

Understanding Migration in the Middle Ages

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This is an extended version of the article published in Exploring and Teaching Medieval History, containing a short section on emigration, more examples and details of further reading and links.

Stories of medieval immigration can be fascinating and surprising. In 1302 King Edward I gave immigrant wine merchants from Gascony a special privilege. From then on, if they appeared in court charged with a small crime, they would have the right to a half Gascon jury. Gascony was then ruled by the English crown and this was the spirit of Magna Carta's 'judgment by peers' being extended to English subjects overseas, so no great surprise perhaps. Half a year later, though, when German merchants asked for the same privilege, it was granted to *all* foreign merchants. Ah, we may say, this benefited only wealthy immigrants who were useful to the King. Indeed, as it was a privilege, it was not automatic and had to be requested in each case. But in 1354 the right to a mixed jury was extended to *all* 'aliens', whatever their social status, in *all cases* including the most serious crimes. And by the mid-fifteenth century, not only did every foreign immigrant have the right to be judged by a jury half of whom were also immigrants, but a 'half-tongue' jury was increasingly being granted, meaning that foreigners who spoke a language other than English had the right to be tried by jurors who shared their tongue. Imagine the outcry if such a measure were to be suggested by an elected government today.

Immigration was of crucial importance to the growth of English economic power. On July 16th 1331 a Flemish wool weaver called John Kempe was granted permission by Edward III to come with a group of men to settle in England, set up business and teach his trade. They were given special rights and protection as encouragement. Edward wanted to transform England's economy from a primary one selling raw wool overseas that would then be woven elsewhere to a manufacturing economy in which woollen cloth was woven here. So now the plan was for the English to learn skills from the Flemings, many of whom were refugees fleeing a repressive ruler who supported Edward's enemy, the King of France. Kempe seems to have settled well - he was still here in 1369 - and many fellow migrants from the Low Countries followed him to kickstart textile manufacturing in places as far apart as Lavenham in Suffolk, Castle Coombe in Wiltshire and - most significant of all for the future - Manchester. At the same time, Dutch women were teaching the people of East Anglia to brew beer from hops where they had previously only created ale from barley.



The Establishment of Flemish Weavers in Manchester, AD 1363 by Ford Madox Brown, 1882. The painting is on a panel in Manchester Town Hall.

England's immigrants in the Middle Ages ranged from the wives of kings to kidnapped and enslaved Icelandic children; from wealthy Florentine bankers and Hanseatic merchants to Scottish servants; from political refugees to business opportunists. Many did well: Flemish weaver Laurence Conync became a freeman of York in 1354; Irishman Nicholas Devenyssh was Bristol's mayor in 1436; Henry Phelypp was a master sculptor who worked on Long Melford church in Suffolk. While the most common employment of immigrants in 15th century England was as servants, the range of occupations was wide, especially after the Black Death created a labour shortage. Here is a selection from contemporary tax records:

armourer, barrelmaker, beerbrewer, butcher, brickman, broker, carter, carver, Chandler, chaplain, clerk, clockmaker, cobbler, collier, combset maker, cooper, corviser, cordwainer, currier, dialmaker, draper, drayman, dyer, farrier, fiddler, flaxwife, gaoler, garcon, girdler, glazier, glover, goldsmith, grinder, hosier, huckster, husbandman, lastmaker, leatherworker, leech, lockyer, mason, mercer, mill picker, miller, minstrel, monk, optician, painter, pardoner, patternmaker, pinner, pointmaker, pommel maker, pouchmaker, poulterer, priest, purser, saddler, sawyer, scrivener, shearing grinder, shoemaker, shuttlemaker, souter, spinner, spurrier, stolemaker, stonesslipper, tailor, tinker, victualler, weaver, wiredrawer

An absorbing task for students could be to find out what some of these occupations involved. At the other end of the scale, meanwhile, there were foreign born queens, ladies in waiting, dukes and bishops. As Mark Ormrod, Professor of History at York University, has said: 'No one in England was more than ten miles from an immigrant.'

Were people from the wider world beyond Europe living in medieval England? There are clues that suggest their possible presence. In May 2010, forensic anthropologists from Dundee University revealed that a skeleton found in Ipswich was that of a thirteenth-century North African Muslim. They knew this from carbon dating, bone analysis, facial reconstruction and historical detective work. Perhaps he was brought here after the Ninth Crusade: buried in consecrated ground, he may have been converted to Christianity. Nine other Africans were buried in the same cemetery. Two entries in the aliens' register refer to people from 'Inde', which could be anywhere east of the Mediterranean. Did 'Benedict and Antonia Calamon' and 'Jacobus Black' (a servant in Dartmouth) take on Christian names that would help them fit into Catholic England? In 1363 Edward III played host to the King of Cyprus who brought with him two non-Christian 'kings': one was probably a Lithuanian pagan while the other, described as 'lord of Jerusalem', was converted from Islam and given the new name Edward in honour of the king, his godfather.

