



## Black history and culture at Blackfen School for Girls



## Contents

<b>What do we mean by the term 'Black'?</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>Mixed race and heritage: Celebrating both sides</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>What is racism?</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>What are microaggressions?</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>What is colourism?</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>The death of BAME and other terms</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>What is Black History Month?</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>Why is Black History Month necessary?</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>What about other non-white histories?</b> .....	<b>7</b>
<b>Why isn't there a 'white history' month?</b> .....	<b>7</b>
<b>What are some key themes in Black British History?</b> .....	<b>7</b>
<b>What are the challenges Black people and communities face in the U.K.?</b> .....	<b>10</b>
<b>How can I be an ally and positively support black and mixed heritage people around me?</b> .....	<b>11</b>
<b>What can I do if I have any questions or would like further guidance?</b> .....	<b>12</b>

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Websites and books used are cited via hyperlink (blue linked words)

## What do we mean by the term 'Black'?

At its broadest term, 'Black' refers to any people with African ancestry and heritage.

This covers a wide range of people. In addition to people from Africa, this also includes people from the Caribbean, the Antipodes, and the Americas whose ancestors were African and people with African heritage can be found across the globe. It can relate to people who have recently migrated from Africa, or to people whose families have lived outside of Africa for generations.

'Black' also refers to bi-racial people who have African ancestry alongside ancestry from other parts of the world. These people may refer to themselves as being of 'dual heritage' or 'mixed heritage'.

You will note that in this guide 'Black' is capitalised, while 'white' is not. This is a conscious decision on two grounds.

- Black is capitalised in recognition of its status in discussions around identity. Terms denoting identity are capitalised in the English language: African, Asian, Caribbean, Native American, Aborigine, Polynesian. While Black people come from a range of cultural backgrounds, these are connected by common historical and cultural threads. Therefore, it is appropriate to describe 'Black' as a diverse but coherent identity worthy of capitalisation.
- The term white has not been capitalised as it is less coherent as an identity. While there are some common threads between white cultures, these hold less relevance as a measure of shared identity. Whereas, much of the Black experience, both today and in history, has been formed in relation to white colonialism and racism. For that reason, Black with a capital 'B' is a symbol of reclaiming Black power and identity.

## Mixed race and heritage: celebrating both sides

Mixed Heritage is defined as an upbringing in which one's parents are of different ethnic or religious backgrounds. Mixed race is defined as deriving from, or made up of, two or more races.



To be of mixed heritage or race does not just mean somebody who is white and Black; mixed heritage can be a mix of any ethnicity, including different ethnicities within the Black community. In the past, a common misunderstanding and isolation among those who are from mixed heritage or mixed-race backgrounds is that they feel 'forced' to choose between the different aspects of their two races or cultures. It is important to understand that people of mixed heritage can celebrate, embrace, and be proud of all aspects of their identity.

Within Black History Month, it is important to recognise that anybody who has a personal connection, through their heritage, to Black culture and history has a voice and may be allowed to celebrate and educate others about their cultural heritage and background, should they wish to.

## What is racism?

Whilst this might seem a straightforward question with a straightforward answer, the reality of racism is very complex. Racism is a system of discrimination based on the colour of someone's skin.

Racial discrimination is when someone, indeed anyone, is treated in a lesser way due to the colour of their skin. Racism is when this discrimination is consistently targeted, consciously or unconsciously, against groups of people based on their 'race'. This takes the form of actions by individuals, communities, and institutions that dehumanise and hinder people on the basis of their 'race' and can lead to direct abuse and violence.

Racism is not only direct abuse, it is far more insidious than that. It can take the form of prejudiced assumptions about people based on their race, and actions that disadvantage and marginalise them, making them feel unwanted or unvalued. Racism can be directed towards different races in different ways: anti-Black racism remains prevalent within British society and anti-Black prejudices are not limited only to white communities.

Following the murder of George Floyd in 2020, American comedian and actor [D.L. Hughley](#) posted the following to his Facebook account, highlighting the different ways in which anti-Black racism manifests itself in society and entertainment.

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*They want our rhythm, but not our blues... from here on out, it's a package deal! **#TeamDL #Repost** @iamrubenpaul with @make\_repost*

*. . .*

*It's all good when listening to our music, you love our singing and dancing, using our slang, our fashion, our swag, watching us play sports, making you laugh, but when you see things that you know in your heart, are wrong, the majority of non-blacks stay silent. Just sit back and watch like it's a horror movie.*

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## What are microaggressions?

