Famous Black Britons

Aims

- To provide students with visual encounters with objects from the British Museum collections which portray famous Black Britons.
- To provide teachers with an opportunity to build student familiarity with Black British history and the historical black presence in Britain.
- To provide a visual starting point for cross-curricular work on Black History.

Description

- A sequence of 10 slides.

Teaching ideas

- Research the life and times of the people featured in the image bank. Create a mini biography in written, drawn or drama form. A brief biography of each person is given below, with more information for each of the featured people available in books and online.
- Create a timeline for the people featured in this image bank. Research other famous Black Britons, such as Mary Seacole and Linford Christie, and add them to the timeline.
- Ask students to imagine that they are one of the people. Record and present student thoughts as a written piece or a dramatic interpretation (individually or in a small group).
- Collect all the class work inspired by this image bank and create a booklet to add to the class/school library for others to read.

Notes on the pictures

Images

- All images in this resource are from The British Museum Collection Online database at www.britishmuseum.org/collection Full object information for each image can be found at Collection Online and the Museum registration number for each image is listed in the comments section for each powerpoint slide.
Due to the nature of the Museum collections, not all of the images were created from a sitting/meeting with the person being portrayed. For example, the image of Ignatius Sancho is an engraved print based on the oil painting by Thomas Gainsborough which is currently held by National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Similarly, the image of Olive Morris on the Brixton note is based on a photograph of Olive taken at a protest, which has been widely reproduced in both the media and museum exhibitions.

Slide 1: John Blanke
John Blanke was a musician at the Tudor court; employed first by king Henry VII and then Henry VIII. He worked as a trumpeter at royal events. He probably came to England as one of the African attendants of Katherine of Aragon who arrived from Spain in 1501 to marry Henry VII’s elder son (and Henry VIII’s elder brother) Prince Arthur. Nothing is known about John’s life before this. He was paid 8d (old pence) a day by Henry VII. A surviving document from the royal accounts of the Treasurer of the Chamber records a payment of 20 shillings to John Blanke the Blacke Trumpet as wages for November 1507, with payments of the same amount monthly throughout the next year. In addition to his wages John Blanke would have received room and board as a member of the royal household.

In 1509, after the death of a senior trumpeter called Domynck [Dominic] Justinian, John Blanke petitioned Henry VIII for his former colleague’s position. John said that his wages were not sufficient for him to serve the King properly ‘as other your trumpets do’ and that he intended to serve the King for the rest of his life. He was successful and had his wage doubled from 8d to 16d a day.

John Blanke appears twice as a musician on the 1511 Westminster Tournament Roll (held by the College of Arms); which shows the royal procession at the tournament held on 12 -13 February 1511 to celebrate the birth of Henry, Duke of Cornwall (son of Henry VIII and Queen Catherine; born 1 January 1511, died 23 February 1511). On this occasion, John was one of six trumpeters on horseback in the royal retinue. He wore yellow and grey livery and carried a trumpet decorated with the royal arms.

In 1512 John Blanke got married, and Henry VIII gave him a wedding outfit on 14 April at Greenwich. The gift included a gown of violet velvet and a hat; an indication of royal favour and John’s status within the royal household. This is the last known record of John Blanke. The next full list of royal trumpeters, drawn up in 1514, does not include his name. Perhaps he changed profession, perhaps he died, perhaps he moved abroad to work at another royal court.
Slide 2: Francis Barber

Francis Barber was born in Jamaica (then a British colony) around 1735. He was called Quashey suggesting he was born on a Sunday. In 1750 he was baptized in London, receiving the name Francis Barber. This was the name he used at school and for the rest of his life. His friend and employer Dr Samuel Johnson called him Frank, a common shortening of the boy’s name Francis.

In 1750 Colonel Bathurst, the owner of the plantation where Francis had been born, sold his plantation, moved to England and brought Francis with him. For a year, Francis went to school in Barton, Yorkshire. Afterwards he worked for the plantation owner’s son Richard Bathurst who was a close friend of Samuel Johnson. In April 1752, two weeks after the death of Johnson's wife, Francis went to work as a valet for Johnson at his house in Gough Square, London.

