Urban Environments: Patterns of Migration - Spitalfields

Version 1
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This is a resource pack for the Historic Environment study that forms part of the OCR GCSE History A unit on Migration, for students taking the examination from 2020 onwards.

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Introduction for students

The first thing to know about Spitalfields is that it was outside the walls. The Romans built a defensive wall round London that lasted until the sixteenth century, and Spitalfields is just outside the north eastern edge, beyond the Bishop's Gate into the City. The second thing to know is that it is close to the river Thames and the docks which were always – until international air travel - the point of entry to London for people coming to start a new life.

It was a place for those who didn't quite fit, who broke the rules or were outside the law, whose business was seen as edgy or dirty, who ended up there because they couldn't afford anywhere else, who arrived from somewhere else.

This is their story.

At first sight it may seem a lot to take in, but that is because we have included lots of contemporary sources so that you can experience the past through the voices of the people who walked the streets, traded from the market stalls and worked in the tenements till the light was too dim to see. Our advice: as you come to each chapter, read its story first. Then when you know what happened, look carefully at the sources and think about them. What was this person saying and why? What does it tell you about their world and their place in it? How does it affect your understanding? Dig deeper.

There are lots of dates but you don't have to learn them all: they are there so that you understand the order in which things happened, the chronology, so that things make sense. The few dates it is useful to know are listed at the end of each chapter.

What you do need to know is the big stories: what happened, how and why:

- How Spitalfields was at the cutting edge of style and fashion thanks to French refugees.
- How conflict between poor and rich became violent as the streets were put under military rule, with Irish workers at the centre of a movement for better conditions.
- How Spitalfields became one of the poorest, dirtiest, most unhealthy and crime-ridden areas of any city in the world.
- How Jews from Eastern Europe transformed the area, fought to defend it, made it their own and then moved on.
- How Bengalis transformed the area again, fought to defend it again, made it their own again, and stayed, joined by Somalis among others.

As you read, think about these four questions from the specification:

1. When did immigrants arrive, why and from where?
2. How were they received by the settled population?
3. What were the key events in the migration history of Spitalfields?
4. What was the impact of migration on Spitalfields?

Are the answers to these questions similar or different in the cases of Huguenots, Irish, Jews, Somalis and Bengalis?

At the end of this pack there is a guided tour through Spitalfields. If you don't get the chance to make an actual visit, use Streetview to explore the streets and find the places mentioned. This will help you capture the place and its history in your mind.

Note: for Chapter 6 you will need the app Zangwill's Spitalfields. You can download it free via your app store or access it online at zangwillspitalfields.org.uk
1. The hospital in the fields

Some of the earliest migration stories in Spitalfields are about women.

In 1999 workers excavating on the site of the old Spitalfields Market uncovered over a hundred graves including a lead coffin beautifully decorated with scallop shells. Inside was the skeleton of a woman in her twenties who died in around 350 AD. We know from the shape of her teeth that she was born in Rome. She probably followed a non-Christian religion: perhaps she worshipped at the Temple of Mithras, following a cult that had started in Persia and spread all over the Roman Empire. By the time this woman arrived in London the temple had been rededicated to Bacchus, the god of wine: scallops were his symbol. This young, wealthy Roman woman was one of the earliest immigrants to end up in Spitalfields, even if it was only in death.

The area we call Spitalfields was outside the Roman walls to the north east of the City, just to the east of Ermine Street, the major Roman highway north to Lincoln and York. The road is now Bishopsgate and the A10. The Romans buried their dead outside the city walls and their northern cemetery was here.

In the Middle Ages this was where women giving birth were cared for by ‘lay sisters’ (similar to nuns) in their Catholic priory, founded in 1197. The sisters belonged to an Augustinian order that had come to England with William the Conqueror and had strong links with France. Some of these sisters may well have been French speakers. The full name of their priory was the New Hospital of St Mary without Bishopsgate, or St Mary Spital. So ‘Spitalfields’ means ‘the hospital in the fields’. Meanwhile the open fields near the priory became an artillery ground where people practised combat skills such as archery, swordplay and later firearms.

Once outside the walls you were no longer controlled by the City authorities, so it became a place where outcasts, criminals and poorer people gathered. By the sixteenth century Spitalfields was a place of refuge for rebels and people who did not quite fit social norms. There were greater freedoms beyond the control of the City. Nearby in Shoreditch was London’s first purpose-built theatre since Roman times: stage entertainment was not allowed inside the City walls.

Further south, below the walls around Houndsditch was an area of often illicit street traders dealing in old clothes and other items, as well as ‘noxious trades’ such as meat curing and tanning.

Some foreign-born people, prevented from living inside the walls, settled here. There was hostility: the violent anti-foreigner riots of ‘Evil May Day’ in 1517 were sparked off by a sermon against ‘strangers’ preached at St Mary Spital.

After the Protestant Reformation (when the priory was destroyed) life was not easy for Catholics and many chose to live outside the walls in the houses and gardens among the remains of the old priory. They included foreign ambassadors from Catholic France and the Spanish Netherlands. Father Henry Garnet, a Jesuit priest who was eventually beheaded for his part in the 1605 Gunpowder Plot, lived here for several years in a ‘safe house’. He arranged for the arrival of Doña Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza, a Spanish Catholic activist and poet with an extraordinary story. Born into a rich family with royal connections, Luisa rejected wealth and power and dedicated herself to religion and the needs of women, especially the poorest. She arrived from Spain in 1605, with a priest disguised as her servant, to support persecuted Catholics. When she got here she set about visiting priests in prison,
collecting holy relics and converting people – especially prostitutes - to the Catholic faith. She was ready to die for her faith. Here is what she wrote about her mission:

And every hour that passed seemed to me a year; and I was filled with a great wish not to lose what was in my hands to achieve that which I believed was rightly in my power, so I could in turn give it all to our Lord and accomplish what I wished and do what I could to help the English Mission.¹

This underground work was really dangerous. In 1611 she rented Brick House on Spital Yard where her next door neighbour was the Venetian ambassador. Here she set up an illegal religious community of five women she called the ‘Society of the Sovereign Virgin’. They grew their own food and the house had tight security features including double doors, grilles and a hidden chapel.

Doña Luisa got away with things for years, maybe protected by the Spanish ambassador, but in 1613 her house was raided by over sixty soldiers with back-up troops on the orders of King James I and the Archbishop of Canterbury. They climbed the walls with ladders and broke down the doors (slowly, due to her defences). Two of her women died and Doña Luisa was arrested and imprisoned. Released on condition that she left England, she refused and was imprisoned again. In December that year she died and, after a funeral service in the Spanish Ambassador’s house, her body was sent in a lead coffin inside a wooden casket to Spain where arguments between different factions meant she was never buried. The casket remains to this day in a Madrid convent, still unburied.

While Catholics were often persecuted, life appears to have been far easier for the small but growing number of African residents. One in every fifteen people recorded in the parish registers of St Botolph’s Church at Aldgate between 1538 and 1603 was described as ‘blackamoore’. One of these was Mary Fillis, a basket maker whose father had come from what is now Morocco. After living in London for several years Mary, probably born a Muslim, asked in 1597 to be baptised in the Church of England. In

¹ Translated by Anne J Cruz in Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza, The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe (Toronto 2014), quoted in https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Luisa_Carvajal_y_Mendoza
Tudor England a darker skin did not seem to be a barrier to acceptance. Religion, not ethnicity, was what decided whether you were treated equally or not.

One industry grew up outside the north eastern walls which would later become significant. This was textile production: the open fields were good places to hang cloth to dry and an informal market grew up on Hog’s Lane, where people sold second-hand clothes. The street soon became known as Petticoat Lane.

Sources

1.1 The Venetian ambassador, 5 May 1517

After Easter, a certain preacher, at the instigation of a citizen of London, preached as usual in the fields, where the whole city was in the habit of assembling with the magistrates. He abused the strangers in the town, and their manner and customs, alleging that they not only deprived the English of their industry, and of the profits arising therefrom, but dishonoured their dwellings by taking their wives and daughters. With this exasperating language and much more besides, he so irritated the populace, that they threatened to cut the strangers to pieces and sack their houses on the 1st of May.

1.2 One of Doña Luisa’s companions in the Brick House between 1611 and 1613

She was very careful and watchful over the house … as she had heard that in the Catholics’ houses sometimes they would break in at the windows and walls of the house and when the doors had been opened to thrust themselves into the house by force … As for the doors, she was always careful to choose one of the house most careful, obedient, and punctual that would follow her directions in all things for to be the porter and to keep the keys of all the doors. When any one had knocked at the door she must look out of the window to see whom it was, then to tell her that such a one was there … because if anything should happen she would be one of the first that should know of it. Luisa also instructed the porter never to open the front door without getting one of the maids to shut the second door before she opens the first.

1.3 From the memorandum book of the parish clerk of St Botolph’s Church, 3 June 1597

This Mary Fillis being about the age of 20 years and having been in England for the space of 13 or 14 years … was desirous to become a Christian. Wherefore she made suit … to have some conference with the Curate … demanding of her certain questions concerning her faith, where unto she answering him very Christian like … Then the said Curate did go with her unto the font, and desiring the congregation with him to call upon God the Father through our Lord Jesus Christ, that of his bounteous mercy he would grant to her … that she might be baptized with water and the Holy Ghost, and received into Christ’s Holy Church and be made a lively member of the same … And the Minister afterwards … said unto the witnesses … you shall name this child, who named her, Mary Fillis, of Morisco, a black more being as she said in that country both a basket maker and a shovel maker. So that I do say that the said Mary Fillis … was christened on Friday being the third day of June.

Thinking points

• What evidence do we have of ideas, as well as people, migrating to the area in Roman and Medieval times?

• How did the location of Spitalfields affect the kinds of people who came?

Practice questions

• Was religion the main reason people migrated to Spitalfields in this period?

• Which of the sources in this chapter is most useful to a historian wanting to find out how migrants were treated in sixteenth and early seventeenth century London?

2 Quoted in https://thehistoryvault.co.uk/immigrants-and-propaganda-the-1517-evil-may-day-riots/


4 Guildhall Library Manuscripts at https://www.history.ac.uk/gh/baentries.htm, Mary’s story is told in Miranda Kaufmann, Black Tudors (Oneworld 2017)
2. Canaries

Some English weavers worked with silk as well as wool. By the 1670s, according to Daniel Defoe, there were around 40,000 poor silk ribbon weavers in London. Throughout the seventeenth century the area became more built up, especially after the Civil Wars of the 1640s. London's population was growing, needing more housing beyond the old walls, especially after the Great Fire of London in 1666 made so many homeless. Relaxed building regulations led to a housing boom outside the walls and Spitalfields became part of an expanding city.

From the 1570s onwards French Protestants – known as Huguenots – started arriving in the area as refugees from religious persecution. The number of Huguenots increased rapidly in the 1680s after the French King Louis XIV overturned a law protecting their rights. Many arrived poor and destitute after terrible experiences. Committees set up to help them estimated that 13,050 Huguenots had arrived in London by 1687, mostly living in Spitalfields. One such committee, La Maison de Charité de Spitalfields was known as ‘La Soupe’ because of what it provided for refugees. By 1700 Huguenots were about 5% of London’s population.

Why did they come to Spitalfields? The building boom meant there were empty properties and further space to build on. There was already a local silk weaving industry. There was a French Protestant church nearby. It was also an area that Protestant Dissenters – religious outsiders such as Quakers and Methodists – were drawn to.

Church records show that many of the Huguenots came from just two towns – Lyon and Tours – so they were often people who knew each other. They had a strong tradition of business skills, self-reliance and community support. Many were highly skilled silk weavers who settled in new houses that were being built over the fields. They transformed the area with their new high quality French styles that soon became fashionable. Along with Huguenot silversmiths and goldsmiths they could offer high fashion at prices that undercut taxed French imports. As these silks were now home produced they were not affected by war or stormy seas.

By 1700 there were about 500 master weavers and 15,000 looms around Spital Square\(^5\). Their work needed a complex process to transform the raw silk to beautiful textiles with patterns of fruit, flowers and plants. Many trades and crafts were involved. The silk came from China, India and Italy, brought by ships of the East India Company at a time when England was expanding its trading empire. More and more people were attracted to Spitalfields and the area became a boom town, helped by a time of national peace and stability.

The Huguenots brought a new, profitable industry that opened up new markets. 50,000 locals now depended on the silk business. The new Spitalfields Market, set up by King Charles I on the corner of Red Lion (now Commercial) Street and Paternoster Row (now Brushfield Street), was a centre for their textile trading.

Some Huguenots were already wealthy merchants and master weavers and soon became estate owners in the area. Families such as Dalbiac, Lekeux, Rocher and Parroissien lived in grand houses on the newly built up Spital Square, where Brick House had been – and before it, the medieval priory and Roman cemetery. Although the square no longer exists, some of the elegant houses built for these families in the 1720s and 1730s survive in Elder Street, Wilkes Street, Fournier Street and Princelet Street.

\(^5\) According to Daniel Defoe

Silk textile designs by Huguenot master weaver James Leman 1710
They were both family houses and workshops. The wide mansel windows let in as much light as possible to help weavers see to work, and well-lit weaving garrets were later added to the upper floors. Some roofs had birdcages and traps to catch songbirds which the Huguenots loved, and a market in birds such as linnets and finches developed along what is now Cheshire Street.

Over a century later the writer Charles Dickens commented on these houses:

And what strange streets they are! ... These high gaunt houses, all window on the upper story, and that window all small diamond panes, are like the houses in some foreign town, and have no trace of London in them ... It is as if the Huguenots had brought their streets along with them, and dropped them down here.6

The early generations of Huguenots kept close to their religion and cultural traditions. They were Calvinists, with a faith quite different from the Church of England. While Anglicans believe that God gives them free will, Huguenots believed in predestination – that our futures are already laid down. While they were given the freedom to worship and build churches – something denied Quakers and Catholics – their dead still had, by law, to be buried in Anglican churchyards. By 1700 Spitalfields had at least nine Huguenot churches which helped the poor and gave support to new arrivals, finding them work and lodgings. One of these was La Neuve Eglise on the corner of Fournier street and Brick Lane. High on its outside wall is a sundial with the Latin words ‘UMBRA SUMUS’ (We are only shadows) taken from a poem by the Roman writer Horace.

The French immigrants were largely well received by the middle classes. The reaction from the working classes was mixed, though. Many saw the new arrivals as a threat to their livelihoods, competing for work and willing to undercut wages. Tensions mounted and some locals even began to arm themselves ready to rise up against foreigners. In 1683 King Charles II placed companies of Horse Guards around Spitalfields ‘to keep the weavers in order’.

In 1709 Parliament passed a law naturalising Huguenots as English citizens. A poem opposing this was published in London, imagining native English birds complaining about the foreign canary (Source 2.6).

Meanwhile the Weavers’ Company looked for ways to bring the two groups together and encouraged English weavers to learn new skills and styles.
The artist William Hogarth created many satirical engravings that commented on London life in the early 1700s. *Industry and Idleness (Source 2.7)* is a series that tells the story of two young apprentice weavers in an upper floor garret in Spitalfields.

In this first plate Francis Goodchild is working hard but Tom Idle is dozing lazily with a beer mug with the words 'Spittle Fields' carved on it. Later plates tell their story which ends with Idle hanged at Tyburn and Goodchild becoming Lord Mayor of London. Some writers think Hogarth may imply that Goodchild is Huguenot.

A young working class man in Spitalfields would be indentured to a master weaver – tied to his employer for seven years to learn the trade. During that time he would receive food and lodging but would not be paid and would have to follow strict rules. Here are extracts from Huguenot John Dupen’s indenture when he was apprenticed for seven years to John Nipping in 1688:

> He shall do no damage to his said master … He shall not commit fornication nor contract matrimony within the said term. He shall not play at cards, dice, tables or any other unlawful games whereby his said master might have any loss. With his own goods or others … he shall neither buy nor sell. He shall not haunt taverns or playhouses, nor absent himself from his said master’s service day or night unlawfully.

> … And the said master to the said apprentice in the same art which he useth, by the

> best means that he can, shall teach and instruct or cause to be taught and instructed

> finding unto his said Apprentice meat, drink, apparel, lodging, and all other necessaries.7

The poor conditions shared by English, Irish and Huguenot apprentice weavers would lead to crisis in the years to come.

Someone walking the streets of eighteenth century Spitalfields would have heard many languages and dialects from the mix of people drawn to the booming industry of the area. There were certainly English, Irish, French and some Jewish people. There may have been African child servants or Indians working as nannies or servants for the wealthy: as early as 1618 a man buried at St Botolph’s is described as ‘James (an Indian) servant to Mr James Duppa Brewer’. One African who definitely spent time here was Ukawsaw Gronniosaw. Born in north eastern Nigeria and transported to enslavement in America, he eventually settled in England and found a room to rent in Petticoat Lane, where he met his future wife Betty, an English widow. He described their meeting:

> The morning after I came to my new lodging, as I was at breakfast with the gentlewoman of the house, I heard the noise of some looms over our heads. I enquired what it was; she told me a person was weaving silk. … I expressed a great desire to see it, and asked if I might … and as soon as we entered the room, the person that was weaving looked about, and smiled upon us, and I loved her from that moment.9

It was a diverse society - by class, occupation and ethnicity.

**Key dates**

- **1572** The St Bartholomew’s Day massacre of Protestants in Paris caused the first wave of Huguenot refugees.
- **1685** The French king Louis XIV reversed the laws protecting Huguenots*, causing a second wave of refugees, many of whom were master silkweavers. (*Revocation of the Edict of Nantes).

**Sources**

2.1 **Statement to Parliament by King William III, 1695**

> Compassion obliges me to mention the miserable circumstances of the French protestants who suffer for their religion. I most earnestly recommend to you to provide a supply of money suitable to these occasions.

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8 Rozina Visram, *Asians in Britain: 400 Years of History* (Pluto 2002)

9 From A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, and African Prince, as related by Himself quoted in *Room to Breathe – Beyond the Walls* (Migration Museum Project 2018) p16

10 Quoted in Hampton p152

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2.2 John Strype, ‘Survey of London and Westminster’ (1720)\textsuperscript{11}
God’s blessing surely is not only brought upon the parish, by receiving poor strangers
… but also a great advantage hath accrued to the whole nation, by the rich manufactures of weaving silks and stuffs and camlets: which art they brought along with them. And this benefit also to the neighbourhood: that these strangers may serve for patterns of thrift, honesty, industry and sobriety as well.

2.3 Daniel Defoe, 1719\textsuperscript{12}
Silk manufactures of this kingdom … [are] the staple of our trade and the most considerable and essential part of our wealth, the fund of our exportation, the support of our navigation, and the only means we have for the employing and subsisting our poor.

2.4 Dr Richard Welton, Rector of St Mary’s, speaking of the Huguenots in the 1690s\textsuperscript{13}
This rabble are the very offal of the earth, who cannot be content to be safe here from justice and begging from which they fled, and to be fattened on what belongs to the poor of our own land and to grow rich at our expense, but must needs to rob our religion too.

2.5 from ‘The Valiant Weaver’ an anti-Huguenot song\textsuperscript{14}
Weavers all may curse their fates Because the French work under rates

2.6 extracts adapted from Canary-birds Naturalised in Utopia – a Canto (1709)\textsuperscript{15}
Here they grew fat, and lived at ease And bigger looked than Refugees…
Or shall such interlopers come, And turn me out of house and home?…
Perhaps in time they’ll take, forsooth The bread out of our natives’ mouth…
To naturalise them is a jest;
Let’s not defile our dear own nest

Or else perhaps they’ll make our state
That’s noble now, degenerate …
With caution then let’s give our votes,
‘Gainst cutting our own subjects throats.

2.7 William Hogarth, Industry and Idleness (1747), Plate 1

Thinking points
• Why did Huguenots start arriving in the 1570s? (Look back over your thematic study of migration history.)
• Did the arrival of French refugees change Spitalfields mainly for the better or the worse?

Practice questions
• What was the impact of Huguenot refugees on Spitalfields?
• Study sources 2.1 to 2.7. Which of these sources is most useful to a historian wanting to find out how Spitalfields residents felt about Huguenot arrivals?

