

## **Shropshire Council Black History Month 2024 Resources Pack**

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### **Introduction to Black History Month 2024**

**October is Black History Month in the UK, an event that has been celebrated nationwide for more than 30 years.**

The month was originally founded to recognise the contributions that people of African and Caribbean backgrounds have made to the UK over many generations. Now, Black History Month has expanded to include the history of not just African and Caribbean people but black people in general.

Our plans for Black History Month 2024 focus upon the opportunity to Show Racism the Red Card this October, as well as the opportunity to shine a light upon Black history and culture. In so doing, the aim is to not only encourage visible action to recognise and tackle discrimination, but also raise awareness of and celebrate the achievements and contributions of the Black community in the UK.

Although Black people have always been present in the UK, there has been a lack of representation in the history books. Contributions made by Black people have often been ignored or played down because Black people weren't treated the same way as other people because of the colour of their skin.

### **Local historical narrative: Mary McGhie of Ludlow**

This year's theme for Black History Month is **"Reclaiming Narratives"**.

As an editorial piece on the Black History Month website tells us, *"This theme underscores a commitment to correcting historical inaccuracies and showcasing the untold success stories and the full complexity of Black heritage. It's about taking control of our stories and honouring our heroes while challenging the narratives that have often overlooked the contributions and achievements of Black individuals both in the UK and globally."*

In Shropshire, we have taken the opportunity to highlight just one of the historical narratives from Shropshire Museums and Archives about Black individuals in the county, who may not have regarded themselves as trailblazers but most certainly fit that description.

Our main feature this year is **Mary McGhie of Ludlow**.

Mary McGhie was a botanist and natural historian, who was born in Jamaica and lived at Castle Lodge Ludlow between 1817- 1844.

The Museum curators featured her in their Women in Science leaflet for Darwin History Month:

<https://www.shropshiremuseums.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Shropshire-Women-of-Art-and-Science-1.pdf>

There is a short film about her, which was produced for the Darwin Festival.

This is on the Museums website here: <https://youtu.be/gDW-b6o6Ey0?feature=shared>

Mary McGhie was a woman of mixed ethnicity born in around 1770 in Jamaica. Her mother, Sarah, was a free black woman who may have once been an enslaved worker at her father's estate of Greenside Trelawny, Jamaica. Her father Robert McGhie was a wealthy man who made his fortune from his sugar plantation in Jamaica. We do not know the exact nature of the relationship between Sarah, Mary's mother, and her father Robert. However, we do know that Sarah and her children, Mary and Thomas, were all granted white status by the Jamaican courts at the instigation of Robert McGhie. This meant when he sold his estates in Jamaica and returned to England, he was able to bring Mary and her brother Thomas with him.

It is undeniable that Robert McGhie and his family profited from the cruel brutality of slave labour. We know nothing of the conditions for the slaves forced to work on her father's plantation. For many slaves across the Caribbean, work was hard and dangerous. A disregard for the welfare of slaves led many to be injured cutting and hauling cane in the fields or pounding and boiling it in the mills. Most were dead within seven years of arriving at a plantation. However, Robert does appear to have acknowledged his relationship with Sarah and accepted Mary and Thomas as his children, bringing them into the privileged life of the social elite.

Robert McGhie was well connected with family ties to the attorney general and Privy Councillor to the King, George Crawford Ricketts. Ricketts retired to Ashford Hall, Ashford Bowdler and this may be how Mary came to live in Ludlow later in life. Mary's uncle Thomas McGhie was a sugar broker in London and no doubt bought and sold goods from his brother's Jamaican estate.

We can only suppose that Mary McGhie may have been educated at home by a governess as was common for girls at that time. She may have had an instinctive interest in the natural world and of course agricultural success was intrinsic to the business of her father's sugar plantation so growing up in this agricultural environment may have piqued her interest in the natural world and all things botanical.

