

# WHO WERE THE BLACK TUDORS?

*Dr Miranda Kaufmann discusses her book  
Black Tudors: The Untold Story and uncovering  
the lost stories of black people in Tudor England*

Interview by Jessica Leggett

**U**ndoubtedly one of the most popular periods of English history, the Tudor era has been dramatised in various books, television dramas and films, while countless scholars have explored every inch of its history - or so we thought. In her book *Black Tudors: The Untold Story*, Dr Miranda Kaufmann investigates a part of Tudor history that has been forgotten, exploring the lives of African men and women who lived in Tudor and early Stuart England.

Challenging people's preconceptions of black Tudors, their day-to-day lives, their careers and even their freedom, Kaufmann's illuminating research provides a vital reassessment of English history that changes our understanding of the Tudors as we know them.

***What triggered your interest in black Tudors and why did you decide to write your book?***

In my final year as an undergrad at Oxford, I was in a lecture about early modern trade and they mentioned that

the Tudors had started trading to Africa in the middle of the 16th century, which was surprising because I had only learnt about the 18th-century trade of enslaved Africans. I found a couple of references in the library to Africans in Elizabethan England and I was inspired to find out more, so that became the subject of my doctorate. I eventually found archival references to over 360 individuals living in Tudor and early Stuart Britain between 1500 and 1640. I wrote the book because I wanted to share what I'd found with the world and change people's



© Getty Images



**EXPERT BIO**  
Dr Miranda Kaufmann is a senior research fellow at the Institute Of Commonwealth Studies. To find out more, visit [mirandakaufmann.com](http://mirandakaufmann.com)

perception of British history. The black presence in Tudor England is an important corrective to the false narrative that black people first arrived in Britain on the Empire Windrush in 1948. This can feed into a negative perspective on the immigration debate, suggesting that as black people have only recently arrived here, there is an option for them to 'go home'. Also, the stories were individually fascinating.

**How did you piece together the lives of the black men and women that you wrote about? What sources did you use?**  
With difficulty! Although other scholars have since published on the topic, those books by Imtiaz Habib and Onyeka Nubia

## “THE EVIDENCE OF AFRICANS BEING PAID WAGES, TESTIFYING IN COURT AND INTERMARRYING ALL SUGGESTS A LEVEL OF CIVIC FREEDOM”

weren't around when I began my research in 2004. Marika Sherwood of the Black and Asian Studies Association was a great help in pointing me towards the primary sources. Parish registers, which record baptisms, marriages and burials, provide information about where and how many people were in the country, but they don't often give a huge amount of biographical information. They might say something like 'John, a blackamoor, was buried on the 3rd of December', and that's about it, although there is an unusually detailed account of Mary Fillis being baptised at St Botolph's, Aldgate, in 1597. There's a small amount of visual evidence, such as the two images of John Blanke in the *Westminster*

*Tournament Roll*, or the portrait of Anne of Denmark with an African attendant. I also used royal and aristocratic household accounts, letters, diaries and state papers. For the book, I often got the most out of legal records that had more detail about people's lives. For example, most of what we know about Jacques Francis, the salvage diver, and Edward Swarthy, comes from the High Court of Admiralty or Star Chamber cases.

Unfortunately, there aren't any primary accounts by the black Tudors themselves, so you have to read the sources written by white men backwards and try to grasp the black experience. A lot of historians looking at black history encounter this problem. When I couldn't find a huge

amount of biographical information about the black people then I researched the white people in the story and that often led to more insights. When I looked into Sir Edward Wynter's life, I found out how Edward Swarthy likely came to England - Wynter had sailed to the Caribbean with Francis Drake. With John Anthony, who was a sailor in Dover, I did more digging into the ship that he worked on, the *Silver Falcon*, and learned of her ill-fated voyage to Virginia.

