

Greeks in the United Kingdom; 1455-2022

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The history of Greeks in the United Kingdom is to a great extent interwoven with the growth of socially and financially prominent diasporic communities in England during the late 19th century, which built their prosperity on the pillars of trade, shipping, and financing. Research has long demonstrated that, as with most world diasporas, it forms part of wider phenomenon, spanning a much broader chronological horizon, involving multiple migratory waves that are not uniform in character and were instigated by diverse political and economic factors.

The earliest documented Grecian migrants reached Britain as a direct impact of the collapse of the Byzantine Empire and the fall of Constantinople to the Ottomans in 1453, which resulted to the diffusion of scholars, artists, and craftsmen westwards. While Italy functioned as the primary pole of this migratory movements, Britain also attracted a small number of often less distinguished individuals. Although one cannot speak of an organised, self-conscious community, the presence of Greeks in 15th and 16th century Britain is well recorded. Artisans appear in tax and other official records in the London area, like the Effomatos brothers who maintained a gold-wire drawn thread embroidery workshop in Broad Street.¹ While the sporadic presence of Greek scribes should be attributed to the revived interest among local intellectuals for classical literature.² During the same period a large number of transient visitors from the fallen Byzantine empire, especially clerics, passed through Britain, collecting charitable donations for those under the Ottoman rule. At least one such clergyman however, the Athenian George Vranas, had a long and successful career at the papal curia, becoming Bishop of Sees in Dromore, Ireland, and Elshin, Scotland, between 1483 and 1529.³

The first community of Greeks, displaying evidence of cohesion and organisation can be traced to the late 17th and 18th century London⁴. Unlike the flourishing mercantile elites emerging during the same period in major European financial centres, the London community consisted primarily of impoverished sailors who had served on British vessels and between voyages or after their discharge made a living in London. Dynamic elements who could exploit the financial opportunities the city had to offer were not entirely lacking. Pasqua Rosee is credited as the first coffee seller in England⁵ and George

Constantine founded the Grecian Coffee Shop in the 1660s.⁶ The establishment of the first Greek Orthodox church in Soho in 1676 illustrates the existence of a sizeable community, whose self-identification was deeply intertwined with shared religious beliefs. Following a successful petition to the Privy Council by three members of the community in 1674, the church was founded through the fund-raising efforts of the ex-bishop of Samos Iosif Georgirenes – another testament to the dire financial situation of the community. Even though the church operated for a short period, until passed to French Huguenots in 1682, the community did in no way cease to exist, and its history can be glimpsed from the records of the chapel of the Russian embassy, where all ecclesiastical services were transferred.⁷

The next century saw the heyday of the Greek diaspora in Britain, with rapid shifts in its composition and character. The Napoleonic Wars functioned as catalyst for the engagement of Greeks in the transit trade from the Black Sea and the Ottoman Empire, previously under British monopoly.⁸ The latter in combination with the outbreak of the Greek War of Independence paved the way for the migration of prospering Greek merchant families to Britain, especially from the island of Chios. Between 1830 and 1860 over 60 families operated merchant houses in London, with a multitude of associated offices along the pre-existing trade routes, while their activities soon spread to Manchester and Liverpool, and slightly later in Cardiff. They controlled a significant amount of the overseas trade, especially with the Black Sea, with a strong focus on bulk cargoes of grain and other agricultural products.⁹ Most prominent among them was Rallis Bros. that quickly evolved into a multinational company and the uncontested head of the growing entrepreneurial community.¹⁰ By the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, Greek entrepreneurship was progressively restructured, expanding into ship brokering and stock exchange, and an accompanying rise of a network of Ionian families, led by the company owned by the Cephalonian Vagliano brothers.¹¹

Shared language, nationally and religion constituted the major cohesive elements for the diasporic community, resulting to the acquisition of new places catering to their worshipping needs, culminating to the foundation of St. Sophia in Bayswater in 1877, that would subsequently become the Cathedral of the Archdiocese of Thyateira and Great Britain. Greek Orthodox churches were also established in Manchester (1860), Liverpool (1864), and Cardiff (1906), while community burial plots were acquired in West Norwood, London (1842), and the Ardwick Cemetery, Manchester (1872). The emerging Greek elite also showed a substantial engagement, with the institution of Greek schools and cultural societies, as well as an interest in fine arts, literature, and antiquarianism, in emulation of the English bourgeoisie.¹²

The trajectory set by Greek entrepreneurship in the end of the 19th century continued to the middle of the 20th century, by when London became the global centre of Greek shipping. Greek ship owners profited from transporting raw materials for the English war industries during WWI, and the 1940s was a time of solidification for the Greek seamen's movement, during which the Cardiff-based unions played a leading role. The defining characteristic of the 20th century, though, is undeniably the wave of Greek-Cypriot emigration,¹³ which, albeit already underway since the 1920s-1930s, accelerated drastically after the war of independence from Britain in the 1950s, the political developments on the island in the 1960s and ultimately the Turkish military invasion of 1974. The Greek-Cypriot diaspora, directed primarily towards the Greater London area, but also other cities including Leeds, Manchester, and Birmingham, was initially involved in the catering and clothing industries, and saw a gradual expansion of its economic base.¹⁴

While the Greek-Cypriot communities continue to grow, accounting to nearly 300,000 people in the United Kingdom as a whole, and over a hundred Greek-owned shipping agencies and companies are still based in London, new migration from both Cyprus and Greece remained on decline during the late 20th century and the turn into the 21st century. This pattern changed completely with the onset of the Greek debt crisis of 2008, which pushed a shocking estimate of 500,000 Greeks to migrate towards Western European countries between 2010 and 2015. The latter resulted in the most recent shift in the composition of the Greek diaspora in the United Kingdom, with a sharp increase in the representation of university graduates and highly qualified individuals in the demographic.¹⁵

Greek diaspora in the UK has always been driven by migratory waves of highly qualified individuals, apart from the refugees from Cyprus that found shelter in Great Britain, after both the Cypriot struggle for independence in the 1950s and the Turkish invasion in 1970s. These intellectual migrations in Britain have created a dynamic and vivid diasporic community and sparked the creation of an Anglo-Hellenic heritage that can be observed in the Greek churches across the country, and the Greek cemeteries and is recognised by the Heritage authorities of the host countries. The newly arrived migrants have also endeavoured to record this amalgamated heritage and culture so as to understand relationships between the host land of the UK and the home lands of Greece and Cyprus.

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