

[Christians support Israel](#)

Stand with Biblical Israel Help
the Jewish communities
www.cfoic.com

[Christianity in History](#)

A Blast of Brutal Honesty
From the Ridiculous to the
Sublime
www.CoffeehouseTheology.com

[Celtic Christianity](#)

Connecting with God using
ancient insights of Celtic
Christians
www.explorefaith.org

[Islam Meetup Day](#)

Meetup to share beliefs
others Meet on the 4
the month
islam.meetup.com



The Association For British Muslims

The History of Islam in the British Isles: An Overview

By **Daoud Rosser-Owen**

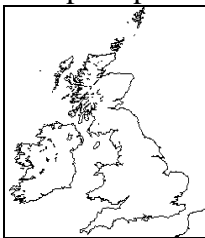
[© Daoud Rosser-Owen 1998. All Rights Reserved. This document may be used for purposes of private research without the prior written permission of the author as long as it is stored unchanged in its entirety with both headers and footers attached. It may be used for other than this as long as due and full credit is given to the author and the text is not changed in any way and the author's written consent is obtained]

[This document can be [downloaded](#) as a Zip file]

It is known that there have been Muslims here in the British Isles on and off since the 7th Century by inference from what records survive. The present-day communities have, however, come here relatively recently, and can be considered to have arrived in four phases: the 18th Century; the final quarter of the 19th Century; the 20th Century from its beginning up until the end of World War II; and the period since 1955.

From the earliest traces to the Middle Ages

There are persuasive traces that indicate that there has been a Muslim presence in parts of the British Isles since perhaps the 7th or 8th Centuries AD. These historical "straws in the wind" come mainly from the western Celtic lands of west Scotland and the islands, northern Ireland, north west and south west Wales, west Cornwall, northern Brittany, and the Galicia province of Spain. Following military destructions of Celtic Christianity by agencies of the Church of Rome, almost all documentary records were destroyed. However, some traces of the evidence are to be found by inferences (and also by the presence of anomalies) in what records the Church did allow to survive, or was unable to suppress. It needs to be borne in mind that this was a period of great panic at the possible encirclement of the Church by the rise and spread of Islam. The prospect of the British Isles, the "Vital Ground" in military terms of western Europe, coming under the control of the Muslims was not to be countenanced by the Papacy or the Frankish and Visigothic kingdoms that did its bidding. Later many of the surviving records were themselves destroyed or lost in the various "land grabs" that went on in Scotland in the Middle Ages.



By inference (or reading between the lines), it seems that the Celts of the 'West of Britain' were in direct sea-borne contact with the Muslims as soon as 'Amr ibnu-l 'As conquered Egypt in 634 AD, and Jerusalem surrendered to the Caliph 'Umar ibnu-l Khattab in 637 AD.

These Celts travelled by sea direct to Egypt and the Levant for trade (this is a well-proved matter by, among others, Professor Emrys G. Bowen of the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth), and brought back with them 'all the news of the orient'.

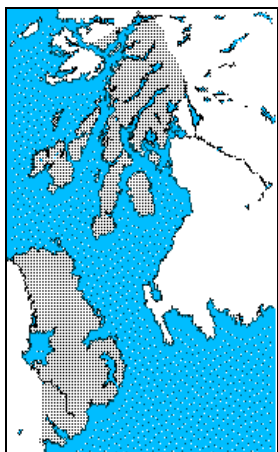
Among the evidences cited for this contact, are the survival in Irish monasteries (and nowhere else) of obscure Gnostic Christian tracts only otherwise known from the excavations at Nag Hammadi in Egypt; the fact that (despite the official Church of Rome 'line') Celtic Christian monasticism owes almost nothing to St Martin and the Isle de Levent and appears to come direct from the Egyptian *lauras*; and that **Celtic Christianity** did not recognise the Bishop of Rome as having a comparable authority to the three Patriarchs that it did recognise - Jerusalem, Antioch, and Alexandria.

At this time Celtic Christianity had not yet been subsumed into the Church of Rome, and would not be for another 200 or so years.

