

telling our stories
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An Overview of Diversity in Bideford's History

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Demographically, Torrington is one of the 'whitest' areas in Britain, yet even here, people of different ethnicities and diverse origins appear in its history.

'Raleigh, a Wynganditoian' brought to Bideford

Famously, following his attempt to set up the first permanent European colony in North America in 1585/6, Sir Richard Grenville returned to Bideford with a Native American. This man became a Christian, was baptised in St. Mary's church, with his name recorded as '*Raleigh, a Wynganditoian*'. Upon dying in 1589, he was also buried in the churchyard: the first Native American to be buried in Europe.

Bideford as a port-town

Bideford, being a port, almost certainly would have seen sailors from around the world, but it wasn't until the nineteenth century that non-white visitors from outside of Europe became more common.

The visitors largely fell into two groups – anti-slavers and entertainers.

Anti-slavers visit Bideford

Amongst the first group, was a "*Mr. Benson, a coloured man from the United States*", who turned up in Bideford in December 1850, to give a talk on teetotalism. He must have been a 'free man', as slavery wasn't abolished in the USA until 1865. In his talk "*He severely animadverted on the unjust system which held three millions and a half of his brethren in slavery in the United States*" though he added "*degraded as they were, he argued that the white slaves of England, slaves to drink*" were even worse off.

Two years later, in November 1852, John Williams, referred to in records as a "coloured man", and also known as 'Toby the Slave', gave a talk on "the horrors of slavery" in the US to a Bideford audience.

In November 1877 the *North Devon Journal* carried an obituary of John Scoble, who had died at his house in Northam. Born in Kingsbridge in 1800, he went to London where he became Secretary of the British & Foreign Anti-Slavery Society for 20 years. During this time he visited the West Indies twice to report on forms of slavery in the islands. Again having heard that a large number of US slaves who had escaped to Canada via the 'underground railway' he visited that country and actually settled there, becoming a member of the Canadian Parliament. He later returned to Britain to live in Northam where he died of 'suffusion of the brain' - a fascinating character whose life would repay research.

Black entertainers visit Bideford

The second group were the entertainers, whose history in Britain can be traced back to the American Christy Minstrels, one of whose troupes visited Britain in 1857 and became a huge draw. They first visited North Devon in 1862, appearing in Barnstaple, whilst various spin-off groups appeared in the area for many years afterwards. One such group was the 'Benzana Family', who were described at the time as "*A natural dark troupe*" when they appeared in Bideford in April

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1864. It was noted that their show was “*free from vulgarity*” and featured “*High-class Music interspersed with humour*”.

This combination of comedy and songs became so popular that local groups sprung up. Performers wore 'blackface' make-up (now highly inappropriate and grossly offensive) and sang the same tunes. In 1875 it was reported that the Bideford Amateur Gymnastic Club staged an 'entertainment' in the Music Hall which mixed gym routines with “*the popular Christy's melodies, step dances etc*”. The newspaper report on this notes that “*Among the negro melodies sung were 'Nelly was a Lady'....'Hard times come again no more'....and 'Ring, ring, de Banjo'*”.

Two years later a 'united choir' of 40 gave a concert in the Wesleyan chapel in Silver Street based on the book *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, with receipts going to the Bideford Dispensary and Infirmary. In 1885 the 'CCC's' or 'The Curio Comical Christies' put on a show at the Bideford Music Hall where two local MPs were made the butt of jokes, much to the enjoyment of the audience. A further two years later, the 'Northam Blackbirds' put on a similar entertainment.