Responses to immigration

But how were 'aliens' - those born outside the monarch's realm - received? The story was complex and many faceted. A changing political, military and economic climate could make them vulnerable and there are numerous examples of the changeability of policy on alien status and towards immigrants. Gascons experienced this: after the French conquest of the region in 1453 they became 'enemy aliens'. And the simmering dispute over immigration between guilds seeking to protect their members and the crown wanting to transform the economy tended to bubble over when kings were weak and could be pressurised by powerful vested interests, or at times of economic crisis or military threat. The following examples show how changeable alien status and policy towards immigrants could be:

- In 1270 Henry III invited Flemish cloth workers to settle in England but changed his mind a month later and expelled many of them.
- In 1325 Edward II, fearing French invasion arrested all foreigners living on the south coast.

- Under Edward III migrant artisans were encouraged, welcomed and granted royal protection
- In 1377, under pressure from the guilds, foreign merchants were forced to live in English households.
- In 1436 migrants from the Low Countries had to buy a special licence and swear an oath of allegiance, or they would be expelled.
- In 1439 householders were ordered to spy and report on their foreign lodgers.
- In 1456 Italian merchants in London felt so vulnerable that they all fled to Winchester for safety.
- In 1492 the London Steelyard, the settlement and trading base of Hanseatic merchants from northern Europe, was destroyed by rioters.
- In 1517 ('Evil May Day') there were fierce anti-foreigner riots by London apprentices which, though ostensibly aimed at wealthy foreigners, targeted the poorest such as French shoemakers. The response of the authorities was severe and in defence of immigrants: the riot was put down violently by troops and several rioters hanged.

There was also opposition, especially from London's guilds who saw the special treatment given to Flemings (and later to Gascons) as a threat to indigenous workers who worked under regulations foreign clothworkers were exempt from. The new arrivals were accused of undercutting prices the locals had charged. Flemish weavers set up their own guild in 1362, however, and in 1380 they came to a compromise with the English guilds but this unravelled a year later with the Great Revolt, when high tension and violence mixed with xenophobia in murderous attacks on Flemings. According to the claims of chronicles, adults and children were dragged from churches and killed and people were stopped in the street and told to say 'bread and cheese'. If they spoke with a foreign accent their throats were cut.

Despite this list, accounts of hostility to foreigners are rare despite the common claim throughout the period that 'aliens and strangers who eat the bread from the poor fatherless children' – in the words of Dr Bell, a Spitalfields preacher who incited major anti-foreigner riots in 1517 – were being foisted on the poor by a rich elite. A counter argument was that immigration was essential for the economy and the wellbeing of all, bringing a labour force and badly needed skills. When in 1469 a householder in Havering asked for a Dutch mason to build his chimney because 'they can best fare', it could almost be the words of a 21st century householder preferring a Polish builder. There were ironies, too, showing that the question of who were seen as 'aliens' was every bit as unresolved as now: in 1455, when the London guilds lobbied for statutes to protect 'indigenous' female silk workers from imports, the women were almost certainly second-generation migrants from Italy and the Levant – a case, one nineteenth century historian commented, of 'antagonism to alien merchants on behalf of alien artisans settled in England.' Overall, however, contemporary evidence of widespread settlement is so plentiful that it appears most immigrants assimilated and the norm was one of acceptance.

The Jewish community in England

One story of huge importance for understanding later European and world history is that of England's medieval Jews. Invited by William I to bankroll cathedrals and castles built during and after the conquest, they established communities in a wide range of occupations across the country. Over time they became the targets of religious xenophobia. The 'Blood Libel', which resulted in massacres of Jews all over Europe, originated in Lincoln and Norwich. Seven hundred years before the Nazi Holocaust, Jews in England had their rights and freedoms removed bit by bit, were forced to wear

yellow badges, were imprisoned, murdered and finally expelled in 1290. As the teaching of anti-Semitism in mid twentieth century Germany is almost universally taught in schools, an understanding of its long history in Europe and the part played in this country, is surely crucial.

'The land exhaust us by demanding payments, and the people's disgust is heard

While we are silent and wait for the light

You are mighty and full of light, you turn the darkness into light.

They make our yoke heavier, they are finishing us off.