These attitudes can also give rise to so-called '[microaggressions](#)'. While for some this is a controversial term, it is a straightforward concept: that people speak and act differently towards people from other races, even if they don't mean to be offensive. This can include things like:

- Giving nicknames/shortening names rather than learning to pronounce them correctly
- Making assumptions about the food people eat
- Making assumptions about people's abilities, social lives, activities
- Asking insensitive questions about heritage/family background that you wouldn't ask a person of the same ethnicity

This does not mean that these topics are off limits or should not be discussed. Rather, we must always be mindful of the way in which we discuss them and consider, "would I make this assumption/ask that question of someone from the same ethnic group as me?"

## What is colourism?



Colourism is a form of prejudice and discrimination found both towards and within Black communities. It consists of lighter skinned Black people being viewed more positively than darker skinned Black people. It has been recorded since the days of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, with lighter-skinned enslaved people being given preferential treatment/lighter duties.

In the contemporary world it takes many forms:

- Lighter skinned Black people being given preferential treatment (some African Americans wonder if Obama would have been elected had he had darker skin)
- 'Skin lightening' products which bleach skin being marketed at Black and non-white people
- Filters and Photoshop being used to lighten skin, at first on celebrities but increasingly on social media

Here is a [link](#) to a short film by the BBC on colourism.

## The death of BAME and other terms

In the U.K. the acronym BAME (Black Asian Minority Ethnic) has been used for some time as a collective term for non-white people. In recent years, BAME has come under fire from some Black groups for being reductionist. That is to say, that it reduces the significance of those groups within the global demographic, suggesting that the global population is majority white. In fact, around [80-85% of the global population is either Black](#), Brown, Asian, dual-heritage, indigenous to the global south, or have been racialised as 'ethnic minorities'.

The acronym GEM or Global Ethnic Majority is now widely being used as a positive reframing of the previously minoritised Black community. Whilst GEM isn't perfect, it is still grouping together people of different races and ethnicities with a variety of racialised experiences as one homogenous group, it is a step in the right direction.

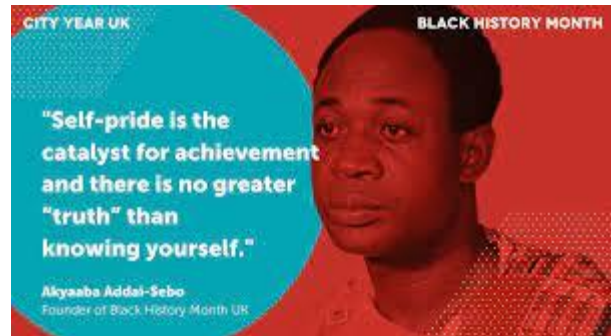
GEM, allows those in Britain who are not part of the 86% white-British majority to collectivise, support one-another, and feel supported. As Marcus Ryder MBE said in 2021 when discussing his book [Access All Areas](#), co-written with Sir Lenny Henry, "We have to stop thinking of ourselves as minorities – we are the majority."

## What is Black History Month?

Black History Month is a nationwide celebration of the Black communities in the U.K., their histories and contributions to our society. Black History Month is an exciting opportunity for Black and non-Black people to discover, learn, and discuss the multitudes of Black history and experiences in the U.K. and around the world.

It is important to note that Black history is not separate from or unconnected to British history or global history. Black History Month gives everybody the chance to focus on history as seen and experienced by Black people and their contributions to Britain and the World.

Black History Month began in the U.S.A. in the late 1960s, arising out of the civil rights movement and previous attempts to raise awareness of the African-American history that had been largely ignored by the national education system. Black History Month was established in the U.K. by the Ghanaian activist Akyaaba Addai-Sebo in 1987 and has run every year since. Each year there is a distinct focus, the focus for Black History Month 2023 is: '[Saluting Our Sisters](#)'. The UK BHM website states:



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*The theme of '**Saluting our Sisters**' highlights the crucial role that black women have played in shaping history, inspiring change, and building communities. This year's celebration will showcase pioneering black women who have made remarkable contributions to literature, music, fashion, sport, business, politics, academia, social and health care, and more.*

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## Why is Black History Month necessary?