In 1754 Colonel Bathurst died, leaving Francis 12 pounds and his freedom. Francis stopped working for Johnson and moved to Cheapside to work as an apothecary (pharmacist); occasionally visiting Johnson. Around 1758, Francis enlisted in the British navy and went to sea. He served on the HMS Stag but was discharged at the insistence of Samuel Johnson in August 1760. In 1767, Johnson paid for Francis to attend Bishop Stortford Grammar School, Hertfordshire. Francis studied there for five years before returning to London.

Francis continued working for Samuel Johnson as a valet and secretary until Johnson died. Francis arranged trips, received documents and kept Johnson’s diary. Around 1773, Francis married Elizabeth Ball, they had three children and the whole family lived with Johnson. Francis assisted Johnson in revising his famous Dictionary of the English Language and other works. Francis was also an important source for Johnson’s biographer James Boswell and told Boswell about events in Johnson's life in the years before Boswell knew Johnson.

In his will, Johnson made Francis his heir with £70 (equivalent to £9,000 in 2020) a year to be given him by Trustees. He also expressed the wish that Francis go to live in Lichfield, Staffordshire; Johnson's native city. Francis was also left Johnson's books and papers, and a gold watch.

After Johnson's death in 1784, Francis and his wife Elizabeth moved from London to Lichfield where they opened a draper's shop. In 1799 Francis and Elizabeth were living in Burntwood, near Lichfield, with their children - Elizabeth, Samuel and Ann. Francis set up a school in Burntwood, possibly making him Britain's first black school teacher. Francis died in Stafford Infirmary on 28 January 1801. After his death, the family moved back to Lichfield where his wife and one of his daughters ran a day school.
Quobna Ottobah Cugoano was an African abolitionist, anti-imperialist and natural rights philosopher who was active in England in the later 1700s. He was born around 1757 in a Fanti village (now the town) of Ajumako, in modern Ghana. In 1770, aged about 13, he was kidnapped by slave traders together with other local children, sold into slavery and transported on a slave ship to the British colony of Grenada. Here he was sold as an enslaved worker forced to work on a sugar plantation. In 1772 he was purchased by Alexander Campbell, an English merchant, who took him to England where he learnt to read and write. In England he became free following the ruling in the Somerset Case (1772). On 20 August 1773, he was baptized at St. James's Church, Piccadilly and given the name John Stuart.

From at least 1784, Ottobah Cugoano worked for the artists Richard and Maria Cosway. He got to know British political and cultural figures including the poet William Blake and the Prince of Wales (later George IV). He joined the Sons of Africa, African abolitionists in England, whose members included Olaudah Equiano. Ottobah Cugoana became a leading figure within the Black British community. In 1786, he and African-British William Green saved Harry Demane, a fellow member of the black community in London, from being forced into slavery (by being kidnapped from England and sent to the West Indies). They enlisted the help of a well-known abolitionist Granville Sharp who had Harry Demane removed from the ship before it sailed.

Ottobah Cugoano wrote against slavery and sent letters calling for its abolition to the London newspapers. His most important work was *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species* (published in 1787) which included an account of his own enslavement. The book was reprinted at least three times and later translated into French. In 1791 he published a shorter version *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil of Slavery*. The book called for the immediate abolition of the slave trade and the emancipation of all enslaved people. In 1791, Ottobah Cugoano travelled to over 50 places in Britain promoting the book and contributing his voice and first-hand personal testimony to the campaign against the slave trade. Ottobah Cugoano disagreed publically with William Wilberforce who he described as a hypocrite for refusing to support the campaign to end slavery across the British Empire. Nothing is currently known about his life after 1791.

**Slide 4: George Bridgetower**
George Augustus Polgreen Bridgetower was born in Biala, Poland around 1782. His father was born in Barbados, had arrived in Europe by the late 1770s, married a German woman and was working as a personal page to the
Hungarian Prince Esterhazy in Eisenstadt by 1780.

