' food supermarkets have opened in the city such as the one in George Hudson Street, catering both for their own community and retail needs but also for the wider population's taste for exotic food. Several more recently arriving grocers, such as the Freshways Store on the Hull Road and the 'Korean' store at the south end of Ouse Bridge, offer food products from a wide range of national origins. Characteristically, families running Chinese restaurants or take-aways have lived 'above the shop' or in relatively low income areas within or near the city centre (e.g. Micklegate ward, Fishergate or Clifton/Rawcliffe). York's Chinese

² He features in the book *Black personalities in the era of the slave trade*, by Paul Edwards and Jim Walvin, Macmillan.

³ *The experience of forced labour*, available from www.jrf.org.uk

population is growing more rapidly than most minority populations, reflected in the numerical growth of these food outlets.

In the past decade or so, as Universities have realised the significance of fee income from overseas students, many, including the University of York, have targeted Hong Kong Chinese and other East Asian students for both undergraduate and postgraduate study. This has substantially boosted the Chinese population in the city on a continuing basis. There has been, for the past few years, both a Chinese Community Association and foci for the Chinese population to meet, for example at St Helen's Church – for those of the Christian faith – and at several local community centres, such as in Tang Hall.

The first South Asian people arrived in the city around the late 1960s; one Indian woman, now past her 90th year, came (she thinks as the first such arrival) as a psychiatrist and other individuals also came to take up professional posts, for example in medicine, engineering or academic work. Unlike many large cities in the UK, there was no significant chain migration process whereby family or clan members follow early migrants to a particular locale and indeed, the history of migration to York might be regarded as a composite of individual processes, leading to what in general terms might be called a pattern of 'accidental settlement'; this is not to say that people ended up in York accidentally (although some appeared, from their accounts, to have done so or came intending to stay for a short period but have remained much longer) but that the overall picture of historical settlement has no clear pattern to it. Thus many of the early settlers in York came as a result of individual decisions, such as some Sikhs coming from larger more multicultural towns and cities such as Leicester and Wolverhampton, to establish shops and small businesses or to work in local factories, including the then-Rowntree factory. The first Sikh settlers came to York in 1976.

The most significant single (forced) migration of South Asian people into York came in the late 1960s and early 1970s as a result of the expulsions from East Africa (particularly Kenya and Uganda) by Africanising regimes. This group were largely Gujarati Hindus, descendants of Indian indentured migrants who went to East Africa at the beginning of the 20th century, and who had been active in business, banking and retailing. These included some Sikhs (who migrated within the UK later on to York) and Indian Muslims. This 'mass' in-migration – partly a result of the government's policy of red-lining (directing the new refugees away from cities with large existing minority populations) - provoked a series of responses including the establishment of a welfare committee, in which the University was active, an Asian Association which met for a while in a Lowther Street church, owned by the-then Ripon and York St John College, and home tutoring organised by the York and District Community Relations Council (later North Yorkshire Racial Equality Council), established as a result of lobbying by prominent local South Asians in 1976. The Asian Association had an important effect in terms of promoting a cultural identity through celebrations of key festivals such as Diwali but as some of the key activists moved away, e.g. to London and Leicester, in search of better opportunities and a stronger cultural context, the Association began to lose impetus; the building was eventually closed and the Association wound up. One difficulty – continuing to be faced by refugees to this country – was that the qualifications obtained by these migrants in their country of origin were not accepted as equivalent to UK qualifications and many therefore worked in jobs well below their previous skill levels. Thus some graduate teachers ended up working in the city's chocolate factories in semi-skilled work.

