

Moving Here

Coming to the West Midlands

“Someone once asked me,
When you moved here what did you leave behind?
With tears in my eyes and a lump in my throat I whispered,
How can I express my thoughts and feelings in words alone?
There is an infinite list in my mind.”

Sayyara N Syed, project participant

This exhibition is the result of a project exploring migration to the West Midlands. During the project, members of many community groups have shared their stories of moving here. They range from Caribbean migrants who arrived in the 1940s to recent refugees from Iraq.

Although they come from different backgrounds the project participants have many things in common. They have all left friends, family and familiar surroundings to make a new life in Britain. They have faced difficulties in finding jobs and decent homes. As they have settled into British society they have made important contributions to the culture and economy of this country.

All the memories in this exhibition are from the people involved in the project. You can see and hear fuller versions of their stories at www.movinghere.org.uk. The Moving Here website includes a vast range of material relating to migration history. As well as personal stories it contains more than 200,000 digitised images and documents.

The West Midlands project is part of an initiative called Routes to the Future, co-ordinated by The National Archives and funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund.

Participating museums

Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery
The Herbert, Coventry
Ironbridge Gorge Museums
Stoke-on-Trent Museum Service
Wolverhampton Arts and Museums

Lead community partners

Connaught Gardens, Birmingham
Coventry Adult Education Service
Coventry Somali Cultural Resource Centre
Moving Memories project, Stoke-on-Trent
North Staffordshire Polish Day Centre
Residents of Whitmore Reans,
Wolverhampton
Wellington Jamaican elders
World Wise project, Coventry
Writers Without Borders, Birmingham

Supported by



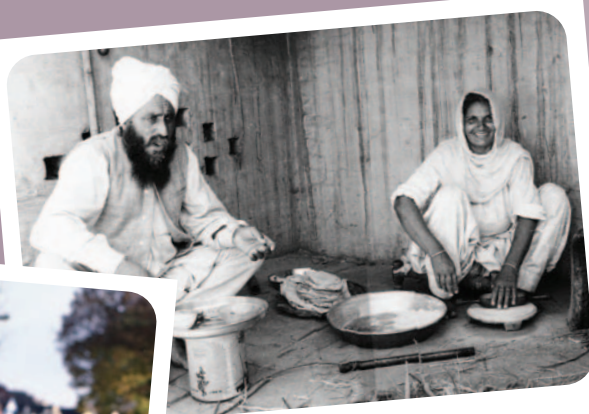
RENAISSANCE WEST MIDLANDS
museums for changing lives



In the mountains at home
in Kurdistan



I spent several years of my
childhood in Guyana and Jamaica



Cooking the traditional way

The home country

“ People arriving in the West Midlands from overseas have come from a wide range of places. Some migrants like Shapol Said previously lived in large towns and cities:

“Although Dukan was a beautiful holiday resort, it was a modern city that had an established manufacturing industry, and an oil fuelled power plant that supplied energy to a considerable large area in Iraq.”

Others remember life in traditional homes in the countryside. Mohinder Devgan Kaur spent her childhood in an Indian village in the 1940s:

“I lived in a mud house which had four bedrooms. They had no bathroom – instead they would get a bucket of water and have a bath anywhere. The cooker was outside and it was made of mud but they had ceramic pots and pans.”

Nigel Singh's family moved between South America, Britain and Jamaica and he has vivid memories of living in Guyana:

“I remember the noise from the insects, and the heat, and your back yard was the sea. Instead of a slide or swing, we had alligators. By the law of nature, they occasionally would eat whatever crossed their path including the cows.”

Many migrants grew up in farming districts where families produced much of their own food and sold any surplus at the market. Violet Barrett's family kept animals and grew a variety of crops:

“In Jamaica we grew ginger ourselves, we used to cultivate it – my parents used to plant sugarcane, banana, coconuts, sweet potato and tobacco.”

”

Lots of families in the Caribbean
grew their own food



Like many Chinese people
I came to Britain for work

Leaving home

People have left their homes to start a new life in Britain for different reasons. Job prospects in Britain have sometimes offered the chance of a better life. Krishan Kumar left a well paid government post in India to train as a teacher in England:

“I was thinking about the children – how will I raise them up and give them a good education? Some people said I should go and try my luck.”

Some migrants like Wai Lin Chan-Wu moved here ahead of their children:

“My second daughter had to take care of all her brothers and sisters, therefore I had to find money to send back home. Later my second son came here and found a job.”