This was also the era of a fashion for scientific study of the natural world. Middle class people held soirees and discussed the latest developments in science. Botany was one of the few areas deemed suitable for the interests of young ladies.

Mary was at the heart of scientific studies that were available to her at the time. She joined the Ludlow Natural History Society and was one of the few women members at the time of the second annual report in 1836.

She contributed to W.A. Leighton's "Flora of Shropshire" and was so prolific with her botanical specimens that she is cited nearly 200 times in that work alone.

By being published in Leighton's "Flora of Shropshire", she demonstrated her specialist knowledge and keen understanding of botany. Her work was able to stand alongside more formally trained and officially expert men with the wonderful records of plants she discovered. Her legacy is still contributing positively to our understanding of local botany all these centuries later.

The story of Mary McGhie also inspired the character of Etta in the fiction book 'The Gifts' by Liz Hyder. In sharing her story, we not only reclaim her narrative but also show how she inspired further narratives too.

Since sharing this story, we have become aware of another amazing story too:

### **Local historical narrative: Price Watkis of Shrewsbury**

Price was one of five children born to Price Watkis (born 1762) who had a half share of a plantation at Greenwich Park, St Ann, Jamaica. The children were baptised at Greenwich Park on 21 April 1802 alongside their mother Elizabeth Watkis described as 'a young woman of c[o]lour, born on 27th March 1778".

At time of his death, Price Watkins, senior, was living in Abbey Foregate with Elizabeth and his property in Shrewsbury was left to Elizabeth for her life. His land in Greenwich Park along with "slaves, cattle and stock" passed to his sons Price and James. The Legacies of British Slavery database records around 70 enslaved people at Greenwich Park.

Despite being mixed race, Price and his brother James were educated at Shrewsbury School. Price qualified as a barrister and on his return to Jamaica was the first person of colour to be elected to the Assembly as member of Kingston in 1832.

He and James were active anti-slavery campaigners both in Jamaica and in Britain. Price supported the Wesleyan Methodists petitioning campaign to end colonial slavery and publicly spoke in favour of Grey's ministry and the reform bill in 1831.

### **Find out more:**

- Legacies of British Slavery (UCL) [Summary of Individual | Legacies of British Slavery](#) with further references
- 2947/728 Title deeds for Abbeydale in Abbey Foregate, 1728-1924

- Will of Price Watkis Snr, TNA/PROB 11/1848/425 and Will of Price Watkis Jnr. TNA/PROB 11/1862/293 (The National Archives)
- D 35.7 Rev. J. E. Auden, *Shrewsbury School register, 1734-1908* (Oswestry, 1909), p. 32 & 34

Thanks to Michael Watkis for making us aware of the contribution of Price and James Watkis.

### **More resources**

The National Archives has a useful guide: [Black British history - Black British History](#)

### ***Did you know?***

These narratives build upon the story of anti-slavery campaigners Katherine Plymley and her brother, Archdeacon Joseph Plymley of Longnor, which was featured in our Black History Month Resources Pack from 2023.

A fantastic series of diaries by Katherine show the support she and her brother gave to the Abolitionist movement at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. She writes with admiration for Prince Naimbana of Mobana who visited Britain in 1791 and also describes meeting Gustavas Vasa (also known as Olaudah Equiano) who was enslaved at 11 but bought his freedom and wrote compellingly about his experiences (Shropshire Archives refs 1066/17 and 19).

Local boroughs, in particular Bridgnorth and Much Wenlock, also regularly petitioned Parliament for the abolition of slavery.

**There must be more stories out there...more narratives to share. Colleagues at Shropshire Archives and Museums would be delighted to hear from anyone who can help us to reclaim those narratives.**

If people would like to share their knowledge and perspectives about their families, or look into the archives to find out more, the Archives service would be delighted to hear from them and to assist them. In so doing, we can reach a fuller collective understanding of the contributions that people of colour have made to life in Shropshire. Please contact [archives@shropshire.gov.uk](mailto:archives@shropshire.gov.uk)

Shropshire Archives operates across Shropshire and Telford and Wrekin. It aims to collect material which relates to the whole community of Shropshire past and present. We are aware that the collections don't always reflect this fully and the service would be grateful for any help which enables us to build a more complete picture of life in Shropshire.