Among what we know about Celtic Christianity (as opposed to the **Celtic Church** which followed it and which was 'trinitarian', as probably also were the **Culdees** (*Céle Déin* Old Irish; *Céile Déin* Gaelic; *Socius Dei* Latin) or 'Companions of God' who were hunted down and exterminated by the sociopathic Queen Margaret, sister of the Saxon pretender to William the Conqueror's throne of England, Edward the Atheling, and who was canonised by the Church of Rome for her energy against the Culdees and the remnants of the Celtic Church) was that it was 'unitarian', believed in Christ as a person separate from and inferior to God (it's not clear how this was dealt with theologically; there are suggestions that he was considered a prophet, but this may be later 'wishful thinking'), would not eat pig, slaughtered their meat, and kept the Jewish rituals and holidays. They were frequently accused by the Church of Rome of being 'Judaizers' and 'Ebionites'.

The last great survival of Celtic Christianity was during the early decades of the 8th Century in the **Kingdom of Dál Riada** (covering what is now Argyll in west Scotland, the southern Inner Hebridean islands (such as Islay), and Antrim in Northern Ireland up to the Bann Rivers).

With the defeat of **Dál Riada** by the Picts under Oengus mac Fergusso in the mid-to-late 8th Century (and the imposition of the rule by the Church of Rome as a consequence), the records, priests and many of the faithful of this religion migrated first to the non-Roman parts of Ireland, then to Wales (the last place in Wales was at Abbey Cwmhir), then to Dol in Brittany, then to Bretoña (now Santiago de Compostela) in Galicia (where the famous Celtic saint and 'heretic' (from Rome) Priscillian is buried, and not the very un-Christian-sounding Asturian 'hero' St James the Moor Slayer (*Santiago Matamoros*)), then they disappear into the Moorish conquest of northern Spain.



There is a story that **Selbach mac Fherchair Fota, High King of Dál Riada** of the House of Lorn in the early 700s, was a Muslim and that there were many Moors in **Dál Riada** (which is why Selbach gets a 'bad press' in what little is written about him; and why there was such a panic in the Church of Rome). The Church paid for the southern Picts of Fortrenn to take on, at various times, both Dál Riada and the "Welsh" kingdom of Alclwyd, also known as Strathclyde. Wars, even in the 8th Century AD, are expensive matters and usually the side with the most money to hand wins. In fact the name *selbachin* Old Irish (*sealbhaighin* modern Scottish Gaelic), equating to the Latin *fortunatus*, would be translated into Arabic as *ghanior mughni* (elements in two common Muslim names). The Beatan clan (traditionally doctors and physicians up and down the islands and western highlands) is thought to have acquired its skills in Muslim Spain.

After the defeat, and before its rise again less than a century later under Kenneth Macalpine (Cionnaich mac Ailpein)(as **The Kingdom of the Scots and Picts**), the records of **Dál Riada** were systematically hunted out and destroyed on the orders of the Church of Rome, and only three documents survive (actually really only two, as two of those are clearly re-writes of the same document).

So, it would seem that there were Muslim settlers here in the western Celtic areas of the British Isles in the early centuries of Islam. Much research needs to be done on this just to discover the extent of the surviving documentary evidence, let alone fresh looks at archaeological material from Ireland, Wales, and the west of Scotland.

From the Middle Ages to the Tudors

It is worth bearing in mind that Britain was always rather 'strange' or 'odd ball' in its following of Christianity, and its adherence to the Church of Rome always left a lot to be desired (by Rome). It was a continual source of heresies, such as [Pelagianism](#), and its derivative variants, which was described by Dom Louis Gougaud, a French Jesuit historian (in *Les Chrétientés Celtiques*, Éditions Gabalda, Paris, 1911, p 34: my translation), as "in some sense the national heresy of the Britons". Belief in Pelagianism would rather predispose a person to Protestantism or Islam.

And even the Roman Church in Britain went its own way for the most part, much to the constant frustration of the Papacy. Not content with ploughing their own furrow, the British would infuriatingly export their waywardness to the rest of Christendom. Pelagius himself, for example, taught his unwelcome views in Rome, Carthage, and Palestine during the early 5th Century together with his companion and acolyte Coelestius (another Irishman, or 'Scot'). And Europe is dotted with towns (such as St Gallen in Switzerland) and monasteries founded by 'Irish' *peregrinimonks* like St Columbanus.

