

Were there Black Tudors?

More than two hundred people of African origin or descent lived in England during the Tudor period.

Black people lived in England as part of the Roman Empire (43 – 410 CE), and there was a wave of migration in the mid twentieth century, famously with the arrival of Empire Windrush in 1948, but this middle period of Black experience in England is lesser known. How did they come to live in England during the reigns of the Tudor kings and queens?

Black Tudors came to Britain from Europe, from Africa, and from the Spanish Caribbean. Increased interaction between Europeans and Africans was initiated by the Portuguese, who established a presence in North and West Africa in the fifteenth century. They enslaved Africans and transported them to Portugal in 1444. After this, a substantial Black population developed across southern Europe, with much smaller numbers appearing in northern mainland Europe. In this period of history, England hadn't yet become heavily involved in trafficking enslaved Africans, nor had they any colonies in the Americas. Any capturing of Africans by the English at this point was not endorsed or financed by the Crown.

In the sixteenth century Africans started to arrive in England from Spain or Portugal. Some arrived in the entourages of Katherine of Aragon and Philip II, and in the households of Portuguese merchants. Some came with privateers and pirates, and from the 1550s, England began to trade with Morocco and West Africa directly, and Africans began arriving at British ports such as Southampton and Portsmouth.

Despite this growing population, the only known images of a Black Tudor are those of John Blanke. Blanke, a royal trumpeter, appears twice on The Westminster Tournament Roll – a 60-foot-long vellum manuscript in the collection of the Royal College of Arms. It provides a visual record of a jousting tournament and pageant held in February 1511 by Henry VIII and his wife Katherine of Aragon to celebrate the birth of their son.



Copyright: Miranda Kaufmann – College of Arms
Westminster Tournament Roll, 1511.

What do we know about Black Tudors?

These Tudors had Christian names, so how do we know they were of African Heritage? Detail about their daily lives and how they were treated appears in a wide range of archival sources including parish registers, tax returns, household accounts, letters, diaries, wills, government papers and legal records. Historians found that the term 'blackamoor' was used most frequently to describe a Tudor of African origin, and 'Ethiop', 'moor', 'negar' and 'negro' were also commonly used.

None of these Africans who lived in England during the Tudor period were slaves. There was no English legislation on enslavement and the status of enslaved people. No statutes codifying modern enslavement were ever passed in England. Forced labour hadn't been recognised in English law since feudal villeinage had died out in the 14th century and even that was a very different system from slavery. England was free soil.

It may be difficult for us, in the 21st century, with the knowledge of the horrors which took place during British colonialism to imagine a time before institutional racism, but Tudor society did not operate based on skin colour. The main focus was social status and whether you were Christian and baptised. A Christian living in England could not be enslaved.

The Tudor period dates from 1485 to 1603, and many changes took place in England during this time. In the later part of the period, when Elizabeth I was monarch, international trade started to change, and voyages involved people smuggling Africans, Europeans, and Native Americans. Some of these were sponsored by Elizabeth I and prominent courtiers. This trafficking did not become racialised until the middle of the 17th century, when laws became prejudice against people of African origin.

The Africans known as Black Tudors became ingrained in English society, and many of their descendants live in Britain today, although their appearance may no longer indicate their African heritage.

Who was Jacques Francis?

Jacques Francis was a salvage diver, on ships like the Mary Rose – King Henry VIII's favourite.

Salvage diving was incredibly important to the English economy, as ships were expensive investments which carried valuable merchant goods or military equipment.

Henry VIII had previously commissioned a large Venetian salvage crew to attempt to lift the sunken Mary Rose in 1545, but this had resulted in breaking one of the ship's masts. After this, recovery of the ship was abandoned, and a salvage diving crew which included Jacques Francis, was employed.

Sadly, shipwrecks were common, as was loss of life as most Tudors couldn't swim! The Mary Rose had a crew of over 700, but only 30 of them were rescued.

Swimming was considered unlucky as Tudors believed washing the whole body with water could be dangerous. Learning to swim was pointless for sailors as ships were not in the habit of turning around to rescue those who fell overboard.



