

Muslims in Britain

A Brief History



Muslims in Britain

King Offa of Mercia (757 - 796)

Of all countries in the western world, Britain has always enjoyed a special relationship with Muslims. Initially, Muslims landed on these Isles as explorers and traders. By 772, Muslims of the Umayyad dynasty were ruling over Spain and parts of Europe as far as within sixty miles of Paris. Charlemagne and King Offa of Mercia (757-796) entered into diplomatic relations with the ruler Haroon Ar-Rashid. King Offa was a powerful Anglo-Saxon king who built the great Offa's Dyke stretching 120 miles from north to south dividing Wales from Mercia. He also minted the first gold coin in Britain. The coin has an inscription in Arabic of the declaration of the Islamic faith ("There is no god but Allah"). Scholars speculate as to the coin's purpose and theories include trade, diplomacy, a protest to the Pope and even acceptance of Islam.



Charlemagne with his ministers

The Ballycottin Cross (900)

The Ballycottin Cross, possibly an ecclesiastical artefact although peculiar in its content, was found at Ballycottin on the southern

coast of Ireland and is dated around the 9th century. This bronze four-armed cross is housed in the British Museum. Like Offa's coin it also bears an Arabic inscription. At the centre of the cross, set in a glass bead in Kufic Arabic script, is the phrase *Bismillah* ("In the name of Allah"). It is one of many artefacts found from this period showing a strong link with Muslim civilisation and is further evidence of Islam's early interaction with Britain.

Robert of St. Albans (1185)

History records that despite the hostilities between Christians and Muslims during the Crusades, there still existed a religious dialogue. The great Muslim leader Salahuddin Ayyubi during discourses with his Christian counterparts spoke to them of the beauties of Islam. The Knights Templars were known and criticized for their adherence and fondness of Muslim habits and customs. Salahuddin's moral character fascinated the crusaders who were so influenced by him that many did indeed accept Islam.



Seal of the Knights

Muslim compassion towards Christian captives resulted in thousands of voluntary conversions to Islam. Such is the case of an English knight known as Robert of St. Albans, a Knight Templar who travelled on a crusade to Jerusalem and then in 1185 embraced Islam. He later had the honour of marrying the great-granddaughter of Salahuddin.

King John (1167-1213)

King John was the younger brother of King Richard 'The Lion Heart'. Although John submitted his crown and country to Rome, it is presumed that this was a tactical move to invite support of the Church for John's fight with the land barons of England. After finding no clear friend in Pope Innocent III and as a result of many quarrels, John was finally excommunicated. Matthew Paris, a contemporary monk, gives details of emissaries sent by King John in 1213 to the North African *Amir* (Ruler) Mohammed An-Nasir. Arab chronicles imply several communications between King John and An-Nasir. The second emissary brought the King's offer of a strategic alliance, whereby King John would "voluntarily" give up to the Amir himself and his kingdom, and was prepared if need be to "abandon the Christian faith, which he considered false, and to adhere faithfully to the Islam of Mohammed". He also vowed his support to the Amir in the final assault to conquer the remainder of Spain from the King of Aragon. After much thought and contemplation, the Amir declined King John's offer of any alliance with Islam.

Travellers and traders

During the reign of Elizabeth I in the 16th century there were considerably more Englishmen living in North Africa than in all North American colonies - 5,000 English converts were resident in Algiers alone. British travellers in the East regularly brought back tales of their compatriots who had



'crossed over' or 'turned Turk' (an Elizabethan misnomer for conversion) and were now prospering in Ottoman service. By the end of the 17th century, trade with Turkey accounted for one quarter of all England's overseas commercial activity - the ambassador Sir Thomas Shirley warned that "conversation with infidels doeth much corrupte". In 1606, Benjamin Bishop who held the esteemed post of British Consul of Egypt, became a Muslim. He promptly disappeared from public records.