\textsuperscript{11} Quoted in Cruickshank, p 162
\textsuperscript{12} In A Brief State of the Question Between the Printed and Painted Callicoes and the Woollen and Silk Manufacture. As far as it relates to the Wearing and Using of Printed and Painted Callicoes in Great Britain.
\textsuperscript{13} Quoted at https://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/survey-of-london/2016/06/10/the-church-of-st-mary-matfelon-whitechapel-part-one/
\textsuperscript{14} Quoted in Cruickshank, p 160
\textsuperscript{15} https://www.ourmigrationstory.org.uk/oms/huguenot-silk-weavers-in-spitalfields
3. Bold Defiance

In 1670 English weavers in Spitalfields complained about foreign competition.

By foreign nations we are impoverished by them trading with our nation especially by the French … for we will not have them reign in our kingdom.

From a pamphlet 'Feare God' published by protesting apprentices, 1670.

Five years later they marched in protest at new engine-looms that threatened their jobs.

There was also some antagonism directed at a new group of immigrants from Ireland. Most were unskilled labourers though some had been linen weavers back home. Many had been forced into poverty by the linen industry’s decline and strict Penal Laws that discriminated against Catholics. Employers in Spitalfields often preferred to hire them because, as the poorest residents, they accepted low wages. This made English weavers resent them. The Irish – most of whom spoke Gaeilge – were the most likely to be underpaid and out of work, and to suffer racist violence. In July 1736 serious fighting broke out after English labourers accused the Irish of undercutting their wages on a church building site. Over a couple of days a series of battles with guns and knives ended with seventeen badly wounded on both sides and one English boy shot dead.

It is shocking to behold the cruelty or impudence of some people, who, even in a strange country, by the natives thereof they get their living; yet these ungrateful wretches are ever belching out their most dreadful oaths, curses and imprecations against those very people by whom they have subsistence. … It is hoped that proper means will be taken by the magistrates to quell those audacious rioters, and to put a stop to their wicked, cruel and inhuman purposes.

From a 1736 pamphlet 'Spittlefields and Shoreditch in an uproar, or, the devil to pay with the English and Irish'.

The Catholic Irish were not allowed to worship openly or build churches. In 1780, when one in eleven Londoners were Irish, there were violent anti-Catholic ‘Gordon’ riots and a mob burnt down Catholic chapels in Brick Lane. Full freedom for Catholics only came in 1829 with the Roman Catholic Relief Act. However, the fact that they shared poverty with many English and Huguenots, especially in the weaving industry, brought them together.

Sometimes, to protect their industry, workers and employers were on the same side. When calico (printed cotton) dresses from overseas became fashionable they protested successfully and the government banned the material.

Now thank God and good friends, we have gained that just cause. Let none henceforth dare to infringe weavers’ laws!
None more quiet than us if they let us alone,
But rob us of our rights and we’re up every one!

From ‘A New Song on the Failure of the Bill against the Weavers’ by Huguenot James Rondeau

When outsiders brought in new mechanical looms and weavers fearing unemployment started breaking the machines, they were often supported by employers who feared the competition.

Nevertheless, for ‘journeyman’ weavers, so called because they were employed by the day (from the French journée meaning ‘day’) the deeper conflict was about class. They – Irish, English and Huguenot – were ranged against their richer employers and landowners (English and Huguenot). New technologies were threatening jobs, the period of being an apprentice was long and hard and eventual wages were a lot lower than for most other skilled workers, even during good times. The silk trade was unpredictable: there were boom times and deep depressions. As the century wore on, more and more master weavers brought in machines and some hired the cheapest labour (women and children) to operate them. The richest employers ran workshops with hundreds of weavers under poor pay and conditions.
In response, Spitalfields weavers, often led by the Irish, gained the reputation of being the most militant, organised and successful of the British working class. They organised themselves into ‘combinations’ with names such as the Subscription Society, the Committee Men and the Liberty Men. Their supporters said the combinations were to support poorer families and prevent weavers being exploited by their bosses. Opponents claimed that armed gangs of angry weavers were roaming the streets and cutting the silk of weavers who worked at lower rates. Some master weavers were threatened. In the 1760s protests were frequent and they included marches, sabotage, damage to looms, even an effigy of an employer being hung and burnt. Some of these tactics had been brought over from Ireland where they had been used against the English rulers.

Things came to a violent climax in the ‘Cutters’ Riots’ of the 1760s. Louis Chauvet (Huguenot) on 40 Crispin Street was hated by many. He employed 450 people and marked the coins he paid his workers so he could see how they spent the money. He trained and armed his own private guard. He refused to let his workers join or give money to combinations. After a large crowd tried to get his workers to pay, soldiers then broke up a committee meeting at a pub. Shots were fired and two weavers were killed. In August 1769 a mob of about 1,500 people then broke hundreds of his looms. At Chauvet’s request, Spitalfields was put under military occupation and he offered a £500 reward for information.

Two leaders of the Bold Defiance combination, John Doyle (Irish) and John Valline (Huguenot), were accused of cutting the silk of the loom of a small master weaver called Thomas Poor. They were sentenced to death and the authorities wanted to make an example of them. Executions usually happened at Tyburn, west of London and far from Spitalfields. In this case, however, the authorities wanted to make an example, so they executed the two men locally, outside the Salmon and Ball Tavern on the corner of Bethnal Green Road and what is now Cambridge Heath Road. A huge, angry crowd gathered for the execution and soldiers were taunted and stoned. Doyle protested his innocence to the end and after he died the crowd ripped down the scaffold, carried it to Spitalfields and set it up outside Chauvet’s house, smashing his windows and burning his furniture.
There was an outcry over the fact that the hanging had been in the East End. Pamphlets attacking the decision circulated locally and anger grew. There were more arrests, mainly of Irish weavers. More combination members were arrested, accused of attacking the looms of a weaver called Daniel Clarke. Two were hanged, this time at Tyburn, in spite of a march by local people calling for a pardon. Two others were transported.

Clarke was now hated. People believed he was in the pay of Chauvet and had lied in court, as a result of which Irishmen were dead. On 16 April 1771 he was walking near the northern end of Brick Lane when he was attacked by a growing mob calling him a 'blood-selling rascal'. He tried to reason with them without success, saying that Chauvet was the real villain. The mob stoned and chased him. He was knocked to the ground and kicked. He fled, bleeding, into a nearby house for safety. A hundred or so surrounded the house shouting that he should be killed. He tried to escape through a back garden and ran towards Norton Folgate where he was again surrounded by a mob and whipped and hit repeatedly. He ran towards what is now Cheshire Street where he was trapped against the wall of a brewhouse and stripped. The crowd dragged him to a field, threw him into the freezing water of a pond and a sandpit and pelted him to death. Two men were hanged for the crime and their bodies sent to be dissected by surgeons.

The cycle of violence ended. Two years later the government responded with the 1773 Spitalfields Act, which was further extended in 1793. Under these Acts:

- Weavers could negotiate pay with magistrates who then set wages.
- Employers were punished if they paid wages above or below those set.
- Employers could not have more than two apprentices at any one time.
- Combinations were banned.
- Imports of foreign silk were controlled.

As a result, no one was paid starvation wages. However, some employers left the area and moved to the north of England where they could get away with paying lower wages. Some workers therefore lost their jobs while other were paid the proper rate. There were no more weavers' riots.

After the 1789 French Revolution, Britain was soon at war with France. The government was worried that people in Spitalfields might support the Revolution and, therefore, the enemy. Huguenots, they thought, would be happy that the French monarchy had been overthrown. They thought the Irish would be attracted by the Revolution's values of liberty and equality, and its opposition to the British who had colonised Ireland. Some weavers did join the London Corresponding Society that opposed the ruling class and called for all men to have the vote. However, Spitalfields was largely quiet at a time of riot and unrest in other parts of the country. The Spitalfields Acts may be one reason for this.

In fact, the silk weaving industry was already in decline and there was now real poverty on the streets of Spitalfields. The 1799 Combination Act stopping workers organising themselves in trades unions made it hard for weavers to get together. In effect, this meant the Spitalfields Acts could not protect the poorer weavers. In particularly cold winters, people were starving. In 1797 the Spitalfields Soup Society started helping the poorest families. In the same year a meeting of London trade unionists commented that the weavers were no longer well organised, 'and what a miserable condition are they in.'

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19 Quoted in http://www.brh.org.uk/site/articles/bold-defiance/
Key dates

1691  The Jacobites in Ireland were defeated, beginning a period of repression against Catholics and economic crisis, forcing many Irish workers to migrate.

1769  The authorities responded to the Cutters’ Riots with executions in Bethnal Green.

1773, 1793  The Spitalfields Acts regulated weavers’ pay and conditions.

Sources

3.1 Samuel Foote, ‘The Tailors: A Tragedy for Warm Weather’ (1778)
... when with weaving sons of silk.
Oppressed with debts and hunger, rose in arms ...
Hence, soon a formidable band arose,
And all the sister trades were forced to join. Lo! Their example points the way.

3.2 A letter from members of the Bold Defiance Committee, asking for contributions.
Gentlemen, send your donations this night to the Dolphin in New Cock Lane by one man with this letter and keep it up your bodies, as at this time you must either conquer and flourish or starve and perish, for if sufficient means is not used at this time to crush your enemies you are and will be for ever bond slaves.

3.3 Another message sent by the ‘Bold Defiance’ combination to a master weaver
We give you an egg shell of honey, but if you refuse to comply with the demands of yesterday, we’ll give you a gallon of thorns to your final life’s end.

3.4 From the ‘Gentleman’s Magazine’, November 1763
In riotous manner [they] broke open the house of one of their masters, destroyed his looms, and cut a great quantity of silk to pieces, after which they placed his effigy in a cart, with a halter about his neck, an executioner on one side, and a coffin on the other; and after drawing it through the streets they hanged it on a gibbet, then burnt it to ashes and afterwards dispersed.’

3.5 A letter from Irish silk weavers complaining about the armed guards of the silk masters, 1768.
At unseasonable hours, [they] go armed with blunderbusses, pistols, swords and cutlasses, heading the army and watch, and lodging whom they think proper in Newgate.

3.6 John Doyle’s last words on the scaffold, according to a newspaper at the time.
I John Doyle do hereby declare, as my last dying words in the presence of my Almighty God, that I am as innocent of the fact I am now to die for as the child unborn. Let my blood lie to that wicked man who has purchased it with gold, and them notorious wretches who swore it falsely away.

Thinking points

- To what extent were the Spitalfields Acts a victory for the weavers?
- Was the decline of Spitalfields solely the fault of the employers?

Practice questions

- Explain why there was such an atmosphere of conflict in 18th century Spitalfields.
- Study sources 3.1 to 3.6. Which of these sources is most useful to someone wanting to decide whether the weavers’ societies were violent criminal gangs or justified organisations defending the rights of workers?

20 Quoted in Linebaugh p285
21 Quoted in Peter Linebaugh, The London Hanged (Verso 2003) p277
22 Quoted in G Rude, The Crowd in History 1730-1848 (Lawrence and Wishart 1981) p76, quoted in Cruickshank p270
23 Quoted in Linebaugh p278
24 Quoted in Cruickshank, p276
4. City of the damned

Conditions in Spitalfields got even worse after war with France ended in 1815. A combination of factors destroyed the wealth of the area:

- There was severe economic depression across the country.
- More and more master weavers were using mechanised looms that put local weavers out of a job.
- In 1824 the Spitalfields Act were repealed, ending import controls and making it easier for textiles from overseas – especially India - to flood the market.

In 1837 weavers petitioned the Lord Mayor of London about their situation (Source 4.1). The writer Charles Dickens visited the area in 1851 and was shocked to see so many unemployed weavers in despair. He could find only ten weavers still at work (Sources 4.2 and 4.3).

As the weaving trade died the main employers in the area were Truman's brewery in Brick Lane and the sugar-baking refineries south of Whitechapel Road, most of which were run by German immigrants benefitting from the shipments of sugar cane arriving at the docks in the Caribbean. While many of the workers at the sugar bakeries were also German, living in lodging houses near their work, both industries employed many of the large Irish community.

By the second half of the nineteenth century Spitalfields was a very different place from the Huguenot boom town of a century before. Those descendants of the French refugees who had done well now lived in wealthier parts of the London or the rest of the country. They had become English and no longer followed the religion and culture of French Protestantism. Up to 90% of today's population of southeast England may have some Huguenot roots. Those who remained lived in a poor, depressed, overcrowded part of the East End. They were joined by migrants from depressed rural England hoping for work, and from an Ireland devastated by famine.

The area was regularly described by outsiders as dirty and dangerous. The idea created in the minds of largely middle-class readers was of a place to be feared. People in Spitalfields needed to be 'saved' by philanthropists such as Thomas Barnardo (himself an Irish immigrant) and William Booth (who founded the Salvation Army). Both were active in the area, working with the poor. Most of all, perhaps, this area at that time is remembered as the haunt of 'Jack the Ripper,' two of whose victims were immigrant women trying to survive: Liz Stride was Swedish and Mary Kelly was Irish.

The poverty and hardship certainly were extreme for many, as shown in the work of people who met them and recorded their lives, hoping to raise awareness of terrible conditions:

- Henry Mayhew – author of London Labour and the London Poor, interviewed people in Bethnal Green and Spitalfields in the 1840s.
- Dr Hector Gavin was a sanitary reformer who wrote in the same period about health conditions in Hare Street (now Cheshire Street).
- Charles Booth organised a detailed house-to-house survey of living conditions in the 1880s and 1890s, published as Life and Labour of the People in London.

25 George Gissing, The Nether World (1889)
The reality, however, was sometimes more complex. Not everyone living here was poor. As Booth's colour-coded ‘poverty map’ shows (Source 4.8), main roads such as Whitechapel Road had better off, middle-class housing while there were streets coloured entirely black, which Booth describes as ‘Lowest class. Vicious, semi-criminal’.

One of the areas he colours black on his map is the east end of Princelet Street (once the houses of up and coming Huguenot master weavers, now divided up between many families). It appears somewhat differently if we look closely at the residents:

- Henry Prollius, 44 years old, cabinet-maker, German, with his daughter Elizabeth, 12
- Isaac Newman, 35, bookseller, Russian, with his wife and 8 children
- Barnet Cohen, 45, boot finisher, German, with his Polish wife and 3 children
- Willaim Germantis, 30, tailor’s presser, with his wife and son and 5 Polish lodgers
- Philip Swartzh, 20, tailor, from ‘Russian Poland’ with his 19-year-old wife and daughter

None of them were weavers, but they all had trades. They lived in overcrowded conditions, in some cases one room per family, but they do not seem to fit the description of ‘vicious, semi-criminal’. There were thriving families and communities and not all were poor.

Sources

4.1 Petition from starving weavers to the Lord Mayor of London, March 1837

May it please your lordship … your petitioners are in a state of the greatest destitution and misery from the want of employment, thousands being at the present moment in a state bordering upon pauperism, without any hope of relief…

4.2 Charles Dickens in ‘Household Words’, April 1851

From fourteen to seventeen thousand looms are contained in from eleven to twelve thousand houses – although at the time at which we write, not more than nine to ten thousand are at work. … Spitalfields contains the densest population, perhaps, existing. Within its small boundaries, not less than eighty-five thousand human beings are huddled.

4.3 Charles Dickens in ‘Household Words’, April 1851 – visiting the house of a poor Irish silk weaver’s family

The room is unwholesome, close, and dirty, … The looms claim all the superior space and have it. … The children sleep at night between the legs of the monsters, who deafen their first cries with their whirr and rattle, and who roar the same tune to them when they die.

4.4 Andrew Mearns, The Bitter Cry of Outcast London (1883)

Few who will read these pages have any conception of what these pestilential human rookeries are, where … amidst horrors … tens of thousands are crowded together … To get into them you have to penetrate courts reeking with poisonous and malodorous gases arising from accumulations of sewage and refuse scattered in all directions and often flowing beneath your feet; courts, many of them which the sun never penetrates, which are never visited by a breath of fresh air, and which rarely know the virtues of a drop of cleansing water … You have to grope your way along dark and filthy passages swarming with vermin.

26 Abridged from Cruickshank pp535-536
27 Quoted in Hampton p187.
29 http://spitalfieldslife.com/2010/02/16/dickens-in-spitalfields-4-the-silk-weavers/
30 Quoted in Cruickshank p468
4.5 Gustave Doré 1872: Waifs and Strays

4.6 Silk weavers in Spitalfields

4.7 Booth’s map of London poverty 1898-99 and detail from the map showing Spitalfields (cont. on next page)
4.8 An Irishwoman who works as a street seller talking to Henry Mayhew, 1840s

I sleep at a lodging-house, and it’s a dacint place. It’s mostly my own counthry- women that’s in it … I live on brid, and ‘taties and salt, and a herrin’ sometimes.

i niver taste beer, and not often tay, but I sit here all day, and I feel the hunger this day and that day.

Thinking points

- Who or what was to blame for this decline?
- Do you feel the writers of the sources were showing solidarity, sympathy or disgust to the people of the area?
- How far are the attitudes of outsiders supported by what the people say about themselves?
- Do you think Spitalfields was a poorer and more dangerous place by 1900 than it was in 1700?

Practice questions

- Which of sources 4.1 to 4.8 are most useful to a historian wanting to know what life was like for people living in Spitalfields at this time?

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5. A foreign land

Something else is clear from the people that Booth’s researchers met on Princelet Street. The names suggest that most, if not all, were Jewish. Throughout the area, Booth’s survey shows the displacement of many of the English, Irish and the remnants of the Huguenots, by the newest arrivals: Jewish refugees from Eastern Europe. For example, Booth comments on Pool’s Square near what is now Quaker Street:

This is the last of an Irish colony, the Jews begin to predominate.\(^{32}\)

There had been a settled and growing Jewish community since the 1650s, after they were invited back to England for the first time since Jews were expelled in 1290. Small numbers of Spanish, Dutch and Portuguese Jews had settled in Duke’s Place, Aldgate, just over the City walls from Spitalfields. Their beautiful synagogue, the oldest in Britain, is still thriving (right).

In 1792 Daniel Mendoza, a Spitalfields boxer of Portuguese Jewish descent, became England’s heavyweight boxing champion.

Jews experienced anti-Judaism and state discrimination, but by the mid-nineteenth century they had achieved civil and political rights equal to the wider population. Most were Sephardic Jews originating from Spain and Portugal. They were mainly middle-class, living just west of Spitalfields. However, increasing numbers of German Ashkenazi Jews began to arrive in Britain, attracted to its relative freedoms, economic opportunities and lack of immigration controls. Many, landing by boat at the London docks, settled in the East End where accommodation was cheap. To meet their needs, the Jews’ Free School moved to Bell Lane in Spitalfields in 1822 and catered for immigrant children, while a Jews’ Infant School opened on Commercial Street in 1841.

In 1851 Henry Mayhew estimated that there were 18,000 Jews in London and many of them were poor pedlars and traders selling second-hand clothes in the ‘rag trade’ on stalls along Houndsditch and Petticoat Lane that had been a rough-and-ready market for centuries. As Jews could not work on Saturdays (the Shabbat or Sabbath), the market was at its busiest on Sundays. The first synagogue in Spitalfields, established by Dutch Jews in 1874, took over a former Huguenot church in Sandys Row and is still functioning as a Jewish place of worship.

Events far away in the Russian Empire then led to huge change in Spitalfields. In 1881, after Jews were blamed for the assassination of the Czar (Emperor), there were pogroms – violent attacks and massacres – aimed at Jews. The 1882 May Laws then restricted where Jews could live, banned them from owning property and put quotas on how many Jews could attend secondary school and higher education. Thousands of Jews from Russian, Poland and other parts of Eastern Europe migrated westwards, arriving by sea in British ports, especially London. They were escaping persecution and hoping to build new lives.

Many hoped to go on to the USA, but significant numbers ended up staying in Britain. Poor, with few possessions and little knowledge of English, most were forced into the cheapest places to live, where they could join a community with familiar language, food, religion and customs. Over a very short space of time there was a huge population shift: by 1899 a quarter of the population of Spitalfields was Jewish.