George was a skilled musician and made his professional debut on the violin in Paris in 1789 before he and his father travelled to London. George performed at the homes of members of the royal court in London and appeared in public recitals in Bath and Bristol. By February 1790, George was performing in Drury Lane Theatre where he was heard by the Prince of Wales (later George IV), an accomplished cellist who gave morning chamber-music parties at his London residence Carlton House. The Prince arranged for George to have music lessons. From 1795 to 1809, George was principal violinist in the Prince's orchestra.

In 1792 and 1794 George performed in London alongside the well-known Austrian composer Joseph Haydn. Between 1789 and 1799, George performed in around 50 concerts in London theatres (including Covent Garden, Drury Lane and the Haymarket Theatre). In 1802 he travelled to Dresden to visit his mother and younger brother Friedrich Joseph, who played the cello. In 1803 he performed in Vienna where he met Ludwig van Beethoven. Beethoven was working on a sonata which George became the first violinist to perform. The sonata was to be named after him but George quarrelled with Beethoven who named it after the French violinist Kreutzer instead.

George returned to England and was elected to the Royal Society of Musicians on 4 October 1807. He attended Trinity Hall, Cambridge where he earned the degree of Bachelor of Music in June 1811 after which he taught, composed and continued performing. In 1813, he performed in the first concert of the season by the Philharmonic Society of London (later the Royal Philharmonic Society), leading the performance of Beethoven's Quintet. He married Mary Leech Leeke in 1816. He later travelled abroad, particularly to Italy, where his daughter lived. He died in Peckham, London in February 1860 aged 78. He left his estate of £1,000 to his sister-in-law (his dead wife's sister). He was buried in Kensal Green Cemetery, London.

Slide 5: Ignatius Sancho

Ignatius Sancho was born in Africa around 1729. He and his parents were taken from Africa to South America as enslaved people. His mother died soon afterwards in the Spanish colony of New Granada (modern Colombia, Ecuador, Panama and Venezuela). He was baptized and given the name Ignatius. His father reportedly took his own life rather than live as an enslaved worker. Aged two, Ignatius was taken by his slave owner to England and given to three unmarried sisters living together in Greenwich. He lived with them from around 1731 to 1749. The sisters called him Sancho because they thought he looked
like Don Quixote’s squire. Ignatius taught himself to read and write. He met John Montagu, Duke of Montagu, who lived nearby in Blackheath and who encouraged Ignatius to read and lent him books from his library.

In 1749 Ignatius left the service of the sisters and presented himself at Montague House in Blackheath where, for the next two years, he worked as a butler for Mary Montagu, Duchess of Montagu. During this time, he wrote poetry, a book on music and two plays. He was also a composer, with three published collections of songs, minuets and music for violin, mandolin, flute and harpsichord. He loved the theatre and regularly went to Drury Lane to see the Shakespearian actor David Garrick, who became a friend. When Mary Montagu died in 1751, Ignatius received an annuity of £30 (about £7000 in 2020).

During the 1760s Ignatius married Anne Osborne. They had seven children: Frances Joanna (1761–1815), Ann Alice (1763–1805), Elizabeth Bruce (1766–1837), Jonathan William (1768–1770), Lydia (1771–1776), Katherine Margaret (1773–1779) and William Leach Osborne (1775–1810).

Around 1766 Sancho became valet to George Montagu, Duke of Montagu (the son-in-law of his friend John Montagu who had died in 1749). In 1768 his portrait was painted by the artist Thomas Gainsborough. He continued working for the Duke until 1773. In 1766, at the height of the debate about slavery, Ignatius wrote to the famous writer Laurence Sterne encouraging him to argue in support of the abolition of the slave trade. Following the publication of the letters they wrote to each other, Ignatius became widely known as a man of letters. He also became friends with Ottobah Cugoano and Samuel Johnson.

Ignatius Sancho said that despite having lived in Britain since he was two, he felt he was ‘only a lodger, and hardly that.’ He describes how he: ‘Went by water – had a coach home – were gazed at – followed, etc. etc. – but not much abused.’ On another occasion, he wrote: ‘They stopped us in the town and most generously insulted us.’