It is important to ensure that Black history and Black experiences are taught, discussed, and highlighted throughout the year. However, Black History Month is an opportunity to specifically and consistently focus on the events and issues that shape Black people's lives, experiences, and histories.

In the past Black history has been omitted from school curriculums and dismissed by institutions and the media in a white dominated society. When it has been raised, it has been done so in a tokenistic fashion, as though Black people and their communities are separate from wider society and unconnected to white history.

While there has been progress in recent years, this has focused on the contributions of 'great Black individuals in history', Nelson Mandela, Mary Seacole, Olaudah Equiano etc. The contributions of Black communities to the life of the U.K. and around the world has been largely ignored. The complexities of Black history have been reduced to a series of easily recitable, individual stories.

Black History Month is an opportunity to consistently focus on Black history on its own terms, highlighting its extent and complexity. It gives Black people and their communities representation and



invites everyone to consider the contributions of Black people, and out shared connections within society.

### **What about other non-white histories?**

Black History Month focuses specifically on the history and issues of Black and mixed-heritage people of African ancestry. This is not intended to exclude or diminish the history of other non-white groups within Britain; rather it is because Black History Month is intended to give representation to Black people in a society where anti-Black racism is still present. We will be celebrating a wider range of non-white and non-British histories in the summer term.

### **Why isn't there a 'white history' month?**

The history of Britain and its people is assumed to be white: although Black people have lived in what is now Great Britain for approximately two-thousand years. As white people have been the dominant group in Britain throughout history, much of British history appears to be white, viewed and recorded as a reflection of that group. While all history is complex, and there have been groups who have been marginalised and overlooked within white British history, white British people as a whole have not seen their history consistently dismissed or overlooked. Black History Month is intended to raise the profile and show the value of histories that have been ignored; white history has long been front and centre of British history and, therefore, does not need the same level of support and attention drawn to it.

### **What are some key themes in Black British History?**

In the same way that there is not one simple story of 'white history' or 'European history', there is no simple story of 'Black history' or 'African history'.

It would do the depth, breadth, and complexity of Black history a disservice to limit it to a few examples here, though there are links here and in the reading list for specific events or topics. Therefore, below are some brief summaries of some of the themes around which Black (British) history can be understood.

#### **Presence**

The common misconception is that Black people were not present in Britain until WWII when servicemen from the empire were stationed here, or until the SS Empire Windrush docked at Tilbury in 1948. This is inaccurate, as the earliest documented proof that we have of Black people being resident on this island is during the Roman occupation. In fact, [Roman York](#) (Eboracum) was more ethnically diverse than 21<sup>st</sup> Century York.

While large-scale Black communities have grown since the Windrush era, records of Black people living in Britain have been found throughout history. For example:

- John Blanke – Trumpeter in Henry VIII's court
- Reasonable Blackman<sup>1</sup> – Fine silk weaver in Tudor London
- Francis Barber – Companion of Samuel Johnston
- Pablo Fanque – Victorian celebrity, circus entertainer and owner



The individuals demonstrate the enduring presence of Black people in Britain prior to the increasing migration in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

Immediately following WWII, Britain actively recruited Black people from the British colonies in the Caribbean to come to the 'mother country' and work, helping to rebuild the war-ravaged country. The British government intended for this to be a temporary arrangement, expecting limited numbers of migrants who would soon return to the Caribbean. However, many of these migrants made Britain their permanent home, establishing communities in which they planned to raise families and put down roots. There has also been growing migration of Black people from Africa to Britain as a result of decolonisation and economic opportunity in the U.K.

### Discrimination

While Black history discussion must be an opportunity to celebrate positive stories of Black history and give empowering representation, it cannot be ignored that discrimination and racism are significant themes in Black history.

However, discrimination and racism were not the sole basis of interactions between the white and Black communities throughout Britain's past. In her recent book [Black Tudors](#), Historian Miranda Kaufmann has shown that it is unlikely that the Black inhabitants of Tudor Britain experienced the level of racial discrimination present in later eras. Indeed, there were Black people in the royal court and Black people being called as witnesses in legal proceedings (this required a certain level of good social standing). Therefore, Tudor England did not have the systemic racism that becomes so prevalent in later centuries.