They continually say of us, let us despoil them until the morning light'

- from 'Put a Curse on my Enemy' by Meir Bin Elijah of Norwich, late 13th century

Emigration

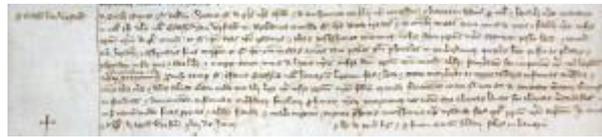
Migration, of course, works two ways. People chose to leave Britain, prompted by opportunities created by trade, war or, occasionally, fleeing from political change. The latter was the case after 1066 when some Englishmen took their swords and service to the Byzantine Emperor in Constantinople. The family of King Harold II fled as refugees, Harold's daughter, Gytha, marrying Prince Vladimir of Kiev. Less desperate but as far-ranging was Hamo Lestrage, who joined Prince Edward's Crusade in 1270 and married the heiress of the lordship of Beirut, a very different land from his native Shropshire. In the 1350s, a Cheshire squire, John Stretton, a member of the Black Prince's retinue, decided to settle in Aquitaine (then ruled by the Prince). Over the next years, John bought lands and married a local heiress, Isabeau de Saint-Symphorien. The long-lasting English rule of Gascony must have led to numerous such examples of settlement.

Trading opportunities commonly took individuals abroad. Amongst many examples, the son of Marjorie Kempe (see *Exploring and Teaching Medieval History* page 121) very likely settled in Germany to trade and then married a local girl. William Caxton left London for Bruges, Ghent and Cologne before returning to set up the first printing press in England. The busy trading links between Bristol and Portugal led to the settlement of Bristolians in Lisbon from the 1350s, if not earlier, with some marrying into local families. Pilgrims, too, may have found reasons to settle overseas during journeys to Rome, Santiago de Compostella or Jerusalem. France was certainly a common destination, with Anglo-French phrase books circulating in the fifteenth century to help English travellers communicate when arriving in France.

Many people, both merchants and soldiers took advantage of Henry V's conquest of Normandy to settle and prosper, with Harfleur, Caen and Rouen being extensively populated with English settlers and smaller groups in many other Norman towns. A good many married into Norman families, sowing the seeds for impossible choices which had to be made when the English lost control of the region in 1449-1450. Some chose to stay with French wives and Anglo-French children and grandchildren. Thomas Bridon was such an individual, whose daughter had married a Frenchman and whose grandson had followed him into the trade of embroiderer. However, many others in 1449-50 became refugees, arriving at English ports, some having been born in Normandy and never having seen England before. Bale's Chronicle records how, in August 1450, there 'daily came through Cheapside many long carts carrying armour, bedding and household goods with men, women and children in a very poor state, having been driven out of Normandy. It was piteous to see.'

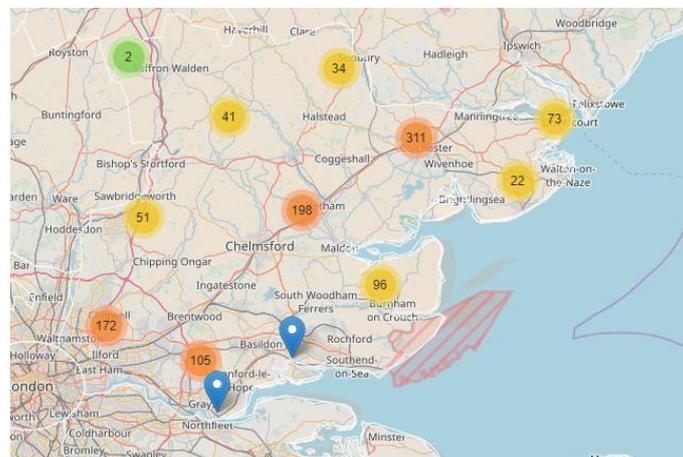
How do we know about individual immigrants?

A trail of documents still extant provides a wonderful resource that gives us names, origins, location and occupations of thousands of foreign-born residents in late medieval England. Letters of denization (see illustration below) were introduced in the 1370s, documents from the king granting full rights and protection to those who could pay. The aliens' subsidy was a tax on all foreign-born residents introduced in 1440 under King Henry VI as a result of anti-immigrant lobbying.

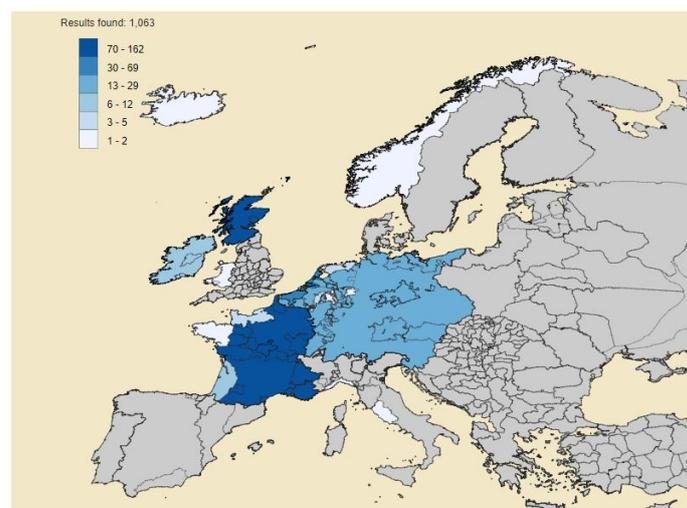


www.englishimmigrants.com/page/sources/letters-of-denization-and-other-sources

Both denization letters and the aliens' subsidy tax returns are at the National Archive and the *England's Immigrants* database created from them is online and accessible free of charge. Anyone can find out – through maps and graphs – who the immigrants were in their town or village with - in many cases - their names and occupations and where they came from.