By the early 1980s, the separate South Asian communities were large enough to establish their own (limited) facilities; and in the early days there was considerable cross-cultural support in this process of cultural establishment. Thus, one Hindu activist was prominent in arguing for a Muslim burial ground and for a mosque, recognising that Muslims in particular needed somewhere for a collective act of worship. Conversely, a Muslim restaurateur provided supplies of food for Diwali festivals; in these early years, these were sold from street stalls as there was no place for them to hire or use. Connections between the different faith groups were also facilitated by the use of common premises; a community building in Lowther Street, also used on occasion as a church, also became a madrasa (school) at weekends for young Muslims to receive instruction. In recent years, York St John's University has been prominent again in establishing an InterFaith Group which provides a means for Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs and Jews in the city to communicate. The lack of awareness of multiculturalism, or confidence to talk about it, within York at the time was demonstrated as a policeman from Leicester – which had become a multicultural city - accepted an invitation to give a lecture on community relations, an invitation to which police in York then felt unable to respond.

It remains the case that some of the minority groups continue to feel a sense of cultural dislocation and isolation and have argued for the need for specific facilities to enable their group to become more visible. As Noake, from York St John's University, puts it ' how important it was for a strong Sikh community to exist in York if they were to ensure that their children received a more positive experience ... as a Sikh that did not rely on constant travel to more established centres like Leeds.'

The Indian community, covering mainly Hindus and Sikhs, formed an Indian Cultural Association in the 1990s. This met at York St John University for significant events and, until recently, was supported by a small grant for Diwali celebrations; a small room was made available for separate prayer meetings for Hindus and Sikhs on a monthly basis. There is, however, still no Hindu or Sikh Gurdwara (temple) in the city and people of these faiths have to travel to Leeds, Bradford, Scunthorpe or Middlebrough for large-scale collective acts of worship. Broader cultural change has also impacted on York's small minority communities. After the East African migration, many of this community would meet at the University of York's Central Hall to see Hindi and Urdu films; this collective activity was undermined by the growth of home videos and no longer occurs.

The East African refugees included a few of Muslim faith, some of whom established the Fourth Avenue mosque in recent years, but the growth of the Muslim-oriented population has been generally a more recent phenomenon, driven in part by the rapid growth of 'Indian' eating houses (mainly staffed and owned in fact by Bangladeshi and, to a much lesser extent, Pakistani people). In 1976, there were two 'Indian' restaurants in York, one owned by a Pakistani man; now there are probably more than 40, mostly owned by Bangladeshis. Although these early restaurants played a key role in the apparent growth of a minority ethnic community in York, this population remains less well-connected to York; most of those owning and working in these restaurants – which developed from the late 1970s onwards – do not live in the city but historically have come in from neighbouring cities, although a relative few have settled in the city now. Some arrived to set up restaurants in York having worked in other towns and cities in the region. Respondents cited the cost of housing in York and the lack of culturally-appropriate facilities (places for worship, community centres, food supplies, cinemas) for them in York as a reason for not living in the city. As one respondent put it '*I have been here for 40 years ... fool ... I should have lived in Leeds, York is not a place to live, it is a*

place to work. It is a White city' In nearby rural areas, similarly, most staff travel in each day from Leeds and Bradford being anxious about living in strongly white areas where they may be more liable to prejudice. Only a few of the restaurants are able to provide accommodation, and this only for single men. Some restaurateurs also have commented that as their own children were moving into more high status occupations, they continued to be dependent on workers from outside the city.

Both of the mosques, which are attended by a similar range of minority ethnic groups, are able to provide a limited focus for community social events as well as religious activities. The larger Bull Lane Mosque was established in the 1980s, with most of its early attendees being of Pakistani or Bangladeshi origin. Its establishment was supported not only by local Asian people from other faith backgrounds but also by collections in other cities. The ethnic diversity of its congregation has increased, particularly in the last few years, as a result of more widespread trends, but particularly in relation to the increasing significance of higher education in the city. A dispute in the 1990s led some members to leave and establish the newer and smaller mosque at Fourth Avenue, Tang Hall, raising the funds by local subscription. The two mosques are not distinguished by adherence to a different *fiqh* (Islamic orientation) although Bull Lane appears to attract a greater part of the mixed student population, and those of Gulf Arab or Turkish origins (for whom *jumma* – Friday prayers - are delivered in Arabic and Turkish as well as English), whilst the Fourth Avenue mosque appears to be based more on the 'home' population of settled residents. Both mosques assert that the separation came about because of personality differences rather than because of sectarian or ethnic differences and both are open to all Muslims; this differentiates York from cities such as Bradford, with larger minority populations, where mosques are more commonly organised along ethnic and sectarian lines with differing emphases on particular *hadiths* (sayings) of the prophet Mohammed. Some local Muslims argue that this is a reflection both of the origins of the minority community in York (with many having moved from more established multicultural societies) and the small size of local minority communities.

