



# BRITISH MUSLIMS: A HISTORY

This guide describes the history of Muslim settlement in the UK and the formation of their communities.



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## KEY POINTS

- There have been Muslims in Britain since the 16th century, with communities developing from the late-1900s in the port cities of London, Cardiff, Glasgow, Liverpool, Tyneside and Hull.
- Major Muslim populations in the UK have their origins in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Yemen and Somalia.
- Following migration from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh (formerly East Pakistan) in the 1950s and 1960s, South Asian Muslims settled in the major industrial towns and cities of the Midlands, northern England and London.
- Civil wars and political unrest in Africa, the Middle East, South Asia and Eastern Europe since the 1980s resulted in the arrival in the UK of asylum seekers and refugees, including Muslims from Algeria, Libya, Somalia, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan and Bosnia.
- Muslim communities in the UK differ from one another historically, socially, politically and demographically. They are internally differentiated too, for example by regional, religious, political and generational differences.
- There is a long history of conversion to Islam in the UK, including early seafarers and elite converts from the mid-19th century, to those who married migrants in the 1950s and 1960s, and more recently to those who have converted for personal spiritual reasons.

## MIGRATION HISTORY AND THE FORMATION OF MUSLIM COMMUNITIES

There have been Muslims in Britain since the 16th century, when North African and Turkish galley slaves were released from ships captured from the Spanish Armada. Sea-faring continued to play a part in Muslim settlement until the 20th century, and was also the context for Ottoman Islamic conversions of English sailors, travellers and merchants.

With the colonial expansion of its activities in the 18th century, Britain's East India Company required more sailors for its trading ships. Many merchant seamen or *lascars* – mostly from India, but including Turks, Arabs, Somalis and Malays – jumped ship because of cruel treatment and poor conditions. Increasing numbers then settled in port towns and cities, in London, Cardiff, Glasgow, Liverpool, Manchester, Tyneside and Hull. By the middle of the 19th century there were some 10-12,000 *lascars* in Britain, and double that number by the end of the century. They were joined by a growing number of Indian and Arab students arriving to study at English and Scottish universities.

Dockland communities developed in port cities in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, with boarding houses as the focal point. Although largely male, they included local women who married settlers. Together they ran these houses and provided services to meet the needs of the migrants. Richard Lawless's history of Yemenis in South Shields in north-east England shows that they maintained their Islamic practices – of prayer, fasting, pilgrimage, festivals and life-cycle rites – and invested in facilities such as mosques and burial arrangements. Similar Yemeni communities also developed in Cardiff, Hull and Liverpool (where the first mosque in the UK was established in 1887, by Henry Quilliam, a convert to Islam).

Relationships and connections were maintained between these communities, with Islamic organisations as well as the National Union of Seamen providing points of contact and support.

An influential Yemeni Sufi *shaykh*, Abdullah Ali al-Hakimi, established Islamic centres in all four cities in the 1930s, and encouraged his fellow Muslims to retain their religious identity and practices. His transnational activism and involvement in the politics of his homeland led to vocal disputes with other community leaders.

## POST-1945 ECONOMIC MIGRATION

The flow of Muslim settlers from other parts of the British Empire slowed between the first and second world wars, with the next major period of migration beginning in the late 1940s. This saw the settlement first of males and later whole families from India and Pakistan (including the territory which, in 1971, became Bangladesh).

In a process of 'chain migration', early pioneers were joined by relatives and friends from villages back in the Punjab, Gujarat, Mirpur (in Kashmir), and Sylhet (in Bengal). These South Asians were by no means all Muslims. Hindus, Sikhs and smaller numbers of Jains, Christians and Zoroastrians also migrated, though – like their fellow Muslims – they came chiefly for work in response to the demand for labour in British cities where industry was expanding. They sought a better life, and did not migrate as a result of persecution.

From just a few thousand males in the late 1940s, the South Asian population grew to over 400,000 by 1971. By then it included women, children and older people, many of whom had arrived ahead of the introduction of the 1962 Commonwealth Immigration Act. Settled in major industrial areas in the Midlands, London and the north of England, they formed the basis of some of the UK's largest Muslim concentrations – in Tower Hamlets, Bradford, Birmingham and northern towns like Blackburn and Dewsbury.

## FORCED MIGRATION AND SEEKING REFUGE

Those who had arrived direct from the Indian sub-continent in the post-war period were joined in the late-1960s and 1970s by Asian migrants from East Africa who no longer felt welcome in the newly-independent countries of Kenya, Malawi, Tanzania, and Uganda (from which they were expelled in 1972). These Hindu, Sikh and Muslim families were 'twice-migrants'. They had moved to the British colonies in East Africa earlier in the twentieth century, and later found their opportunities were restricted or that they faced deportation as Africanisation policies were introduced. Many already had British citizenship and moved to the UK, with smaller numbers going to Canada and India.

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Like Yemen, Pakistan, India and Bangladesh, Somalia had a colonial relationship with the UK (as part of the

country had been a British protectorate until Somalia became a republic in 1960). Although Somalis began settling in Britain in the 19th century, in the late 1980s Somali asylum seekers began arriving as a result of war and drought in the region. Many came from refugee camps in neighbouring states, but some came via other European countries, eager to join compatriots in established Somali communities in the UK. By 2011, they numbered over 100,000, with most living in London, and many of them women and children.

In the case of Libya, it was political exiles, fleeing the Gaddafi regime in the 1980s, who first settled in Manchester, London and Sheffield. Many of them were professionals who went on to find work in the health service, in education and engineering. Unrest in Libya in 2011 led to further asylum applications.

