

# **HIDDEN HISTORIES & HIDDEN FIGURES**

**BY AKIRA HOLLAND**

When it comes to Black history, unfortunately, an overwhelming amount of prominent and powerful Black figures who have changed the course of history, have been overshadowed and hidden. There's a lot missing from the average history book and a lot to catch up on. With so much information now readily available, it can be difficult to know where to begin.

As part of Black History Month 2020, in collaboration with Major Players, I have put together some little-known snippets of Black history that you may not be aware of. It's incredibly important that we recognise and celebrate the extraordinary stories of influential Black people throughout the ages.



## **BLACK HISTORY DID NOT BEGIN WITH SLAVERY**



The narrative of Black people, as taught by most British schools and curriculum's, begins with slavery, but this isn't where the story begins. It starts in Africa; a vast and diverse continent with long, complex histories and today comprises of 54 countries.

But how much do we know about Africa before slavery? Below we flashback to a few important moments in history:

## MANSA MUSA

[Mansa Musa of The Mali Empire](#) is believed to have been the richest person in the world, ever. “Contemporary accounts of Musa’s wealth are so breathless that it’s almost impossible to get a sense of just how wealthy and powerful he truly was,” Rudolph Butch Ware, associate professor of history at the University of California, told the BBC.

## THE MALI EMPIRE & TIMBUKTU

Many may not know that this was a cultural, academic and economic hub for centuries. [The Mali Empire](#), once a large region in West Africa, was one of the world’s most powerful in the 14th century.

## THE KINGDOM OF BENIN

The [Kingdom of Benin](#) began in the 900s when the Edo people settled in the rainforests of West Africa. By the 1400s they had created a wealthy kingdom with a powerful ruler, known as the Oba. The Oba’s lived in beautiful palaces decorated with shining brass.

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# INFLUENTIAL HIDDEN BLACK & HERITAGE FIGURES

In the words of historian Andrew Hann “History tends to be written by the powerful... it tends to be written by the people in charge. If you look at the archival history, which is the history that most people know of, it’s predominantly male, it’s predominantly white, it’s predominantly middle or ruling class, and it focuses very much on formal relationships to do with title and entitlement to land and that sort of thing. You don’t tend to get minorities or transient populations in recorded histories”

Hann perfect explains why the list of people below have had their true race hidden from the limelight and have sometimes been hidden all together.

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### JOHN RICHARD ARCHER - POLITICIAN

Elected Mayor of Battersea in 1913, John was a British Politician and political activist. Archer was not only one of the first Black mayors in London but he was also a founding member of the Labour Party.

Discover more about [John Richard Archer and his story here](#).



### LILIAN BADER - MILITARY PERSONNEL

Lilian was one of the first Black women to join the British armed forces, although initially was forced to leave the Navy, Army and Air Force Institutes (NAAFI), because of her race. In 2018, The Voice Newspaper, celebrated Lilian as a key contributor to the development of Britain.

Find out more about [Lilian Bader and her story here](#).

## **UNA MARSON - BROADCASTER & ACTIVIST**

Not only was Marson the first Black female to be hired as a broadcaster at the BBC, but she was a Jamaican feminist, activist and writer; producing poems, plays and radio programmes.

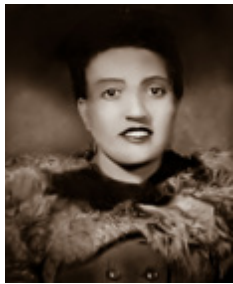
Read more about [Una Marson and her story here](#).



## **SEPTIMIUS SEVERUS - ROMAN EMPEROR**

Septimius Severus was the first African Roman emperor, fighting wars from Scotland to Syria in search for imperial stability. The Roman Empire reached it's greatest extent under his reign - over 5 million square km.

Explore [Septimius Severus' story here](#).



## **HENRIETTA LACK - MOTHER**

Henrietta was diagnosed with cancer aged 31 and some of her cells, nicknamed 'HeLa' cells were taken without her consent. Tragically, Henrietta passed away aged 31, but her cells still play a part in the world's most important medical advances today.

Learn about [Henrietta Lack and her story here](#).

## **ALEXANDRE DUMAS - AUTHOR**

Dumas' most popular works, The Count of Monte Cristo and The Three Musketeers, have engrossed readers and actors for years. Yet many forget and have often erased his racial origins.

Find out more about [Alexandre Dumas and his story here](#).



## **CLAUDETTE COLVIN - ACTIVIST & NURSE**

In March 1955, nine months before Rosa Parks defied segregation laws by refusing to give up her seat to a white passenger on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama, 15 year old Claudette Colvin did exactly the same thing.

Learn more about [Claudette Colvin and her story here](#).

## **CATHAY WILLIAMS - MILITARY PERSONNEL**

The first African-American female soldier who enlisted in the US Army. Cathay enlisted under the pseudonym William Cathay, posing as a man.

Discover more about [Cathay Willams and her story here](#).



# DID YOU KNOW: BLACK HISTORY IN BRITAIN



It's commonly misunderstood that Black people arrived in Britain through the Windrush migration. However, all throughout history, there have been Black and Brown individuals and societies living, working and travelling through Britain.

Recent discoveries show that a Black presence in the British Isles goes back to at least the 3rd Century, with figures such as the Ivory Bangle Lady and the Beachy Head Woman. Black figures have always and continue to play significant roles in British history.

## THE FIRST BLACK BRITONS

Black people have lived in Britain for centuries - Their circumstances varying significantly. The [Ivory Bangle Lady](#) showed that wealthy Black people were living in England as early as the 4th Century, however, later years show a large number of Black Britons were [enslaved and exploited](#).

## THE CARIBBEAN MIGRATION

When we talk about Caribbean migration into England we often think about the [Windrush generation](#), who arrived in Britain between 1948 and 1971. But Black people were actually invited over from Jamaica to [fight in World War One](#).

## BLACK LONDONERS BEFORE 1948

It is believed that the [Black population in London](#) had reached up to 20,000 by the 18th Century.

Many were either waged or enslaved servants, but there were also remarkable works of prose, poetry and music written by Black Britons.

## THE BRISTOL BUS BOYCOTT

After WW2 Caribbean and African people were invited over to help rebuild the country, working NHS and public transport jobs. Bristol's bus company's refusal to hire Black and Asian people led to the [boycott of buses across the city](#).

## EDUCATION IS KEY

Until recent conversations, it was often said that racism was not a problem in the United Kingdom, a misunderstanding that has affected Black lives in Britain for too long. These views likely stem from gaps in available information and the education system. Ideally, schools would have equipped us with a more comprehensive view of history, and unfortunately, this doesn't seem to be the case for most. "If you're omitting different histories and narratives, you're saying that these people aren't part of this country, this nation, this heritage - or they're not important enough to be taught as common knowledge," says Melody Triumph, policy specialist at The Black Curriculum. These hidden figures are important and the information is out there, we just need to look a little harder.