### **How and when did black Tudors first arrive in England?**

Although an African man named Pero Alvarez from Portugal visited the court



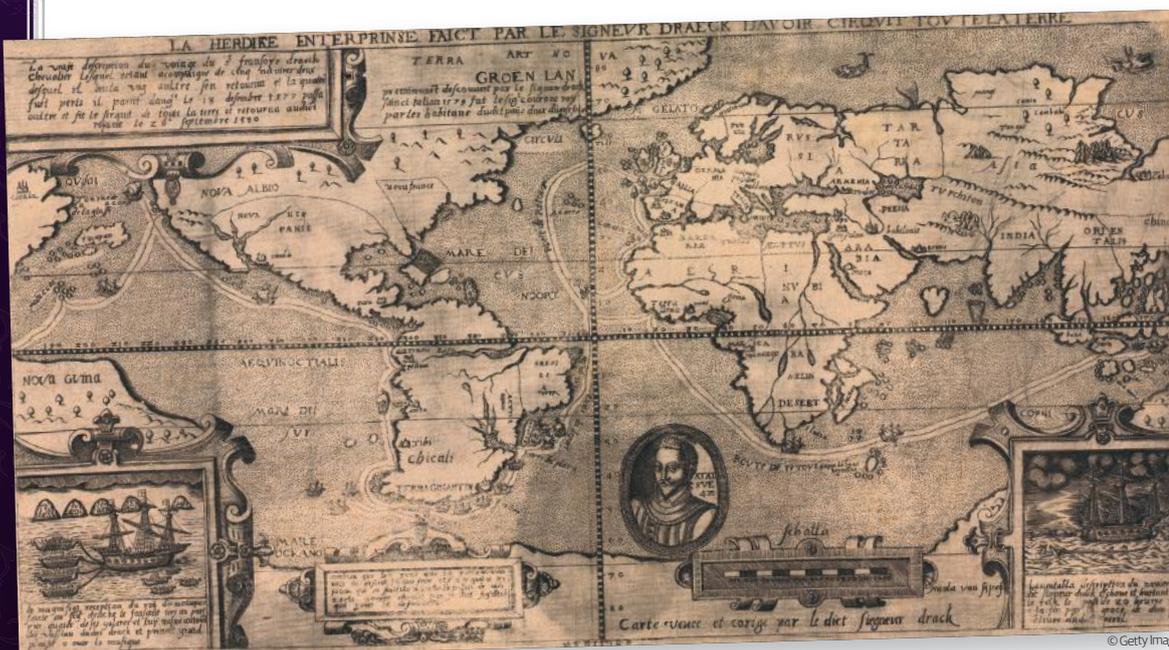
Image source: wik/ Rhetorica Christiana via Getty Research

**ABOVE** A drawing from 1579 depicting 'the Great Chain of Being' that medieval Christians believed was decreed by God

**BELOW** Map of Sir Francis Drake's circumnavigation of the world, 1581, by Nicola van Sype

of Henry VII in the late-1480s John Blanke, the Tudor court trumpeter, was the earliest person I found living here for a significant period of time. Our first record of Blanke is from 1507 but he probably came with Catherine of Aragon in 1501. Around the same time, there were several Africans at the court of James IV of Scotland.

I identified that Africans arrived in Britain in three main ways. Some came from Southern Europe, like Blanke. There was a much higher black population in Spain, Portugal and to some extent Italy in this period, because those countries were already engaged in enslavement and contact with Africa and had colonies in the Americas. Africans came to England as a side effect of that, with royals like Catherine and Philip II of Spain; with English aristocrats or merchants who travelled in Europe; or with the Sephardic Jews who were expelled from Portugal and Spain. The second way was through direct trade with Africa. For example, Prince Dederi Jaquoah and those before him who came to England learnt English and then went back as traders and interpreters. The final way is through privateering, so when Francis Drake or other privateers captured Africans when they raided Spanish ports or captured Spanish or Portuguese ships



© Getty Images

## SANCTUARY STATE

How Africans found freedom in Tudor England

It's frequently assumed that black people who lived in England prior to the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833 must have been enslaved. However, among the numerous discoveries to come to light in Kaufmann's research for *Black Tudors* is the fact that there were no enslavement laws in Tudor England. This will come as surprise to many, especially considering that the future British Empire would become one of the major slave-trading nations of the transatlantic slave trade.

While Portugal, the Netherlands, France and, indeed, the English colonies in America all introduced law codes on slavery between the 15th and 17th centuries, Parliament never passed any legislation regarding the status of slaves in England. In fact, Pero Alvarez, an African slave who arrived in England from Portugal, was set free by King Henry VII himself.

As the concept of slavery was not recognised by English law, Africans who settled in England were deemed to be free. In his *Description Of England*, first published in 1577, English priest William Harrison wrote: "As for slaves and bondmen we



have none... if any come hither from other realms, so soon as they set foot on land they become as free in condition as their masters."