In 1774 Ignatius, opened a grocery shop at 19 Charles Street in Westminster. As a shopkeeper he enjoyed more time to meet other writers, actors, artists and politicians. In addition, as a financially independent male householder living in Westminster, he qualified to vote in the parliamentary elections of 1774 and 1780; he was the first person of African origin known to have voted in Britain. Ignatius Sancho died on 14 December 1780 and was buried in the churchyard of St Margaret's, Westminster. There is no visible memorial at the church, as the grave stones (which lie flat) in the churchyard were covered over with grass in 1880. He was the first person of African descent known to have been given
an obituary in the British press. After his death his letters and memoirs were published. The fifth edition of his letters was published in 1803 by his youngest child William, who thus became the first black publisher in Europe.

Slide 6: Bill Richmond
Bill Richmond was born on 5 August 1763 in New York, America; at the time a British colony. He grew up in the household of Richard Charlton, a wealthy rector at St. Andrew’s Episcopal Church. At the age of 13, Bill entered the service of the British General, Earl Percy (future Duke of Northumberland) who was the commanding general of British forces in New York during the American War of Independence. In 1777, at the age of 14, Bill was sent to England where he went to school in Yorkshire before beginning an apprenticeship as a cabinetmaker in York. On 29 June 1791, the marriage of Bill Richmond and Mary Dunwick was recorded in Wakefield. The couple had several children. While living in Yorkshire, Bill fought and won five boxing matches; defeating George ‘Dockey’ Moore, two unnamed soldiers, one unnamed blacksmith and Frank Myers.

By 1795, Bill and his family were living in London. He became an employee and household member of Thomas Pitt, Baron Camelford. Pitt and Bill visited prize fights together and Bill also took part in some prize fights himself. He became a professional prize fighter in the early 1800s and his winnings enabled him to buy the Horse and Dolphin pub near Leicester Square, London. It was probably at this pub that Bill met the American Thomas Molineaux. Bill immediately saw Molineaux's potential as a boxer, and decided to put aside his own boxing career to train Molineaux. Their goal was to challenge Tom Cribb, the national boxing champion, and win the title for Molineaux. With Bill as his trainer, Molineaux won two fights and then challenged Cribb. In December 1810, Cribb and Molineaux fought at Copthall Common in East Grinstead, Sussex. Cribb only just won amid the chaos of a ring invasion and rumours of a long count that had allowed the champion longer than the allocated 30 seconds to recover in between rounds. In October 1811, Molineaux and Cribb fought a rematch, which Cribb won easily.

After this 1811 match, Molineaux fired Bill as his trainer. Having lost money training Molineaux and arranging the Molineaux-Cribb fight, Bill had to sell the Horse and Dolphin. He became a member of the Pugilistic Society, the sport's first governing body in Britain. In May 1814, at the age of 50, Bill returned to the boxing ring and won against Jack Davis. The victory over Davis encouraged Bill to accept a fight with the young boxer Tom Shelton. After suffering a horrendous eye injury early on, Bill beat Shelton after 23 rounds. When the fight was over, Bill jumped over the ropes with joy to celebrate this victory. After this fight, Bill
retired from boxing. In the 1820s Bill ran a boxing academy where he trained many amateur boxers, including literary figures William Hazlitt and Lord Byron. In 1821 he was asked to be an usher at the coronation of king George IV. In his later years, Bill became close friends with Cribb. The two men often met and talked late into the night at Cribb's pub, the Union Arms on Panton Street in Westminster. It was here that Bill spent his last evening, before he died on 28 December 1829, aged 66. He was buried in the burial ground of St James's Church, Piccadilly, which was located away from the church, beside Hampstead Road in Camden, London.