## UNDERSTANDING MUSLIM ETHNIC COMMUNITIES

Minority ethnic communities in the UK, including those that are predominantly Muslim, are highly diverse. They differ from one another historically, socially, politically and demographically, and they are internally differentiated.

In 2009, the UK Government's Department of Communities and Local Government commissioned a series of profiles of Muslim communities originating from Afghanistan, Algeria, Bangladesh, Egypt, India, Iran, Iraq, Morocco, Nigeria, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Somalia and Turkey. The reports' authors note that the reasons for migration vary for different Muslim ethnic communities.

*For example, Moroccans have been present in significant numbers in England from the 1960s while large numbers of their neighbours from Algeria arrived more recently as refugees and asylum seekers following civil disruption and widespread terrorism in Algeria. The Nigerian community arrived in numbers from the 1950s and then again during the 1990s to pursue economic opportunities following*

*economic failures in their country, while Turkish Cypriot communities in the main migrated during the early post-war period to take up employment opportunities. Egyptians and Saudi Arabians have been present in small numbers for many decades while the Iranian, Iraqi and Afghan presence includes established exiles, students and, in the case of Iraq and Afghanistan, more recent arrivals fleeing war and social breakdown.*

The Change Institute,  
*Understanding Muslim Ethnic Communities*, p. 10.

Muslim migrant populations differ, depending on their country of origin, pre-migration status, migration and settlement histories and the particular issues they face in the UK, relating to accommodation, education, legal status and employment. Being Muslim is no guarantee that people from different ethnic backgrounds will mix or get along. Language, history and family ties bind people together, and community associations and mosques are often organised on these lines.

However, it is important to be cautious about assuming that Iraqi Muslims, Turkish Muslims or other Muslim ethnic groups constitute meaningful 'communities'. They may not be homogeneous, but may be internally divided on the basis of regional background, mother tongue, social status, and religious or political affiliation. Pakistani Muslims in the UK, for example, include Punjabis, Kashmiris, Pathans, Sindhis and Baluchis.

Furthermore, the extent to which migrants from different backgrounds maintain connections with people in their places of origin differs. How long they have been settled and whether they are first generation migrants or second and third generation settlers born in the UK are likely to be influential factors.



## CONVERSION TO ISLAM

Although migration, settlement, family life and the birth of children account for the vast majority of the UK's Muslim population, a minority are converts (under 4 per cent). They were not born or socialised within Muslim families, but made the decision to adopt Islam as their religious identity, belief system and way of life.

There have been a small number of converts to Islam in Britain since the 16th century when the process was referred to as 'becoming a Turk'. It was in the late 19th century that a number of British travellers, administrators and intellectuals were exposed to Islam and Muslim societies and made the decision to convert. They included Henry Quilliam, who converted in Morocco in the 1880s and returned to the UK to found a mosque and Muslim Institute; Lord Headley, who was President of the British Muslim Society from 1914; Marmaduke Pickthall, a scholar of Islam who translated the Qur'an into English (1930); and Lady Evelyn Cobbold. Lady Evelyn, or Zainab, as she was known, was a Scottish noblewoman who had

spent much of her childhood in North Africa, and was the first British-born woman to undertake the hajj or pilgrimage to Mecca.

In the 1950s and 1960s, like Mrs Khan in the case study below, many converts to Islam were women who married South Asian migrants. They adopted some of the ethnic as well as cultural practices of their husbands, and were seen as responsible for bringing up the children as Muslims. Although some people continue to adopt Islam when they marry into Muslim families, most now make an individual spiritual choice to convert.



## CASE STUDY

### **A PAKISTANI MIGRANT SETTLES IN LEEDS IN THE 1940S**

Chaudri Bostan Khan arrived in London in 1941 from Mirpur. His family had a strong tradition of army and navy service. He claimed to know of 120 family members across four generations who had served the British in this way. His uncle worked for the City Line in Bombay. In 1936, aged 25, Bostan Khan took his first voyage out from Bombay to England. His voyages took him to New York, Montreal, and Melbourne. When the Second World War began, he re-joined the navy and jumped ship in London. His intention was to discover a better life for himself: 'English people go look in Pakistan, so I go look on England, to look for labour, for a good living.'

Chaudri Bostan Khan was a successful businessman proud of the fact that, since coming to Britain, he had worked only for himself. Before coming to Leeds in 1946, he had worked as a market trader in Huddersfield and Newcastle, selling hairgrips, babies' dummies and plastic combs. He and a cousin opened two restaurants in East London, and then he moved to Leeds where he opened a fish and chip shop. Until 1971 he expanded his fish and chip business and then moved into the textiles' industry, wholesaling cloth. In 1989 he had two large factories and several shops in Leeds. All his business concerns were managed by family members who migrated from Mirpur.

In 1948 Chaudri married an Englishwoman who eventually converted to Islam. They ran the businesses together. Mrs Khan was invaluable for her knowledge of English life and her skill in dealing with paperwork. Chaudri's friends and relatives began to arrive, beginning with his brother in 1950. Mrs Khan liaised with the authorities and dealt with the formalities of immigration. Chaudri provided his countrymen with employment and housing. Like many who were to follow him, Chaudri Bostan Khan thought for many years that he would return to Pakistan but this never happened. Up to the time of his death in 1992, he was the President of the Leeds Islamic Centre.

An annotated account of an interview with Chaudri Bostan Khan by Ron Geaves in 1989.  
Ron Geaves (1995) 'Muslims in Leeds', *Community Religions Project Research Paper*, 3-4.

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### READ MORE

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