

Telling Our Stories, Finding Our Roots



Workers of the World

For centuries, people have come to Tiverton to work. Tiverton may be a small town but it also reflects the international nature of Britain's history. In Tudor times people journeyed from France, Belgium and the Netherlands. As Britain expanded its trading reach, Tiverton's population slowly diversified, incorporating the stories of people who travelled from countries in the British Empire, and afterwards the Commonwealth of Nations.

The tax assessment of 1524 suggests that there were four men listed who came from abroad, and who were all probably in Tiverton because of their involvement in the town's cloth trade. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Protestant Huguenots in France, Belgium and the Netherlands were persecuted by the ruling Catholics. Many fled, including to Britain. Quite a number were weavers, some of whom settled in Tiverton and contributed to the growth of the town's trade.

Other people with diverse backgrounds also appear in Tiverton's records. In August 1700, a marriage license was sought for Balthazar Vanhulthen of Tiverton, while one John Duntze, a descendant of German immigrants, was married and worked in Tiverton.

Evidence of black people working in Tiverton is scant, but it is likely that 19th century households would have included black servants. In the St Peter's Church records, some entries offer evidence.

The first is:

'Tiverton (St Peter), burial of John, a Negro, 17 4 1743'

followed by another record of a baptism for

'Bretton, a native of Africa now resident in the town of Tiverton, servant, 21 7 1813'

News reports from the early 20th century also suggest that the town was gradually developing a more diverse population. A news report from the Western Morning News describes events surrounding a silk merchant named Phuman Singh, who lived in Tiverton in 1933, providing further evidence that workers were starting to come to the town from further afield, including India.

Finally, there is also tantalising pictorial evidence in the Tiverton Museum of Mid Devon Life archives. An early photograph shows a black worker standing alongside others in front of Roller Mills in West Exe. Sadly though, we don't know their name, and any records of the workers are now lost.

These brief glimpses into the past are but fragments of Tiverton's past - but they are important ones, suggesting a more diverse history than might typically be expected.