**Slide 7: Billy Waters**

Billy Waters was born in the British colony of America around 1778, during the American War of Independence. Little is currently known about his early life but he later served in the British Royal Navy for many years. While serving aboard the Ganymede he was badly injured when he fell from the topsail yard and had to have his left leg amputated. After his accident, he was discharged from the Navy and moved to London where he was awarded a naval pension. He lived in London with his wife and two children and forged a second career as an entertainer. In 1815 Billy had his portrait painted, possibly by Sir David Wilkie. The painting is currently held by the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich.

Billy was a popular entertainer outside the Adelphi Theatre in the Strand, London clearly identifiable by his wooden leg, military style outfit and naval hat adorned with feathers; all signifiers of his time in the royal navy and his role as a British service person. He was a skilled musician and would sing and play the violin as people entered and left the theatre. He became a well-known London entertainer and in 1821, he was portrayed on stage as a character in William Thomas Moncrieff's theatre production of Tom and Jerry, (also known as Life in London) which also ran at the Caledonian Theatre in Edinburgh. Billy appeared in a number of prints, in books such as Cries of London Drawn from Life by Thomas Busby (1823) and was the inspiration for the Billy Waters figurines produced by the Derby and Staffordshire Potteries in the 1820s and again in the 1860s.

Billy and his family lived in the house of Mrs Fitzgerald in Church Street, St Giles, Camden. In 1823, Billy became ill and spent his final 10 days in St Giles’s Workhouse, on the corner of Short’s Garden and Endell Street, Camden. He died in the workhouse aged 45. To ensure money for his wife and children he had pawned his violin shortly before he died. He was buried in the New Burial Ground, St Pancras.
Slide 8: Fanny Eaton

Fanny Matilda Antwistle was born on 23 June 1835. Her mother was Matilda Foster, a former enslaved African who had worked on the British-owned plantations on Jamaica. Fanny and her mother left Jamaica for Britain sometime in the 1840s and settled in London. Around 1856 Fanny married James Eaton, a horse-cab driver. They lived in London's Coram Fields and had ten children between 1858 and 1879. When James died in his forties in 1881, Fanny raised and provided for all of their surviving children.

Fanny Eaton featured in artwork by Pre-Raphaelite artists; working as an art model from 1859 to 1867. Fanny was employed regularly by the Royal Academy and surviving records show she was paid 15 shillings for three sittings in July 1860. Paintings for which she posed were publically exhibited at the time - one at the Royal Academy itself in 1860 – and nowadays some are on display in public art collections at galleries such as Tate Britain and the Delaware Art Museum. It is thought that some of her children may have appeared in art works where Fanny was modelling alongside a child or baby. In the oil painting Mother of Moses, the small baby which Fanny cradles as she poses as main figure in the composition (the Biblical figure Miriam, mother of Moses) may be her own baby son James. After 1867, Fanny virtually disappeared from Pre-Raphaelite paintings. A 'Miss Fanny Eaton' was recorded modelling at the Royal Academy between 1874 and 1879; this may have been her daughter, also called 'Fanny Eaton'. Her family continued to work in the arts and in the 1891 census her daughter Miriam is listed as an artist's assistant.

By 1871 Fanny and her family had moved out of Camden and were living in neighbouring Islington. Her husband died in 1881 and in this year Fanny is listed in the national census as living in Kensington and working as a seamstress (needlewoman). The 1891 census lists her working as a housekeeper in Hammersmith where she lived with several of her children. In 1901 Fanny was working as a domestic cook on the Isle of Wight and by 1911 she was living back in Hammersmith with one of her daughter’s Julia, Julia’s husband and their two children (Fanny’s grandchildren). Fanny Eaton died in 1924, probably at the home of one of her children, aged about 89. She was probably buried at Margravine Cemetery in Hammersmith.