Dr Henry Stubbe (1632-1676)

Dr Henry Stubbe was the first European Christian to write favourably of Islam. His biographer Anthony Wood described him as "the most noted person of his age that these late times have produced." He was also a scholar, who had mastered Latin, Greek and Hebrew, and was fully conversant with the new critical scholarship on the Bible. Putting all these gifts together, he wrote a book entitled 'An Account of the Rise and Progress of Mahometanism, and a Vindication of him and his Religion from the Calumnies of the Christians'. The book was never published but at least six manuscripts were circulated in a more or less clandestine fashion. No fewer than three of them were preserved in the private library of the Revd John Disney, who at the beginning of the 19th century shocked the established Church by publicly converting to Unitarianism. Dr Stubbe died in 1676, after being accused of heresy and spending some time in prison.

British India

Formed in 1600, the British East India

Company wanted to cash in on the profitable spice trade of the East. But competition from the Dutch drove the company to India, which was ruled by the Mughals. British control of India, through trade, conquest and colonization, resulted in a gradual migration of many classes of Indians to Britain, including servants, sailors, students and civil servants. Many young British men went to India as employees of the company in search of wealth. They returned to Britain as a new class of rich men, the 'Nawabs', and brought their Indian servants with them.

Queen Victoria's favourite

Queen Victoria became Empress of India in 1877 and several Indian servants and their wives joined the royal household. Abdul Karim, a Muslim employed as a teacher, was the Queen's favourite. He later became her secretary. The Queen took lessons in Hindustani from him and encouraged ladies at court to do the same. Abdul Karim received the title of 'Companion of the Indian Empire'. All this attention given to an Indian servant horrified the court and, after Queen Victoria's death, Abdul Karim was sent back to India.



Queen Victoria had an affection for Abdul Karim

Lascars

Between 1830 and 1903 some forty thousand foreign seamen sailed with British war and merchant ships, most spending some time in British ports, either in transit or discharged.

They stayed with those of the same nationality and language in authorised boarding houses. Lascars, as they became known, often suffered under cruel officers and became distraught and diseased. Many did not brave the journey home and sought better and safer jobs on shore. Some worked in the booming dockyards or opened small shops while the new railways led others to industries in the North. Most were illiterate though and became street sweepers, beggars and peddlers in London dockland areas of Shadwell, Wapping and Poplar. Living conditions were deplorable - often eight to a room, with many dying of starvation and infection. It is likely that the first community prayer halls in Britain were established in this era.

Zawiyahs

By 1948 there were some 850 Muslims, mainly Arabs from Yemen, in Tyneside. Many married local women some of whom converted to Islam. With increasing stability and growing families the Yemenis tackled their religious needs, and collected contributions from the community to set up Zawiyahs (small mosques). World War II broke up this close-knit community as many Yemenis went to work in factories in Sheffield and Birmingham. In the 1950s many Muslims arrived from other countries with different traditions and the zawiyahs declined in importance and faded away.

Shaykh Abdullah Quilliam

In 1882 William Henry Quilliam of Liverpool visited Southern France on holiday and crossed over to Algeria and Morocco. There

he learned about Islam and in 1887 he became a Muslim. He returned to Liverpool in 1889 to spread Islam as Shaykh Abdullah Quilliam. His mother was a Methodist activist until 1893 when at the age of 63 she also converted. Local Muslims called her Khadijah ('Mother of the Faithful'). Quilliam set up a prayer and meeting room in Mount Vernon Street. The Sultan of Turkey conferred upon him the title *Shaykh-ul-Islam* of Britain. His son became the British Consul General in Turkey.



When the Sultan of Afghanistan sent him a gift of £2500, Quilliam used this to set up the Islamic Institute and Liverpool Mosque in Broughton Terrace, Liverpool. A hundred Muslims could pray there. The *khutbah* (sermon) was delivered in both Arabic and English. A printing press started publishing *The Crescent* magazine, and a weekly Debating and Literary Society attracted the general public, who were also invited to the Institute for prayers and sermons on a Sunday. There was singing from Quilliam's collection of hymns for English Muslims. These historic meetings led to a hundred and fifty locals embracing the Islamic faith by 1896!

Quilliam always faced opposition, arguing for, amongst other things, *muezzins* and the cessation of British interference in Sudan. As his success increased, the level of harassment worsened. Parts of the Church and media were quite antagonistic. He finally

left for the East in 1908, and his absence led to the decline of the Institute and its mosque.