Jacques Francis
by Nina-Simone Brown

Jacques was born in the 1520s on an island off the coast of the part of West African known to Tudors as 'Guinea' (named by the Portuguese in the 15th century, but previously situated within a series of African empires. Today it is known as the Republic of Guinea). He arrived in England before regular, direct trade with Africa began, and was part of a team of divers managed by a Venetian named Peter Paolo Corsi. Jacques led the diving team, which also included men named John Iko and George Blacke. It's possible from the names of these men, and their swimming and diving skills, that they were also African.

Documents show that in May 1547 Jacques testified in court in support of Corsi, who had been accused of stealing items salvaged from another ship in Southampton. This wreck became the subject of a legal dispute and a two-year court case. It is unknown whether Jacques's testimony was enough to exonerate his employer, as the verdict does not survive.

Jacques's testimony states that he was a very skilled diver, having mastered the art of free diving (requiring no breathing apparatus). Free diving demands years of training from an early age to develop the necessary lung capacity and the ability to equalise pressure in the ears. His ability to swim to such depths would have been admired and much sought after by Europeans in need of their valuable possessions being brought to the surface.

Only free people could testify in a court of English law, and there are references to him being paid wages by his employer. Jacques Francis was a Christian and the court would not have accepted his testimony if he had not sworn on the bible. He was the first known African to testify in an English Court.



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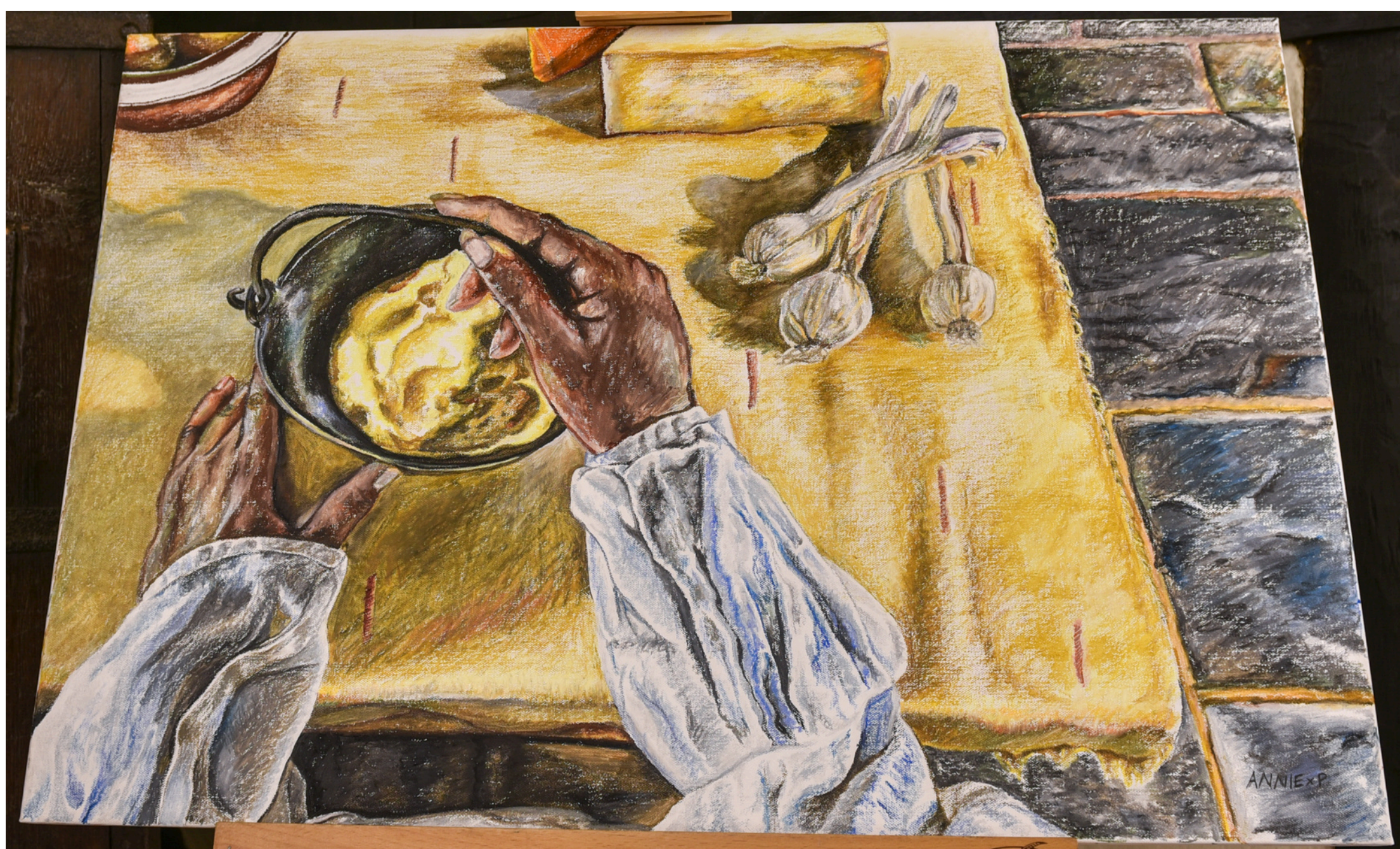
Who was Cattelena?

