

The President's Column

It would be a pretty good bet to claim that many people in the UK – young and old – have heard of the sinking of the *Marie Rose* in Southampton Waters in mid-July 1545, its recovery, and now the splendid reconstruction and display in Portsmouth. I would also bet that very few of those same people know about Black African pearl-diver from the South Seas, Jacques Francis, who was critical to the original salvage operation. Francis had been brought to Europe from Guinea as a slave to the Venetian salvage expert Piero Corsi who had experience with other sunken treasure. Although Francis may have found the waters off the southern coast inclement compared with those of the Mediterranean or his home climes, his expertise allowed the recovery of an extensive and expensive range of naval ordnance (worth some £1,700) as well as the goods of various merchants. We can reconstruct Francis's work from the payments made to his master over the course of two years.

A legal case ensued in the High Court of Admiralty which allows a powerful glimpse both of the Black presence in Tudor England and the complicated attitudes this prompted. The judges were very ready to accept the testimony he presented; the Italian merchants, for their own self-interest, attempted to use his racial status against the integrity and authenticity of his witness statements. Francis's deposition, given on 8 February 1548, was delivered in a confident and powerful manner, with clear expertise and accuracy. He defended his master Corsi from the accusations of other Italian merchants that items of tin and other goods had been removed without permission from other wrecks.

Francis did not describe himself as a slave (*servus*) but as a member of Corsi's household. Nevertheless, here is early evidence of the notorious slave trade, but at the same time an example of the potential for exploring the historical record to recover the experiences of Black lives. Francis was regarded by the Court of Admiralty as having equal legal status with other participants, despite the claims of the Italian merchant that his ethnicity compromised his voice. Corsi purchased appropriate dress for the diver, and he was presented as a powerful figure in the Court. Despite attempts to diminish this status with remarks about his ethnicity and by

calling him a non-Christian 'infidell', Francis showed (and it is preserved in the court reports) that a Black African could be eloquent, expert and accomplished.

This little-known story first came to my attention a while ago when I was asked to make a short radio programme on *Black Elizabethans*. In the absence of any massive historical literature I had the opportunity to explore the archives to search for records of a Black presence. Much work has been undertaken into the elite world of the court, the theatres and musicians in high society but less on everyday lives in Tudor England. With the help of the London Metropolitan Archives we discovered that it was possible with only a little effort to recover details of 'ordinary' men and women of colour in the period and indeed into the Stuart Age. Of course historians of slavery have made much progress in the structures and profits of the trade, but until recently less attention has been devoted to non-elite histories.

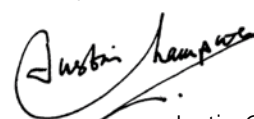
This dimension of the history of the Black presence in the British Isles has been addressed in the recent publication of a beautifully illustrated and important book, *Blackamoors: Africans in Tudor England* (2013) by Onyeka. The work itself is testimony to the lack of historical enquiry devoted to the issue. The struggle against the lack of interest in academic institutions meant that the author had to plough a lonely furrow. The results are remarkable, and should be a starting point for all historians of the early modern period. *Blackamoors* shows what could be done. Indeed now with many archives becoming digital and with open access the possibilities of recovering these lost histories is ever more possible, and therefore ever more important.

Although it is possible to recover the roots of some fundamental prejudices about non-Europeans, these should sit alongside the deep hostility to the French and the Spanish too. While some Black and Asian individuals were regarded as pagans and much of the way they were regarded was driven by theological prejudice, on the streets of London, and in the alehouses and theatres, there is some evidence of a form of social tolerance. After all many of them lived in intimacy with local

families they served. There is some evidence for inter-marrying too. It is clear that the encounter with peoples from around the globe (literally from all over the world) brought a fantastic diversity to English culture: it's an aspect of our history that is often forgotten or denied. There has been a Black presence in the country for centuries, so in one sense 'English society' as we know it has been shaped by their contribution too. The key thing to underscore here is that Black and Asian communities have been part of the history of these islands since Roman times: the idea that this is a recent development is simply wrong. If we can all explore this shared heritage (and the important contribution of other communities such as the 'refugees' from religious persecution in the seventeenth centuries) it will be possible to appreciate the diversity of our collective history, rather than the rather narrow celebration of traditional histories.

Earlier in the year a conference took place under the title of *History Matters* to discuss why there are so few black history students and teachers in the UK. While history in the UK remains popular among those of African and Caribbean heritage in Britain, in schools many black students regard history as a 'white middle-class pursuit'. One important factor is a school curriculum that under-represents and overlooks the histories of those of African and Caribbean heritage. Curricular reforms which omitted key British historical figures of African and Caribbean heritage such as Mary Seacole and Olaudah Equiano did not help. In 2013/14 only three black applicants won places to train as history teachers, and statistics from the Higher Education Statistics Agency for 2012/13 show admission of 'Black British' students was just 1.8% (1,340) of the total at undergraduate level and just 0.5% (25) of the total at post-graduate level in 2013/14.

History Matters aims to launch a public investigation into what a group of black historians called in a recent letter to *Times Higher Education* 'this dire situation'. A documentary film will be launched very soon.



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