

WEST MIDLANDS REFUGEES

Malcolm Dick



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Above: The Wash House which opens onto the communal courtyard of the Birmingham Back to Backs.

Above right: A view of the courtyard.



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Above: Courtyard on washing day.

Left: Back to Backs, corner of Inge and Hurst streets, Birmingham.
www.nationaltrust.org.uk/birmingham-back-to-backs/



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Refugees are migrants who are forced to leave their homes because of persecution or war. This definition hides many personal stories, which describe experiences which those born in Britain find difficult to imagine. The first West Midlands refugees were Huguenots, escaping religious persecution in France because they were Protestants. The early Stourbridge glass industry owes a lot to these newcomers.

The first established refugee community was the Jews. By the late-eighteenth century, Birmingham had a synagogue and a Jewish burial ground and men with Jewish names appear as traders or industrialists in directories of the time. The local historian William Hutton described a visit to the synagogue in his *History of Birmingham*.

In the nineteenth century there were two Jewish communities divided by class. Poorer residents lived in the Hurst Street area with their own place of worship. Visitors to the National Trust's Back to Back Houses in Hurst Street can gain a glimpse into the life of one of these families. Wealthier Jews lived in Edgbaston, Handsworth and the Jewellery Quarter. They built Singers Hill Synagogue, now a grade II* listed building near the Mailbox. Some were jewellers and merchants and one, Jacob Jacobs, led a consortium which built the Great Western Arcade, Birmingham's fashionable shopping mall. We know less about Jewish women and children, but the records of the Hebrew Congregation in Birmingham Archives and Heritage document the experiences of local Jewry. By the late-nineteenth century, Coventry, Wolverhampton and Stoke-on-Trent had Jewish communities.

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War and persecution in the early twentieth century brought Belgians and Serbs during the First World War, Basque children in the Spanish Civil War, Jews escaping from Nazi repression, and Poles and Serbs at the end of the Second World War. Local Quakers and trade unions eased their settlement in Birmingham. The Belgians and Basques returned home, but many parts of the West Midlands region are now home to people of Serbian and Polish descent who settled after 1945.

Global conflicts in the late twentieth century led to all western countries accepting refugees escaping from conflict and discrimination. Some settled in the West Midlands, including East African Asians from Kenya and Uganda, Vietnamese boat people, Sudanese, Somalis and Ethiopians.

The break-up of Yugoslavia in the 1990s brought Bosnians and ethnic Albanians from Kosovo to Birmingham and the Black Country. Wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo led to refugees settling in local towns. There is also an Iranian presence, composed of escapees from political and religious intolerance in their homeland.

Many newcomers work in the fast-food industry, the care sector and as cleaners. Others have entered industry, local government, charitable work and the arts. For over two-hundred years, individual refugees have contributed to the economic, social and cultural life of the region in many different ways. ●

Further Reading

Malcolm Dick, *Celebrating Sanctuary: Birmingham and the Refugee Experience 1750-2002* (Refugee Action, 2002).

Malcolm Dick, 'Birmingham Anglo-Jewry c.1780 - c.1880: Origins, Experiences and Representations', *Midland History* 2011, 36:195-214.

Zoe Josephs, *Survivors: Jewish Refugees in Birmingham, 1933-1945* (Meridian, 1988).