

## Free, but forgotten

We're Tudor-mad so why do we know so little of the black population, asks **Miranda Kaufmann**

**I**n 1584, the author of *Leicester's Commonwealth*, a scurrilous tract attacking the reputation of Elizabeth I's favourite, Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, made a passing reference to 'the Black moors... that dwell in Guinea (whereof I suppose you have heard and seen also some in this land)'. Africans were 'heard and seen' across England, from Hull to Truro, throughout the 16th century and thereafter. And yet their presence has been forgotten. In 1999, an eminent Liverpool professor, expert in the history of British and Portuguese West Africa, asserted that: "Black Africans were hardly at all known in England itself, Anglo-African contacts being almost exclusively within Guinea." He was wrong. The presence of Africans in Tudor England was common knowledge at the time, and it needs to become common knowledge again.

Despite the insatiable appetite for all things Tudor, from raunchy television series to bath ducks modelled as Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn, the existence of the Black Tudors is little known. The popular concept, as dramatised in the Opening Ceremony of the London Olympics in 2012, is that people of African origin first arrived in England when the Empire Windrush docked at Tilbury in 1948. It's quite a jolt to consider that there could have been Africans in the crowd gathered at those very same docks when Elizabeth I galvanised her troops to face the Spanish Armada 360 years earlier. There were Africans present at the royal courts of Henry VII, Henry VIII, Elizabeth I and James I, and in the households of famous Tudors including Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, Sir Walter Raleigh, Sir Francis Drake, William Cecil, Lord Burghley and his son Robert.

But not all Africans were in domestic service. Jacques Francis was a salvage diver who recovered guns from the Mary Rose. Reasonable Blackman was a silk-weaver in 1590s Southwark. Dederi Jacquoah was a prince from modern-day Liberia who lived in London merchant John Davies' house for two years learning English before returning home.

People often assume that the Black Tudors were slaves. This misconception is part of a wider impression that any African living outside Africa before the



King's Trumpeter John Blanke appears on the Westminster Tournament Roll of 1511

**"That an African whipped a white Englishman in a crowd of 20 men speaks volumes"**

mid-19th century, be it in Europe or the Americas, must have been enslaved. When most of us think of a slave, the image that appears in our minds is of an African. There is more than enough visual material to draw upon, from films such as *12 Years a Slave* and television series such as *Roots*, to the exhibits at museums such as the International Slavery Museum in Liverpool and the London, Sugar and Slavery gallery at Museum of London, Docklands. Often the first and only mention of Africa in the

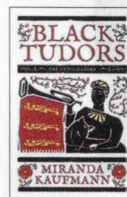
school curriculum is when children are taught about the slave trade. They see Africans reduced to one of a series of commodities traded in a triangle, packed into ships in chains. Equal attention is not given to the extensive history of Africa before the Europeans arrived there and to examples of collaboration between Europeans and Africans, or to the free Africans living in Europe.

In fact, the Africans living in Tudor England were not enslaved. There was no law of slavery in England. The only judgment on the subject in this period ruled that 'England has too pure an air for slaves to breathe in'. As one African named Diogo put it in 1614, once he set foot on English soil he became free, "because in that Reign nobody is a slave". The Black Tudors were paid wages and allowed to testify in court – both key indicators of free status.

The evidence that Africans were baptised, married and buried by the Church of England is indicative that they were accepted into the parish community. Tudor England was a highly religious society, making this inclusion really significant.

I wanted to write *Black Tudors* because as the debate about immigration becomes ever more vituperative and divisive, it is vital to understand that the British Isles have always been peopled with immigrants. I wanted to convey to as many people as possible that there were Africans in Tudor England, and to challenge the assumption that they must have been enslaved.

Perhaps the most telling story I uncovered is that of Edward Swarthy, who worked as a porter in a Gloucestershire manor house. One day in the winter of 1596, his master Sir Edward Wynter commanded him to whip another servant, John Guye, in the great hall of the house in front of a crowd of some 20 men. That an African whipped a white Englishman in public with impunity speaks volumes about how different the lives of the Black Tudors were to what we might imagine.



*Black Tudors: African Lives in Renaissance England* by Miranda Kaufmann is out now (Oneworld, £18.99)