Life was very hard for the new arrivals. There were also different reactions to them within the settled Jewish community. Many were worried that their own status might be threatened if there was an antisemitic backlash. Other Jewish groups organised charities to support the refugees and help them get on their feet. This included soup kitchens and a temporary shelter.

\(^{32}\) Quoted in Cruickshank p531
Most Jews lived separate lives from the Irish and English: as they moved out, some areas became between 75% and 100% Jewish. When that happened, observers noted, the crime rate went down and these areas became quieter. However, they were also seen by some as a threat to jobs and wages. To many desperately poor people in Spitalfields it could appear that newly arriving immigrants were the problem, even though the true reasons for these included new technology, foreign competition and economic depression. Housing was also a real point of conflict. At a time when houses were being demolished for new roads and railways, some long term residents felt the influx of Jews was making it even harder for them to be housed. Wentworth Street, the area of the worst housing, had a lodging house containing 800 people and there was racial tension in the area.

Visiting journalists and missionaries, writing for their middle-class readers, described Jewish Spitalfields as an ‘alien’ land, but with some respect for its inhabitants.

**Key dates**

**1656**  
Jews were readmitted to England, 366 years after they were expelled. Small numbers settled near Spitalfields.

**1881**  
The assassination of Czar Alexander in Russia led to violence against Jews, forcing them to move west, many arriving as refugees.

**Sources**

5.1 *Israel Zangwill, The Children of the Ghetto* (1892)  
Into the heart of East London there poured from Russia, from Poland, from Germany, from Holland, streams of Jewish exiles, refugees. Settlers … all rich in their cheerfulness, their industry, and their cleverness … rich in all the virtues, devout yet tolerant, and strong in their reliance on Faith, Hope, and more especially Charity.

5.2 *Beatrice Potter, social reformer 1889*  
For a few moments it is a scene of indescribable confusion: cries and countercries: the hoarse laughter of the dock loungers at the strange garb and broken accent of the poverty-stricken foreigners: the rough swearing of the boatmen at passengers unable to pay the fee for landing. In another ten minutes eighty of the hundred newcomers are dispersed in the back slums of Whitechapel. In another few days, the majority of these, robbed of the little they possess, are turned out of the ‘free lodgings’ destitute and friendless.

5.3 *Louis Winogradsky* in 1987, describing his arrival aged five and a half in 1912.  
My initial impressions of the place were not good … Brick Lane was bleak and rather dark, and so were the two rooms we lived in … For the first time in our lives we were really poor, and, on top of this, I could barely make myself understood because all I could speak was Russian … My own memory is that, while there was no money for luxuries, we never went hungry. [*He changed his name to Lew Grade and later became the producer of many popular TV programmes.*]

5.4 *Advertisement for the anniversary for the founding of the Jews’ Free School*. Dated February 25, 1829

5.5 *The Jewish Chronicle 12 August 1881*  
The outside world is not capable of making minute discrimination between Jew and Jew, and forms its opinion of Jews in general as much, if not more, from them than from the Anglicised portion of the Community… they appear altogether to forget that in accepting the hospitality of England, they owe a reciprocal duty of becoming Englishmen.

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23 Quoted in Cruickshank p491
24 Quoted in Cruickshank p489
26 Still Dancing (Collins 1987), in Ed David Englander, *A Documentary History of Jewish Immigrants in Britain 1840-1920* p23
27 Quoted in Cruickshank p489
5.6 Lionel Alexander, Secretary to the Jewish Board of Guardians, 1888
My Board does not favour unwarranted immigration but do their utmost to check it by warnings rather than prohibitions … it is one of our largest operations sending people back who, having wandered here, prove useless.

5.7 Gustave Doré and Blanchard Jerrold, 1872
The German, the Jew, the Frenchman, the Lascar, the swarthy native of Spitalfields, the leering thin-handed thief … with endless swarms of ragged children, fill the roads and pavement. The Jewish butchers lounge – fat and content, in their doorways; the costermongers drive their barrows slowly by, filling the air with their hoarse voices.

5.8 Metropolitan Police Report on Immigration of Foreigners, 28 July 1888
The immigrants are no doubt attracted to the United Kingdom by the prospect of obtaining a better livelihood and enjoying more freedom than they would in other countries. They are quiet, inoffensive, and industrious, making the most of what they earn and generally abstemious as regards intoxicating liquors it being seldom they are seen the worse for drink in the streets…

5.9 Report of an investigation by the medical magazine ‘The Lancet’, 3 May 1884
The foreign Jews, who for many years have been flocking to the East-end of London, are so numerous that their presence seriously affects the social and sanitary condition of this part of the metropolis.

5.10 Metropolitan Police Report on Immigration of Foreigners, 28 July 1888
the effect of the overcrowding by the immigrants has been to drive our own population from the districts now inhabited by the former … they easily become the victims of designing persons who use them as the means of bringing down wages, they being willing to turn their hands to anything.

We seem to be in a world of dissolving views. We suddenly find ourselves in a foreign land. The streets we enter might be Warsaw or Cracow. We have taken leave of everything English, and entered an alien world. … In the heart of London, it is yet like a foreign town, with its own liberties of trade, own segregated peoples, religions, customs and industries … Strange as it may seem, there are no scenes of disorder, and nothing approaching to ruffianism. The people are peaceable and law-abiding.

5.12 The Spitalfields Soup Kitchen 1867

Thinking points
- Many Eastern European Jewish immigrants lived very separate lives from the English and Irish already living in Spitalfields. Was this mainly through choice or necessity?
- How did the response to Jewish immigrants compare to past attitudes to Huguenot and Irish arrivals?

Practice questions
- Explain why East European Jews came to settle in Spitalfields.
- Which of the sources in this chapter are most useful for a researcher wanting to find out how Jewish immigrants were viewed and received?

Speech to the House of Commons Select Committee on Immigration, 30 ‘London, A Pilgrimage’ (Grant and Co 1872) p50, quoted in Cruickshank p420
- "Englander p22
- "Englander p85
- "Englander p93
6. Children of the Ghetto

Israel Zangwill was born in 1864, lived in Fashion Street and went to the Jews’ Free School in Bell Lane. He grew up to be a teacher and writer dedicated to the interests of his people. His novel *Children of the Ghetto: A Study of a Peculiar People* (1892) is set in the Spitalfields he knew and paints a vivid picture of Jewish Life. Zangwill – who coined the term ‘melting pot’ to describe a multicultural community – challenges the stereotype of the East End as a place only of degradation and despair. His Spitalfields was exciting, vibrant, warm and fascinating. It’s also a place where Jewish culture was alive and well, as historian Robert Winder describes:

> There were Jewish theatres and music halls, Jewish publishers and booksellers, Jewish tobacconists and jewellers – a complete community-in-exile … On the corners of Whitechapel, you could lay bets with Jewish bookmakers while chewing on Warsaw sausage, salt beef or gefilte fish, with perhaps a bagel or strudel on the side.

Dr Nadia Valman’s app *Zangwill’s Spitalfields* ([https://itunes.apple.com/gb/app/zangwills-spitalfields/id1076318988?mt=8](https://itunes.apple.com/gb/app/zangwills-spitalfields/id1076318988?mt=8)) takes you to that world in a combination of podcast, images from the time and a tour of the streets.

The podcast can be accessed through your phone’s app store (search for Zangwill’s Spitalfields) or viewed online at [zangwillsspitalfields.org.uk](http://zangwillsspitalfields.org.uk). There are seven sections. To start, click on number 1 and play the audio. As you listen, images will appear. When you have listened, close the window and click on number 2. And so on. From each section of the podcast, pick out one image and one quotation that especially strike you as giving you a deeper understanding of Jewish life in Spitalfields.

**SECTION 1** introduces Zangwill and the Spitalfields he grew up in.

**SECTION 2** takes us to the soup kitchen for the Jewish poor, set up by richer middle-class Jews.

**Thinking point**

- What do Nadia Valman (the narrator) and Zangwill have to say about philanthropy – wealthy people donating time and money to help the poor – and class in Victorian London?

**SECTION 3** takes us to the Jews’ Free School on Bell Lane. [https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Jews-Free-School-playground-assembly-1909-CJews-Free-School-Courtesy-of-Jewish Fig1_307724693](https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Jews-Free-School-playground-assembly-1909-CJews-Free-School-Courtesy-of-Jewish Fig1_307724693)

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43 *Bloody Foreigners* (Abacus 2004) p234
Thinking point

- With its excellent facilities and strict rules, the school encouraged children to have high aspirations. But what does Valman mean when she describes the school as an ‘Anglicisation bootcamp’ in Zangwill’s eyes? What do you think of the school’s negative attitude to Yiddish, the students’ home language?

SECTION 4 looks at life in the former Huguenot mansions of Princelet Street, now broken up into single rooms each housing one family. Number 19 became one of several synagogues inside buildings where people also lived. These were important community hubs, richly described by Zangwill.

SECTION 5 takes us to the Spitalfields Great Synagogue on the corner of Brick Lane and Fournier Street, the very same building that was first built as a Huguenot church. In 1809 it had passed to the London Society for Promoting Christianity Amongst the Jews, and a few years later it became a Methodist Church. In 1898 it passed to a strictly orthodox Jewish community who had broken away from the more liberal, relaxed Judaism of the West End. They wanted to hold on to traditional values. A journalist visited their synagogue.

There was often conflict between the Brick Lane synagogue and Jewish socialist and anarchist political activists – of whom more in the next chapter – many of whom were atheist. In the ‘Battles of the Ghetto’ activists sat on the synagogue steps eating ham sandwiches on the holy day of Yom Kippur – a solemn day of fasting - provoking orthodox Jews to violence.

Thinking point

- In the areas of religion and education there were deep disagreements about how far cultural traditions and language should be cherished and maintained, or how far immigrant communities should adapt to English ways. This tension remains an issue for later immigrant communities. What do you think?

SECTION 6 is about ‘The Lane’ (Goulston Street and Wentworth Street) and Petticoat Lane markets, the heart of the working class Jewish East End but also where middle-class Jews came to shop for feast days.

Petticoat Lane, London, on a Sunday morning, 1883
SECTION 7 tells the story of the new housing developments by Peabody and Rothschild.

The Board of Deputies for the Relief of the Jewish Poor, led by Lord Rothschild, addressed the crisis in housing by building the Rothschild Buildings on Flower and Dean Street (now Thrawl Street). They replaced notorious slums with two huge, sturdily built six-storey apartment blocks, and in 1887 198 families – mainly Jewish – moved in. Zangwill described the blocks as ‘monotonous brick barracks’.

Thinking points

• How far were the Peabody and Rothschild Buildings an improvement on previous housing for the poor of Spitalfields?

• Valman describes the world of Jews in Spitalfields as one of ‘tenacity and survival.’ How accurate a description is this?

Practice question

• Which of the sources in the app would be most useful to a historian wanting to understand how people living in Spitalfields dealt with the challenges of daily life between the 1880s and 1900s?
7. Great Yiddish Parade

During the nineteenth century the buildings that had housed weavers’ looms fell into poverty. Many became ‘sweatshops’ – each room a tiny, crowded workplace where Jewish entrepreneurs took advantage of a growing demand for cheap clothing from the huge industrial working class, and of a ready supply of cheap labour forced to accept low pay and bad conditions. Unable to speak English and therefore use the official channels to find work, many went to the unofficial Jewish Labour Exchange on Whitechapel Road where they were picked up by employers. There were more than 25,000 immigrant garment workers in the area. If workers refused employers’ terms there were also others without work willing to take their place.

They were free-wheeling and aggressive business units which relied on a strict and highly competitive division of labour: one house would prepare leather for shoes, another would cut out the uppers and soles, another would stitch them together, another would close and finish them. It was called ‘outwork’, and it was a production line without a factory floor, turning out low-cost clothes at ultra-high speed.45

For many, sweatshop tailoring making ready-to-wear garments was the only work available. It paid enough to survive. It was also attractive that – in contrast to non-Jewish businesses – the workshops were closed on Saturdays and open on Sundays. But conditions were often terrible.

Men and women toiled ceaselessly in hot, steam-filled rooms, their heads surrounded by dust, threads of cotton and wool, and fumes from dyes, glues, and the gas used to light the dim cellars.46

Workers even included children: according to trade unionist Lewis Lyons, one sweatshop had nine-year-old girls shackled to the machines.

This was not a united community. There were deep divides between the new arrivals and some settled Anglo-Jews who were uncomfortable about the influx and wanted to restrict the numbers arriving. And there were fundamental political and religious divisions. Socialist and Communist ideas – often led by Jews – were spreading in Russia in opposition to the monarchy, and many Jews arrived from there already politically active. Others, angered by sweatshop labour, joined Jewish revolutionary groups such as Aaron Lieberman’s Hebrew Socialist Society and read newspapers such as Arbeter Fraynd. (Workers’ Friend). Its editor, Morris Winchevsky, met regularly with others at the International Workers’ Education Club at 40 Berner Street. The ‘Berner Street radicals’ aimed to end the social injustice affecting all the London working class. They saw the Jews who ran the sweatshops, many of whom were supported by Anglo-Jews and the Chief Rabbi, as the capitalist enemy.

Things came to a head in 1889. In March unemployed workers and ‘sweaters’ victims’ marched to the Great Synagogue in Aldgate, led by a German band, to demand that the Chief Rabbi speak against the employers’ treatment of workers. They called the march the ‘Great Yiddish Parade’. When they reached the synagogue the Chief Rabbi was not there: he denied he had ever agreed to speak on that day. He refused to denounce the employers.

45 Winder p235
46 Winder p236
When police confronted the marchers the *Jewish Chronicle* supported the police and said of the organisers:

> It becomes our duty to declare that they are not Jews.

That night fighting between police and activists led to the Berner Street club being destroyed.

Later that year Jewish garment workers went on strike. These were their demands:

1. That the hours be reduced to twelve, with an interval of one hour for dinner and half an hour for tea.
2. All meals to be had off the premises.
3. Government contractors to pay wages at trade union rates.
4. Government contractors and sweaters not to give work home at night after working hours.

*Manifesto of the tailors' strike committee 27 August 1889*\(^7\)

The strike was opposed by many Anglo-Jews, though two prominent wealthy Jews – Samuel Montagu MP and Lord Rothschild – gave money to support the strikers.

Four weeks into the strike, there was almost no money left in the strike fund. So the leaders went to ask the dockers’ union for help. There were tensions between Jewish garment workers and the largely Irish dockers, many of whom felt their families had been pushed out of Spitalfields by the influx of Jewish immigrants. Ben Tillett, the dockers’ leader, had described Jewish immigrants as

> the dregs and scum of the continent

and when he met Jewish striking workers he said:

> You are our brothers and we will do our duty by you, but we wish you had not come.\(^8\)

However, the tailors convinced them and the dockers gave a generous donation of £100. The strike lasted six weeks and around 10,000 garment workers took part. It ended with a compromise deal: in return for reduced working hours, the unions pledged not to strike again.

There was another successful Jewish tailors’ strike in 1912, at the same time as a dockers’ strike. Led by Milly Witkop and others from *Arbeter Fraynd*, Jewish families offered to look after dockers’ children, to give striking families fewer mouths to feed. They remembered how the dockers had supported them in 1889.

Meanwhile, anti-immigrant feeling was on the rise in Britain and especially in East London. One anti-Jewish campaign was for strict Sunday trading controls which would have shut down the Petticoat Lane Sunday market and hit Jewish businesses that closed on Saturdays but worked on Sundays. Jews had to deal with antisemitism on a daily basis. The British Brothers League, founded in East London in 1900, accused Jewish immigrants of putting up rents, taking jobs and forcing down wages. Their slogan was ‘England for the English’ and they campaigned against

> the dumping … of foreign paupers on these shores.

They recruited members from the local Irish community and their rally on Mile End Road in January 1902 attracted 4,000 marchers. Most of the signatures to their 45,000 strong anti-immigration petition were from East London.

In response to the BBL, antiracists set up an Aliens Defence League at number 38 Brick Lane.

Responding to anti-immigration pressure, the government set up a Royal Commission on Alien Immigration headed by local Conservative MP Major William Evans Gordon, himself a member of the British Brothers League. While the Commission said that immigration was not to blame for the social problems of the East End, it did say that it was leading to overcrowding and previous inhabitants being pushed out of the area. It recommended immigration controls. In 1905 the Aliens Act was the first UK law to control immigration.

A generation later in the 1930s Jews in Spitalfields faced a serious threat with the rise of fascism and antisemitism across Europe. The British Union of Fascists (or Blackshirts) had a headquarters in Bethnal Green. Violent attacks on Jews in the East End became common. When the BUF planned to march through the East End to a series of rallies on 4 October 1936, Jews were divided over how to respond. As in the case of the tailors’ strikes a generation earlier, official community leaders such as the Board of Deputies were against action, arguing that it would only inflame violence and antisemitism.

\(^7\) Englander p169
\(^8\) Rosenberg p84
Jews who, however innocently, become involved in any possible disorders, will be actively helping antisemitism and Jew-baiting. Unless you want to help the Jew-baiters, keep away.

_The Jewish Chronicle, 1 October 1936_\(^\text{90}\)

On the ground in East London – where some Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany were beginning to settle - the popular view was that the community had to be defended. Resistance was organised from various places including a downstairs room in 19 Princelet Street. On the day of the march a huge crowd assembled at the junction of Whitechapel High street and Commercial Street, on the edge of Spitalfields. They set up a barricade of trams left there by anti-fascist tram drivers. They were organised by younger people in the Jewish People’s Council Against Fascism and Antisemitism, a combination of trade unions and political organisations such as the Communist Party. Police – who many felt to be on the side of the Fascists - charged them but they did not give way.

Bursts of shouting, cheering and booing mingled with the sound of police whistles, the galloping horses of mounted police, the clanging of ambulance bells and the roar of buses racing extra police to the scene … all the time the crowd was shouting in unison ‘They Shall Not Pass.’

_The Daily Herald, 5 October 1936_\(^\text{90}\)

Aldgate was blocked and the police could not clear a way for the Fascists to march. Similar confrontations between police and protesters happened on Royal Mint street and, most famously, Cable Street. The fascists were unable to march through Spitalfields. One significant factor was that, although the BUF tried hard to enlist Irish dockers on their side, most joined the antifascists.

Some of those who joined the barricades said they had been the children looked after by Jewish families during the 1912 dock strike.

In the years between the World Wars and into the 1950s Jewish Spitalfields continued to thrive, a world of strong community with an undercurrent of poverty and crime. It is preserved in the memories of those who grew up there.

**Brick Lane in the 1940s and 1950s – some memories\(^\text{51}\)**

**Irvin Bernard**

It was a very Jewish area…there’s no doubt about it…every shop was virtually Jewish and everybody who lived there….I don’t know the percentage… but I guess 90% if not more…were Jewish. There were many Synagogues and all the people that came into the shop, not only as customers but friends as well…were probably Jewish, you know … the same way that everyone’s Bengali, in our day everyone was Jewish. The shops, the names, the sort of people you saw walking around

We had a printer’s exactly across the road from us, a fellow called Weinberg we used to do all our printing. … Needer’s men’s tailors, he made suits for my father, his son made suits for me

… On the corner of Brick lane and Hanbury Street was the next turning was a very famous baker’s, Burnsteins. Everybody knew them, they made cakes and all the usual things and that was on the corner a few doors away, and on the other corner … there used to be a dress hire place called Lozna. … and of course if you go the other way towards Whitechapel, you had Bloom’s which was the big thing.

**Basil Jackson**

Brick Lane itself used to have stalls along the road, mainly fruit and veg and everybody knew each other there by name. The banter there was tremendous,

… And also along Brick Lane there, the types of shop they had there. …

The sort of delis there where … they had herrings hanging up on strings, barrels of pickled cucumbers and smoked herring. The chopped herring. … It was a focal point at that time for the Jewish people, in as much as they would come down for their delis, they used to come down for their fresh beigels and chollahs for the weekend because they were baked on the premises …

\(^{90}\) Rosenberg, Battle for the East End p197

\(^{90}\) Rosenberg p203

\(^{51}\) interviewed in 2006 by Eastside Community Heritage
There was the classic things like chopped herrings or egg and onion or chopped liver and then you had chicken soup which was a classic thing was knedels and krapploch with the meat in the middle of it. A classic Jewish lochshun soup and then the other famous things you’d have were salt beef and lutckers, fried potatoes cut up tongue was another favourite thing there and the desserts, there would be things like lockshun pudding. Of course you’d have things like lemon tea, black coffee, because you couldn’t have any milk dishes because you can’t mix milk with meat. Being Jews they also did takeaways of salt beef sandwiches, which was a meal in itself. And you’d get a salt beef sandwich and a wally, which was a pickled cucumber and that was a solid meal.