The real beginnings of Protestantism take place in England in the 14th Century with the Oxford educated Yorkshireman John Wyclif's attacks on Roman Catholic fundamentals - papal authority, confession, transubstantiation, and monasticism. He believed in the sole authority of the Holy Scripture, and produced a partial translation of the Bible into English from the Latin Vulgate of St Jerome. He was condemned by the Pope in 1377, and protected for a while by Oxford University (where he'd been Master of Balliol College in 1360, and was currently Warden of Canterbury Hall) and by his mentor John of Gaunt, "time honoured Lancaster". He eventually went too far for his allies' comfort and was condemned by Oxford and by Archbishop Courtenay in 1381. He died in 1384 at Lutterworth.

His 'movement', which lived on in the Lollards for another century or more, degenerating into a popular protestantism during the later 15th Century and into the 16th, gave rise to the Hussites (after Jan Hus) in Bohemia and through them led directly to European Protestantism which received such a boost from Martin Luther's publication of his *Theses*. But it is because of lollardy that much of England and Scotland was openly heretical and sympathetic to Calvinism when it arrived in the 16th Century.

It is recorded that in the 12th or 13th Century that there was a 'factory' (a local representative trading post) of "Arabs" next to a wine warehouse in London. Not much more is known about it, because, although some of the archives exist (not everything was destroyed in the Great Fire of 1666), the essential research hasn't been done.

The Merchant Venturers' company dealt in the Baltic sometimes in collaboration with the Hanseatic League and sometimes in open competition with them. London, Berwick, and Leith had Hanseatic factories. In the Baltic they traded with "Turks" in Lithuania and "Muscovy" for horses at the Novgorod Fair. The great ports on the east coast of Britain were at London, Boston, Yarmouth, Hull, and - probably the richest town in England and Scotland - Berwick. Here merchants from the Muslim world would arrive, stay, have dealings with the locals, trade their wares. So factories as in London were not unusual in any of the main ports or fair towns.

The Middle Ages were noteworthy for the Fairs, such as the great ones at Basel and Novgorod, where merchants from the Christian and Muslims worlds met and traded. The whole of Europe held lesser fairs. In England, among the most famous were St Giles' Fair at Winchester (which lasted 3 weeks), St Bartholomew's at Smithfield in London near where the hospital used to be, St Botolph's at Boston in Lincolnshire, St Ives' in Huntingdon (which lasted 8 days and had been granted by King John to the abbot and monks of Ramsey Abbey in 1202), and Stourbridge Fair in Cambridge. To these fairs came traders from the Muslim world, selling silks and cottons, the essential spices, condiments, herbal medicines, and manufactures. It is, thus, quite possible that the Mediaeval British man and woman had much more direct person-to-person contact with Muslims than many people do today.

The existence of these 12th Century (and later) bureaux allows us to draw certain inferences about the Muslims who manned them, and how they would have behaved, because a lot is known about similar Muslim 'factories' that were located in various places in Africa, around the coasts of southern India, and most particularly in South East Asia (*i.e.* what is now called Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, Cambodia and South Vietnam, and the Philipines (of course, known as Tumasik, Singapore was then little more than a mangrove swamp)).

The Guilds, a noteworthy feature of the the Middle Ages, were largely an invention of the Muslims, as were certain essential features of foreign trade (such as the promissory note or cheque, itself a loan-word from the Arabic *shaqq*"a torn part", as the note would be torn and the parties would each keep one piece which when married together would produce payment), and the 'factory' (known variously as a *zawiyyah*, or *ribatin* the west, and *khanqahor dergahin* the east). In the Muslim world, the Guilds, or brotherhoods (*akhawiyah*), were part of the whole *tariqah* movement (known to the present-day West as "Sufism"). These religious fraternities specialised in different activities, in which the members and adepts were required to participate as part of their spiritual practises. For example, 'tent making' was the chosen area of the fraternity that the famous mathematician and poet 'Umar al-Khayyam ('Umar "the Tentmaker") belonged. Two great Orders, one now known as the Shadhili (and still extant) and the other called the Suhrawardi (now absorbed into the Naqshbandi), specialised in merchanting and foreign trade. The Shadhiliyyah were active in the Levant, North and West Africa, and Spain (and so would have been dealing with Europe) and the Suhrawardiyyah operated out of the Gulf, Multan and Uchh, and South Arabia to the East African coast, south and south-east Asia and China.