Shah Jehan Mosque (1889)

In 1884 Dr Gottlieb Wilhelm Leitner, an Orientalist and traveller born in Budapest in 1840, left his post as Principal of Punjab University where he had been for 20 years, and came to England. As a linguist, his great ambition was to create an institute for Oriental learning and literature in the form of an Islamic University. In 1889 Professor Leitner built a mosque in Woking with money from Begum Shah Jahan, ruler of the Bhopal State, after whom the mosque was named. It is regarded as the first purpose-built mosque in Britain.



After his death in 1899, it was neglected somewhat until the arrival in 1912 of Khwaja Kamal-ud-Din, a scholar and barrister from what is now Pakistan. He came to Richmond in Surrey and started publishing the *Islamic Review*. In 1913 he repaired and revived the mosque and started Woking Muslim Mission, a body set up to support new Muslims. In December that year, a member of the House of Lords, the eleventh Baron Headley, announced that he was a Muslim. Lord Headley had worked in India as a civil engineer and had been learning about the Islamic faith since 1896. Lord Headley was not



Lord Headley

the first peer to do so however, because Lord Stanley of Alderley, an uncle of Bertrand Russell, had become a Muslim half a century earlier.

Migration and growth

The whole of Europe was occupied with the massive task of reconstruction after the Second World War, and there were severe labour shortages. The government positively encouraged immigration initially from Europe but then also from Ireland and the New Commonwealth. From the 1950's to the 1970's, there was a significant influx of Muslim immigrants. Most immigrants came with the intention of returning though eventually many did settle as well. Large communities developed in London, in the industrial towns of the Midlands like Wolverhampton and Coventry, and in the textile towns in Lancashire, Yorkshire, Strathclyde, Bradford and Glasgow. Their much-needed labour helped to rebuild British industries and keep services going.

In addition, Muslims have migrated for a variety of reasons from North Africa, the Middle East and the Far East. Some came for business or as students, whilst others were forced migrants due to famine and wars. Not all have settled but those families that did have resulted in a later generation of Muslims who today contribute to the rich mix of modern British society. Migration does not give us the whole picture however. Citizens of British decent have, historically as well in the present time, chosen to become Muslims - citizens of every age,

class and background. Some have done so at 80 years of age, others may be mothers from an English village; some are celebrities whilst others may be academics. Islam is after all no more and no less an eastern religion than Christianity.

There are no official figures for the numbers who have changed their faith or for the size of Britain's Muslim community, although Census 2001 was the first such official attempt. A guesstimate would be 2 million - making Muslims, at roughly 1 in every 30 Britons, the largest faith group outside Christianity. British Muslims today have entered every profession, making a full and positive contribution to the national economy. Datamonitor 2002 suggests there are 5000 Muslim millionaires in Britain, and the general elections saw 2 Muslim MPs take their seats.

Today's Muslims are part and parcel of British society, feeling totally British and totally Muslim. But British Muslim identity is not without its challenges and there remains inadequate legal protection for anti-religious behaviour targeted against Muslims, often the result of negative portrayals and a resultant mistrust of Muslims. Combating such Islamophobia remains a challenge, a challenge for us all.

Islamic Society of Britain

The Islamic Society of Britain is an established national organisation with local branches throughout the UK. It brings together Muslims of every background who see Britain as their society and home, a home that has been destined by God. **The Young Muslims UK** is its youth section and has long earned a reputation as a trusted, dynamic and pioneering organisation in its own right.

The Islamic Society of Britain wants to connect British society with God, building on all good that already exists. The Society wants to change the perception of Islam as something eastern or alien to British society, and seeks to challenge head-on misconceptions in European thought that have grown like weeds. A long road lies ahead and there are no shortcuts - Muslims must share the message of God and His Messenger in a structured manner that today's Britain can relate to and understand. But many hands make light work and we urge concerned Muslims to join in our work. For a membership form or information about our work contact your local branch or our Central Office.

Your local branch:

inspiring people to live islam