## Terminology and the Slave Trade

### Background

This year's theme for Black History Month is "Reclaiming narratives", and part of that is about understanding what terminology and words we use now, whose history can be traced back to the transatlantic slave trade. By avoiding those which may cause discomfort or distress, we can claim a better narrative.

Please do not worry if you see a phrase below that you have used before; this is about raising awareness now, and resetting our spoken and written narratives as we move forward.

We all know not to use the 'N' word. But did you know that the phrase '**nitty-gritty**' is thought to have its origins in the slave trade? And should therefore be avoided.

Here's why:

**Nitty-gritty** is thought to refer to the detritus left behind in the bottom of the hold of a slave ship, when the journey across from Africa had finished. This would include dead bodies and debris.

There is also a possibility that the term was used to refer to slaves in chains being made to have sex with each other for the benefit of the crew on a slave ship.

The key point to make here is that, whilst there are sources who will say that there is insufficient evidence to point to the slave trade, due to a lack of documentation, it should also be added that there were known to be conscious efforts made to use terms in meetings eg of slave plantation owners, that were not recorded, and to minimise documentation.

A search now on the intranet will bring up theories around nits and grits, which I had not seen when I last looked two years ago, and reference to its first recorded origins as being in 1940 'by which time "there were no slave ships"'. My commentary would be that just because an abhorrent historical practice has ceased, does not mean that spoken etymology or use of slang arising from the practice is not still circulating, amongst the unaware.

Another you may have come across is '**sold down the river**'. Again, this phrase is to be avoided.

Here's why:

This one almost certainly comes from the time of slavery, when masters in the north would sell slaves to plantations further down the Mississippi River, where conditions were known to be much harsher.

For generations, the phrase "**sold down the river**" has been used to signify a profound betrayal. But it used to refer to a slave-trading practice.

"River" was a literal reference to the Mississippi or Ohio rivers. For much of the first half of the 19th century, Louisville, Kentucky, was one of the largest slave-trading marketplaces in the country. Slaves would be taken to Louisville to be "sold down the river" and transported to the cotton plantations in states further south.

Because white planters valued men over women as labourers, [male slaves](#) were far more likely to be "sold down the river." In addition to the tragedy of being separated from family, to be sent down the river meant a sentence of brutally hard labour. As the global demand for cotton grew, the demand for more and more slave labour grew at an equally large pace.

Sociologist Wilma A. Dunaway has [written](#) that the global demand for cotton set off a forced migration of slaves with close to one million being transported to the Deep South between 1790 and 1860.

## **Cakewalk**

This phrase is not really seen in common usage. However, that is just as well.

It refers to the practice of some enslaved Black Americans spent Sundays dressing up and performing dances in the spirit of mocking the white upper classes. It is thought that the enslavers didn't know they were the [butt of the joke](#), and even encouraged these performances and rewarded the best dancers with cake, hence the name.

Possibly because this was viewed as a leisurely weekend activity, the phrase *cakewalk* became associated with easy tasks. Cakewalks didn't end with slavery: For decades, they remained (with cake prizes) a part of Black American life—but at the same time, white actors in blackface incorporated the act into [minstrel shows](#), turning what began as a satire of white elites into a racist caricature of Black people.

The dance that appeared on plantation grounds in the mid-nineteenth century looked nothing like it does today. A promenade-type dance performed in hand-me-down finery, the dance was meant to parody the movements of the ballroom dancing favoured by white elites of the time.

Their white masters, without apparently understanding the joke, would join in the festivities, clapping along in time and often taking it upon themselves to award the prizes. According to the ragtime musician Shepard Edmonds, born of formerly enslaved parents, "It's supposed to be that the custom of a prize with the master giving a cake to the couple that did the proudest movement."