Max Bronstein

The East End theatres were all in what we call Yiddish you know and they weren’t too many Jewish people but they did manage to congregate there and that was their enjoyment ‘cause not a lot could speak English properly.

Key dates

1889    Jewish tailors went on strike.
1905    The Aliens Act restricted immigration for the first time.
1936    Fascist Blackshirts were stopped from marching through the East End.

Sources

7.1 Rudolf Rocker, editor of Arbeter Fraynd from 1898, writing in 1956
An abyss of human suffering … squalid courts and alleyways, with dreary tumbledown hovels … And in those cesspools of poverty, children were born … nowhere was the contrast so vast between assertive wealth and indescribable poverty as in the great cities of Britain. Riches and poverty lived almost on top of each other.

7.2 Resolution circulated during the march to the Great Synagogue, reported in the Jewish Chronicle
We render our protest against the practice of labour sweating indulged in by certain members of the Jewish community. In consequence of the indifference of the rich Jews in not telling us, through the Chief Rabbi, how to improve our miserable condition, we clearly see that they are unwilling to assist us in ameliorating our position.

7.3 The Jewish Chronicle 1889
It is questionable policy on the part of poor foreigners to give an exaggerated idea of their numbers by parading through London, and thus excite further prejudice against their entire body.

7.4 Arthur Goldberg, A Jew Went Roaming (1937), writing about his childhood
My Jew-baiter was a hefty young rascal bigger than I was, who had earned something of a reputation in the neighbourhood as a bully and tormentor of Jewish boys smaller and less muscular than himself… I and some other boys were playing cricket early one evening … One of the
boys gave a mighty swipe at the ball with an improvised bat, and it fell at the feet of the tormentor. He picked it up … then coolly slipped the ball into his pocket.

‘Give me my ball, please,’ I said, pulling up in front of him … He stepped up to me menacingly.

‘Accusing me of pinchin’ yer ball, eh? You stinking, dirty Jew-kid! Yer better mind what you’re saying.’

That was more than enough to make me see red. Regardless of the size and strength of him, I shot out a fist which, more by luck than judgement, caught him full on the nose. The next moment we were at it hammer and tongs, with an ever-growing circle of pals urging us on … If I let my opponent get the better of me, life would become intolerable not only for me but for all the other Jewish lads around …

7.5 Major Evans Gordon, BBL member and Conservative MP for Stepney, in *The Alien Invasion* 56

East of Aldgate one walks into a foreign town… [The Englishmen feels] under the constant danger of being driven from his home, pushed out into the streets, not by the natural increase of our own population but by the offscum of Europe.

7.6 Arnold White*, Efficiency and Empire, 1901 57

The island of aliens in the sea of English life is small today. It is growing. Rule by foreign Jews is being set up. The best forms of our national life are already in jeopardy.

[*White was the founder of an organisation called ‘For Preventing the Immigration of Destitute Aliens.’*]

7.7 Statement by Jewish Trade Unions, 1895 58

We hope to convince our English fellow workers of the untruthfulness, unreasonableness, and want of logic contained in the cry against the foreign worker in general, and against the Jewish worker in particular. It is, and always has been, the policy of the ruling classes to attribute the sufferings and miseries of the masses (which are natural consequences of class rule and class exploitation) to all sorts of causes except the real ones. The cry against the foreigner … is international.

Everywhere he is the scapegoat for others’ sins.

7.8 A BUF pamphlet, 1937 59

Not so long ago East London was the home of British stock. The cabinet maker, polisher and tailor were Englishmen. Today the Englishman in East London is the slave of the Jewish master.

7.9 George Lansbury, Labour MP for Bow and Bromley, speaking in Parliament on 10 July 1936 60

There is, I believe, in nearly every East End district, east of Aldgate, real terror among the Jewish population … the sellers of [fascist] literature go into a market-place full of Jewish traders and use the most foul language to them … they are inciting others to attack them, and to visit their horror and spleen upon these unfortunate people.

**Thinking points**

- How successful were the tailors’ protests?
- Why would the arguments of the British Brothers League and, later, the British Union of Fascists, have been attractive to some people in East London?
- Why did direct action against the Fascists get so much local support in 1936?
- Find out about the many foods Basil Jackson refers to.

**Practice questions**

- In the 1880s, explain why the views represented in the *Jewish Chronicle* and those represented by the Unemployed Committee and the tailors’ unions were so opposed to each other.
- Of the sources in this chapter, which would be more useful to someone wanting to understand the tensions in Jewish Spitalfields?

56 Winder p256
57 Winder p257
58 University of Warwick, reproduced at https://www.ourmigrationstory.org.uk/oms/jewish-immigration-and-the-aliens-act-1905
60 Hansard, quoted in Rosenberg, *Battle for the East End* p234

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8. Number Thirteen and London’s Harlem

Nineteenth and early twentieth century East London was also the home to a small but growing number of Lascar seamen who had been working on British merchant ships. They came from many parts of the Empire – Malta, China, Cyprus, the Caribbean – and especially from Bengal in the east of British India and British Somaliland in East Africa. They worked on ships bringing tea and jute from Bengal to Britain. Some were abandoned in London, unable to return home because their contracts had ended. Others jumped ship to escape their employers. Many had to sleep rough in sheds by the docks, surviving as beggars, pedlars and street performers. They were not illegal immigrants: as subjects of the Empire they were British. Some women also came as ayahs, brought from India to work as nannies and often abandoned when no longer needed.

Earliest records of Bengalis in East London, brought from India as servants, go back to the seventeenth century. Silk – so often part of the Spitalfields story – was a reason why many young Bengali men looked for jobs at sea. Before British rule Bengal had been rich from the trade in high quality silk and cotton cloth. To boost their own exports, the British destroyed the Bengali textile trade with high taxation and cheap manufactured cotton from the UK. The silk business collapsed, causing poverty, debt and sometimes famine for families. An alternative for young men was work in the terrible conditions of ship’s boiler rooms. Nearly all these men were from Sylhet in the north of Bengal.

The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 enabled ships to travel from Asia to Europe without having to go all round southern Africa, cutting journeys by months. The entrance to the Red Sea from the Indian Ocean was guarded by two ports facing each other, Berbera in Somaliland and Aden in Yemen. The two were strongly linked and both were controlled by the British Ships docking and refuelling in Aden’s natural harbour, offered job opportunities for Somali men who had crossed the gulf.

There was an East India Company lodging house for Lascars in Shoreditch as early as 1801. Over time, local women and some former Lascars set up lodging houses for overseas seamen – there were 22 in East London by 1850 – and an Ayah’s Home at 6 Jewry Street, Aldgate, was opened in 1897. In the years after the First World War, lodging houses began to appear in the former weavers’ houses previously occupied by poor Jewish and Irish families. One was Munshi’s at 16 Elder Street.

The most famous lodging house among Bengali seamen, though, was ‘Number Thirteen’ – 13 Sandys Row, run by Ayub Ali ‘Master’ who had arrived in London in 1920 after jumping ship in the USA a year earlier. There, men could get shelter and food without charge. He also ran the Shah Jalal ‘curry café’ at 76 Commercial Street.
Ayub Ali provided lodging in properties dotted all over Spitalfields including places in Princelet Street, Old Montague Street, Wilkes Street and Heneage Street.

Men took what jobs they could – as kitchen porters, in restaurants, in the clothing trade. Life on the ships and then in the lodging houses meant they learned to cook, and around this time the first Sylheti owned Indian restaurant opened. Though it was aimed at other Bengalis, a few English people began to visit. In 1936 the first Asian general store – Taj - opened in what is now Buxton street, later moving to Brick Lane. A community was beginning to establish itself and to get organised. At the same time, Somali and Caribbean clubs and cafes appeared in the western end of Cable Street. In 1943 Ayub Ali and Shah Abdul Majid Qureshi formed the Indian Seamen’s Welfare League, making support of new arrivals more organised. In 1941 an East London Mosque was opened in a small house on Commercial Road.

Several of the men married local white working class women and began to settle. Others, especially those still working on the ships, saw London as only a temporary stage in their life. For these men, and some women, life was on the margins. Officially they were British, but – following the 1905 Aliens Act and the 1925 Coloured Alien Seamen Order which forced them to register with police – they suffered a ‘colour bar’ at a time of low immigration and high unemployment. Racism – and isolation from the wider community – were a daily reality.

This was also true on Cable Street where Somalis and other Africans and Caribbeans – many of whom had arrived as stowaways - formed a growing community that became known as ‘London’s Harlem’. The most celebrated Somali meeting place was the Rio café on Cable Street but there were also cafes on Commercial Street in Spitalfields.

At the start of the Second World War numbers were still small – under 200 Bengalis in the East End and only a few of them in Spitalfields – but Somali and Bengali Lascars were a quarter of the men serving on British merchant ships and many died on the Atlantic convoys bringing food to Britain.

After the Second World War a labour shortage would see the small group of merchant seamen joined by many, many others as Bengal became part of Pakistan and then an independent Bangladesh; and, later, as Somalis became engulfed in civil war.

Key dates

1869 The Suez Canal opened, providing job opportunities for Lascar seamen.

Sources

8.1 Ahmed Yusef
Life’s very hard, you are working for £23 a month and when you come here maybe you’ve been away for six months, maybe one year, maybe three months. You send some money back home and very small money they come to you. We wouldn’t stay here very long because when you have too many ships. You get off a ship today, you go to the Shipping Federation and tomorrow another ship.

8.2 Shah Abdul Majid Qureshi
I had one or two addresses, but they were wrongly written, they were not correct, and when I showed them to anyone, they didn’t know. I was very much disappointed, didn’t know what to do. At that time I cannot go back to my ship, because I have come here to stay … I suddenly saw a young man, about twenty-five very dark looking … he spoke to me in Sylhet dialect … I was so very glad, I held him, I embraced him. I said, ‘By good luck, at last I have found someone who can help me.’ He said, ‘You have come from the boat?’ I said, ‘Yes’. He said, ‘Come with me, I will give you shelter, I live in Mr Munshi’s house.’

8.3 Haji Kona Miah
… on the corner of Fashion Street, near the big church, that was where all the Bengali people came after leaving the ship. We stayed there, or he would put us with someone else to sleep.

… He was a very good man, he helped a lot of people, no take money, nothing. When people couldn’t speak English, he helped them. There were plenty of others after him, but nobody like him.

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61 https://www.ideastore.co.uk/local-history-online-oral-history-somali-oral-history
62 Adams p41
63 Adams pp 41-42
8.4 Mr Ashraf Hussain
Later, when they had got jobs, they would rent rooms in Ayub Ali’s house. He still used to look after them, reading and writing their letters, filling up forms, holding their money and remitting it for them.

8.5 Shah Abdul Majid Qureshi
And some of them did the peddling, they used to go from door to door with the silk clothes and different clothing … or in the streets with toffee. In the streets they used to ring a small bell and they used to attract the school children …

8.6 Mr Abdul Manan
Our great success was that thousands and thousands of our country people have come here and they don’t know that it was we few who came before. Bangladesh depends on the foreign exchange sent by our people, and it was we who started that.

8.7 Mr Abdul Malik
They came because they were poor and they wanted to make some money … There were only about ten or fifteen when I first came, and all living very far from each other. … I could have brought in my family. But I never expected to stay so long – I thought I would go back.

8.8 Shah Abdul Majid Qureshi
Haji Taslim Ali was the first one who organised the Muslim mortuary – he rented a room near the mosque. He used to pick up the dead bodies from the hospital, wash the body, and give the funeral service according to the Muslim rites …

8.9 Kathleen Warsame interviewed in 1981
The white people tolerated the seamen but there was that invisible line down Cable Street, an invisible line that no decent white family ever crossed. Because that side you were good, this side you’d gone to the Devil … no matter how good you were, you lived that side of the line so you’d gone to the Devil.

8.10 Mr Abdul Malik
I joined the ships again in this country. Three ships died under me, gone down … bombed, torpedoed, mined … I decided not to go to sea any more, and same night we heard the war was over. I finished work, came home, laughing, singing, jumping, all in the street. I think we were two or three Bengali men together.

Thinking point
• Nearly all the sources in this chapter are from oral interviews with older people in the 1980s remembering their younger lives. Think about the value of this kind of evidence. What are its strengths? Are there any problems with oral history?

Practice questions
• Explain how these small numbers of men managed to survive and support themselves.
• How useful would the sources in this chapter be for a descendant of a Lascar seaman who settled in Spitalfields, wanting to uncover their family history?
9. Shahid Minar

In 1947 India was partitioned and became the two nations of India and Pakistan, independent from Britain. Sylhet was part of East Pakistan. Calcutta (Kolkata), the port where men could previously get jobs as Lascars, was now over the border and inaccessible. Many in Sylhet faced unemployment and extreme poverty. At the same time there was a serious labour shortage in Britain. The 1948 British Nationality Act reaffirmed that they, as Commonwealth citizens, had the same rights as British citizens to enter the UK and live and work here. Young men came to work in the mills and factories of the north of England and in the East London clothing trade.

The old sweatshops of Spitalfields, some still run by Jews and others by Pakistanis, suited the new migrants. They could work for several months, sharing cheap lodgings with other men, spending very little, and save enough money to go home for a few months every year during times when demand for garments was slack. Back home, they married and started families, not expecting to settle permanently in Britain. The money they saved meant they could buy land and build houses in Sylhet.

Men lived in very crowded dwellings in conditions not so different from how Irish migrants had been forced to live previously. Used to living in spacious housing back home, they were now squashed into substandard housing, often exploited by landlords, some of whom were also Bengali.

Meanwhile the Jewish population was beginning to move out of the area. Some left voluntarily: those who had made money went to more leafy parts of north and west London. Others, especially working class Jews who could only afford council houses, were rehoused in new estates further east towards Ilford. According to a 1957 report *Family and Kinship in East London*, many were not happy to leave Spitalfields, which was becoming underpopulated.

They left a declining, ageing population alongside a remaining white working-class community, many of whom had strong Irish roots, centred to the north around Bethnal Green.

In 1962 a new law, the Commonwealth Immigrants Act, limited immigration of British subjects and citizens from the colonies and Commonwealth to those who had vouchers (work permits). This actually led to an increase in numbers coming to settle permanently. Men who went home to East Pakistan for several months risked being refused vouchers to return, so the best option was to put down roots in the UK, which meant bringing their families over. As vouchers could be given to people with a job to go to, those already here arranged jobs for friends and family from Sylhet. This *chain migration* meant that a large proportion of Spitalfields Bengalis came from only three subdivisions of Sylhet.

Then disasters hit Bengal. In 1970 a terrible cyclone killed half a million people, followed by a bloody war for independence from Pakistan in 1971. East Pakistan became the independent nation of Bangladesh. Many Spitalfields Bengalis were politically active during these years. Funds to help cyclone victims were coordinated at the East London Mosque and Toynbee Hall. During the war there were major protests in London, especially after the *kala ratri* (‘black night’) of 25 March 1971 when thousands in Dhaka were murdered by the West Pakistan army.

Men working in East London worried about their relatives’ safety. The next two decades were times of political and economic instability in Bangladesh. Many living in East London invested money to help the country rebuild. Many also made arrangements to bring their families to the UK as soon as they could afford to.

Meanwhile rising unemployment in the UK meant that it was becoming impossible to earn enough money to go back ‘home’ to settle. In 1960 over 80% of Bengali garment and restaurant workers said they did not intend to stay in the UK. Twenty years later, 89% said they did intend to stay, forced by economic realities both here and in Bangladesh. As families came to join husbands and fathers, the northern factories were closing down. Bengalis already working in the garment industry – especially leatherware – were now joined by men who came from other parts of the UK looking for work.

The work on offer was as cooks and waiters in the ‘Indian’ (but Bengali-run and owned) restaurant trade centred on Brick Lane. The growth of these ‘curry houses’ was because of several factors coming together. Spitalfields was close to the wealthy
City of London and the Bengali-run restaurants could offer cheap, tasty food to city workers. Licensing laws meant people could still drink alcohol after pubs closed, as long as they had it with food. And for waiters and cooks working till the early hours, the fact that they could live a short walk from the restaurant was a huge advantage.

However, there was a major housing problem. Council flats were the only housing most people in Spitalfields could afford. Some estates were run by Tower Hamlets Council. The Labour council allocated housing according to a ‘ladder’ system: when a flat became available, it went to whoever had been on the list longest. Allocation was not on the basis of need. This presented Bengali men with impossible choices because the rules discriminated against them.

They wanted to bring their loved ones to join them but they were living in overcrowded tenements completely unfit for families. So they applied for family housing, hoping to bring their families over when it became available. According to the council rules, the fact that their families were separated should have given them priority. But the rule did not apply if their loved ones were overseas.

Another rule also hit hard. If a man was away from the country for over three months he lost his place completely and could not apply for another year. This was disastrous for Somali men, most of whom were still working on merchant ships. Their work took them away for many months and meant they were permanently homeless with no chance of getting council housing or being joined by their families.

As a result, the council estates were nearly 100% white (a mix of English, Irish, Maltese, Jewish and Cypriot in fact) and Bengalis were living in the slum tenements, paying rent to private landlords. Faced with the choice between returning to poor prospects in Bangladesh, staying separated from family or bringing the family over without secure accommodation, more and more chose the third option.

The number of people living in one dilapidated townhouse in Princedet Street went up from 77 in 1951 to 150 in 1979. In 1980 nearly a hundred households had over twice the official level of overcrowding. The 1984 Spitalfields Health Survey reported that 30% of Bengali women complained of chronic poor health due to living conditions, with mothers worried about their children being undersized for their age and having no appetite.

But while Tower Hamlets was busy demolishing the slums, it was not building new housing. Between 1965 and 1980 the Council built no new homes at all in Spitalfields. The amount of housing was actually going down. The council wanted to move people out and attract City office development that would bring in revenue. As slums were cleared, overcrowding got worse.

When Bengalis were offered flats by Tower Hamlets, they were a long way from Spitalfields at the eastern end of the borough. But those families who did move there often suffered violent racism from neighbours. Moreover, people needed to live near Brick Lane. The small businesses of Spitalfields needed a mix of housing and workspaces with workers living close by. Restaurants needed to be in Spitalfields to catch city workers and tourists: for men leaving restaurant work in the early hours of the morning after transport shut down the journey home was long and dangerous. The garment business needed to be close to suppliers and shops of the West End and be able to respond to the fast-changing fashion business: women sewing from home had to be within reach of the sweatshops.

Meanwhile, in the early 1970s the ‘Local Committee’ which grew out of the Spitalfields Project brought together over 40 local groups and had Bengali and white residents working together to oppose developers and improve local services such as care for the elderly, youth centres and local parks.

Most of the remaining social housing in Spitalfields was run by the Greater London Council (GLC) and in the summer of 1975 homeless families took matters into their own hands. 22 adults and 50 children broke into empty GLC houses in Old Montague Street and occupied them. It was the start of the Bengali squatters’ movement, and it spread to other buildings in the area and as far as the streets south of Whitechapel Road and north of Bethnal Green Road. In some cases it was planned, in others people were squatters by accident when they found...
they had been cheated by fake landlords to pay key money for houses that were derelict. Then in February 1976 Mala Sen and Farrukh Dhondy from the Black radical group Race Today and Terry Fitzpatrick from the Squatters’ Union brought squatting families together to launch the Bengali Housing Action Group (BHAG – which means ‘tiger’ in Bengali). This was the start of Bengali direct political action in Spitalfields.

At its height the movement involved several hundred families. A new, younger generation in Spitalfields were clear that they wanted to stay and would get involved in political action to make this possible. Helal Uddin Abbas, who squatted with his parents, became BHAG Secretary at the age of 17. The squatters’ movement was directed mainly at the GLC, the main housing provider in Spitalfields. They had done some building but very little – one block and a small estate. Squatters demanded rehousing, but the Labour-controlled GLC refused.