When Britain still had an empire many people in the colonies felt bound to help in difficult times. Mr Johnson left Jamaica in 1944 to serve in the RAF:

“Everyone said your mother country is at war, and it was colonial rule at the time. It was everywhere – come and help your mother country, join the air force.”

Educational opportunities have also attracted people to Britain. Sahro Ali moved from Somalia to the Netherlands in 1994 and came to England seven years later:

“I wanted my children's future to be better and to learn the English language, because the English language is very important in my country.”

Some migrants are living in Britain not through a positive choice but because they have fled danger in their home country. Shapol Said lost 22 relatives who were murdered by Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq. Garib Mohammed left Iraq at around the same time:

“People would go missing and the local militants would seize homes. Karkuk suddenly became a very dangerous place to be. I was very frightened.”



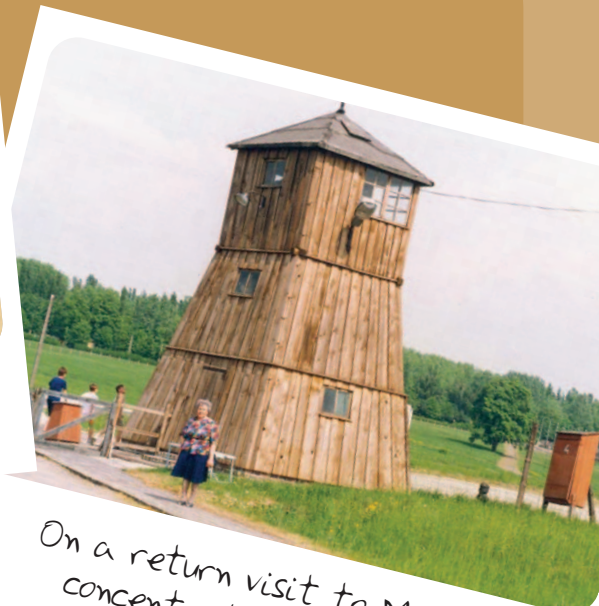
I came to Britain from India
to improve my family's future



Kurdish people in Iraq
feared for their lives



I served with the Polish forces in Italy during the war



On a return visit to Majdanek concentration camp in 2000

Experiences of war

A lot of migrants to Britain have experienced war and conflict. Some of them have memories of the Second World War (1939 to 1945). Mr Johnson joined the RAF in 1944:

“The training for this involved doing the drill in Jamaica and we did all the hard training in England, shooting, all around in the bushes, and then every day you're out. You learnt to go to war.”

Many Polish servicemen joined the Allied forces to fight against the Nazis but some were unable to return to their home country afterwards. Jack Havrylak was one of them:

“When the war finished, all the Allied soldiers were dancing in elation and our Polish officers were crying because we could not go home because of Stalin. I had been to Siberia and would have been straight back there. We went all over the world and I settled in England.”

Civilians in occupied Europe also came to Britain after being displaced during the war. Josephine Rudzik survived the notorious Majdanek concentration camp:

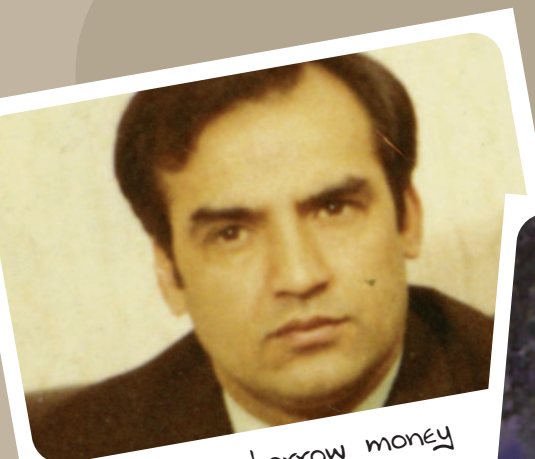
“The German soldiers came and took all of the people from the five neighbouring villages to the concentration camps. First they put us in Majdanek near Lublin in Poland. Lots of people died in Majdanek... people were dying from hunger.”

War and civil unrest continue to drive people from their home countries today. Abdulkadir was attacked by rebels on his farm in Somalia:

“Three men grab my wife and me and another two men go into my house... They look all over the house, in bags, boxes and between the bed and mattress. Another man shoots his gun. I fall to the ground – blood is pouring out of my leg.”