While slaveowners missed the covert implications of the cakewalk, the white elite asserted control over the revelry in this way, affirming their place at the top of the social hierarchy in the antebellum South. But as Black dancers continued to revel in these caricatures underneath the noses of their enslavers, they reclaimed what little cultural power they had.

Following Emancipation, many Black communities continued the tradition of the cakewalk as a point of joy and subversion. But as African-American political will grew during the Reconstruction era, white elites sought to reclaim their political and cultural power through means both overt and subtle.

As the post-war social order tumbled and contorted, Black Americans did something previously untenable: they moved. As formerly enslaved folks and their children spread from the South throughout the country, the cakewalk moved with them, and as it did it continued to evolve. It is no surprise then that the word cakewalk gained mass popularity during the 1870s, according to the Oxford English Dictionary.

Cakewalks became so popular to both Black and white Americans that they became a regular part of the then-wildly popular minstrel shows, a type of variety show typically performed in blackface. Here, white performers would become the cakewalkers, dancing in outrageously gaudy clothes and with exaggerated movements. These shows, like other forms of minstrelsy, were meant to reinforce the inferiority of Black Americans, turning a joyful dance into a grotesque and infantilising exhibition.

So if you didn't know enough to avoid minstrel shows, which I remember from my own childhood as being viewed as perfectly acceptable 'family entertainment', you do now...

**Primary Source:** "[\*American Dancing: From the Cakewalk to the Moonwalk\*](#)", in which Megan Pugh writes, *"the cakewalk gets at deeper truths, and deeper patterns, all the way down to the country's great unfinished business of slavery."*

### **Terminology and acronyms**

Advice here would be to either to be specific about a particular grouping, or to use the term 'ethnic minority' as a preferred term if there is a need to extend this to a wider grouping, and to explain why. This enables us to be inclusive and respectful, whether we are talking about Black people of African heritage, where to be Nigerian is to not be Kenyan, or White people from Eastern European countries, where to be Polish is to not be Bulgarian.

Umbrella terms like 'B.A.M.E.', for 'Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic', and 'Eastern European' should please be avoided. They can at best be seen as lazy and at worse unhelpful, to us and to the diverse communities that we seek to serve. They do not help because in grouping people together by colour without sufficient thought to their heritage, or by geographical region without sufficient thought to country, we are making generalisations rather than making genuine efforts to work with all our communities, including those represented in our own workforce.

If in doubt, please also refer to the national Census 2020 reporting categories, as these were agreed through extensive consultation and engagement and are used by us in local consultation exercises.

A 2021 report by the NHS Race and Health Observatory, ***“The power of language: a consultation report on the use of collective terminology at the NHS Race and Health Observatory”***, makes no recommendations for other organisations but encourages others in the system to have their own conversations about language.

**The Observatory has committed to undertaking the following five key principles:**

1. Where possible, the Observatory will always be specific about the ethnic groups it is referring to – only using collective terminology where appropriate and necessary.
2. The Observatory will not use acronyms or initialisms such as ‘BME’ or ‘BAME’.
3. Where collective terminology is needed, the Observatory will always be guided by context, and not adopt a blanket term. Where there is a need to refer to more than one ethnic group at a time, the Observatory will use terms such as ‘Black and minority ethnic’, ‘ethnic minority’, ‘Black, Asian and minority ethnic’, interchangeably, to reflect the varying views of its stakeholders.
4. The Observatory will always be transparent about its approach to language.
5. The Observatory will be adaptable and remain open to changing its approach to language in the future.

These principles remain ones with which we can ourselves seek to be inclusive and respectful.

A related report came out the same year, by Sir Lenny Henry Centre for Media Diversity: ***“BAME: A report on the use of the term and responses to it: terminology review for the BBC and Creative Industries”***.