Indeed, African men and women who lived in England were paid wages, baptised by the Church of England, allowed to intermarry and even testify in court, suggesting that not only were they free, but they were also accepted by English society.

**BELOW**  
A 1521 portrait of a young African woman, Katherina, by Albrecht Dürer



- the largest number in this period was the 135 Africans brought to Bristol in 1590 aboard the Charles.

***In your book, you discuss how people were more likely to be judged on their religion and social class rather than the colour of their skin. Why was this?***

We have to remember that this was a highly religious society and religious identity was central to the way people conceived of themselves. The English went through the Reformation in this period and were increasingly identifying as a Protestant nation. I argue that welcoming Africans into the Protestant faith through baptism is a key indicator of acceptance, they were seen as potential equals in the eyes of God. Meredith Hammer preached a sermon in 1586 at St Paul's Cathedral on the baptism of a 'Turk' - he was thrilled that the heathen had become a Protestant and that the Spanish had failed to entice him to become a Catholic.

As for social class, there was this idea of 'the Great Chain of Being'; everybody had their place. The Moroccan ambassadors were received with diplomatic pomp; West African merchants were traded with as equals by English merchants; Francis Drake sees the Panama Maroons as military allies. If you were skilled like Francis the salvage diver, Reasonable

Blackman the silk-weaver or John Blanke the musician, then you were respected and remunerated for your work.

Those who had been previously enslaved by the Spaniards and Portuguese and had arrived without a penny to their name were more likely to be treated - not necessarily worse than an impoverished white Englishman - but according to the perception of their social status, and they might end up working as a servant. I think people sometimes see black people in domestic service and assume it was akin to enslavement because now domestic service isn't really seen as a career path. Africans were paid wages, just like their white counterparts, which makes it clear they were not enslaved.

***In Black Tudors, you include a quote from 1569 that states that England had "too pure an Air for Slaves to breath in". Did the belief that black labourers in England were 'free' during this period encourage them to move there?***

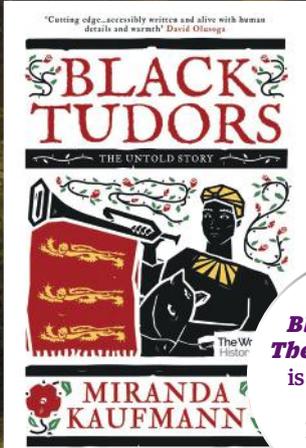
I argue that the Africans were free in England not only because of the idea that setting foot on English soil conferred freedom, but also because there wasn't any legislation passed delineating enslavement in England in this period, compared to the codes in Portugal or later in France and English colonies like Virginia and Barbados. The evidence of Africans being paid wages, testifying in court and intermarrying all suggests a level of civic freedom. Across the Atlantic world, people were aware that Africans weren't enslaved in England and someone like Diego [a circumnavigator] might have heard that and taken the risk to get on Drake's ship rather than stay enslaved in Panama. However, the Africans who arrived in England in this period didn't always come here of their own volition so were not necessarily 'voting with their feet'.

***Did African women have different experiences compared to African men in Tudor England?***

The short answer is yes. Roughly half of the records I found were of women and the original draft of my book had five chapters on women. One was about Maria, who was abandoned on an island in Indonesia by Drake, but as she never actually came to England I couldn't justify a whole chapter on her, and instead told her story in the Diego chapter. There was another woman called Helen Jeronimo, who was described as a 'moor' but I couldn't be sure if she was of African origin or whether she was from the East Indies because she was the wife of an East India Company sailor. I ended



**“ IT’S ASSUMED  
AFRICANS WERE LIVING  
LIVES OF DRUDGERY  
AND PAIN AND PEOPLE  
DON’T EXPECT THEM  
TO HAVE SKILLS LIKE  
SALVAGE DIVING OR  
SILK-WEAVING”**



**Black Tudors:  
The Untold Story**  
is out now from  
Oneworld  
Publications

up with chapters on Mary Fillis, Anne Cobbie and Cattelena of Almondsbury, who had an interesting range of experiences.

Fillis shows that you could develop a skill like being a seamstress that might allow you at least some level of financial independence, and Cattelena of Almondsbury is independent and able to make a small living for herself, with the help of her cow. In a way, I would rather not have included Cobbie because although there's a preconception that if there were African women in Tudor London then they were probably prostitutes, there's very little evidence of that. In fact, there's more evidence of African men visiting English sex workers than the other way around.

