

Diverse Histories at the Berkshire Record Office

Magda Adkins; Charlie Brooks, Dr. Richard Blakemore, Dr. Daniel Renshaw and Mark Stevens

Introduction

The purpose of this research project was to **identify** and establish the presence of ethnically diverse individuals within the historical records of rural Berkshire in the 18th and 19th centuries. Another key focal point of this research was to evaluate the project's potential for evolving into a sustainable, community-driven initiative in the future.

There is currently a **gap** in the representation of ethnically diverse histories in the larger historical narrative of Berkshire. This research seeks to address this underrepresentation with a critical eye and scope out ways to engage with wider audiences to achieve a more inclusive history.

Research Methods

Archival research at the Berkshire Record Office

Collections research at the Museum of English Rural Life

Desk-based research of relevant local and social history resources

12 Semi-structured interviews with University of Reading staff, Museum and Archival staff and Reading Borough Council members

Research Context: England's construction of the rural as a 'white' space



Figure 1. Basildon Park, Berkshire, a well-known National Trust property

The **exclusion** of ethnically diverse histories from a broader historical tapestry of rural Berkshire is not attributable to the absence of such populations. Instead, it stems from a deliberate effort to exclude individuals who challenged the dominant notion of an English identity that rested on a **white ethnicity**.

Symbols of this problematic national identity still exist in the landscape today in the form of large country houses. Grand properties like Basildon Park (depicted above) serve as emblems of rural English heritage, having been built with proceeds traceable to colonial exploitation and imperial expansion. These histories must be challenged. They are not representative of the lives and experiences of ethnically diverse people in the 18th and 19th centuries or of local communities today.

Research Findings

A **lack** of evidence was uncovered within the extensive archival and museum collections during this project. It was particularly challenging to identify any specific ethnically diverse individuals.

These gaps in the findings provide a space to engage in a critical reevaluation of the **limited historical perspective** present in these archives and collections.

Through the series of interviews, it was re-enforced to the team that this project's future prospects and its true potential are best served by embracing a **community-led approach**.

Next Steps? Community engaged heritage as a sustainable approach for this project

The absence of evidence in the archives is not the project's end but a beginning. The semi-structured interviews yielded valuable insights on effective community engagement practices and essential considerations to bear in mind.



Acknowledgements

Special thanks to Richard, Dan and Mark for their support and positive encouragement on this project. I would also like to thank my research partner Charlie who I thoroughly enjoyed working alongside on this research.

This project was supported by the UROP (Undergraduate Research Opportunities Programme) scheme at the University of Reading. UROP is managed by Careers.