The trans-Atlantic slave trade was a significant factor in the development of racist attitudes towards Black people. These racist attitudes persisted into the twentieth century, with Windrush migrants and their descendants facing continued racial discrimination across many areas of life, such as housing and employment (the colour bar meant that Black people could be denied jobs based upon their race) and attacks from openly hostile politicians. While there has been some improvement over the past seventy years, challenges remain, as seen in reactions to the murder of Stephen Lawrence and then George Floyd, the Windrush scandal, Teresa May's hostile environment, and the growth of the Black Lives Matter campaign in the U.K.

### Resistance

Black people have a long history of refusing to remain passive in the face of the injustices perpetrated against them, actively resisting against mistreatment.

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<sup>1</sup> This name is likely a nickname based on his 'reasonable' prices. His surname, whilst also a common English surname, may also be a nickname/identifier based upon his ethnicity.



While some African kingdoms (most notably [Dahomey](#)) worked with the slave traders, others like [Queen Nzinga](#) of Ndongo and Matamba fought wars against the traders. Enslaved Africans used their [hair](#) to communicate maps for escaping, while on the island of Haiti there was a successful [rebellion](#) that led to the French abandoning the island and the formerly enslaved inhabitants taking governorship of it for themselves (for which the island was isolated, and Haiti remains one of the poorest states in the world).

The successful campaign for the abolition of slavery in the British Empire (Britain was the biggest enslaver in the trans-Atlantic trade) was in part led by formerly enslaved Africans, drawing heavily on the work of Black people who told their stories and organising networks of free Africans and their supporters. [Olaudah Equiano](#), [Ignatius Sancho](#) and [Mary Prince](#) wrote unflinching accounts of their enslavement and treatment which helped reshape public perceptions of Africans and the kidnapping and trade in human beings.

When it comes to discrimination within Britain; Black people and the Black community have played a key role in fighting back.

- In 1958 the [Notting Hill riots](#), were retaliation against white supremacist violence.
- In 1963 Black people and their white allies in [Bristol boycotted](#) the bus network in opposition to anti-Black hiring practices, this resulted in Black people being allowed to work on the buses and increased pressure on the government that led to the introduction of the Race Relations Act 1965 that outlawed discrimination based on race.
- Inspired by the civil rights movement in the USA, a number of Black anti-racist groups were established including the [British Black Panthers](#). These groups used [protest, education](#) and squatting to highlight the discrimination and challenges experienced by Black people.
- Frank Critchlow, Altheia Jones-LeCointe, and Darcus Howe united the Black community of Notting Hill in the 1970s in the wake of continued police harassment against the [Mangrove](#) restaurant and its patrons. Exposing police corruption and the wrongful arrests of the Mangrove 9.
- In the past 30 years the Black community has continued to organise against discrimination, like drawing attention to police failings in the murder of Stephen Lawrence, continuing discrimination over Afro hair and anti-Black attitudes in society.

Black people have made significant contributions to British society, the economy, and culture even before the increased migration of Black people in the past 70 years.

In the First and Second World Wars large numbers of Black people fought and died for Britain, including Walter Tull, the first Black officer in the British Army.

The British economy is as large as it is today thanks to Black people. The economic “contribution” of Black people to Britain dates back to the enslavement of Africans, where not having to pay the enslaved people led to large profits which could be reinvested back into Britain. Port cities like Bristol, Liverpool and Glasgow owe much of their development to the kidnapped and enslaved Africans who never stepped foot in them. The abolition of the slave trade saw the traders and plantation owners (and not the enslaved) given compensation for their “loss”, many of whom invested this money back into the burgeoning Industrial Revolution.

More positively, Black people have migrated to the U.K. since the Second World War and provided essential work that has made positive impacts on the U.K., not least in the NHS where [7% of the workforce](#) is Black (compared to 3.5% of the general working population).

Black people have also made significant contributions to the U.K.'s cultural and political life. The 1987 election saw the [first Black M.P.s](#) (Bernie Grant, Diane Abbott and Paul Boateng)



elected since the increased migration of Black people after the Second World War. However, Black and mixed heritage people have a long history of serving the community in politics. Black celebrities also enrich Britain's cultural scene, and the profile of Black celebrities has increased in recent years with [Michaela Coel](#) recently winning an Emmy and footballer [Marcus Rashford](#) campaigning for better conditions and food for young Britons.