**What preconceptions do we have today about black Tudors in England?**

Well, the main preconceptions are that there weren't any, or if there were that they were enslaved and that there weren't many women. Often people know a bit more about the black presence in the 18th century and read stuff backwards, reaching false conclusions. It is assumed Africans were living lives of drudgery and pain and people don't expect them to have skills like salvage diving or silk-weaving. They might think of musicians because of the long-held association of Africans with music, and perhaps of Africans in royal or aristocratic households, partly because they might have seen portraits from a later period or other countries showing royals and aristocrats with black attendants. However, my research shows that a lot of black Tudors were working in much more humble households like that of a London beer brewer or a seamstress; or that in a few cases they were independent, living their own lives.

**Your book focuses on ten black men and women from the Tudor and Stuart periods. Whose story fascinated or surprised you the most?**

I think I was always most engaged with whoever I was writing about at the time. Diego's story is brilliant because it's an exciting global adventure, with the Maroon alliance and his untimely death from an arrow wound sustained off the coast of Chile. Swarthy's story is the most surprising: an African man whipping an Englishman. The testimony in which he describes the event was in very bad handwriting (of a court scribe, not Swarthy himself) and I couldn't make it out at first. The first word that I identified was 'whip' with a double 'p', and I assumed that the black man was being whipped

## SALVAGING THE MARY ROSE

How an African man became one of the first to see the wreck of the Mary Rose

There are many interesting stories to uncover in Kaufmann's book *Black Tudors*, but the tale of Jacques Francis is one of the most fascinating. Born in Guinea, West Africa, in the 1520s, it is likely that Francis would have been trained as a pearl diver and, in fact, many Africans were skilled free-divers. In comparison most Tudors, including sailors, couldn't even swim.

Although we don't know exactly how he ended up there, Francis found work as a salvage diver in Southampton, working for a Venetian salvage operator named Peter Paulo Corsi when he was around 18 years old.

In July 1545, the *Mary Rose* - one of the largest ships in the English Navy - sank in the Solent, a tragedy witnessed by King Henry VIII himself from Southsea Castle. The weapons aboard the ship were very expensive and after an initial attempt to raise the ship failed that August, Corsi was hired to recover the weaponry in 1547.

Francis, an expert swimmer and diver, was chosen to lead the team of eight divers. It's possible that two of the other team members were of African origin too, and together they succeeded in recovering some of the guns from the wreck.

Following another salvage operation in the Solent, Corsi was accused of theft by Italian merchants and the case was brought to the High Court of Admiralty. Most of what we know about Francis is thanks to the records from this case because he testified on his master's behalf, becoming the first African to give evidence in an English court of law.



by the white man, as was the case for so much of our later history. It was only when I deciphered the whole document that I realised it was the other way around. The fact that John Anthony, a free waged sailor, was bound for Virginia in 1619, the inaugural year of African American history, was a striking contrast to the experience of the 20 or so Africans who actually became the first to arrive in Jamestown that summer.

**What do you hope readers will take away from Black Tudors?**

It depends who the reader is! The first thing that I wanted to put across was

**OPPOSITE** Portrait of Anne of Denmark accompanied by an African attendant

**BELOW** John Blanke, pictured in the *Westminster Tournament Roll*, was a black trumpeter at the courts of Henry VII and Henry VIII

simply that black Tudors were here. To give people a different perspective by showing that British history is a lot more diverse than they think and also raise questions, like was it inevitable that white people would enslave black people in our history? What changed in the 17th century that created all the pain and misery of enslavement and racism that followed afterwards? I want teachers to teach it in schools and I'm working with a group of secondary school teachers now on a project called #TeachingBlackTudors [mirandakaufmann.com/blog/teaching-black-tudors], creating black Tudors teaching resources with a major educational publisher. I want it in museums and I want to change the traditional narrative of British history. This is beginning to happen: Francis now features at the *Mary Rose* Museum in Portsmouth; Diego's story is now told at the National Maritime Museum and the National Trust's Buckland Abbey (Drake's former home near Plymouth), as part of the Colonial Countryside project [www2.le.ac.uk/departments/english/creativewriting/centre/colonial-countryside-project]. I would like the next generation of historians to build on my work, do some more digging and find out more. I hope it's a starting point that brings people to black British history and takes them on different journeys. ○