In general, the South and South East Asian communities have grown steadily but modestly over the past thirty years. Other much smaller groups, such as Black African groups, have followed similar trajectories but from even smaller beginnings; for example, the first few Ghanaians arrived in the late 1960s, when they felt very exposed to local racism; by 2005, a Ghana Independence anniversary in the city attracted more than 100 Ghanaians. The major boost to York's BME population came in the 1990s as a result of three key factors; the growth of higher education, the arrival of refugees and those seeking asylum, and the recent arrival of, potentially, a short-term migrant workforce. The latter should not be dismissed however as a transitory phenomenon as it is likely that international migration for both refugee and economic purposes will continue to have a growing impact on the city, and other cities like it. The result has been an enormous growth in ethnic diversity in the city. This has been accelerated both by the impact of European enlargement, with substantial numbers of East and Central European migrant workers coming to the area from 2005 onwards; and by a rapid increase through the 1990s of refugees seeking asylum. Two of York's largest minority groups – Polish and Turkish/Kurdish respectively – have resulted from these phenomena. Continuing growth in higher education and the offering of new University disciplines (such as law and business studies) have led to a further widening of ethnic diversity, with e.g. substantial postgraduate students from a number of Gulf States. The position of refugees remains precarious, however. The city was never designated as a refugee dispersal centre when the government introduced dispersal in 1999, and therefore it is possible for policy agencies to dismiss the issue of asylum as not relevant. But there

are probably up to 1000 refugee or asylum-seeking people (both those, forming the majority, of those who entered legally and a small minority who are here on an irregular basis) in and around York, mainly from Turkey and the various elements of Kurdistan and these get some help from a small local organisation, Refugee Action York.

The small size of these early migrant populations created difficulties both for the individuals and in terms of organisational responses. For individuals, these difficulties have been reflected in a sense of loneliness and cultural isolation, leading on occasions to depression and breakdown. The kinds of comments made by people responding to local research studies included:

It was very lonely for me ... I had given up work and was at home. There was nobody around, it was pretty isolating, one part of me was always wanting to go to London or somewhere where there was more of our community.

Again my heart would pang for community and there wasn't that community.

I caught my eldest, she was having a bath and she was really scrubbing herself with pumice ... she said I want to be white like [name] ...

The relatively small numbers also exposed minorities to the impacts of racism. Some respondents recounted how they were the victims of what they called 'misunderstandings' (although these involved physical attacks and abuse, for example calls to a Sikh man of 'Paki go home') and many commented that they had had to reach out to neighbours, acquaintances and school staff, to address some of these cultural 'misunderstandings'. Some for example had gone into their children's schools to introduce staff and other children to cultural customs around food and dress ('*why is your dad [a Sikh] wearing a bandage on his head?*'). Whilst they tried to integrate into local community life, however, it was important to maintain aspects of their and their children's identity, for example in terms of food, clothing, and going to the nearest temple (in Leeds). Some organisations have tried to promote good cross-community relations and highlighting the multicultural nature of York's life by, for example, a series of annual dinners reflecting the diversity of food available from cultures resident in the city.⁴

However, the attempts by minorities to get a higher profile often ran into the sand because of political disinterest locally. Organisational responses were generally at a low level for much of this period. One South Asian delegation went to the Chief Education Officer in County Hall in Northallerton in 1978 (then responsible for administering education in York) and argued the case for multicultural education in schools, only to be told there was no problem and no discussion to be had. There remained at the time a small Community Relations Council in York, but this was disbanded in the 1980s, following disagreements about its direction, and for a while there was no formal organisational basis for addressing the issues raised by a growing multicultural population, or the impacts of racism. Finally, in 1992, a small self-help group was established, called the York Racial Equality Network. This initially focused on issues around education and the need to address discriminatory practices in local agencies. By 1994, YREN had adopted a formal constitution and eventually gained modest funding from York City Council and the Commission for Racial Equality. It