We know about Cattelena is because of the inventory of her possessions after her death.

She is described as ‘Cattelena, a negra deceased of Almondsbury in the county of Gloucester, single woman & in the diocese of Bristol’. Her inventory includes cooking utensils, clothes, bedding, tablecloth, and a candlestick. However, Cattelena’s most prized possession was a cow.

One cow would keep her in milk and butter, as well as provide an income through the sale of dairy products in the local area. Cattelena would have been able to graze her cow on common village land. This would provide her the opportunity of independence and self-sufficiency.

Dairying was women’s work. With around 90% of people living in the countryside, it could be a serious income generator. On a farm you would have one dairymaid to six cows. Anything greater would require more servants, and a herd typically had no more than twelve cows. The best hours for milking were between 5-6am and 6-7pm. From Whitsun (May) to Michaelmas (end of September), a cow could produce a gallon of milk a day, which could be used to make a range of ‘white meats’ meaning cheese and butter.



Cattelena by
Annie Pearson



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Cattelena’s cow was worth £3 and 10 shillings, £460.32 in today’s money. In 1625, the year Cattelena died, this was the equivalent of 70 days of skilled labour.

Tudors gave their cows names. Some reflected their function, as well as the owner's sense of humour. In 1559 Eleanor Cumpayne of Halesowen, Worcestershire, inherited a cow named Fillpayle. Was this name an order shouted at the cow or a compliment for how productive she was? Other cow names recorded include Gentle, Brown Snout, Lovely, Motherlike, Winsome, and Welcome Home. There is no record of Cattelena’s cow having been given a name, but that doesn’t mean she wasn’t, as this wasn’t a typical thing to record in an inventory.

There is no furniture in Cattelena’s inventory, which suggests she rented a room in someone else’s home. Cattelena was unmarried but this was not unusual, with around 30% of the English adult female population single. However, it was rare for single women to live in their own home and only about 5% of single women below the age of 45 were head of their own households.

Cattelena’s inventory shows that Black Tudor women could own property and financially support themselves, living a life of relative independence.

Who was Mary Fillis?

Mary Fillis was twenty years old when she was baptised in the parish of St. Botolph Aldgate. Thanks to a detailed account of her baptism, written in July 1597 by Thomas Harridance, we know a lot about her.

Mary was born in 1577 and had lived in England since she was around 6 or 7 years old. Mary was the daughter of 'Fillis of Morisco, a black more', a basket maker and a shovel maker. 'Morisco' suggests they were from Morocco. We might assume this means Mary is lighter skinned, however, the record describes both her and her father as 'a black more'.

By the time of her arrival, Morocco would already be a familiar destination for London merchants for trade in delicacies and sweetmeats such as sugar, dates and almonds, as well as saltpetre, a key ingredient for making gunpowder. Several English merchants lived in some of Morocco's main port cities. Before the 1620s there were more British people living in North Africa than in North America. Queen Elizabeth I started sending ambassadors to Morocco in the 1570s, and Moroccan ambassadors visited London in 1589 and 1600. This was a time of growth in diplomacy and embassies.