Wearing the medal from my service in the RAF



I had to borrow money to buy my ticket



I escaped Iraq and was smuggled into Britain hidden in a lorry



The passport that I got for my journey to England

The journey

For some migrants the journey to Britain from their home country was a memorable one. Mr Johnson sailed from the Caribbean in 1944 as part of a military convoy:

“The ship that I travelled in was the HMS Georgia. When it left Jamaica in the early morning it stopped in Bermuda... there was ships all around us... all the cargo ships were coming to England with four destroyers.”

By the 1960s more migrants were arriving by air. It could be a confusing experience for people who were not used to travelling. Daphne Jeffrey-Shaw came from the Caribbean in 1962:

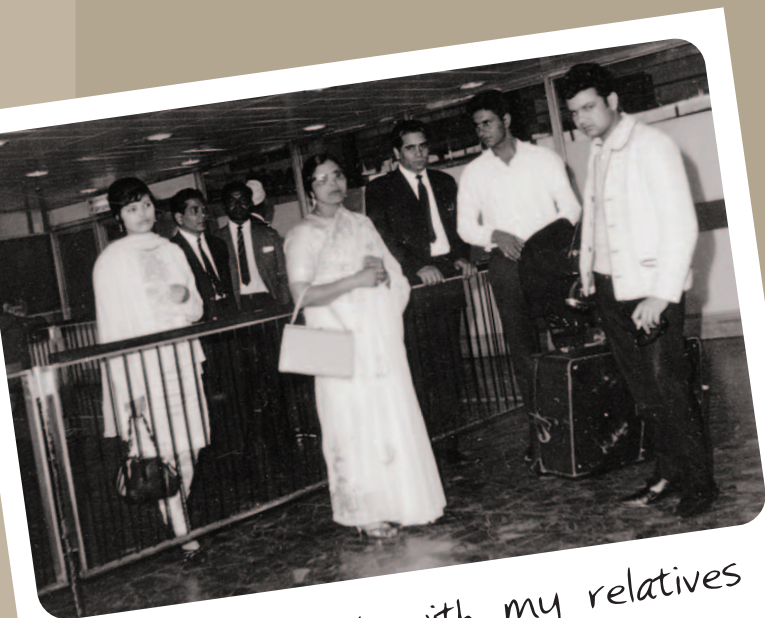
“We landed at Stansted. I had never flown before and people were falling over on the escalator. I watched them to see how to do it so I didn't fall. We didn't know where we were going and we were all very scared.”

Leonie Williams had an unpleasant encounter with an immigration official when she arrived from Jamaica:

“The questions he began to ask was nothing short of rude. Questions like: Did you buy your ticket or was it sent? Why would your cousin buy such an expensive ticket for just a few months? Have you got a love interest here, mam?”

Refugees fleeing persecution often face difficult and dangerous journeys to safety. Shapol Said spent months walking from Iraq to Turkey, travelling at night to avoid arrest. He was then smuggled across Europe:

“The traffickers placed me in a lorry, hidden between large boxes and crates. After a few days of travelling, the lorry stopped. The driver simply told us to get out of the lorry... I arrived in Wolverhampton on 12 October 1999.”



At the airport with my relatives



First impressions

Migrants arriving in Britain have often found it very different from their expectations. Caribbean people like Joshi Johnson who grew up with an idealised image were shocked by the reality:

“We thought Britain consisted of large white elegant houses, with long driveways. What I saw was the long rows of small houses, the constant smell of coal and furthermore the cold.”

Ruby Watson was one of many migrants forced to share overcrowded houses with other families:

“We lived in one bedroom, there were so many people in that house. There was no table in the living room, we had to prepare our food in the kitchen and eat in the bedroom.”

Poor living conditions have been particularly difficult for people who left comfortable homes in their own country. Fatima Qader lived in the suburbs of a city in Iraq:

“My family's house has some big rooms, a big kitchen and a big garden. At my house you can see the mountains... But in the UK I live in a small flat and I have a small kitchen, a small bedroom. I haven't any garden.”

Homesickness also made it hard for people to settle down. Kwok Hing Fung struggled with loneliness when he arrived from Hong Kong in 1975:

“I felt like a stone rested on me, it was very uncomfortable. I was single at that time and I missed my siblings and parents.”