⁴ The city council clearly found this difficult: a formal invitation to minorities to attend a lunch at the Guildhall a few years ago offered sandwiches but only of ham or beef: Muslims of course do not eat ham, and Hindus do not eat beef.

was reconstituted in 2003 but remains the only Black-led organisation in the city. It is arguable that its funding has not kept pace with the growth or increasing diversity of the minority ethnic population, the issues that this population presents or, in recent years, the growth of racism. There is also a voluntary organisation, with again very modest funding called YUMI which promotes the idea of multiculturalism particularly through food or arts-related events.

Clearly there remains much that can be done to ensure that York's policy-makers, those who deliver services and the ordinary people in the street both understand the multicultural nature of the city's population (which is sometimes obscured by the flood of tourists from other countries) and develop effective and welcoming responses to it. A fundamental requirement (enacted in the 2010 Equality Act) is that organisations should promote equality by, for example, effective ethnic monitoring, and organisations need to undertake equality impact assessments of their policies to see if they intentionally or otherwise discriminate against minorities. But much more can be done, particularly to highlight the important contribution minorities have made to the city. A start might be made, appropriately, since we are talking about history, in the museums in York. The Jorvik museum could strengthen its narrative by focusing even more on the positive contribution Vikings have made to the city⁵; so could those museums such as the Yorkshire Museum, which have a focus on Roman history. The Clifford's Tower story could be strengthened to show the consequences of racism by linking it with the historic persecution of the Jews (the first Immigration Act, in 1905, was designed to keep Jews fleeing pogroms in Russia and Poland from entering the UK and the UK government resisted immigration of Jews fleeing the Nazis in the late 1930s until it was too late, only accepting a few children through the Kindertransport scheme). The Castle Museum might showcase domestic life in the 17th and 18th centuries differently by indicating the place of Black slaves within it. The Royal Dragoon Guards museum, which tells the history of its soldiers, some of whom saw active service in South Africa, might showcase the contribution of minorities to the British Armed forces.⁶ Even the National Railway Museum could develop a theme about the invitation to Caribbean people to come to the UK in the 1940s and 1950s to help rebuild Britain's fragile public transport systems. And all could be linked by a continuing narrative about the place of minorities in York's life, a kind of minority trail which would foreground minorities in York rather than leave them, as they have been for two thousand years, in the shadows.

This kind of work might then help to shift the current terms of the debate which sees immigration as a problem and portray it instead as something which has been of enormous benefit to us all, and which enriches our lives – and reminds us too that we are all mongrel migrants!

Footnote: of course it would be wrong to suggest that Black people and ethnic minorities more generally, have been written out of York's history alone. It is a phenomenon which is common across the world of white-dominated literature and it is only in the past fifty or so years that writers have

⁵ Yorvik is perhaps the only museum in the city which has addressed this issue and might be regarded as promoting best practice.

⁶ During the First World War, despite a major contribution from Black soldiers, White soldiers still regarded them largely as inferior. The Army hierarchy promoted a view expressed in 1886 by the Adjutant General that Black people, as 'lazy cowards', would undermine the British army's power. He seems to have overlooked the astounding courage of the Ashanti (Ghanaian) and the Zulu (South African) nations, who won remarkable military victories even when faced by technologically far better-equipped Western armies. In both the First and Second World War, the contribution of minorities has also largely been written out of history; York is surrounded by disused airfields but nowhere honours the role of minority members of the armed forces.

generally begun to address this serious deficiency in historical writing and minority writers have been able to get a platform for their own historical voices. This is the importance of, for example, the teaching of Black history within the slot allocated to citizenship studies in the national curriculum. For those interested, there is now a growing volume of Black studies – poetry, history, literature and so on – but there are many many gaps to fill. One is to write the history of minorities in York.