Next to the warehouse, or conveniently close, there would have been the hospice (*zawiyyah*, *ribat*, *khanqah*, or *dergah*), which would have served them also as a community centre and mosque. They would probably have belonged to the (Sunni) Maliki *madh'hab* (the jurisprudential school followed in Spain and most of north Africa), they almost certainly have been members of the Shadhili Sufi Order, they would have had regular *dhikr* meetings - colourful and musical affairs with much gaiety, and food (the surplus of which would have been given to the local poor) - and would have intermarried with the locals, usually with daughters of important merchants, burgesses, nobles, and local officials. This is part of how Islam spread in

the Malay Lands.

In the early years of the 13th Century (or the tail end of the 12th), **King John I** (the one who got the 'bad press' about Robin Hood) sent word to the **Sharif of Morocco** that he wished to marry his daughter and was willing to convert to Islam to do so (which is why he's got such a bad press since). He got excommunicated for his pains by the Church of Rome. Nothing more is known about the incident, as it has been hushed up, but again many of the records still exist.



It is further inferred that there were many Spanish Muslims wandering around Britain during this time. It is worth remembering that John's (and Richard Coeur de Lion's) mother was **Queen Eleanor of Aquitaine**, Duchess of Aquitaine in her own right and the grand-daughter of the famous Duke William IX (acknowledged as the first of the Troubadours), whose court was filled with scholars and so on from Muslim Spain and for whom Islam was no stranger and therefore no threat. Eleanor herself spoke and read Arabic.

It's likely that the disappearance of these British groups of Muslims took place at the end of the 13th Century, and were simply catalogued among the purges of 'the Jews' such as took place in York in 1189 AD to mark the start of the Third Crusade. But some contacts and even intermarriages continued, partly through the institutions of crusading and pilgrimage.

The **House of Windsor** (previously known as the House of Saxe-Cobourg-Gotha, and before that as the House of Hanover, and before that as the House of Stuart, and before that as the House of Tudor) has a *shajarah* of seven lines of descent, both Hasani and Husaini, from the **Prophet Muhammad** (on whom be peace). There are many old families in Britain with similar *shajarahs*, and others who are descendants of the Spanish Umayyad Caliphs also. These lines come about through intermarriage with Iberian families who descend from Moors, such as the (Portuguese) Dukes of Lara.

Apart from this, we are left largely with only local tales and legends, which no self-respecting modern anthropologist would dismiss out of hand. The Moor "Azeem" who appears in the Hollywood epic film *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*, although not in the usual "Tales of Robin Hood", does have some local legends to support his existence. In fact, there may have been more than one character doing this "Robin Hood" thing, and some of these legends may have become absorbed into that of Sir Robert de Loxley, Earl of Huntingdon.

The whole episode of the King Robert I "the Bruce" needs looking into, including the story of the spider in the cave, the murder of the Red Comyn, the coronation, the attempt to restore Celtic Christianity and the Celtic monarchy, the appearance of the Templar Knights at the decisive moment of the equally decisive Battle of Bannockburn in 1314, the request to take his heart to the Holy Land and its going to Spain where it is cast into the midst of the Moorish army by Sir James Douglas in 1330; and, indeed, the constant involvement in Scottish politics like a *lietmotiv* of the Douglasses - who according to one account contain within them the descendants of King Selbach mac Fherchair. So much of the story and so many of the incidents and involvements have echoes of anecdotes from the Sufis of Spain and the West, that something might be connecting the two traditions.

The surname Morris, which is common in Wales and the West Country, certainly derives from "Moorish". Whether this also identifies a Moor (*i.e.* a Muslim), or simply an eponymous ancestor who looked like one, is problematic. Whatever the answer may be, it is certain that "Morris Dancing" comes from the Muslims of Spain, and is derived from the *raqsor hadrah* of the Spanish Sufis. The questions remain largely unanswered

as to what the Spanish Muslims were doing in Britain at the time, how they could mix so freely with the native population and be accepted by them, and how they could go about their business so easily without the Church interfering (or rather, without the magistrates and justiciars taking any notice of what Church officials said). Perhaps the answer is to be found in the timing and circumstances of King John's offer to the Sheriff.