Slide 9: Olive Morris

Olive Elaine Morris was born on 26 June 1952 in Harewood, St Catherine, Jamaica, at the time one of Britain's Caribbean colonies until full independence in August 1962. Olive moved to London with her family when she was nine years old. She had three brothers and two sisters and lived in South London for most of her life. Olive went to Heathwood Primary School, Lavender Hill Girls Secondary School, Tulse Hill Secondary School and later the London College of Printing (known today as the London College of Communication).
Olive was active in the feminist, Black nationalist and squatters' rights campaigns during the 1970s. In the early 1970s, she became a member of the youth section of the British Black Panther Movement (later the Black Workers movement), alongside Linton Kwesi Johnson and Clovis Reid. This movement was inspired by the Black Panther Movement in America, but was not affiliated with them. In 1973, she squatted at 121 Railton Road, Brixton, with her friend Liz Obi. The squat served as a local activism hub until 1999 (when squatters lost a court case against Lambeth Council) and was also the site of the Sabarr Bookshop, one of the first Black community bookshops, which Olive helped to set-up. A key organiser in the Black Women's Movement in Britain; Olive co-founded the Organisation of Women of African and Asian Descent (OWAAD) in London. In 1974, she helped found the Brixton Black Women's Group; one of Britain's first networks for black women.

Olive studied Economics and Social Science at Manchester University from 1975 to 1978. While in Manchester, she co-founded the Manchester Black Women's Co-operative and the Black Women's Mutual Aid Group with activists in Manchester such as Kath Locke and Elouise Edwards. She also helped to establish a supplementary school after campaigning with local Black parents for better education provision for their children. After university she worked at Brixton Law Centre. Olive became ill during a trip to Spain in 1978. When she returned to London, she was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin lymphoma. She underwent treatment, which was unsuccessful. She died at St Thomas’s Hospital, Lambeth on 12 July 1979, aged 27. She was buried in Streatham Vale Cemetery.

**Slide 10**

Kelly Holmes was born on 19 April 1970 in Pembury, Kent and grew up in the nearby village of Hildenborough. She went to Hildenborough Primary School and then Hugh Christie Comprehensive School in Tonbridge. Her favourite subject at school was PE. She began competing in middle distance athletic events in her youth. After school, she joined the British Army. Initially she was an HGV driver in the Women's Royal Army Corps (WRAC) and later becoming a physical training instructor in the Army Physical Training Corp. She competed at Army athletics events and became the British Army judo champion.

In 1993 she became a professional athlete and won the 1500m at the Commonwealth Games and took silver at the European Championships in 1994. She won a silver and a bronze medal at the 1995 Gothenburg World Championships, but suffered from various sports leg injuries over the next couple of years. During this time, she continued to work for the Army.
Kelly became a full time athlete in 1997. The next year she won silver in the 1500m at the 1998 Commonwealth Games. She won her first Olympic medal in 2000 when she won bronze in the 800m at the Sydney Olympics. In 2002, Kelly won the 1500m at the Commonwealth Games and the 800m bronze at the Munich European Championships. In 2003 she won silver in the 1500m at the World Indoor Championships and the 800m silver medals at the World Championships and first World Athletics Final. She took part in her final major championship in 2004, with a double gold medal-winning performance at the Athens Olympics, finishing as the 800m and 1500m Olympic Champion. Kelly won the BBC Sports Personality of the Year in 2004.

She retired from athletics in 2005 and was appointed Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire (DBE) that year for her sporting achievements. She has also been made an honorary Colonel with the Royal Armoured Corps Training Centre. Nowadays, Kelly works as a global motivational speaker. She has published five books and made a number of television appearances. In 2008, she founded the Dame Kelly Holmes Trust, a registered charity, to support young athletes and help the lives of young people facing disadvantage across the UK. In May 2009, Kelly became the president of Commonwealth Games England; the organisation responsible for supporting and managing the participation of Team England at the Commonwealth Games.

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All information assembled by the Schools and Young Audiences Team at the British Museum. The brief biographies above have been written using a range of published sources (print and online). Each biography seeks to present an introduction to the life and times of the person and further information can be found in other sources (for example printed, online, lectures). In creating this resource, we are aware that society and historical research continually change, open up new areas of debate and reveal further evidence. If you think something in the personal biographies is out of date or incorrect, or you would like to give feedback on the vocabulary used in this document, please email us. We read all responses and view this document as open to review and change. Email: learning@britishmuseum.org