If all immigrant groups put in a similar request it would be chaos.

Tony Judge, Labour Chair of the GLC Housing Committee

But as the movement grew, the GLC faced the fact that it could not evict families if they had nowhere to go. The empty properties would just be squatted again unless they destroyed the buildings, which would look very bad.

In 1977 the Conservatives won the GLC elections. To the squatters’ surprise, they were far more sympathetic than Labour had been. Leading Conservatives said they admired the self-help and entrepreneurial spirit of the movement. They invited BHAG to give them a list of the estates they felt were safe for Bengali families.

There have been physical attacks on Bengalis in areas of East London away from Spitalfields and it has been suggested that they need to live in a mainly Bengali area to obtain the protection which a large group of their people can provide.

Jean Tatham, Conservative Chair of Housing, GLC 1978

However, the Controller of Housing, Len Bennett, interpreted this to mean Bengali-only estates.

We might continue to meet the wishes of the Bengali community by earmarking blocks of flats or, indeed a whole estate if necessary, for their community, provided the existing tenants wish to move away and could be given the necessary transfers.

GLC Housing document, 22 May 1978

This caused an outcry from BHAG who were against what the press called a ‘ghetto plan’ that they felt would force them into poor quality housing. Their statement said:

We will not settle for segregated slums

It also angered white residents who feared they would be pushed out and told the GLC that they:

were living in the dustbin of London, and the GLC was doing nothing for the white community.

Tensions were very high, made more so by the wider political situation. At the same time as Bengali women and children were arriving, the 1973 international oil crisis and deep economic depression were hitting working-class communities. Prices were rising and so was unemployment. This encouraged the growth of the far right in the form of the openly racist and fascist National Front. They had a base in Bethnal Green where they won 10% of the vote in the October 1974 General Election. They regularly sold their paper on Brick Lane, taunting and abusing Asians. Violent racist attacks became more and more common. Schools were unsafe for Bengali children and so were the streets. Skinhead gangs targeted Asian families on estates.

In response to the rise of racism, younger Bengalis began to organise. In 1976 Race Today helped organise the Anti-Racist Committee of Asians in East London (ARCAEL) and one of their actions was a march to Leman Street police station protesting about their failure to prevent racist violence.

Forman p83
East London Advertiser, June 1978, quoted in Forman p84
Kenneth Leech, Brick Lane 1978; The Events and Their Significance (Stepney Books 1994), quoted in Glynn p124
Leech p14, quoted in Glynn p124
Forman p202
On 4 May 1978 – local election day, with the National Front standing with over 40 candidates in all Tower Hamlets wards - a 25 year old clothing machinist called Altab Ali was walking home from work when he was attacked by a gang of teenagers near St Mary’s Park and stabbed to death. He had been carrying his food shopping home and they had chased him down Brick Lane.

One of his murderers told police: ‘If we saw a Paki we used to have a go at them. We would ask for money and beat them up. I’ve beaten up Pakis on at least five occasions.’

Altab Ali’s murder is remembered as the moment that woke up the whole community to a need for action. On 14 May 7000 people, mainly Bengalis, marched behind Altab’s coffin from Brick Lane to Downing Street.

Then on Sunday 11 June, just as the media were full of the GLC’s ‘ghetto plan’ for housing, gangs of white youngsters terrorised the Brick Lane area, throwing concrete and bottles, breaking windows and damaging cars and shops. The Times reported that ‘the destruction yesterday was carried out by the largest gang to assemble to threaten Asians in that area.’ The following Sunday there was an anti-racist march of people of all backgrounds and ethnicities organised by the Anti-Nazi League. In days that followed violence continued, with racist violence often happening in side streets.

St Mary’s Park is now officially Altab Ali Park, in his memory. Within it is the Shahid Minar, a replica of a monument in Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, which commemorates five students killed in 1952 while protesting for the right to use their own Bengali language rather than the Urdu language being imposed by the Pakistani government. It represents a mother protecting her children with the red sun behind her. Its presence in the park asserts the importance of national identity and connects Bengalis here with their roots in Bangladesh and its independence struggle. Translated as ‘martyrs’ memorial’ it also resonates with the murder and all it meant for local people.

At a meeting in the Montefiore Centre on Hanbury Street on 13 June, two days after the attack on Brick Lane, GLC leaders were confronted by an alliance of Bengali and white residents and the ‘ghetto plan’ was abandoned. The squatters’ movement had succeeded in getting housing on their own terms. But there was still a long way to go. The following year three people died when substandard housing on Brick Lane caught fire. Whole areas of the East End were a danger zone for Asians. Things had to change, and they did.

75 https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-36191020
### Key dates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1948</td>
<td>The British Nationality Act gave people of the Commonwealth the right to come and work as British citizens.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1962</td>
<td>The Commonwealth Immigrants Act was the first of many laws controlling immigration from the colonies and Commonwealth. It was one of the reasons why Bengali men decided to stay and bring over their wives and children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>The war for independence led to the formation of independent Bangladesh.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>The Bengali squatters' movement began.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1978</td>
<td>Altarb Ali was murdered.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Sources

9.1 **Number of Bengali families in Wentworth Dwellings**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

9.2 **Charlie Forman**

It was this amalgamation of organisations – from mosque, church and synagogue, Bengali youth groups and white youth clubs, the white tenants’ groups and the Bengali co-ops, the careworkers for the elderly and the support workers for Bengali pregnant women – which was the backbone of the Committee. In one combination or another it is these groups which have had to confront the pressures mounting up against Spitalfields. At its heart was a new community, wanting to see its children growing up and working in the area … And those qualities made the Spitalfields communities very hard to beat.

9.3 **Helal Uddin Abbas interviewed in 2001**

[BHAG] wasn’t a group of radical activists who had an agenda against any particular political grouping. What we were saying is, that this is a group of people who are not currently being catered for by your local authority, which you have a legal obligation to [do]. You should listen to them. If you don’t listen to them you will pay a price for it.

9.4 **A member of the white Collinwood gang, interviewed in 1972**

Now, you realise that it is a serious thing to take someone’s life, but then you didn’t think it was taking a life, you thought that it was a Paki, and that didn’t matter.

9.5 **Caroline Adams, youth worker, 1979**

ARCAEL and the activity around it transformed the consciousness of many young people … The Bengali community had come of age and could no longer be patronised or ignored, at least not without a comeback.

9.6 **Ansar Ahmed Ullah, interviewed in 2000**

Many of us witnessed the war [for Bangladesh in 1971] or saw the political movement before the war and were very much aware of political movements and what they can do in order to campaign for your rights … And they probably felt the same when they came here. They felt like it’s déjà vu … we are being attacked, we can’t get jobs, we’re not given decent housing. As a community we’re kind of looked down on, that kind of stuff.

9.7 **Shams Uddin, Altab Ali’s friend**

When Altab Ali lost his life we didn’t feel like we had a choice any more, we had to fight back if we were to survive…. The blood of Altab Ali made us realise we couldn’t ignore it, or who would be next?

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77 Information in these two sources and the following paragraph taken from Forman pp88, 60-61
78 Spitalfields – a battle for land (Hilary Shipman 1989) p67
79 Glynn p123
81 The Spitalfields Bengali Action Group and the Kobi Nazrul Centre 1974-78’ (Avenues Unlimited 1979), quoted in Leech, Brick Lane 1978 p22 and Glynn p126
82 Glynn p127
83 https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-36191020

© OCR 2019
9.8 Suroth Ahmed, interviewed 2006

I came to Britain in 1972. …we had the mindset that we, the Asian and the Bengali people don’t have the right to be here. We are here to work, not to demand any rights of our own. We have to hide ourselves from the white racist, we have to be indoors after sunset, and we have to group together to be safe … But after the killing of Altab Ali, the scenario was completely different … We never expected such huge numbers of people would come out to protest the killing … And I believe we never ever were unconscious of our rights after that. The Bengali people developed after that incident day by day … It was like the people were sleeping, unaware of their rights and dignity, suddenly something woke them all; they begin to realise their power of unity and so on.

Thinking points

• In what ways were younger Bengalis different from their elders in their approach to living here, and why?

Practice questions

• Explain why it was difficult for Bengali families to get housing.

• Explain how Bengalis responded to the housing crisis in Spitalfields.

• Which of the sources in this chapter are most useful for someone wanting to understand the rising tensions in Spitalfields in the 1970s?

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Interview by Swadhinata Trust and University of Surrey, Glynn p128
10. We can grasp our rights

Charlie Forman, a housing and community activist in Spitalfields in the 1980s, wrote this description of the area he knew thirty years ago:

It’s Friday. There’s a queue in the take-away cafes for the meat pancake ketlama, cooked only once a week. Someone pushed his way out with an armful of polystyrene cups of steaming tea and vegetable samosas, carried in a cut-down cardboard box, which he uses as a tray. He heads back to the other machinists in his workshop. They’re on piece rates, there’s no time for anyone else to stop and have a break.

The doors of the mosque fly open. Men burst out into the frosty street and the flow of those leaving prayer is traced in the crowds by the bobbing of their white skull caps, called tokis. Some of the men filter past the wicker baskets of vegetables into the New Taj Stores for the weekend shopping. As ever, the shop is packed. Someone is explaining with intricate gestures how he wants his fish cut up. Others from the mosque pass the shops by and gather round the knots of people at the talking corners of Princelet Street and Hanbury Street.

A woman wearing a cardigan over her sari reaches the bottom of her tenement staircase and turns out from Hanbury Street against the flow from the mosque. Her daughter holds her hand, walking slowly, wearing her knee-length skirt over her long trousers. They cross the road, past old Weinberg the printers, where until recently metal letters were still laid out waiting for a compositor. Next door, the black-hatted orthodox Jews sort their bales of cloth.


The Brick Lane Great Synagogue was by then a mosque, the Jamme Masjid. Clothing workshops still existed, but they were part of a business in decline. Trumans Brewery, that always had a mainly white workforce, was closing. The north end of Brick Lane was an area of decaying shops and flea markets. In the south, though, there was a new energy. It was a Bengali heartland and the restaurant trade was starting to boom.

Altab Ali’s murder was a turning point. For Bengalis, Spitalfields was no longer a place they would be in for a time before moving on. It was home and had to be fought for. In the 1980s younger Bengalis became active politically. While their elders were still absorbed by events in Bangladesh, they immersed themselves in UK politics. Bengali youth and community organisations such as the Bangladesh Youth Movement became highly organised and adept at getting funding for their activities. Many other groups sprang up to provide support for people dealing with racism, employment, education and health.

The Jagonari Women’s Centre was one of several organisations providing a springboard for girls and women. The Kobi Nazrul Centre opened as a hub for arts and culture. Bengali activists were at the forefront of organisations such as the Tower Hamlets Association for Racial Equality and many became active in the Labour Party. In 1985 Helal Uddin Abbas – who had been a teenage squatter – became the first Bengali councillor to represent Spitalfields. Like many of those who now entered mainstream party politics, his ideas were formed through grassroots action on housing and against racism.

By the mid 1980s the National Front had been chased off the streets of Spitalfields by Bengali youth and anti-racist organisations, who often confronted them directly, and Brick Lane was a fairly safe area. But overt, violent racism against Bengalis was still rife, especially on housing estates with majority white residents.

In the early 1990s some of the hostilities and insecurities of the ‘70s returned. In a 1993 ward byelection a member of the far-right racist British National Party was elected as a Tower Hamlets councillor after a campaign blaming Asians for the housing problems faced by white residents. A group of women realised that many Bengali women had not voted. When the full council elections came round the following year, they got organised.

There was a lot of intimidation going on so people didn’t come out to vote. … We saw that a lot of the anti-racist organisations and movements were very male dominated and very egotistical. I don’t think it was a very encouraging or supportive environment for women. The meetings weren’t held at times

86 Spitalfields- a battle for land (Hilary Shipman 1989) p1
or places where women could really attend. So as a group of women from different nationalities and different backgrounds, we decided to form an organisation ourselves, and we came together as a group called Women Unite Against Racism. … We wanted to ensure that women who wanted to vote, could vote and get to those polling stations. And so our aim was to make sure that women felt safe to do that. So we would provide escorts to a polling station, be present at hotspots so if there were going to be BNP people around, that we would try and provide safety or company for the women.

Julie Begum, Women Unite Against Racism

The BNP councillor lost his seat.

Housing was the major issue to address and the problem was the ‘ladder’ system of allocations which favoured long term residents. Most council housing was still overwhelmingly white. Bengali housing activists, along with many poorer white residents, argued that housing should be allocated according to need. Other white residents, some of whom had been waiting for years, saw this as unfair queue-jumping by newly-arrived families. In most cases, though, Bengali fathers had been struggling for years to bring their families over, unable to put them on the list until they arrived.

The real problem was that Tower Hamlets Council was not building new houses. This was true both of Labour and of the Liberals who took over from them in 1986. The Liberal council tried actively to prevent family reunion. Their ‘sons and daughters’ policy – giving housing to the children of those already in council flats - aimed to make it even harder for Bangladeshi families to be housed. There was even a threat - carried out - to put homeless families on a ship moored in the Thames. Meanwhile, families were being farmed out to appalling conditions in hotels in north and west London. For wives and children, these hotels were often their first experience of the UK. Children would start in schools far from Spitalfields, not knowing how long they would be there.

There was also a battle with the GLC, the main housing provider in Spitalfields. A 1988 report was damning about racist allocations policy being carried out by officers. In a mass meeting at the Brady Centre – with Bengali women organising minibuses to bring families from the hotels – the GLC leader Ken Livingstone was challenged about racist allocations and agreed to set up a new Race and Housing Action Team, led by Nazia Khatun, which lasted until the GLC was abolished in 1986.

Meanwhile the growth of housing associations and housing cooperatives – often with strong local involvement – meant that more and more houses were being built in Spitalfields. The areas the council had originally cleared for office development now went mainly to housing for local people thanks to this organised community action.

The SHA began in 1979 when ten low paid workers living in the Wentworth Dwellings tenement got together and formed a cooperative. It is now the biggest Bangladeshi-run housing association in the UK.

Audio interview at https://londonagainstracism.wordpress.com/films/julie-begum/
In the 1980s and 90s councils of all political parties tried to disperse and divide working class people, force Bengalis into designated areas, undercut the clothing industry, sell land and promote office development. In response, an alliance of local Bengali and white residents managed to resist dispersal, develop their own industries, organise the homeless, break open racist allocation policies, stop the sale of land, challenge office developers and get over 1,000 new rented homes built.

Bengali businesses were also transforming Brick Lane. The number of Bengali-owned restaurants and cafes rose from 10 in 1997 to 46 in 2003. This was now the biggest concentration of ‘Indian’ restaurants in the UK and the area was thriving. In 1999 Brick Lane was officially renamed ‘Banglatown’ by the Council. For councillors this was a drive to copy Soho’s Chinatown and attract tourists, while residents also saw it as an opportunity to create a distinct space in the street and its buildings. ‘Banglatown’ affirmed the permanent presence of a settled community and a distinct and proud Bengali cultural identity. Meanwhile Bengali involvement in politics grew. At Council level, two former Spitalfields councillors, Lutfur Rahman and Helal Uddin Abbas, became Leaders of Tower Hamlets Council. In early 2019 just over half the councillors were Bengali.

By having a higher concentration of Bangladeshis in a borough like Tower Hamlets, people felt we had the numbers, we had the influence to bring about change. … By having a Bengali leader now on the council, I think we are sending very clear messages about equality … but also able to demonstrate that as a Bengali leader you can represent not only the Bangladeshi community.

Helal Uddin Abbas

Tower Hamlets local politics has had its share of scandals, with councillors accused of using old village networks and getting community leaders to deliver votes. The young activists of a generation ago became the power politicians of the early 2000s and many Bangladeshis became disillusioned with them. The war in Iraq brought a collapse in support for Labour and, for a time, Respect (an alliance of Muslim groups and groups on the left) won both the Parliamentary and Mayoral elections. But in 2015 Mayor Lutfur Rahman was removed from office on corruption charges.

Many of the people who were the first to support me and stand up for me were people of my father’s generation, the kind of elders, if you like … I was so impressed, and actually just totally inspired by their ability to stand up to people who were peddling just absolute garbage about me.

Rushanara Ali MP

Key dates
1991 The civil war in Somalia began.

Sources
10.1 Report to Tower Hamlets Housing Committee, February 1987, describing the experiences of Bengali residents on some local estates

Verbal abuse, spitting, physical assault by stabbing, kicking, punching. Shooting with airguns, throwing stones, eggs, sticks, using iron bars; criminal damage to property, e.g. windows being broken, doors damaged, burning material being put through letter boxes, cars damaged; excreta, stink bombs and rubbish being pushed through letter boxes, rubbish dumped on doorsteps,

Claire Alexander

Interviewed in 2012, Glynn p162

Interviewed in 2012, Glynn p163

Forman p208
washing vandalized or stolen, graffiti daubed on doors or walls, banging on doors, thumping on ceilings; dogs, cars, motorcycles, knives, petrol bombs, shot guns and threatening letters have also been used to frighten the victims.

10.2 Charlie Forman. 1989

…. ‘Need’ is a difficult thing to define. How do you compare the needs of a family of six renting one private room that has no kitchen or hot water with a single-parent council tenant on a one-bedroom flat on the top floor of a block without a lift? Both families will be desperate. On the other hand, it would not be sensible to leave a pensioner couple in a four-bedroom flat which they were given 30 years before when they had five children.

10.3 Letter to the East London Advertiser 1982

Please try and remember there are still English people living in the East End and we have always been here. So fair’s fair. Let everyone work their way up the housing ladder.

10.4 Letter to the East London Advertiser 1983

We’re sick and tired of priority being given to coloured people who have not lived in the East End for long. Our children are being forced to find homes outside the borough and our families are splitting up as they watch a steady stream of coloured people moving into flats and houses.

10.5 Jeremy Shaw, Liberal councillor, November 1991

Tower Hamlets is full to bursting, and … for anyone to leave Bangladesh and come to Tower Hamlets and expect the Council to house them is totally irresponsible – both to their own families and to the rest of the community.

10.6 Tower Hamlets homeless families in hotels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Number of Families</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>June 1980</td>
<td>26 families</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 1983</td>
<td>166 families</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 1986</td>
<td>928 families</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

10.7 Dr Deborah Phillips, researcher into GLC Housing allocations from 1983 to 1984

A disturbing level of racist comment and joking was witnessed by the researcher. Bengalis in particular were commonly stereotyped as dirty, trouble makers, and causing problems on estates … Several officers… offered remarkably similar solutions, that is, to put all the Bengalis together in E1 and to allocate them to poorer estates; their view was that they would turn them into slums anyway.

10.8 Charlie Forman. 1989

By putting people you have chosen to discriminate against in the worst housing, it perpetuates the myth that these people actually create bad housing conditions. The system will only work at all, so long as there is a constant supply of new housing coming on tap, into which people at the top of the ladder can move. … The system ensures that people on different rungs of the ladder will start arguing among themselves, rather than recognising their common enemy – the State – which has coldly decided to stop providing affordable housing for the working class at all.

Thinking points

- Why did the ‘ladder system’ of housing allocation seem fairer to many white residents, while allocation according to need seemed fairer to Bengali residents?

Practice questions

- Explain how Bengali families managed to gain access to housing.
- Which sources in this chapter are most useful for someone wanting to explain the housing issues in the 1980s?
- Which sources in this chapter are most useful for a writer wanting to explain the changes in Spitalfields over the last thirty years?
11. Desh or bidesh? Fish and chips or bastoo iyo bariis?

Although British Somalis are one of London’s largest communities and have had a long history in the East End, it is hard to uncover their stories. They were often not identified as Somali in the archives. The terms ‘coloured’ or ‘negroes’ were frequently used to identify Somali people. Veiled within the archive, researchers are finding that it was not just Somali seafaring men that made Spitalfields and the East End their home. The untold story of Somali women lies veiled within the archive.