The Tudor Era

The Tudor period begins with the defeat of King Richard III "Crookback" at the Battle of Bosworth Field in 1485 by Henry Tudor, Earl of Pembroke, a putative descendant of Princess Joan (known as Tywysoges Siwan in Welsh history)(the 'natural' daughter of King John I, who was quite 'legitimate' by the Laws of Hywel Dda, who married Llywelyn ap Iorwerth the Prince of Gwynedd), John of Gaunt (protector of John Wyclif), and of Queen Catherine de Valois (the "Kate" of Shakespeare's play *King Henry V*) who was his grandmother. The Earl became King Henry VII, and was eventually succeeded by his brilliant second son who became King Henry VIII. This Henry's older sister Princess Margaret married King James IV of Scotland in 1503: a hundred years later, in 1603, her great-grandson became, in effect, the first king of the British Isles when he succeeded his cousin Queen Elizabeth I to the throne of England as King James VI and I, and ushered in the rule of the **House of Stuart** which our present ruler, **Queen Elizabeth II**, continues.

When the Tudor monarch, King Henry VIII, broke with Rome, England was already, to a great extent, popularly a Protestant country; and Scotland was well advanced on the same path, with John Knox teaching Calvinism. The break with Rome was brought about by stupid European 'power politics' directed at the British Isles and was borne out of a fear that a link up between the British and the Muslims was possible. The Spaniards had become obsessive about the Muslims because of their long Crusade against the Moors of Spain, which had entered an intense if not frenetic phase with the Fall of Granada: there seemed to be Muslims hiding everywhere, even disguised as Christians and nobles of Old Castile. By the mid-1500s, the neurotic obsession with *limpieza de sangre*("purity of blood") was in full swing. So was the burning of Muslims, Jews, heretics, and apostates.

The Spanish economy was in a severe down-turn over the country as a whole. Parts of it, such as Aragon, Valencia, Catalonia, and the Balearics, were in total financial collapse. This was all owing to the expulsion of the Moors. And the persecution (*pogroms* is not too strong a word) of the *Moriscos*, *Marranos*, even the Christian Mozarabs (from the Arabic word *Musta'rib*, "an Arabified person"), and the *Conversos* by the Church of Rome's "Holy Office" (more commonly known as "The Spanish Inquisition") and their mass extermination by burning at the stake in the regular *Autos de Fe* exacerbated matters. Many Jews and Muslims fled to North Africa. Many others joined the guerrillas in the Sierra Morena, the Sierra Nevada, and the Alpujarras. The pitiful story of the hounding and persecution of the *Moriscos* continued from the Fall of Granada in the last decade of the 15th Century until the last of them were finally deported from Murcia to North Africa in the early months of 1614. All this was quite well known in the British Isles, and with the weakening of the control of the Church of Rome (never really very strong) there was a danger (in the eyes of the Papacy) that England might tie up with the Moroccans.

This seems to have been a constant nightmare from the 8th Century onwards - that there might be a collaboration between the British and the Muslims of Spain and North Africa. This had become complicated over the centuries by the Church coming to believe its own propaganda that there was no difference between the heresies of Protestantism and the infidelities of Judaism and Islam: a Muslim was as bad as a Protestant. It seems that the Church sometimes was unaware that there were any differences between them; so that it may be that at key periods the Papacy actually thought that Islam was just another Christian heresy and so

Britain's protestants were, to all intents and purposes, Muslims. Perhaps it was also thought that *Moriscos* were taking refuge in the British Isles (they may have been; we don't know, because the research hasn't been done)?