Many women like Mary who became servants were brought to England quite young, and this was a common element of the black female migrant experience.

We know from records of employers Mary worked for, that it was likely she spent her days laundering expensive linen and polishing silver plate and candlesticks.

Mary was not the only Black servant working for wealthy families in London. In her previous employment fellow servants Laying Mouea aged 20 and George, were described as 'Blackamoors'.



Mary Fillis by Jade Eynon

At the time of her baptism, Mary's employer Millicent Porter was a 58 year old widow, working as a seamstress and living in East Smithfield, London. Unlike her previous employers, Porter did not have a large household, which would have given Mary the opportunity to learn her trade. It was Millicent Porter who encouraged Mary's interest in becoming Christian, standing as her godmother for baptism.

It is possible that Mary was previously a Muslim, as during the 16th century a large population of Muslim Moriscos lived in Spain. They were later forced to convert to Christianity, but many clung onto their ancestral beliefs.

Baptisms of Africans in Tudor England in this period was not unusual. Baptism would allow Mary to fully participate in community life at a time when religion shaped many aspects of society and daily life. Africans would often get baptised to enable them to marry. Black baptisms were more common in adulthood rather than childhood, even though there are records of black people being brought to England as children like Mary Fillis.

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Who was Reasonable Blackman?

Reasonable Blackman was an independent skilled silk weaver of African descent living in Southwark, just outside the City of London.

In the Tudor period Southwark was an area of deprivation and poverty, with alehouses and five prisons. But it was also filled with thriving artisan trades and a lively community with a high number of migrants from Europe and beyond. Foreigners could work freely in Southwark but not in the City of London.

Reasonable Blackman was a financially independent craftsman, earning enough by his trade to support a family. Examples of married African men with families in the Tudor era are not unusual, appearing in Cornwall, Kent, Worcestershire and Hertfordshire.

Church records of Reasonable Blackman describe him as a 'blackmor' and 'a blackmore'. These records include the baptism of two of his sons, his death, and the deaths of two further children. We do not know the name of Reasonable's wife, as she does not appear on the records of the children. However, this was not an unusual detail to leave out of baptisms. It is likely they were married as the children are not listed as illegitimate.

Two of Reasonable's children died during the plague of 1592. It was the last major plague London would experience in the Tudor era, with over 15000 dying. However, Reasonable was spared this grief, having died four years earlier, and buried in his parish on 14th January.

One of the later church records suggests Reasonable's son Edward carried on his father's trade. His marriage is recorded on 6th March 1614, when he would have been 27: 'Edward Blackmore of Mile End, silkweaver' married 'Jeane Colle of Stepney'.

Silk weaving originated in China and came to Europe along the 'Silk Roads' through Asia and North Africa. The trade reached Spain in the eighth century, but it took a further six hundred years to reach England. By the 16th century imports of raw silk increased substantially and silk weaving was a new and expanding industry in Elizabethan London.

Elegant silk clothing was highly sought after by aristocracy and gentry. In addition to cost, sumptuary laws prevented the lower classes from wearing such luxurious fabrics. This dress code was intended to signify people's status within society and give cues to how strangers meeting for the first time should interact. However, in practice these laws were difficult to enforce. Perhaps Reasonable Blackman wore this aspirational material?

The leading centre of the silk industry from the 1530s was Antwerp in the Netherlands. Silk weavers produced a wide range of different silks, including satin, damask, taffeta, velvet and armoisin. The Netherlands had strong trade connections to Africa via Spain and Portugal.



Reasonable Blackman by Nompumeleo Ncube

In the mid-16th century, Antwerp's position in the silk industry started to be challenged, resulting in revolt against Spanish rule in 1568 and war. These tensions led to an estimated 50,000 refugees leaving the Netherlands for England, with a very high proportion of silk weavers settling in Southwark – perhaps this is how Reasonable Blackman came to live there.



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