When Patricia Sinzi Bamurangirwa moved to Britain she missed the friendliness of Rwanda:

“Don't expect that your neighbour will knock at your door to say good morning and don't do that to them because they might call the police if you knock at their doors.”





Lots of us used to do double shifts in hard manual jobs



I worked as a chef in the Chinese takeaway

Working life

Migrants arriving in Britain did various jobs in their home countries. Henry McLean was a farm worker in Jamaica:

“Before I came here I used to work in the sugarcane fields and cut the cane, they used to come and take the sugarcane to the cane factory to make sugar.”

Muna was one of many who trained for a profession:

“When I finished secondary school, I started nursing school in Mogadishu. Three years later I finished and worked in a general hospital. I took care of patients who had problems with their eyes, ears and noses.”

People with good qualifications have often had to take manual jobs. Kornelia Danek was a professional musician in Poland but worked in a factory in Stoke-on-Trent:

“I was sponging the plates, but to be honest I didn't like it, it was too heavy for me, my hands hurt and my wrists ached which is not good for a pianist.”

Racism often prevented people from getting suitable jobs. Even when Ruby Watson did find work she was unfairly treated:

“I started working nights at Burton Road Hospital in Dudley. The qualified white nurses were nasty to the black auxiliary workers. They constantly barked orders.”

After these early struggles many people worked hard to build successful careers and businesses in Britain. Jack Havrylak began as a miner after being demobbed from the forces:

“They were advertising jobs and the best paid ones were in the pit. I spent 27 years in the pit and after this I opened my own business selling ice cream and confectionery... I did very well and paid a lot of income tax.”



I worked nights as a nurse to help support my family



I like England with her castles and cathedrals



At the fair with my mates



With my classmates and teacher

Settling in

People coming to Britain have sometimes found themselves in a much more diverse society than the one they left behind. Jeyarathy arrived from Sri Lanka in 2000:

“I was surprised by the variety of different coloured people.”

Certain neighbourhoods have become home to migrants from many countries of origin. In Carmel Watson's part of Wolverhampton close ties grew up between people from different backgrounds:

“Whitmore Reans was a very safe area, the neighbours whether black, white, Indian or Irish looked after each other. This was a real community.”

Having good neighbours made a big difference to people who were trying to settle and build a new life. Maqsoom Begum was able to share her cultural traditions:

“The next door neighbour was a good lady, we had a good relationship and friendship. On special occasions or when we cooked curry we offered food to each other.”

Nellie Kuzina also had many positive experiences when she arrived from Russia:

“I was surprised by how people helped me and my son to adapt to life in England. I have made many friends in England.”

However, other migrants were made to feel unwelcome. Joshi Johnson experienced racism soon after his arrival in 1966:

“On my first visit to West Park we were not allowed to use the boat lake. The boats were for the white folks – I felt this place was no different from South Africa.”

There were many obstacles to community integration and particularly to mixed relationships. Jean Kowalik was an English girl who faced prejudice:

“I daren't tell my mother I was going out with a Pole, a foreigner, there was a stigma attached to it.”



There was a real community spirit in our neighbourhood



My children were born in Britain and feel that this is their home

Looking to the future

Many migrants who arrived in Britain decades ago saw it as a temporary move. They expected to go home with better prospects after two or three years. Hassan Fidow is a more recent migrant who also hopes to return:

“I am really homesick for my country and I ask my God before I die to let me enjoy this life... I ask my God to help all my people in Somalia end this difficult situation.”

Others are building a permanent life in Britain. After fleeing persecution in Iraq, Garib Mohammed does not intend to go back:

“For the first time I can see a future here. Futures where I start my own business, raise a family and learn a new language.”

Some migrants are seizing opportunities that were not available in their homelands. Mohammed was unable to go to school in rural Afghanistan but now has academic ambitions:

“Education is very important... Now I am going to college, in the future I hope I will go to university.”

The cultures of migrant communities have influenced many aspects of British life including fashion, food and music. As later generations are born in Britain their sense of identity is changing. Sarbjit Verdi arrived as a child in the 1960s but:

“The children have known nowhere else apart from Whitmore Reans. They tend to feel at home in England, especially the older one.”

It is not only the younger generation who now feel integrated into British society. Josephine Rudzik arrived from Poland over 60 years ago and speaks for many people who have moved here from all over the world when she says:

“I love England as my homeland.”



The shops in our neighbourhood now cater for many different communities



I left my country in 1981 but I still hope to live there again one day