Papal policy was to get a dynastic marriage with a solid European crown: to get Britain into the "heart of Europe" by *coup de main* or subterfuge. The eldest son of King Henry VII, Prince Arthur, was duly married in 1502 to the King of Spain's daughter. But not only did King Henry die, but so, inconveniently, did his son (of consumption five months after his wedding). The teaching of the Church was that it was forbidden (by that same Church) for a man to marry "his dead brother's widow". The convoluted thinking was that as a husband and wife had become "one flesh" with the consummation of the marriage, therefore the wife had become the sister of her husband's brothers and the daughter of her father-in-law. And for a sister to marry her brother was incest: therefore for a man to marry "his dead brother's widow" was also incest. This was, of course, in flagrant disregard of the Old Testament injunctions to the levirate and was probably, therefore, uncanonical, and also flew in the teeth of common sense. But politics is politics, and the 'nightmare' had always demanded extreme measures. So when King Henry VIII was eventually successfully married to Princess Catherine of Aragon (the *Infanta de Castilla* of the "Elephant and Castle") in 1509 it seemed that the nightmare was over.



Then, when she failed to give him a 'son and heir', Henry (quite a devout man for that day and age,... and country) came to believe that he was cursed by God for this "incest". So he asked the Pope for an annulment, expecting that it would be granted (Henry was very learned in theology). But the Pope was in the pocket of the King of Spain. So, when the annulment was refused for political reasons (the same Pope had annulled the marriage of a German king in similar circumstances only a couple of years before), Henry was outraged at this blatant abuse of religion by the Pope for mere politics, considering it blasphemous. And so followed the train of events that led to the break from Rome, and the establishment of the Church of England.

With a interval when Queen Mary Tudor, who was married to King Philip II of Spain, tried to restore the Church of Rome in England, and Marie of Guise was Regent in Scotland (and her daughter Mary Stuart was in France being educated and eventually married to the Dauphin) and the Catholics enjoyed a period of ascendancy there too, England was effectively at war with Spain, or France, (or both), and the Papacy. And finally, when Queen Elizabeth I ruled England, Wales, and Ireland, came the threat of invasion by the Duke of Parma's army from the Spanish Netherlands and the Great Armada set sail in 1588 under Medina-Sidonia to aid in moving Parma to Kent. But it was not to be. The Spanish fleet was harried by the English all the way up the Channel; it was attacked with fire-ships as it lay off the Low Countries, and had to disperse to save itself; a storm blew up and the dispersed elements were scattered all over the North Sea, many perishing in the hazardous waters or being wrecked on the Dogger Bank. The scattered remnants tried to run before the storm around the north of Scotland and back around Ireland to Spain, many being driven ashore by the weather in the Atlantic.

It is known that many *Moriscos* and *Conversos* were among the shipwrecked around the coasts of north and west Scotland, the Islands, and the west of Ireland. There are many stories from those parts of the British Isles of such people marrying local women and 'returning to their heathen ways'. The Irish surname Mahood is said to derive from this period.



In 1587, **Queen Elizabeth I** of England, Ireland and France, had arranged an agreement with the **Ottoman Empire** that if the Spaniards landed in England, the Ottomans would come to the rescue. The prospect of aid from regiments of Janissary Marines did not seem



an unwelcome thing: the Church of Rome with its Inquisition was deeply feared in England, especially as the persecutions and martyrdoms of Queen Mary's reign were still fresh memories, and in Scotland after the activities of the (French) Guise family, and the Muslims were not. And what was going on in Spain was not unknown either. It was well-known also that in Europe if Protestants could escape into the Ottoman domains (such as southern Silesia, Hungary, or Bosnia) they were safe from Romish persecution. Help from such a quarter was therefore not a problem.

Corsairs, Mamlukes, Travellers, Adventurers, and Servants of Empire

In the period from the 14th to early 19th Centuries, many of the **Barbary Corsairs** (and 'Sully Rovers' - from Salih in Morocco, now absorbed into Casablanca) came from Britain. These corsair fleets were based in certain ports along the north African coast. The sailors of these fleets were 'mamlukes' and Muslim converts, having first been taken as slaves in raids and naval encounters.

The fleets of a number of these ports had affiliations across the Mediterranean in Europe: Algiers, for example, was for years in the 18th Century a largely French manned fleet (and always served French interests); and **Tripoli**, in what is now Libya, was British.