In the 1990s big changes affected the Somali community. In 1960 the newly independent Somalia had brought together two territories previously colonised by Britain and Italy. In the early 90s a terrible civil war forced many people to flee and arrive as refugees in many countries including the UK. While most of the earlier Somali immigrants had been working class seafarers, many of the new arrivals were middle class with professional backgrounds. They included significant numbers of women and children. Mothers who had had professional careers in Somalia - and some of whom had lost their husbands in war - were often the driving force in the community.

Contrasting first impressions of East London

Yurub Farah

It felt like I am in my city actually because there was so many Somalis around, so many Arab nations, so I didn’t feel any disadvantage because I was feeling, wow, everyone’s there, you can go there … I found friends, I found some families … I didn’t feel any problem with staying in Tower Hamlets.

Ruqiya Egeh

Old, dirty, lots of people, I didn’t like the market. I had high expectations, I thought going to Europe is going to be big roads, beautiful buildings … It was strange … not that much far away from a mini Africa, but a little bit more advanced. I hated Whitechapel area … but I was connected to the vegetables they were selling. It was something I’d seen in Somalia, the tomato, the coriander and all these spices. … It grew on me. I loved it later on … I just became an East Londoner.

Central to the lives of most Bengalis and Somalis is their Muslim identity. The striking new, state-of-the-art East London Mosque opened in 1985 on Whitechapel Road. In 2004 the London Muslim Centre opened next door, to be joined by the Maryam Centre for girls and women in 2013. It is the biggest mosque in the UK.
Everybody was quite apprehensive that the project was so large, did we have the people who would use the mosque, and it’s going to cost so much, can we afford to do it? And it was one brave uncle who said, ‘no, no, of course we can do it, our people will help us’. And then they turned to the community, obviously everybody was like ‘yes, of course, we’re all behind it.’

Maheera Ruby, 2018

They have a separate place for women. It’s a big place. All kinds of communities go there, not only Sylhetis, not only Bengalis, but all kinds of communities.

Rimi talking about East London Mosque

The mosque is active in community work through organisations such as the Young Muslim Organisation, Jamaat-e-Islami and Muslimaat for women. These organisations offer the Islamic community as a positive alternative to drugs and crime.

They talked to me about Islam. What is Islam? Islam is a way of life … After that I suppose I had role models. I saw in YMO … people who were lawyers, teachers and so on. These role models gave you a motivation; you want to be like them … we can look up to them, because we know that they were once taking drugs and in gangs and doing other things … One of the fundamentals of Islam is to bring about change, change for the benefit of everyone … The best way to make a change in the community is to do something and be something.

Nazmul, talking in 2000

In the heart of Spitalfields is the Brick Lane Jamme Masjid. This beautiful building, previously a church and a synagogue, was consecrated as a mosque in 1976 and is especially loved as a guardian of Bengali cultural traditions. It is also proud of its multifaith history as a place bringing the immediate community together.

In Brick Lane Mosque, I find Islam in the spirit that most of the people from my country like - for example, folk-based Islam or Sufism. In this tradition, the people do not use the mosque for politics, they think of it as a sacred place. They use it simply for prayer.

Momin Ahmed, talking about Brick Lane Mosque

The mosque has strong links with the Bangladesh Welfare Association, which dates back to 1954 and gives welfare rights advice, and with the Swadhinata Trust that works with young people to promote Bengali and East London history and heritage.

In the early twenty first century some Bengalis were attracted to more fundamental political Islam, which claimed to offer a radical alternative to socialism and capitalism and, for some young people, perhaps a way of breaking away from conservative Bengali traditions – a chance to feel they were ‘making history’ in the way that antiracists were in the 1970s. ‘Radicalisation’ attracted young people who
felt alienated by media stereotyping of Muslims as ‘terrorists’. Alternatively, many others from the younger generation have moved in a more secular, socially liberal ‘Westernised’ direction, rejecting traditional values about relationships and family. Most, though, negotiate various ways to be true to their Bengali, Islamic and British identities with room for all. At some point in the 1990s, too, young British Asian style, with its crossover identity, became fashionable – represented in East London by the Asian Underground club scene and musicians such as Joi Bangla, Talvin Singh, State of Bengal and Asian Dub Foundation.

Meanwhile, problems remain. Poverty levels, unemployment rates and crime are still high and some young people from all communities drift into the enticing but dangerous world of drugs and gangs. Issues of hate crime have arisen. In 2011 posters announcing a ‘gay free zone’ appeared in the area, quoting a verse from the Qur’an. While these were roundly condemned, life in Spitalfields can be hard to negotiate for people of LGBTQ+ identity. In the tradition of self organisation, in 2017 East London LGBT Bangladeshis set up Apanjon which offers support to people within the community here and also campaigns for justice and equality in Bangladesh. In the past decade, in an environment of rising Islamophobia, the far right has targeted Muslims and this has deepened tensions in the area. In 2013 the English Defence League was prevented by court action (and huge opposition) from marching through the area.

There is also the issue of the latest immigrants to the area, the ‘gentrifiers’. There are two distinct gentrification stories in Spitalfields, and both raise complex questions.

The first concerns the old Huguenot townhouses between Brick Lane and Commercial Street. Back in the 1970s they were in a state of disrepair. Some were empty, some had multiple occupancy and some housed businesses such as textile works and minicab offices. There were plans by British Land to demolish them and use the land for offices. A group of young white women and men, squatting in Elder Street, formed the Spitalfields Historic Buildings Trust in 1977. They recognised the streets’ architectural value and managed to prevent the developers from obliterating them. They bought up a few properties such as 27 Fournier Street, renovated them and sold them to buyers. Since then, as property prices have risen, these houses have become highly desirable for people who can afford them: successful artists and city business people who can walk to work from Spitalfields. Gentrification of the Huguenot town houses has gathered pace. The streets are elegant but largely silent. Houses are attainable only for the very wealthy. This area now feels very disconnected from the communities living on the Chicksand Estate and shopping at Banglatown Cash and Carry.

While the ‘look’ of the Huguenot streets has returned with some beauty, the tradition of the townhouses as homes and workplaces – started by Huguenots and carried on by Jews and Bengalis – has gone. Some argue that their true character has been lost. When 27 Fournier Street was bought the Bengali families and clothing businesses renting space had to leave. These houses could, activists argued in the 1980s, have been perfect for large Bengali homeless families.

The rich … can afford to live elsewhere. The Bengalis of the catering and clothing trades can’t. They don’t have a choice. They must live in the area to survive. If the Bengalis do move on, it won’t be because they are trying to better themselves as the Jews did. It will be because the East End will have ‘bettered itself’ to the point where working-class people can no longer afford it.

Charlie Forman, 1989

In response, conservationists would argue that the only realistic alternative – the developers’ wrecking ball – would have been far worse and an important link with our migration history, along with beautiful buildings, would have been lost. The other version of gentrification is happening on the northern end of Brick Lane around the Old Truman’s brewery and on towards Bethnal Green Road. Here the club scene of Shoreditch has its outlays with the ‘hipster’ world of vintage clothes shops, independent cafes, music shops and ‘artisan’ chocolate. It began with the regeneration of Bethnal Green cityside in the early 2000s and is bringing a new, younger, moneyed crowd to the area which buzzes till late at night.

Traces of a Jewish shop front on Fournier Street
In 2015 rioters attacked the Cereal Killer café, seeing it as a symbol of an attack on working class communities. One protester said

> We don’t want luxury flats that no one can afford, we want genuinely affordable housing. We don’t want pop-up gin bars or brioche buns, we want community.

In response, the Northern Irish owners of the café said

> If you want to talk about gentrification and different classes, you don’t go about attacking independent businesses who are putting their whole life on the line to open a business, you go to the conglomerates and big companies.¹⁰⁵

Meanwhile the threat from City planners remains. The campaign to prevent destruction of much of the old Spitalfields Market failed when Tower Hamlets Council, supported by the City of London Corporation, sold it to developers and now chain restaurants have replaced local independent traders. Gigantic blocks of offices and student flats loom over the Petticoat Lane Market. While local Bengalis looking for market produce will now head for Whitechapel, that street market may see huge changes with the opening of Crossrail and the new Town Hall in the old Royal London Hospital building.

As for the heart of Bengali Spitalfields, the restaurant boom is drying up. The ‘Banglatown’ project was poorly funded and had no teeth: now the Banglatown arch has seen better days. People can buy Indian meals in their supermarkets and the traditional curry houses find it hard to compete with new fashions for global street food on the one hand, and high-end dining on the other. Locals have had to diversify: the new sushi bar may well have the same Bangladeshi owner as the curry café it replaced.

A building that has lived the changes over the past hundred years is 46 Brick Lane. Jews remember it as the Mayfair cinema; for Bengalis it was Naz café; now it is becoming a bijou hotel. Perhaps it is a symbol of change as much as the mosque down the Lane.

Will Bengalis stay - or move on as the Jews, Irish and Huguenots did? Many are already leaving because they want to buy their own homes but can’t afford to live in Spitalfields. Of those who have prospered, some leave and some stay.

Internal and external tensions may be too much. But the community is heavily invested in the area culturally, politically and economically. They have a strong presence close to the centre of London. The quality of health and education services is high: Tower Hamlets has some of the best performing schools in the whole country, although the fact that many schools are nearly 100% Bengali may make integration difficult.

Bengali culture has always valued the arts and Bengali theatre, poetry, music and visual arts are flourishing. The annual Boishakhi Mela in July – starting with a parade down Brick Lane – is the biggest Bengali festival outside South Asia.

Some argue that the creation of a strong and – to some extent – separate Bengali community has made it possible to thrive and grow in safety and confidence, taking the best of British while keeping the best of being Bengali. Others feel Whitechapel and Spitalfields are a ghetto trapping people – especially women – and holding back social equality.

And how do the very young see themselves? Is ‘home’ completely here or does the place family came from represent home in some way? Young British Somalis jokingly call those still immersed in their Somali identity ‘bastoo iyo bariis’ (pasta and rice) while their Westernised friends are ‘fish and chips’. And, of course, it was Jewish immigrants who gave us the battered fried fish in our ‘national’ dish! In 2009 the Bangla Stories project asked primary school children about the Bengali words desh (home) and bidesh (foreign place). (The names are not the children’s real ones, just ones they chose to be known by.)

Q: Where is your desh?
Max: I’d say Bangladesh.

Q: What, your bidesh?
Max: My home is England … that’s my bidesh.

Q: So your desh is Bangladesh?
Max: Yeah.

Q: What does desh mean? Is it home?
Max: Yeah.

Q: And what does bidesh mean?
Max: Bidesh means home and desh means away.

Q: Are you sure? I thought it was the other way round … I may be wrong, I thought that desh was your home and bidesh was away.
Max: I dunno.

Q: Ok … let’s say where is … home is England?
Max: And away is Bangladesh. I got family in there that I don’t really get to see … Once in a blue moon.

Ted: My ‘away’ is here.106

For people with a migration memory still resonant in their family, perhaps there is no easy distinction between ‘home’ and ‘away’.

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106 From a research project in two East London primary schools by Katy Gardner and Kanwal Mand, University of Sussex, described in http://www.banglastories.org/home-and-away/where-is-home-where-is-away.html
Sources

11.1 Rushanara Ali MP\textsuperscript{107}

I’m first and foremost British, I was brought up here, and I have Bengali origin and heritage, and I was born in Bangladesh. So I have strong connections with my country of birth, and I’m very proud of that … I meet a lot of parents who say to me that they find it really helpful to be able to say to their children, look, if she can go and be an MP, then anything is possible. … But obviously, as you know, as a member of Parliament, a third of my constituents are of Muslim origin, majority Bangladeshi, the rest of my constituents are from other communities, white middle class, white working class, Somali. So I’m not a representative of one community

11.2 Ruqiya Egeh\textsuperscript{108}

I’ve done all sorts of jobs starting from being a cleaner because I can’t speak the language, to working in a hospital when I finished my degree. I trained as a phlebotomist, then came back to the community because I felt there was a need to help people with language. … I’m working now with the Somali elderly as a sheltered key manager. I felt like my school gave me a lot of support which helped me develop, and I was keen because I was coming to a different country. I think if I was back in Somalia I would not have achieved what I’ve done here. I would like to get rid of the negative thought of the violence in Somalia … these kind of things can get to you … I always think I will go back one day, I don’t want my children to forget their identity, but … I feel as a people we can have a positive impact in Tower Hamlets, and we are part of Tower Hamlets so this is home.

11.3 Zahra Hassan\textsuperscript{109}

Tower Hamlets became clean. All the old properties gone or repaired, more habitable now. … Some of the other ethnic minorities like Bengalis educated, they have got very high positions and good jobs. When I moved twenty years ago they were like us, but they moved forward. Unfortunately the Somalis are where, twenty years ago, the Bengalis were.

11.4 Mostaq Ahmed\textsuperscript{110}

Once Brick Lane was an outdated area – it had tailoring factories. Now you don’t see any tailoring factories, Instead, you see curry houses on the main street. But I don’t know where we’re going with this trend. In future it will be difficult for us to survive … 15 years ago, you wouldn’t have found anyone but Bengalis; now 50% of Bengalis have moved away … that has been the major change.

11.5 Mobarak Hossain\textsuperscript{111}

Now Brick Lane is two minutes away from my house, but I don’t think I go there more than once every six months. It’s a place of curry houses. There is no room for adda (chatting with friends) … It seems to me there is no Bengali culture in Brick Lane any more, only curry houses … So I do not find it interesting to go there.

11.6 Fatama Khanam\textsuperscript{112}

I used to have my friends … they’ve all moved out. There’s no one there and, well all the people I used to play with when I was young, we used to spend a lot of the time together in the area, we used to go out and about, we used to go to the farm, to explore the area itself. We used to get up to so many things … A lot of them have gone, moved out … ‘cos like, housing was a problem for them. Before there was extended families around the area itself … But nowadays you’ll find only single people moving into the area with a partner, couples with … 2 kids, young kids. It’s not the same anymore.

\textsuperscript{107} Speaking in January 2012, Glynn p155
\textsuperscript{108} https://www.ideastore.co.uk/local-history-online-oral-history-somali-oral-history
\textsuperscript{109} https://www.ideastore.co.uk/local-history-online-oral-history-somali-oral-history
\textsuperscript{110} http://www.banglastories.org/about-the-project/the-locations/tower-hamlets.html
\textsuperscript{111} http://www.banglastories.org/about-the-project/the-locations/tower-hamlets.html
\textsuperscript{112} Interviewed in 2006 by Kim Stokes and Nicola Weinfass for Eastside Community Heritage
Thinking points

This chapter raises questions about ‘mixed’ identities. The streets have seen continual change, as have the people who passed through. Much to think about...

• How similar is ‘Banglatown’ to the Jewish East End of a century before?

• How does the relatively unacknowledged archival evidence of Somalis and their families impact the way the Somali community is viewed today? How do you feel this affects their children and grandchildren?

• Have the two gentrifications – of the Huguenot townhouses and the northern end of Brick Lane – been a positive or negative change?

• Spitalfields rose in the eighteenth century then fell sharply in the nineteenth. In the twentieth it rose as the heart of a Jewish community, declined after the Second World War then rose again to become a Bengali heartland. As it faces change yet again, is it rising or falling?

• Is Max confused about bidesh and desh – home and away – or is he saying something profound? When we migrate, at what point does ‘home’ stop being where we came from and start being where we are? When do we become ‘fish and chips’? Or, just as fish and chips came from elsewhere and changed what we thought of as British food, do we change the place we come to as much as it changes us?

Practice questions

• Explain how Spitalfields is changing today.

• How useful are the sources in this chapter for someone wanting to understand the current migration story of Spitalfields?
Notes for teachers

This pack provides materials to enable teachers to plan and deliver a ten-hour course for students.

IMPORTANT: There is far more material here than schools will need. Working on the assumption that schools do not have easy access to Spitalfields migration history, the author has provided enough material for no other research to be needed. Schools are not expected to use all the resources here: teachers will need to plan a course to fit their own requirements, using selected material as they see fit. It will be possible to design a whole unit using only some materials from the pack, though of course teachers should feel free also to look elsewhere. We give many suggestions of where to look.

The pack tells a (very roughly) chronological story. These are supported by contemporary sources, as well as other recommended resources, many with direct hyperlinks to helpful sites online. **Thinking points** encourage students to reflect, while chapters end with **practice questions** which are structured similarly to the questions in the OCR exam.

In this section for teachers there are ideas of different ways to approach the unit; a suggested walking tour if you manage a visit (or an online wander); and additional **notes and resources** at the end of the pack with further information and other available resources you may wish to use.

The area known as Spitalfields is a settlement that grew up outside the north eastern walls of the City of London and eventually became part of the East End of the London metropolis. Its borders are not easy to define. The nineteenth century Spitalfields parish and today's Spitalfields and Banglatown Ward cover a much smaller area than the Spitalfields of the 1680s which included much of what is now Bethnal Green, Shoreditch, Whitechapel and Mile End. For anyone studying the movement of people, boundaries are not so clear: events and trends spread beyond. The area focused on for this study stretches approximately from Bishopsgate in the west to Vallance Road in the east, and from Whitechapel Road in the south to Bethnal Green Road in the north.

Use of terms

We have used the term ‘Bengali’ to describe those with family origins in Bangladesh, though many would prefer to refer to themselves as ‘Bangladeshi’. However, as this history includes the time when what is now Bangladesh was part of India and then Pakistan, we have kept the term ‘Bengali’ for all periods to avoid confusion. While this community is predominantly Muslim, we recognise that there are smaller communities of Hindu Bengalis in Spitalfields, some of whom originate in West Bengal (part of India); and that many Bangladeshis regard wider Bengali culture in both West Bengal and Bangladesh as part of their heritage.
Planning the course

Here are three of many possible approaches.

A. **An approach focused on the key skills for the exam:** understanding how and why migrations and events happened and assessing the value of sources, including evidence in the built environment. Keep the basic framework of the pack. Decide when to give students text to read and when to explain to them or to let them elicit stories from their interrogation of sources.

B. **An approach with a structure similar to the layout of the exam specification,** taking in turn each of the following:

- **When did immigrants arrive, why and from where? How were they received by the settled population?**
- **What were the key events in the migration history of Spitalfields?**
- **What was their impact? How has Spitalfields been shaped by its migration history?**

This allows a more thematic overview rather than a step by step chronological narrative. Select sources and explanatory text from this pack that reflect these themes. Use some of the practice questions from the pack.

C. **A more holistic, creative, project-based approach.** Spend a couple of lessons sharing key points of the history with students to give them a basic framework, then give them creative challenges that will force them to study deeply and to select and judge the value of sources. Suggested examples:

- Students create a Spitalfields tourist guidebook that focuses on its migration and multicultural history.
- Two opposing teams prepare evidence for a debate on an underlying question.
- Using still photos and sources in the pack, and possibly clips found online, studies create a 5 minute film history, each group of students focusing on a particular period.
- Students write and perform a scripted play telling the story of Spitalfields.
- Students select material from the pack for an exhibition in which they address each of the five questions listed in (B) above.
- Students have to select a restricted number of sources (five, perhaps?) that they think tell key aspects of the story over the whole period, and defend their choice.
Notes and resources

General

http://spitalfieldslife.com/ is a treasure trove of Spitalfields riches, changing every day and with an archive of over 3,000 pages. In the sections below on each chapter there are links strongly recommended by the author, many of which provide exceptional photographs for you to share with students.

Chapter 1

Links

* The medieval charnel house: http://spitalfieldslife.com/2015/07/01/inside-spitalfields-oldest-building/
* An artist’s impression of the Hospital of St Mary and surrounding buildings: https://www.spitalfieldsforum.org.uk/history/

Notes

* For more on Evil May Day, go to https://www.ourmigrationstory.org.uk/oms/londons-evil-may-day-riots
* We know Luisa’s story from her own letters and the accounts of her friends. Remains of the Brick House were also found during the excavations in the 1990s. Doña Luisa also collected religious relics and body parts from martyrs who had been hanged, drawn and quartered. In one case a man sent to find the body of an executed monk found it buried under the bodies of other criminals. One body fell onto him, spraying his face with rotting bits. The site of the chapel where the body parts were kept is now an Italian restaurant. If you fly Iberia to Spain, look out for Luisa: one of their Airbuses is named after her.