It contains much of continuing resonance and relevance to the public sector, including this statement:

*“We identify strong evidence to suggest that the term BAME is problematic for many, and that a case can be made for considering alternative language. This is not to say that the term BAME can simply be replaced with an alternative term, as there is no easy consensus on what such a term might be.”*

In their research, the authors found something echoing what we have discovered as local authorities in the West Midlands, through engagement with workforce forums in a number of authorities:

*“One or two individuals wanted to do away with any collective term altogether. While acknowledging that people who do not identify as White experience racism, some felt the experience is so different between individuals that it hinders more than it helps understanding. The argument is illustrated by the example that while Black people and East Asian people both experience racism, the forms it takes is “so different” that putting both groups of people under a single term hinders*



*understanding of the different types of racism they both face. This in turn hinders the implementation of effective policies to address racial disparities.”*

The report authors make the following concluding statement, with which I will also leave you as it pretty much says it all.

*“Underlying the research presented here is the understanding that at the heart of the issue is a power dynamic; a power dynamic between those who have the power to label and those who are labelled. Labels and language can be indicative of wider issues of power.*

*“However, we are also acutely aware that while language matters we must guard against this being seen as the dominant focus of debate around race and racism in the UK. It is important that issues around language are addressed but that changing terminology is not perceived to be a solution in itself.”*

### **Regional narratives: Online Chatty Cafes for the Workforce**

During Black History Month, a number of Wolverhampton City Council colleagues and Telford and Wrekin colleagues hosted a range of free virtual chatty cafes, open to colleagues here, as part of the national Black History Month theme. This sharing of resources featured the following:

- Being a ‘Black Father’.
- What does it mean to be ‘Black British?’ exploring the identity of 2<sup>nd</sup>,3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> generations in Britain today.
- Social Care Advanced Practitioners looking at how language shapes narratives and how we need to consider inclusive and consistent language in assessments.
- The rich diversity of Africa, far removed from the televised views from the 90s and 00s (in house articles on Africa Day 2023 and 2024 are also available for further reading)
- Young and Black in the Workforce
- Black Mothers

### **National campaign: Show Racism the Red Card Day: Friday 18<sup>th</sup> October 2024**

Racism affects people across heritages and ethnicities and also intersects with religions and beliefs. This day is for everyone to show racism the red card, and to be allies in so doing.

The Council works with the national charity Show Racism the Red Card on this initiative every year, along with partner organisations including local unions. The week leading up to 18<sup>th</sup> October was also Hate Crime Awareness Week: a national week of action to encourage communities affected by hate crime, local authorities, police forces and other key partners to work together to tackle local hate crime issues.

As part of national Black History Month and Hate Crime Week, Shropshire Council marked Wear Red Day on Friday 18<sup>th</sup> October, to show racism the red card in Shropshire.

This was a chance for the workforce, wherever they were located in our large rural county, to send in photos to the Communications Team during the week of themselves in red or with something red in the background, such as red flowers or a cute dog or cat in a red ribbon.

The idea, as used in previous years, was to form a visual gallery of support on staff and elected Member computer screens, with a special design for the day on the screen. A collage of photos built up over the week, with people encouraged to join in online from wherever they were based.

These were then used for a press release, which included a picture of the Exec Team and Cabinet Members with the Show Racism the Red Card posters.

In the press release, Councillor Lezley Picton said:

*“As Leader of this Council, I am proud that Shropshire Council councillors and staff across our rural county are Showing Racism the Red Card from wherever they live or work. To do so, through sharing photographs of themselves with red props such as flowers, dogs wearing red ribbons, and so on, costs nothing beyond our time, and is helping us to build up a visible collage of commitment over this week. I am delighted to join with Cabinet members and Executive team in our own show of support for the efforts we must continue to make to tackle racism and other forms of discrimination, harassment and victimisation.*”