They would even act as 'proxies' for their original countries when a certain 'deniability' was needed, such as keeping the Americans out of the Mediterranean (after 1785) while Britain and France fought their wars. The Tripoli Fleet provided intelligence for Nelson's squadron prior to the Battle of the Nile, and its ships frequently victualled and took shelter with Royal Naval vessels in Majorca and Gibraltar.

The Tripoli fleet would organise regular furloughs back to Britain for the sailors to see their families. There are many West Country rumours about such Muslim families. **Lundy Island** in the Bristol Channel was a well-known corsair staging place, and there was a base for many years on the **Isle of Wight**.

There is no reason to suppose that there weren't other such bases at convenient locations around the coasts of southern Ireland, south Wales, Cornwall, and the south-west of England.



There are other little points: the Admiral of the Tripolitanian Corsair Fleet during Nelson's Battle of the Nile (and also the person responsible for capturing and beaching the *USS Philadelphia*, leading to Stephen Decatur's moment of fame and the phrase in the US Marine Corps hymn "...to the shores of Tripoli...") was "that demonic Scot" called **Murad Raïs** (previously **Peter Lyle**, master mariner, sailing out of Leith as First Mate on a ship trading into the Mediterranean). And in conversation with his friend Colonel Worthington, the British Consul in Tripoli, with whom he shared a passion for growing roses, Admiral Murad stated that British corsairs (who mostly seem to have come from the West Country, south Wales, and southern Ireland) used to go home on regular "furlough", and visit their families in Britain. The Age of the Corsairs died with the defeat of Napoleon in 1815.

Another Scot, who was killed commanding the rearguard (and who had been the Military Governor of Medina) during the Ottoman War against the Wahhabis in the same year that Napoleon was beaten at Waterloo, was **Thomas Keith (Ibrahim Aga)** of Edinburgh, who had been an armourer with the 78th Highlanders when he was captured during the expedition to Al-Mansoura (in Egypt) in 1807. He had been one of the last of the Mamlukes.

The famous British Orientalist of Swiss origin, **John Lewis Burckhardt**, was a Muslim who settled in Cairo,

performed the Pilgrimage in 1813, and died and was buried in Cairo in 1815.

General Wheeler, one of the heroes of Cawnpore, where he was killed during the Indian Mutiny of 1857, was a Muslim. In fact, unlike what commonly happens in the UK in the period after World War II, for a British officer to become a Muslim during the *Raj* in India was not viewed as a "career disadvantage" and treated with suspicion and ostracism. Many of the 'political officers' operating on the Frontier and inside Afghanistan were converted Muslims. Among the last examples of this are the cases of Shepherd and Green, two Britons serving in Malaya and Borneo during the period immediately after World War II: **Hajji Mubin Shepherd** became a famous personage in Kuala Lumpur, where he would entertain his guests to tea on the terrace of the "Spotted Dog" (the Selangor Cricket Club), and **Hajji Muhammad Ali Green** settled on the island of Labuan in the estuary of the Brunei River.

The really (relatively) well documented period of settlers from the Muslim world comes at the end of the 19th Century.

These were for the most part sailors (lascars) off the merchant ships that would dock in the ports of Cardiff (Tiger Bay), Swansea, Bristol, London, South Shields, Leith, Glasgow, and Liverpool.

The sailors married local women and settled. Mostly the sailors were from three areas: the Malay lands, Bengal, and the area of the Yemen, Aden and Somalia.

The Muslim community in the east end of London dates back to the days of the 'Indiamen' of the **Honourable East India Company**. This places its origins in the 18th Century.

The best documented of the 19th Century communities are two: Cardiff and Liverpool.

The Cardiff community dates from the 1870s or 1880s, and was made up mostly of Yemenis who married local Welsh girls. They had a mosque in Tiger Bay which was an old Chapel, and the exterior of which had been rendered and whitewashed to look like a South Arabian mosque. They followed the (Sunni) Shafi'ite *madh'hab* and the Shadhili Sufi Order (Alawiyyah branch). They have since been moved out of what used to be Tiger Bay and resettled. They have a new mosque which is not so picturesque.

The Liverpool community is particularly interesting because it attracted a number of British Muslim converts led by a solicitor of Manx origin, '**Abdullah William Quilliam**. As solicitor to the City Corporation of **Bradford** in the West Riding of Yorkshire, he was asked to participate in the opening of the new City Hall: he did so by reciting the opening chapter of the Quran, the **Fatihah**.