* Mary Fillis’s story, along with nine other Africans in Tudor England, is told in Black Tudors by Miranda Kaufmann (OneWorld 2017).

* As this chapter focuses so much on women it seems appropriate to mention that Mary Wollstonecraft was born in Spitalfields in 1759.

Chapter 2

Links

Video: The Legacy of the Huguenots in London https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wa5-9l5YiqQ

* The artist Adam Dant has created a wonderful map showing the Huguenot families who lived in Spitalfields: http://spitalfieldslife.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Huguenots-of-Spitalfields-Map-by-Adam-Dant1.jpg
* For more on the Huguenots of Spitalfields see:

  http://spitalfieldslife.com/2013/04/14/the-huguenots-of-spitalfields/
  http://eastldn.co.uk/2016/06/15/the-immigrants-of-spitalfields/
  https://www.exodus2013.co.uk/the-silk-weavers-of-spitalfields/
  https://www.migrationmuseum.org/tag/spitalfields/

  * www.huguenotsofspitalfields.org has a range of resources on the Huguenot story. Created for primary schools, they therefore provide some basic, easy-access information – mainly about why and how they came, and about the process of silk weaving.

  * You can read more about Canary-birds … in an illuminating article by Dr Tessa Murdoch at https://www.ourmigrationstory.org.uk/oms/huguenot-silk-weavers-in-spitalfields.

  It is nuanced – in the poem, while native birds oppose the French canaries, migratory sea birds argue they should be accepted. In the poem, the native city birds win they day: in Parliament, they didn’t.

  * For anyone interested in art and design, or in overlooked histories of significant women, Anna Maria Garthwaite stands out. She wasn’t Huguenot – she came from York to live in Spitalfields – but her exquisite fabric designs were commissioned by wealthy Huguenot master weaver Jean Rondeau. http://spitalfieldslife.com/2010/08/13/stanley-rondeau-huguenot/ . At a time when ‘craft’ so often led by women is at last being recognised as high art, her story matters. See a five minute clip at https://www.bbc.com/teach/class-clips-video/anna-maria-garthwaite-16901763-and-textile-design/zvgfbdm.

Notes

* For the feel of Huguenot Spitalfields from the 1720s to the 1900s, Dennis Severs’ House at 18 Folgate Street, one of London’s most atmospheric spaces, is outstanding. An immersive installation on five floors, it recreates the world of an affluent silk weaving family. Highly recommended for an individual or small group visit: if you are in the area, go! It is not suitable for a school group, though, as numbers are filtered so there are only two or three in each room and visitors are expected to explore in silence. Details at www.dennissevershouse.co.uk – and watch https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eAjZWZwxxg_q

  * Some of the English silk weavers may have had migrant origins. For example, it is possible that silk weaver Edward Blakemore of Mile End who got married in 1614 may have been the same person as Edward, the son of Reasonable Blackman, an African silk weaver south of the Thames.

  * An attempt was made to cultivate silk in England by growing the mulberry trees that silkworms feed. It failed.

  * Among the refugees was John Dollond, who came from Normandy and worked as a Spitalfields weaver, later starting an optics shop in the Strand. His company, now the opticians Dollond and Aitchison, is on most High streets today. Daniel Marot designed the ceremonial coach still used by the Speaker of the House of Commons. Sir Isaac Tillard, descended from the earlier wave of Huguenot refugees, owned a big Spitalfields estate and by the time of his death in 1726 was Colonel of the 2nd Regiment in the Royal Hamlets, Lieutenant for the City of London, Deputy Lieutenant for the County of Middlesex and the Tower Hamlets, Justice of the Peace, Commissioner for the Land Tax and the Sewers and Governor of St Thomas’s Hospital.

  * Two other buildings that were Huguenot churches still exist: they are L’Artillerie on Sandys Row (now a synagogue), La Patente on Hanbury Street (now a café and community hall). As the Huguenot community grew, the new Anglican Christ Church – designed by Hawksmoor - appeared on the corner of Fournier Street and Commercial Road, towering over the area. With Huguenot churches springing up, perhaps the authorities were pointing out where the power still lay.

  113 Robert Winder, Bloody Foreigners (Abacus 2004) p96
* Spitalfields Market lasted as a general market until 1887 when the current buildings went up to house a wholesale food market. That moved to Leyton in 1991. A new development opened in 2017 which knocked down half of the market buildings for offices and chain restaurants, while the remaining nineteenth century building contains craft and street fashion stalls.

* Here are two more fascinating anti-Huguenot pieces. The writer of the first was himself a Huguenot who set himself against his own people. In the second, the threat posed to England is seen to be because of the superior qualities of the French!

Jean-Baptiste Denis in a 1722 pamphlet

> What a glorious set of people are these French master weavers … that ruin the body, of which they denominate themselves members, purely to enrich themselves by the ruin, the spoils of the unfortunate, not sparing their own countrymen … the greatest part of the refugees are a cast-out people, without honour or principle … a ridiculous concourse of vagabonds.

Considerations upon the mischiefs that may arise from granting too much indulgence to foreigners (anon, London 1735)

> As the French are, of all people, the most enterprising, the most industrious; and frugal, so we have the more reason to be jealous of their designs, and to provide against their admission into any places of power, profit or trust. For considering their frugality, economy and industry, they will in time engross all the profitable branches of trade as they have already that of the silk manufacture, for I believe it can be demonstrated, that nine parts in ten of that trade is in their hands, with a great share of that of wines. Nor are they less considerable with regard to their numbers … and considering their sobriety and diet, and the fruitfulness of their women, the City, in time, will probably be called a French colony.

* In another engraving, Noon, Hogarth compares rich, fashionable Huguenots leaving a Soho church with the coarse English working classes. It is not clear whether Hogarth wants us to laugh at the English or at the Huguenots, or both.

Chapter 3

Links

* For a fuller account of the industrial disputes see http://www.brh.org.uk/site/articles/bold-defiance/ The writer is sympathetic to the weavers.

Notes

* The weavers protesting in 1670 wore the green of the Levellers in a conscious reference to that radical movement of twenty years before.

* Another factor in the lack of activism in the 1790s may be the free food in the soup kitchen set up by Patrick Colquhoun (founder of the Thames River Police) in 1795, which he started in order to divert people’s attention away from revolutionary ideas. Nevertheless, the memory of what Spitalfields weavers had achieved lived on, and in the 1840s the Irish Chartist leader Feargus O’Connor described them as ‘the originators, the prop and support of the Chartist movement.’

* In 1812 the Spitalfields Soup Society reported that just under half of the families using their soup kitchen were in the silk trade and of them, 352 families were ‘much distressed for work,’ 649 were ‘in distress,’ 216 were ‘in greater distress’ and 31 ‘need immediate relief.’

Chapter 4

Links


* Quoted in Cruickshank, p164
http://spitalfieldslife.com/2015/01/15/charles-booth-in-spitalfields/ Booth’s map, photos of Irish and Jewish children
https://booth.lse.ac.uk/

http://spitalfieldslife.com/2014/12/09/gustave-dores-east-end/


Notes

* The full account of Dickens’s visit and his conversation with the weaver is at http://spitalfieldslife.com/2010/02/16/dickens-in-spitalfields-4-the-silk-weavers/ along with an 1885 photo showing a weaver at work with his wife nearby.

* The 1839 Royal Commission report on The Condition of the Hand Loom Weavers included accounts of visits to weavers’ houses. One was the home of William Bresson in Orange street, probably of Huguenot descent:

  … there is no cess pool nor sewer to carry off the soil from the privy, and close to the house runs a stagnant ditch filled with abominable black filth for which there is no drain.115

* Some working class children were taken away from their parents and sent forcibly to Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa – supposedly for a better life. In reality, many suffered terribly and were told their parents had abandoned them.

* Popular authors who reinforced the idea of a criminal and dangerous East End included Charles Dickens, especially in Oliver Twist (1837-9). The violent robber Bill Sikes is described as being from Bethnal Green and the thief Fagin is a Jewish stereotype that local Jews complained about at the time.

* Sarah Wise’s book The Blackest Streets – the Life and Death of a Victorian Slum (Vintage 2009) looks at the Old Nichol off Bethnal Green Road and shows that its population was a mix of poor and not-so-poor and that there were many positive aspects to the community in spite of the challenges faced, often as a result of negligent landlords and local authorities.

* One thing Mayhew noticed was people selling fried fish battered in the Jewish style. An enterprising trader – maybe here, maybe in Oldham (it is disputed) - combined this with French-style fried potatoes to create our ‘national’ dish of fish and chips.

Chapter 5

Links

Adam Dant’s map of Jewish Spitalfields:


Excellent photos of the Jews' Free School: http://spitalfieldslife.com/2016/06/28/israel-zangwills-spitalfields/

* George Arkell’s Jewish East End map shows areas of Spitalfields that were almost 100% Jewish, while areas to the north and west had very few Jews. It may be problematic, though, as it may have been inaccurate and was used by some to promote antisemitic arguments. You can find the map at https://digital.library.cornell.edu/catalog/ss:19343551.

Notes

* One writer in the Jewish Chronicle disapproved of the soup kitchens, saying ‘They must either earn their own living without charity or return to the land whence they came.’116

115 Quoted in Hampton p188
116 Winder, Bloody Foreigners (Abacus 2004), p232
* Another account by a middle-class visitor that can be compared with source 5.11:

Mrs Brewer, ‘The Jewish Colony in London’ in The Sunday Magazine 1892

My first impression on going among them was that I must be in some far-off country whose people and language I knew not. The names over the shops were foreign, the wares were advertised in an unknown tongue, of which I did not know even the letters, the people in the streets were not of our type, and when I addressed them in English the majority of them shook their heads.

They have been neither trouble nor expense to us as citizens; they have not attracted the notice of the public by their appearance in the police courts; they have not intruded themselves on our attention in any way, and hence there has been nothing in their existence to excite our interest or rouse our wrath.

Chapter 6

Links

There is a rich collection of images and objects at https://jewishmuseum.org.uk/collections/online-collections/

Notes

* Here are transcripts of some of the sources used on the podcast that can be used for discussion, or if you prefer to give students sources rather than them choosing their own.

SECTION 2 – soup kitchen

Soup Kitchen Laws 1901

Any two or more members of the Distributing Committee shall have the power to stop any order for relief on receiving a report of the Investigating Officer, justifying such stoppage, or on being otherwise satisfied that the recipient is not deserving.

Mark Fineman, born 1904

The Dutch tenterground … was at one time quite a good area, but when I lived there it was a pretty dreadful area. It was on the verge of the most notorious street in the whole of London, which was Dorset Street. It was full of the most common lodging houses and very cheap brothels … The cheapest bed you could get was called a rope. There were two ropes slung across the room and very cheap mattresses there, and in the morning someone would come and pull the rope and you all fell down. It was a way of getting you out of the place.

That was called the fourpenny rope. The poverty was awful … my house really was more like an orphanage than like a family. My father was dead, my mother was out all day, my poor old grandmother couldn’t speak a word of English and my younger brothers and sisters didn’t really speak Yiddish - I was the only one who spoke fluent Yiddish – so my grandmother would do the best she could.

SECTION 3 – school

Stella Vine, born 1902 in Falticne, Romania

In Bell Lane there was a very narrow turning … all the kids used to run there to go into school, and here was little houses about one storey … and beggars used to sit there with their trousers undone and beckon to you. When I first arrived to the teacher’s desk and she says ‘What is your name?’ I don’t know how she understood any of us because we were all from different parts. So she opens the book, and because English is the same writing as Romanian I recognised a couple of letters, and she smiled at me – ‘Good girl’ she said, ‘This one knows a couple of letters.’

117 Included in ed.Englander, A Documentary History of Jewish Immigrants in Britain 1840-1920 (Leicester UP 1994) pp69-70
118 London Metropolitan Archive, quoted in Valman, Zangwill’s Spitalfields
119 Quoted in Valman, Zangwill’s Spitalfields - by kind permission of the Jewish Museum, London.
120 Quoted in Valman, Zangwill’s Spitalfields - by kind permission of the Jewish Museum, London.
SECTION 4 – Princelet Street

* 19 Princelet Street is open to the public, but only occasionally due to the delicate fabric of the building. It is a deeply atmospheric space containing a ‘suitcase’ museum of immigration and the synagogue. Further details and how to book a visit at www.19princeletstreet.org.uk

Mrs A.E, born 1907 in Stepney

There was no such thing as loneliness, everybody helped one another. It was kind of open house, the street doors were open. A lady wanted a little chat, they just sat by the door and they ran in and out, the children, all of them, we just ran in and out, very seldom did you find the door closed, unless they were going out or going away … Someone didn’t have any money to buy their food, then somebody would lend them. My mother was always lending someone, she didn’t have enough money to get the weekend groceries.

Israel Zangwill, *Children of the Ghetto*

They dropped in, mostly in their workaday garments and grime, and rumbled and roared and chorused prayers with a zeal that shook the window panes. It was their salon and their lecture hall. It supplied them not only with their religion but their art and letters, their politics and their public amusements. It was their home as well as the Almighty’s, and on occasion they were familiar and even a little vulgar with Him. It was a place in which they could sit in their slippers – metaphorically, that is – for though they frequently did so literally, it was by way of reverence, not ease. They enjoyed themselves in this Schul of theirs: they shouted and skipped and shook and sang, they wailed and moaned, they clenched their fists and thumped their breasts and they were not least happy when they were crying.

SECTION 5 – Great Synagogue

George R Sims, 1894

In the hall or anteroom of the building are shelves packed with ancient volumes, books of Rabbinic law and law. Gathered together in groups are a number of Jews, young and old, who are standing around a desk at which an ancient man with a long, grey beard is reading a well-worn volume and explaining certain passages of it to the men who crowd about him and listen intently to his words.

*The Times, 20 September 1904*

The orthodox Jews were observing the religious fasts in connection with the Day of Atonement. Between 3 and 4 o’clock large numbers were walking along the streets when a body of Socialist Jews drove a van containing food through the crowded streets. The orthodox Jews resented this and drove the Socialists into their club, from the windows of which glass bottles were thrown … The disorder thus started quickly spread, and within half an hour the whole neighbourhood around Princelet Street was in a state of great agitation. Stones were thrown at the houses of several prominent Socialists, and the police had to clear the streets.

SECTION 6 – market

Isaac Zangwill, *Children of the Ghetto*

[About the market in the 1860s]

The Lane was always the great market-place, and every insalubrious street and alley abutting on it was covered with the overflows of its commerce and its mud … a pandemonium of caged poultry, clucking and quacking and cackling and screaming.

… The confectioners’ shops, crammed with ‘stuffed monkeys’ and ‘bolas,’ [sweet pastries] were besieged by hilarious crowds of handsome girls and their young men, fat women and their children, all washing down the luscious spicy compounds with cups of chocolate.

[How it had changed by the 1890s]

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121 Copyright Lara Marks. Quoted in Valman, Zangwill’s Spitalfields – by kind permission of the Jewish Museum, London.
122 Quoted in Valman, Zangwill’s Spitalfields – by kind permission of the Jewish Museum, London.
123 Quoted in Valman, Zangwill’s Spitalfields – by kind permission of the Jewish Museum, London.
124 Englander p107
125 Quoted in Valman, Zangwill’s Spitalfields – by kind permission of the Jewish Museum, London.
The community was Anglicized … respectability crept on to freeze the blood of the Orient with its frigid finger, and to blur the vivid tints of the East into the uniform grey of English middle-class life.

Charles Booth, Life and Labour of the People in London, 1903

One of the wonders of London, a medley of strange sights, strange sounds and strange smells.

Chapter 7

Links

Video: Jewish East End:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5YNZhjMqlNM&d=126s
http://spitalfieldslife.com/2017/02/25/alan-deins-east-end-shops/
http://exploringeastlondon.co.uk/stepney/eastendtoday/east_end.htm
http://www.cablestreet.uk/

Notes

* The Lancet, 1884
At all hours of the day and night the street resounds with the rattle and whir of the innumerable sewing machines, the windows shine with the flare of gas.

* Myer Wilchinski, 'History of a Sweater' in Commonweal, 26 May 1888
Many of them like myself, ‘greeners’ willing to work at anything that would bring them the scantiest means of existence; some married and with families, and all with that enquiring, beseeching look that half-starved, helpless hopeless beings must of necessity possess … The majority looked like so many unwashed corpses.’

* Jewish Chronicle, 22 March 1889
… on the 16th February … a goodly number of the class on behalf of whom Messrs. Lyons and Phillip Krantz profess to speak, attended on that occasion, when Dr Adler gave them some wholesome advice with respect to their daily work, and persuaded them not to be deluded by the false socialistic and revolutionary doctrines which a few noisy agitators were desirous of propagating.

* Arbeter Fraynd, 1888
[we shall] change entirely the present order of tyranny and injustice … the workers must unite and organise themselves … What good is talk when Jewish workers are complaisant and smug and nothing perturbs them? … Jewish happiness will come only with the happiness of all unhappy workers

126 Quoted in Valman, Zangwill’s Spitalfields - by kind permission of the Jewish Museum, London.
127 Quoted in Winder p236
128 Quoted in Bill Fishman. East End Jewish Radicals p141, and in Winder p235
129 Englander p172
* An account of how Jews took in dockers’ children:

**Rudolf Rocker, The London Years (1956)**

The Jewish workers who had just won their own strike felt they must do something to help their fellow workers… It was decided to ask Jewish families in the East End to take some of the dockers’ children into their homes. Offers poured in. Unfortunately we couldn’t accept them all. Members of the Committee always went first to see the house and too often the family couldn’t feed its own children properly…[when we fetched the children]… they were in a terribly undernourished state, barefoot and in rags. We placed over 300 dockers’ children in East End Jewish homes. Shopkeepers gave us shoes and clothing for them. Trade union leaders and social workers in the docks area spoke publicly of the kindness shown by the East End Jews. The docker parents used to come to the Jewish homes in Whitechapel and Stepney to see their children. It did a great deal to strengthen the friendship between Jewish and non-Jewish workers.

* Spitalfields and Whitechapel continued to be a centre of leftwing activism. In May 1907 – in a building on the corner of Fulbourne Street and Whitechapel Road, now a sari shop but then the headquarters of the Jewish Socialist Club – a meeting of the Bolshevik faction of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party included future Soviet leaders Lenin, Trotsky and Stalin.

* One leading Jewish activist was the socialist feminist and anarchist Milly Witkop who campaigned all her life against capitalism, antisemitism and male domination. She came to London from Ukraine in 1894 and worked in a sweatshop to earn the money to pay for the rest of her family to join her. With her German partner Rudolf Rocker she edited the Arbeter Fraynd. He described her as ‘a slim young girl … with thick black hair and deep large eyes … eager and zealous for our cause.’ She opposed the war in 1914 and ran a soup kitchen for the poor. However, after her husband was interned as an enemy alien she was also arrested in 1916 for her anti-war activities. After two years imprisonment she was released in 1918 and left the UK for the Netherlands and then Germany where she became active in campaigning for women’s right to birth control. The rise of the Nazis forced her to become a refugee again, and she and Rocker travelled to the USA where she died in 1955.

* Anti-Jewish feeling among non-Jews in the area was high in 1888 during the panic around the ‘Jack the Ripper’ murders. One of the suspects arrested, Aaron Kosminsky, was Jewish, and graffiti appeared in Goulston Street saying ‘The Jewes are the men that will not be blamed for nothing.’ When the Metropolitan police Commissioner ordered this to be erased he was accused of hiding evidence but was probably doing so to prevent antisemitic rioting.

* There were major events involving Russian revolutionaries – this time Latvians, not Jews – in Spitalfields in 1911. Activists killed three policemen who surprised them while they were robbing a jeweller’s in Houndsditch. They then fled to Sidney Street in Whitechapel where, after a siege involving police and army, the house they were hiding in caught fire and they were all killed. The ‘Battle of Sidney Street’ contributed to anti-immigrant feeling in the general public.