### What are the challenges Black people and communities face in the U.K.?

The information below is taken from an article in the [New Statesman](#), which is behind a paywall:

- At 4-5 years old, Black children meet expected development goals at similar rates to their white classmates.
- Even at ages 7-11, the same share (64 percent) of both Black and white children meet the expected standard in reading, writing and maths.
- By the time they reach their GCSE exams, however, fewer than two out of five Black children (39 percent) receive a strong pass — grade 5 or above — in English and maths, compared with 43 percent of white children and half of Asian children. The racial “grade gap” gets progressively wider from here.
- Only 5.5 percent of Black students achieved three As or better at A level in 2019, compared with 11 percent of white students and 25.7 percent of Asian students.
- For those that progress to university, 57 percent of Black students graduate with first and upper second-class honours compared to 77 percent of white students.
- Worse educational outcomes is one obvious reason why Black adults are less likely to end up in well paid, influential jobs.
- Just 5.5 percent of Black employees work as directors, managers or senior officials, less than half the rate of white people (12.2 percent).
- The Resolution Foundation estimated the pay gap between white and *BAME* [sic] employees to amount to around £3.2bn per year.
- As with the gender pay gap, this is then reflected in retirement. Black pensioners have an average gross income of £425 per week, compared with white pensioners' weekly £554.
- Black unemployment remains more than twice as high as unemployment among white Britons, which stood at four percent in 2018.
- Most visibly, just under a third (32.4 percent) of Black people in England owned their own home in 2018- 2019, compared with two thirds (66 percent) of white people and Black people are also more likely to live in overcrowded houses and properties with damp problems — which leads us on to health inequality.

## How can I be an ally and positively support black and mixed heritage people around me?

In addition to being members of staff at a school we are also people in a community and there are specific things we can all do to support Black people, not only at school but in our society. As ever, the most important thing is to treat everyone with respect:

- Listen. If a Black person is talking to you about their experiences or concerns avoid giving the impression of not being interested or asking probing/challenging questions.
- Take Black people's concerns seriously. No matter how confident people can appear, many Black people experience times where they feel less accepted or vulnerable. If a Black person opens up to you about this then take it seriously and offer them support as necessary.
- Be clear in your support for Black equality and anti-racism. Encourage supportive discussion of Black issues and challenge prejudice wherever you encounter it.
- Avoid assumptions. Avoid assuming a Black person's background, beliefs or interests.
- Accept we all make mistakes, but learn from it. Everyone says the wrong thing from time to time. What matters is what we do next: if someone corrects you, listen and take it onboard. Continuing to say the wrong thing simply shows you do not respect that person/group.

In summary:

### Do:

- ✓ Understand that structures, ideas and ways of doing things have not been as accessible to Black people, and this has to change.
- ✓ Educate yourself on the experience of others and seek to understand how they may have experienced things differently to you.
- ✓ Listen to Black people when they talk about their experiences and what affects them.
- ✓ Take a genuine interest in the cultural and historical heritage of others, while doing so in a way that avoids making them feel uncomfortable or interrogated. For example, asking 'what's your ideal meal?' or 'what would be served at an event like that?' is more inclusive than 'what do you eat?'
- ✓ Speak up for Black people even if there are none the room; don't let ignorant or insensitive comments go unchallenged.

### Don't:

- × Become 'colour blind'. Saying things like 'I don't see colour just people', while often meant with the best of intentions, can make Black people feel like their different experiences are erased or not seen as meaningful.
- × Dismiss the concerns someone might have about how they are treated or try and explain them away.
- × Make assumptions about someone based on their ethnicity or race. This can include the foods you think they might eat, their opinions on issues or their leisure activities.
- × Think challenging inequality or discrimination is someone else's job. It is everyone's responsibility.

### What can I do if I have any questions or would like further guidance?

Check out the further reading section below and feel free to get in touch with Danielle Dunsdon at [ddu@blackfen.bexley.sch.uk](mailto:ddu@blackfen.bexley.sch.uk)

#### FURTHER READING FOR STAFF

[David Olusoga](#) has produced several books on Black British History, as well as a documentary series

Miranda Kaufmann tells the stories of Black Tudors

[Otegha Uwagba](#) gives an unflinching account of being Black in Britain

[Robin Diangelo](#) has written a book that addresses the reactive defensiveness of some white people when discussing issues of race.

Steve McQueen has produced '[Small Axe](#)', a series of episodes that tell the story of Black resistance movements in the UK

Channel 4 has a showcase of Black talent, as well as a range of programmes focusing on Britain's Black Community

The BBC has a range of Black History Month resources

The Black History Month UK website has an array of stories, accounts and information