*“Racism is a form of hate crime, and we also take this opportunity to re emphasise that here in Shropshire, we will not condone any hate crime in any form. We encourage members of the workforce and members of the community to ensure that they report any incidents of hate crime direct to the police. There is a reporting form on our website and I would like to urge people to make use of this, either for themselves or on behalf of others. We will continue to work with the police and other agencies on tackling hate crime.*”

*“National Black History Month has given us a very timely opportunity to find out more about our local history and in the words of this year’s theme, to reclaim the narrative. In so doing, we can reach a fuller collective understanding of the contributions that people of colour have made to life in Shropshire, as well as moving forward together to help Shropshire to be a welcoming county, to and for everyone.”*

The idea is easily transferable for use by other organisations, so it was shared with the Shropshire and Telford and Wrekin Integrated Care System (ICS) for potential adaptation across the System.

The Council also ran with the Show Racism the Red Card message on October payslips, in order to reach everyone in the workforce.

**Change hearts, change minds, change lives.**

## ***Did you know?***

The anti-racism educational charity **Show Racism the Red Card** was established in January 1996, thanks in part to a donation by then Newcastle United goalkeeper Shaka Hislop. In 1990s Newcastle, Shaka was at a petrol station near St James' Park when he was confronted with a group of young people shouting racist abuse at him. After one of the group realised that they had been shouting at Shaka Hislop, the Newcastle United football player, they came over to ask for an autograph.

It was from this experience that Shaka realised he could harness his status as a professional player to make a difference. Coupled with the power of football and his status as a role model, Shaka thought education could be an effective strategy in challenging racism in society.

To this day, SRtRC continues to utilise the high-profile status of football and football players to help tackle racism in society and has also expanded into other sports. The majority of the campaign's work involves the delivery of educational workshops to young people and adults in schools, workplaces and at events held in football stadiums. Across the UK, SRtRC provides educational sessions to more than 50,000 individuals per year.

## **A new narrative: Benjamin Butler**

We finish with this fresh perspective from a new member of staff. Making a contribution of his own in Shropshire is one of our new employees, Benjamin Butler, who recently started working for the council as part of the Enable team as an Expert by Experience.

Ben, from Shrewsbury, writes here about how his background and experience has been channelled into being a positive role model for others.

*"I'm delighted to be starting my new role within Enable at the council where I aim to assist people with mental health issues and other challenges in life, just like I've faced, to help them get back into work."*

*"I've been diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention deficient hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), epilepsy, eating disorder, anxiety and depression, with the first two only recently identified. These conditions have impacted my relationships and led to some poor decisions in the past, including a stint in a young offenders' institution."*

*"Growing up, I faced physical and racial abuse, which began in infant school and continued into my 30s. Without strong role models, I made some misguided choices. My father was in prison, and I didn't know about my black heritage, leading me to struggle with my identity and self-worth. My grandparents were there for me but unfortunately it wasn't enough to steer me in the right direction."*

*"Despite these struggles, I found my way. While in prison, I learned about my culture and heritage, which was a turning point for me."*

*“I believe Black History Month is something to be celebrated every day, not just for a month, as it often gets forgotten afterwards.*

*“I have an organisation called New Generation Coaching, currently on hold, where I mentor, coach, and conduct workshops on knife crime, gangs, positive role models, racism, and County Lines (where illegal drugs are transported from one area to another).*

*“I’ve performed at Theatre Severn and recently shared the stage with my favourite Shrewsbury Town player, Mickey Brown, as part of ‘The Drifters’. I’ve also finished writing my book, which I hope will be published next October, and I’m working on a play based on the book, aiming for a May premiere.*

*“I also do volunteer work for TAARC which is a black-run organisation in Telford that helps bring the black communities and other communities from different backgrounds together. I’m excited about my journey with Enable at Shropshire Council and look forward to making a positive impact.”*

### ***And finally***

For more information about any of the articles collated into this resource pack, please contact Mrs Lois Dale, Rurality and Equalities Specialist, via email to [lois.dale@shropshire.gov.uk](mailto:lois.dale@shropshire.gov.uk)