Numbers of immigrants in Essex 1330-1550 (on modern map)



Origins of migrants to Lincoln 1330-1550 (map showing medieval borders)

[screenshots from www.englishimmigrants.com]

Teaching about migration

The value and richness of studying medieval migration is clear from the above examples. There are extraordinary human stories that enable students to connect with those who lived then, and to understand and respect people who lived in a period that is full of surprises that challenge simplistic stereotypes. The key role played by migration in the change from a primary economy to a wealthier manufacturing one is essential to understanding how this small island became a European and then a world power: the pattern would be repeated in later centuries by Huguenot refugees helping the growth of a capitalist economy, Irish migrants building the transport links of the Industrial Revolution, Eastern European Jews powering key sectors of our retail economy and Commonwealth immigrants helping rebuild the UK and staff its welfare state after the Second World War. Moreover, the similarities and differences between the debates then and now mean that students will understand from their own experience some of the concepts involved, as well as enabling discussion of controversial issues in the safe space of locating them in the past.

A specific enquiry into medieval migration could start with your own local area. Use the *England's Immigrants* site to find out who the local immigrants were according to the tax records: where had they come from, what were they doing? Then set questions to widen the enquiry about where immigrants came from, why they came, how they were received, about their impact and about the typicality of their area.

A thematic study over time during Key Stage 3 can look at migration from the early Middle Ages until now, a way to understand key developments in the country's history – Hundred Years War, Reformation, empire, industrialisation, world wars, Europe as well as our continually transforming economy – through the lives of 'ordinary' people whose decisions to move led to and resulted from these changes. This could be done in Y7 as a 'fast forward' across time or at the end of Key Stage 3 as a 'fast rewind' overview.

Migration as a, enquiry within a unit on the Middle Ages, with the questions revisited in each period studied during Key Stage 3, can build an understanding of key themes and connections between periods.

Resources linked to this article

Articles by Professor Mark Ormrod, leader of the England's medieval immigrants project in BBC History Magazine: www.historyextra.com/article/premium/moving-medieval-england

and also on the Historical Association website (which also provides other materials on this topic)

<https://www.history.org.uk/student/resource/8182/foreigners-in-england-in-the-later-middle-ages>

<https://www.history.org.uk/student/module/6163/englands-immigrants-1330-1550>

HA workshop materials by Ben Walsh and Andrew Payne:

<https://www.history.org.uk/secondary/categories/364/resource/9167/cherishe-ye-calais-better-than-it-is-aliens-and>

The early chapters of

- Lyndon, Adi, Sherwood and Spafford – *Migration* (GCSE textbook for OCR 'A'), Hodder 2016
- Lyndon and Spafford – *Migrants to Britain* (GCSE textbook for OCR 'B'), Hodder 2016
- Robert Winder – *Bloody Foreigners*, Abacus 2004, 2013

Chapters 6 and 7 of David Miles – *The Tribes of Britain*, Phoenix 2006

The searchable database at England's Immigrants: www.englishimmigrants.com and for individual stories go to www.englishimmigrants.com/page/individual-studies

Our Migration Story: www.ourmigrationstory.org.uk/oms/by-era/AD43-1500

<http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/newsevents/news/englishimmigrantsinthemiddleages/>

Many local histories include migration and there are some devoted entirely to the subject. An example of this:

- Dresser and Fleming – *Bristol, ethnic minorities and the city 1000-2001*, Victoria County History/ Phillimore 2007

Jews in Medieval England

Leventhal M and Goldstein R, *Jews in Britain*, Oxford, Shire Publications 2013

Marcus Roberts, *The story of England's Jews: The First Thousand Years* 2007

Anthony Bale 'Poems of protest: Meir ben Elijah and the Jewish people of early Britain' -

<http://www.ourmigrationstory.org.uk/oms/put-a-curse-on-my-enemies-meir-ben-elijah-and-the-jews-of-early-norwich>

www.oxfordjewishheritage.co.uk/english-jewish-heritage

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_Jews_in_England

www.theholocaustexplained.org/ks3/anti-semitism/medieval-anti-judaism/

Martin Spafford is a retired school history teacher who co-wrote textbooks for the OCR GCSE thematic unit on migration. He now runs workshops on history, human rights and social action for teachers and students.