



The History of Immigration to the UK

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1. Until the Second World War episodes of immigration were small and demographically insignificant. Britain is not “a nation of immigrants” like the United States or Australia as some claim. Large-scale immigration is an entirely new phenomenon.
2. We can measure historic immigration by looking at Census records. The Census first began to record people’s country of birth in 1851. Estimating the size of the foreign born population before that is much more difficult but historical records do give us some idea as to the scale of immigration.
3. In 1964 the International Passenger Survey was established and, in 1991, a more sophisticated measurement of immigration called the Long Term International Passenger Migration estimate was put in place. These allowed migration to and from the UK to be monitored on an annual basis.

Pre-History

4. The history of Britain before the Roman invasion is known as pre-history as there are no written records to document it. However, we can say with some confidence that the area that is now known as Britain was almost certainly inhabited in a previous period but was rendered uninhabitable during the Ice Age so the longest settled populations arrived after the Ice Age, some 25,000 years ago
5. About 10,000 years ago the inhabitants of Britain began using the land for agriculture; some theorize that this was as the result of a migration. During the Roman Occupation, which began 2,000 years ago, the population of Britain was about 4-5 million. While there was undoubtedly some migration to the UK, it is probable that the population remained overwhelmingly indigenous. There were probably about 125,000 Roman migrants in the British Isles, or about 3% of the overall population.

Post Roman Occupation

6. After the end of the Roman Occupation Britain’s population fell markedly, perhaps to as little as 1.25 million. In this period, Britain experienced invasions and settlement by Germanic tribes but their size and scale are contested. Some historians believe that the number of Anglo Saxons that came to the UK

was relatively small, while others argue that there was a large scale migration of Germanic people. Most lean more towards the minimalist model. Subsequent settlements from Viking invasions may have made up as much as 4%-8% of the total population. Some historians argue that the Norman Conquest of 1066 resulted in little migration to Britain, while others believe that Norman settlers eventually made up as much as 5% of the population.

7. The Middle Ages saw very small migrations; one of these was of Jewish people, who were later expelled from England in 1290. Quite sizable numbers of Flemings also came at this time. England's rise as a trading power in the sixteenth century was arguably the start of contemporary migration to Britain. However, this did not result in large scale migration as we know it today; in 1610 it was estimated that only 10,000 of London's 300,000 people were born abroad.

8. Over the next couple of centuries, small numbers of Europeans, Africans and Asians came to Britain. For example, it is estimated that there were about 10,000-20,000 Africans living in Britain in the eighteenth century, with some outlying estimates of 30,000.

9. By 1734, it was estimated that there were around 6,000 Jewish people living in England and in 1800 around 15,000-20,000. This population was joined by other migrations over time. At the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century a larger wave, around 100,000, came from Tsarist Russia and Eastern Europe. Another wave from Nazi Germany came in the 1930s- with perhaps as many as 100,000 arriving.

10. It is estimated that by 1700, about 50,000 Huguenots (French Protestants) had settled in England making up as much as 1% of England's total population in 1700. The eighteenth century also saw German refugees known as 'Poor Palatines' arrive in Britain, with perhaps as many as 13,000 arriving.

11. By the 1901 Census there were 82,844 Eastern Europeans living in Britain. Small numbers of people came from Asia to Britain - there were perhaps a few hundred at the start of the 20th Century. The 1901 census also showed that there were just 387 Chinese nationals in Britain. There was also some movement to and from Britain's colonial Empire. Many of those that came to live in Britain were the descendants of British settlers to Australia, New Zealand, Canada and South Africa. In the eighty years between 1851 and 1931, the population born abroad increased by only about one million.

Post World War Two

12. After the Second World War, the pace of immigration increased considerably. For example, thousands of Poles, many of whom had fought for Britain in the Second World War, were offered British citizenship in 1947. The 1951 census recorded 162,339 Poles living in Britain. Britain also introduced a guest workers scheme after the war that enabled quite large numbers of other Eastern Europeans to come to Britain.

13. The Government, seeking workers from the Commonwealth, introduced the British Nationality Act of 1948, which granted subjects of the British Empire the right to live and work in the UK. From 1962, tighter restrictions were put in place, but migrants from the Commonwealth continued to come in quite large numbers.

14. In 1973 the UK joined the European Union, so beginning the period when citizens of other member states could come to the UK to work. Over time, free movement was extended to cover the self-employed, job seekers, students and the self-sufficient. ([Read a short history of the European Union here](#))

15. Between 1964 (when annual migration began to be recorded) and 1997, total net migration was low. For example, in 1964, the first year in which it was recorded it was negative, in part because of quite large net emigration of British citizens. Across the whole period it averaged just 17,000 a year. In the almost 25 years from 1975 (when net migration was first recorded by citizenship) to 1997 migration from the EU was initially low, averaging just 7,000 a year.

1997 to the present day

16. In the late 1990s the pace and scale of migration increased to a level without historical precedent. Indeed, between 2001 and 2011 the foreign born population increased dramatically from 4.6 million to 7.5 million. Part of the reason for this huge upturn in migration is that, under the Labour Government of 1997-2010, immigration controls were relaxed. Over that period, net foreign migration was 3.6 million. This was the result of deliberate policy changes rather than changing patterns of migration or globalisation. Policies such as expanding work migration and opening up the country to East European migration following the expansion of the European Union in 2004 caused immigration to reach record levels. The massive increase in the level of migration after 1997 is totally unprecedented in the country's history, dwarfing the scale of anything that went before. [To read more about the Labour Government of 1997-2010 and its impact on immigration click here.](#)

17. Ahead of the 2010 general election the Conservatives campaigned on a pledge to reduce net migration to the tens of thousands. A Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition was formed and during David Cameron's period in office the system of non-EU migration underwent significant reform in an attempt to reduce its level. However, migration from the EU continued beyond the control of government. Despite efforts to reform the non-EU system and restrictions on benefit provision for newly arrived EU workers, net migration continued at very high levels, totalling 1.5 million over the period of the Parliament. Concern about the level of immigration (amongst other things) led David Cameron to go to the EU in search of reform, after which he had promised a referendum on Britain's membership of the bloc. His attempts achieved only minor amendments to free movement which were put to the country in a referendum. In June 2016 the country voted to leave the EU.

18. The government is currently negotiating Britain's exit from the EU but proposes a new relationship with Britain outside of the Single Market. This would mean that free movement of people would come to an end when we leave the EU, giving the government control over European migration for the first time in over 40 years.

[To explore this topic in more depth please see our full History of Immigration paper here.](#)

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