He became a Muslim in Morocco, studied at the famous **Qarawiyyin University** at Fez, was graduated as an '**Alim** from there and recognised as such. He wrote many pamphlets on Islam, which are available in the British Library in London for research.

He set up an organisation which eventually came to be called the *English Islamic Association*. They had many meetings and organised a mosque, community centre (which had a meeting hall and a library) and a *madrassah* (religious school). It seems that there were two separate communities, or perhaps one should say two distinct communities, because they worked together: the English converts and the settlers. It doesn't seem that they intermarried much at that stage, which implies that whole families of English people had converted to Islam.

They attracted a lot of hostility from the 'Establishment' (a reading of the 'Letters' pages of *The Times* at the time of the Young Turk Revolution of 1908 and the Balkan War of 1912 gives a flavour of what they had to put up with). Finally on the eve of World War I most of them fled to the Ottoman Empire for refuge: Quilliam's eldest son was a major in the Ertogrol Life Guard Regiment, for example.

It is, however, important institutionally that Quilliam was appointed **Shaykhu-l Islam of the British Isles** by the Caliph, Sultan Abdul Hamid II (*jannat makan*), and this was endorsed by the (Qajar) Shah of Persia (for the Shiah) (on advice from the Ayatullahs in Qom), the King of Afghanistan, and the Emir of Morocco, with the wholehearted approval of **Queen Victoria**. The Queen-Empress was very proud that she ruled over as many or more Muslims as Sultan Abdul Hamid, and always discharged this duty on his behalf as Caliph. Her descendants were proud to continue this tradition.

This means that an Office of Shaykhu-l Islam has been legitimately established in the UK by the age-old method, and can be revived at any time, when the Muslims can 'get their act together'. And by the doctrine of 'residuary sovereignty' this legitimacy devolves on the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland, and the 'Dependent Territories' of the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man also. Any or each of these could appoint their own **Shaykhu-l Islam** with a proper Caliphal authority.

The mosque still exists in Liverpool. It is part of the local government buildings complex and is used to store archives. It is still known as 'the mosque'.

The other communities that were established at about the same time as the Liverpool and Cardiff ones seem to have disappeared.

There were also, from the latter decades of the 19th Century, various refugees from the Muslim world living here. This increased after the Young Turk Revolution in the Ottoman Empire in 1908, when many Ottoman families sought exile here rather than live under such a godless and anti-religious rule. Many of these are buried in Brookwood Cemetery near Woking.

One interesting 'angle' is the activity of certain converts around the turn of the 19th-20th Centuries. Prominent among these were the diplomat **Henry, Lord Stanley of Alderley**; **Al-Farooq, Lord Headley**, on whose land the Shah Jehan Mosque at Woking was built in pure Moghul style; and **Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall**, sometime Resident Minister in Hyderabad (Deccan), who translated the Quran.

The Era after 1914

Most of the present-day settlers in the UK arrived of course after the 1960s. Initially these were mostly from the Indian Sub-Continent, but in recent years there have been arrivals from all over the Muslim World (there are even ethnic Chinese and Japanese Muslims here).

Now the majority of the Muslim population of the British Isles comes from elsewhere than the Indian Sub-continent (who now account for less than 48 percent of the total). Many of these are from East Africa (particularly Eritreans, Somalis, and Sudanese) and from the Maghreb (especially Morocco).

There is, however, a very large community of converts of both "white"; and Afro-Caribbean origins (these two singularly offensive descriptions are used because they appear on an increasing number of official forms

and questionnaires).

Estimates place the total number of converts in the region of between 50,000 and 80,000. Some of them chose to be known as "reverts", on the basis of a Quranic injunction that states that every child is born a Muslim, it is its parents who make it a Christian, Jew or Magian.

[MainMenu](#) | [Pelagius](#)

© Daoud Rosser-Owen 1998. All Rights Reserved.

This page was created using [TextToHTML 1.3.4](#) and [PageSpinner 2.1](#)
[TextToHTML is a free software for Macintosh and is © 1995,1996 by Kris Coppieters]