* There were other forms of community organisation. The Brady Boys’ Club helped boys and young men – its building, the Brady Centre, is still a centre for East End community activity. In 1884 Henrietta and Samuel Barnett, a couple committed to radical social change, established Toynbee Hall on Commercial Street. The aim was ‘to create a place for future leaders to live and work as volunteers in London’s East End, bringing them face to face with poverty, and giving them the opportunity to develop practical solutions that they could take with them into national life.’ Volunteers included William Beveridge (whose 1942 Report later laid the foundation for the welfare state) and Clement Attlee (whose 1945 Labour government set up the National Health Service).

* The BBL were supported by some prominent people including Arthur Conan Doyle, author of the *Sherlock Holmes* books.
* Captain Colomb, Conservative MP for Tower Hamlets, 1887

[I wonder] …what great states of the world other than Great Britain permit the immigration of destitute aliens without restriction; and whether Her Majesty’s Government is prevented by any treaty obligations from making such regulations as shall put a stop to the free importation of destitute aliens into the United Kingdom.

* Clement Bruning in The Blackshirt, 4 October 1935

The most surprising phenomenon in the growth of British fascism is the great popular support we have gained in East London …because we have preached a cause and a system bringing hope and sunlight into lives darkened by long years of hunger, squalor and despair, because we have shown them a way to cast off the foreign yoke of a domineering, all pervading Yiddish culture, which strives to make East London take on the character of Odessa or Warsaw.

* Few traces of Jewish Spitalfields remain. The Sandys Row synagogue still holds services. Rinkoff’s bakery – hidden in the middle of a housing estate off Mile End Road – and the two competing beigel shops at the northern end of Brick Lane keep baking traditions alive. NB the London beigel brought by Russian Jews should not be confused with the New York Polish Jewish bagel. Enjoy this: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u-Ri3-tdWEG

**Chapter 8**

**Links**

https://www.ourmigrationstory.org.uk/oms/the-lascars-britains-colonial-era-sailors

https://www.ourmigrationstory.org.uk/oms/a-home-for-the-ayahs-

https://www.ideastore.co.uk/local-history-online-oral-history-somali-oral-history

* At https://www.ourmigrationstory.org.uk/oms/seafarers-and-stowaways-in-londons-harlem there are details of violent racism suffered by Africans immediately after the war. The story of Young Epiae of 32 Brushfield Street in Spitalfields may be one to share with students. You can see his statement to police: when he confronted men who abused his white housekeeper he was attacked but ended up being the one arrested. (Be aware that his statement contains the extreme racist language that was directed at him.)

https://www.swadhinata.org.uk/bengalis/

http://numbi.org/heritage-archive-projects/

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P0afJbusVjk

**Notes**

* In 1895 Indian Parsee Mancherjee Bhownaggree (Conservative) became Bethnal Green North East’s MP and held the seat till 1906.

* An anonymous Bengali man, interviewed in old age, commented:

> When I first came to Aldgate, it was 1925. I asked a policeman where the Indian men lived, and he said, ‘I don’t know, you’d better go on till you smell curry.’

* An indication of the Asian presence in the area is the fact that an Indian Workers Conference was held in Whitechapel in 1939.

* Kathleen Warsame was brought from Ethiopia in the early 1900s as a small child and had a solitary childhood in Yorkshire as the only Black child, suffering neglect and discrimination. As an adult in London she had a happy marriage to a Somali man and lived on Cable Street where she was a community activist all her life.

* There is a memorable photograph by Bill Brandt of a Sikh family sheltering in Christ Church, Spitalfields during the Blitz in November 1940. https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205194626

133 Winder p255
134 Rosenberg, Battle for the East End p154
135 Quoted in Caroline Adams, Across Seven Seas and Thirteen Rivers (Tower Hamlets Arts Project, 1987) p39
There is now a fairly big male colony of different nationalities, and they do not all mix well. A great many are unemployed and all are living in squalor. The combination of low wages, poor housing stock and discrimination also resulted in many African and Caribbean settlers being unable to secure decent accommodation. Instead, they often found themselves living in run down, overcrowded and insanitary conditions. With few recreational facilities available, many of the settlers tended to socialise with members of the small Asian, Maltese and Arab communities who ran the busy cafes and lodging houses in the Cable Street area, often thought to be venues for prostitution, gambling and the illegal sale of goods.

* Also at https://www.ourmigrationstory.org.uk/oms/seafarers-and-stowaways-in-londons-harlem:

**The Times, January 1950**

The Times, January 1950

There is now a fairly big male colony of different nationalities, and they do not all mix well. A great many are unemployed and all are living in squalor. The combination of low wages, poor housing stock and discrimination also resulted in many African and Caribbean settlers being unable to secure decent accommodation. Instead, they often found themselves living in run down, overcrowded and insanitary conditions. With few recreational facilities available, many of the settlers tended to socialise with members of the small Asian, Maltese and Arab communities who ran the busy cafes and lodging houses in the Cable Street area, often thought to be venues for prostitution, gambling and the illegal sale of goods.

**Chapter 9**

**Notes**

* Nazrul Islam

It is a hobby for a Sylheti to go to London … We do not think of what it has and what it doesn’t have and what we’ll do over there. It’s just all thrilling. When we come here, we understand the reality, but then we cannot go back … It’s like a dream but once we come the dream goes.

* Max Levitas, Jewish political activist, commenting in 1999

It’s all gone back to the backroom workshops which we fought against in the ‘30s and ‘40s.

* The Great East End Housing Disaster, 1972

…the tenements of Spitalfields are left apparently to collapse of their own volition … Whatever the reason, the continuing existence of seething, filthy, vermin-infested tenements such as Wentworth Dwellings is a public scandal.
The population of Spitalfields is likely to increase by 40 per cent in the next few years as the existing Bangladeshi dependants arrive from Bangladesh. If they are not to live in distressing conditions the … Committee must do all it can to encourage Bengalis to live beyond Spitalfields where they can be housed more quickly. This is not forcible dispersal. This is the same procedure used in dealing with every applicant, black or white, whose housing location demands cannot be met within a reasonable timespan.

Many activists in BHAG and other organisations were strongly influenced by black consciousness and thinkers such as A. Sivanandan, Malcolm X, Fanon and others, that oppressed people needed to take control of their own struggle. For them, there was merit in separate housing:

Mala Sen, interviewed November 2001

Some people said, ‘You are creating a ghetto.’ We said, ‘fine, we prefer the ghetto, at least you have each other to defend yourself.’ … So that’s what it was and we achieved it, and today you walk round Brick Lane, it’s totally Bengali.

On the other hand, for many squatting families the motivation was about fairness:

Letter from the Bangladesh Youth Movement to the Leader of the GLC, 7 June 1978

We are committed to the multi-racial multi-cultural society of which we are part, and join with other local Bengali and white groups in protesting against dangerous separatist housing policies, which would ruin existing and developing relationships between the communities and isolate the Bengali community as a target of violence.

* Interviews with the Collinwood gang show that what they felt threatened by was unemployment and how their streets were changing because of larger forces they could not control. Immigrants were an aspect of this change that they could attack.

Chapter 10

Links

http://www.banglastories.org/
https://www.ideastore.co.uk/local-history-online-oral-history-bengali-east-end

Women Unite Against Racism:
https://londonagainstracism.wordpress.com/images/women-unite-against-racism/
https://londonagainstracism.wordpress.com/people/julie-begum
http://herfootsteps.org.uk/tower-hamlets/
http://spitalfieldslife.com/2014/05/12/julie-begum-on-brick-lane/

Housing:

The stories of many of the Bengali community and campaigning organisations that emerged, as well as some of the leading people involved, are in the free downloadable booklet at https://www.ideastore.co.uk/assets/documents/bengali%20booklet%20FINALcropped1.pdf

139 Forman p90
140 Glynn p125
141 Leech p14, quoted in Glynn p124
Anyone who’s come from fleeing terror or oppression – they don’t want that in their lives. It’s no coincidence that people here fight oppression.

During this time the BNP were encroaching on Spitalfields just as the National Front had in the 1970s. When young Bengalis confronted them, police frequently targeted and arrested the Bengali men. Julie and other women, while challenging sexism and male domination in the anti-racist movement, also formed a cordon round the men. If the police wanted to get them they would have to attack the women first.

* Violent racism returned to Brick Lane in April 1999 when a nail bomb exploded, injuring 13 people. The bomber, a BNP member, had bombed Brixton Market the previous weekend (48 injured, many seriously) and a gay pub in Soho the following weekend, killing 3 and injuring 79, some of whom had limbs amputated. The clear targets were the Black, Asian and gay communities.

* The Liberals’ ‘Sons and Daughters’ policy aimed to make it even harder for Bangladeshi families to be housed. In the 1990 council election the Liberals created a fake leaflet, made to look as if it came from the Labour Party, which said ‘If Labour is elected the homeless will go to the top of the list, EVEN IF THIS MEANS ALL EMPTY FLATS BEING ALLOCATED TO THEM.’

* Forman’s book describes the founding of the Spitalfields Housing Association: Formed not by squatters, but by tenement dwellers of Wentworth Dwellings, its members saw a co-op as the way of stopping the GLC from moving them from one set of slums to another. With a co-op, they wanted to buy housing in their own chosen area, and not be forced to move where the GLC was demanding. Ten Wentworth tenants first met above a minicab office in Fashion Street in the summer of 1979. They were some of the worst-paid workers in London, with scarcely a penny of capital between them. They can hardly have imagined that within a decade their co-op would own the best part of £25 million pounds worth of property. … In the winter of 1979 they spent many evenings visiting the privately rented terraces in Princelet, Hanbury and Spelman Streets which Tower Hamlets had failed to buy up in the 1970s. Through the cold evenings they went from room to room explaining the co-op idea. In these dimly lit rooms heated by paraffin stoves, with tenants sitting on their beds in their vests and lunghis, the debate developed. The tenants were convinced. They agreed to ask the co-op to buy the houses from their landlord. Seventy tenants in 21 houses and 18 tenements became the core of the co-op – only three of them were not Bengalis.

**Notes**

* Julie Begum


* Forman pp104-105

**Chapter 11**

**Links**

http://www.banglastories.org/ with a wide range of quotations by Bengalis in Tower Hamlets in the early 2000s

https://www.ourmigrationstory.org.uk/oms/the-east-london-mosque

https://www.ideastore.co.uk/local-history-online-oral-history-somali-oral-history

http://spitalfieldslife.com/2015/04/18/return-to-elder-st/

https://www.londonlive.co.uk/news/2017-11-25/archiving-british-somali-history

http://numbi.org/heritage-archive-projects/ for interviews with Somalis of different generations and other resources

http://spitalfieldslife.com/2017/06/14/dan-jones-artist/ has a wonderful full-colour painting of life in Brick Lane in 1978 during a antifascist march

https://www.ideastore.co.uk/assets/documents/bengali%20booklet%20FINALcropped1.pdf

https://www.ideastore.co.uk/assets/documents/bengali%20booklet%20FINALcropped1.pdf
Notes

*The author is grateful to Kinsi Abdulleh for the information about the challenges facing researchers and the hidden story of Somali women. She writes: ‘[The problems facing researchers trying to uncover British Somali history] reiterate the fact that Somali immigration to the UK was within a greater historical context than specific ethnicity. … The untold story of Somali women speaks to a racial, gendered dynamic of empire’s power. Numbi Arts projects has been attempting to re-frame the narrative of the British Somali presence in the East End of London over the past 10 years through our archive and heritage projects - most recently the CHBH ‘Hida Raac’ heritage walk (https://www.londonlive.co.uk/news/2017-11-25/archiving-british-somali-history) - by mapping the Somali spaces and stories around Spitalfields, Cable Street, Whitechapel and the wider East End, including the cafes, lodges, clubs and homes with the local Somali Community and Heritage institutions and professionals.’

* There have been tensions between the mosque communities in recent years. In the quotations taken from Bangla Stories in the main text, Rimi goes on to complain that the Brick Lane mosque is very male dominated, while Momin Ahmed says he will only go to the Jamme Masjid because other mosques are fundamentalist

*Asian Dub Foundation managed to attract a following that brought together fans of white rock and Black dub reggae as well as the Asian underground.
Visiting Spitalfields

Spitalfields is easy to reach and there is lots to see in a small area, making it very easy to recreate the past in students' minds, telling some of the stories as they stand in the actual places where things happened. It is also, of course, perfectly possible to use Streetview to visit virtually.

Here is a suggested itinerary, starting at Liverpool Street Station and finishing at Whitechapel.

1. If you arrive by tube, on entering the main station concourse turn right. If you arrive by overground train, turn left. At the eastern end of the concourse are escalators going up to Bishopsgate. Cross the road, turn left and then right (with Dirty Dicks on the corner) into Middlesex Street – the site of Petticoat Lane Market but only on Sundays. Go immediately left into the narrow alley Widegate Street and then right into Sandys Row to see No 13 (now an Italian restaurant) where Bengali Lascars would head to be looked after by Ayub Ali Master. Double back across the crossing to find (on your right, blue door) the Sandys Row Synagogue (the only still functioning one in Spitalfields). Double back again and turn left into Artillery Passage. Almost immediately you can turn left into a dark, narrow alley to explain to them that this is the remains of what the 19th century streets were like. Good for stuff about Dickensian squalor. Then back into Artillery Passage and turn left to emerge (past Ottolenghi's) into Crispin Street and, to your left, the huge façade of the former Providence Row Night Shelter, now flats. Though nothing remains of the 18th century this is where Louis Chauvet lived and the Cutters' Riots erupted.

2. Diagonally opposite is Tenter Ground (where textiles were pegged out on tenter hooks) and a building that was once a Ragged School and then a bakery. Just past it, turning left, is White's Row and on your left you'll see the frontage of the former Jewish Soup Kitchen.

3. Now double back and walk north past the night shelter to emerge into Brushfield Street. You'll see Hawksmoor's Christ Church Spitalfields dominating the end of the street to your right and the last vestiges of Victorian Spitalfields Market opposite you. Turn left towards the goat statue and then right into Bishop's Square (the stone benches under the canopy are a good place to sit and eat packed lunches). A little ahead of you among the landscaping are stairs and lift down to the remains of the Priory's charnel house and beyond is what's left of Spital Square on the site of Spital Yard where Luisa de Carvajal lived.

4. Walk east up Brushfield Street (or through Spitalfields Market) to reach Commercial Street and cross to enter Fournier Street – you're now entering what remains of Huguenot Spitalfields. Turn left into Wilkes Road and then right into Princelet Street. Anna Maria Garthwaite lived on the corner. In front of No 6 (now new offices) is a pavement roundel commemorating the Yiddish theatre that was there. No 19 houses the Museum of Immigration (advance booking only) and the garden synagogue and which is covered extensively in the Zangwill's Spitalfields app.
5. You emerge in **Brick Lane**. To your left, **Taj Stores** and just beyond, above a doorway, the **1797** from the Spitalfields Soup Society. If you have time, turn left to the junction with **Hanbury Street** where, turning left, you can find the **Kobi Nazrul Centre** and **Hanbury Hall**, a former Huguenot church down the street on your left. The best bet for affordable, authentic Bangladeshi cooking is not the Brick Lane restaurants but one of the few remaining cafes. Not fair to recommend one specifically, but try the other end of Hanbury Street, walking east from Brick Lane.

6. An optional foray north up Brick Lane can include walking past the **mural of Mala Sen** (commissioned by the Tate Gallery) on the corner of Brick Lane and Drays Walk, then the bijou shops, under the railway and on towards Bethnal Green Road, eventually finding on your left the two iconic 24-hour **Jewish Beigel shops** which are a great place to get salt beef, salmon and cream cheese or many other fillings in a chewy bun. Authentic eating but there are often queues.

7. Walking south down Brick Lane from Princelet Street we are now in the heart of Banglatown and to our right is the sleek silvery minaret of the **Jamme Masjid** mosque, previously a synagogue and a church. The side facing Fournier Street has the UMBRA SUMUS sundial on the wall.

8. Continuing south down Brick Lane, pass under the **Banglatown arch** and then turn left into Monthope street to see some of the affordable **Chicksand Estate** housing enabled by the Bengali-run Spitalfields Housing Association – a victory for community over Council and developers.

9. Walking back down Brick Lane you come to the junction with Wentworth Street. To your left is **Old Montague Street** where the squatters’ movement began, but we turn right into **Wentworth Street**. Soon on the right is the brick arch which is all that remains of the **Rothschild Buildings**. Continue across Commercial Street and you're in the **Petticoat Lane** daily market – a few clothes stalls and great street food on **Goulston Street**. Incidentally, the forbidding housing block on your left as you look down Goulston Street is where the blood-covered rag from the Ripper’s victim Catherine Eddowes was dropped below a chalked graffiti saying ‘The Juwes are those that will not be blamed for nothing’. Here we are at the heart of the poorest dwellings of Victorian Spitalfields and also where the housing cooperative movement began, in the **Wentworth Dwellings**.

10. From Wentworth Street, head down Old Castle Street past the temporary base for **Toynbee Hall** and, on your right, the grey former communal **bath house** to emerge into Whitechapel Road. Turn left and soon after you cross **Commercial Street** you will pass a Burger King. That is on the site of **Blooms**, the famous Jewish kosher restaurant that finally closed in 2010. Next door is the White Hart pub and then an alleyway and Albert's clothes shop, above the door of which is an ornate six-pointed- star sign indicating the site of the **Jewish Daily Post**. A few doors down you pass the Whitechapel Gallery and former library which was the gaunt of Jewish writers such as Isaac Rosenberg, Bernard Kops and Arnold Wesker.

11. Now cross the street. Opposite to your left – on the corner of White Church Lane – you will see the **Altab Ali Arch** over the entrance to **Altab Ali Park** and, in the far corner of the park, the **Shahid Minar**. A suitable place for reflection. Continue walking east along Whitechapel Road and you will soon come to the **East London Mosque**. A little further, on the other side of the road, is the start of Whitechapel Market and the entrance to **Whitechapel Station** for the journey home. If you need a toilet stop and refreshment a good place is the **Idea Store** on the corner of Whitechapel Road and Brady Street – the top floor café is spacious with great views and cheap food, and fine to rest without buying. If you want some good Asian food, several of the joints lining the market open out into bigger eating places inside and generally do better food, far cheaper, than Brick Lane.

Spitalfields tours available online:

- [Bengali Spitalfields](https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/Documents/Leisure-and-culture/Tourism/Visitor-information/Banglatown-and-Bengali-walk-leaflet.pdf)
- [women activists (Julie Begum, Mala Sen, Sarah Wesker, Naseem Khan)](http://herfootsteps.org.uk/tower-hamlets/)
- [social housing tour](https://www.cardboardcitizens.org.uk/sites/default/files/files/CC%20Map%20and%20Key.pdf)
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www.ideastore.co.uk/local-history-online-oral-history-somali-oral-history

Sundeep Lidher, Malachi McIntosh (Runnymede Trust)

www.ourmigrationstory.org.uk

Peter Linebaugh, The London Hanged (Verso 2003)

Migration Museum, Room to Breathe – Beyond the Walls (2018)

David Rosenberg, Battle for the East End – Jewish Responses to Fascism in the 1930s (Five Leaves 2011)


Tower Hamlets Library and Learning, The Somali East End

Nadia Valman, zangwillsspitalfields.org.uk


Two recommended poetry books, both locally published so possibly hard to access:

Shanghati Literary Society, Poetic East End (2017) – including poetry (all translated between Bengali and English) by residents from the 1950s through to the present

Stepney Words III – Poetry by East London Schoolchildren (Rich Mix/Apples and Snakes 2017)
Thanks

Special thanks to:

Kinsi Abdulleh – Numbi Arts [http://numbi.org/]

Prof Claire Alexander – University of Manchester

Julie Begum – The Swadhinata Trust [https://www.swadhinata.org.uk/]

Judith Garfield – Eastside Community Heritage [https://www.hidden-histories.org/]

Halima Khanom – Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives
[http://www.idealstore.co.uk/local-history]

Sundeep Lidher, The Runnymede Trust [www.runnymedetrust.org]

Dr Nadia Valman – Queen Mary University of London

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The author, Martin Spafford, was Head of History in an East London secondary school and wrote the previous OCR resource packs on Butetown and South Shields. He is co-author of the Migration textbooks for the OCR GCSE. He is an Honorary Fellow of the Historical Association and the Schools History Project.
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