

East India Company Spice-War Stories (1600-1625)



A Brick Lane Circle project, funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund

The project

The initiative will engage members of our diverse communities in East London and the surrounding areas to explore Anglo-Dutch Spice-War stories that took place during the early years of the English East India Company (1600-1625). During that time, these two powers violently competed against each other, and against Asian powers and Portuguese powers especially by the Dutch, for the control of spices from Asia. Journals, treaties and letters held at various heritage institutions - such as the British Library, London Metropolitan Archives and Royal Museum Greenwich - contain relevant materials. This project seeks to help interpret them imaginatively through fictionalised stories.

The project will engage diverse participants from a wide range of backgrounds, including a special focus on East London's Bangladeshi community as they have strong historical and recent connections with the British history of love for spices. The participants will:

1. Become familiar with events, activities, dangers, violence, brutality, profits and sea voyages associated with the competitions for spices
2. Interact with heritage resources and help bring to life, through creative imagination, stories of the past and share them widely
3. Develop an understanding of how various locations in East London and the City of London first connected with places across the vast landmasses and waters of Asia, east of the Cape of Good Hope.

This process aims to promote greater engagement with our common inter-linked heritage going back centuries. The connecting process began with competitions for spices and knowing about that will inspired others to take the love and learning of heritage deeper and broader, utilising ever-more creative methods.

Much of the early British history of spices was centred on East London and the City of London, an area today has also become a significant centre of spice eating, spice trade and spice restaurants, and experimentations with new spice mixes in creative new dishes.

During the end phase of the Anglo-Dutch Spice War, the shipment of Bengalis as slaves by the Dutch from Arakan in 1623/4 to their spice islands possessions had just started. Thousands of Bengalis were captured, kidnapped and sold by the Portuguese and the Arakanese as slaves to the Dutch, who came year after year to buy them for their growing empire in the Indonesian archipelago.

The four-hundredth anniversaries in 2020 and 2023 - the Dutch capture of the only English possessed nutmeg island, Pulau Run, in October 1620, and the massacre of the English by the Dutch in Ambon in March 1623 - provide a unique opportunity to generate wide interest in the early English history with the worlds of diverse Asia. Materials held at heritage institutions provide relevant records that can be utilised to explore and write about many topics, from occurrences in the Atlantic to Asia, including what happened on land and at sea.

In the past - especially during the days of the empire – many people in Britain were somewhat familiar with the spice history and the history of European colonialism. However, very few people know much about that today, and some of the stories told in the past, which have come down the generations, were from a particular point of view unsuitable for a modern diverse multi-cultural British society. They were English-centric, British-centric or Euro-centric. As such, this project, in effect, will help contribute toward re-examining heritage materials held in British heritage institutions and help develop fresh interpretations through critical reading and creative imagination.

The East End has also become known, at least from the post-war period, as a centre of curry and a place to taste the delicious spices of Asia. Although Indians, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis set up the East End curry houses, the Bangladeshis came to dominate in this regard with a continuous presence to this day. The British curry has also become somewhat synonymous with the Bangladeshi community as they have set up curry restaurants in every corner of the UK and spread the taste of Asian spices across the country.

By learning about how the story of the East End and the nearby City of London got directly connected to Asia through efforts to secure the most sought-after spices – pepper, nutmeg, mace and clove - from the sources, which also involved the taking of Bengali slaves by the Dutch to work on their newly established nutmeg plantations from 1623/4 onward, both East London's and the local Bangladeshi community's links with the early 17th Century European crave for spices will generate new perspectives on the heritage of the East End.

Also, this project will help people become aware of what was London was like around four hundred years ago - what kind of industries and jobs existed in the area; shipbuilding, the use of timber and sailing ships using wind power and help develop greater levels of awareness of environmental issues, concerning our modern-day carbon usages, sustainability and living conditions.

The project will produce a printed stories book, an exhibition, and a video documentary; engage additional diverse participants to deliver a drama performance. In addition, there will be a project completion celebration and touring events.

Application deadline: 15 July 2022

For further details of the project or would like to discuss anything before applying, please email bricklanecircle@yahoo.co.uk.

Project timetable (tentative)		
August-September 2022	Induction, group visits and workshops	The participants will be given a comprehensive induction on the project and taken on groups visits for workshops at National Maritime Museum, British Library, London Metropolitan Archive.
September 2022	East India Company Walks	The participants will be taken on two East India Company walks: East India Company Dockside
September- October 2022	Training on archival research and palaeography	National Maritime Museum
October-November 2022	Training on historical fiction writing – two whole day sessions or six half a day session	Idea Store Whitechapel and Zoom online
September - October 2022	Community heritage fiction writers undertake initial research, and continue thereafter	Primarily at the British Library (and London Metropolitan Archives/National Maritime Museum) and utilising the materials already collected by Brick Lane Circle
October January June 2023	Community heritage fiction writers are supported by six-weekly mentoring support	Idea Store Whitechapel/Zoom combination
October 2022 - May 2023	Monthly support, progress and experience sharing sessions	The participants will get together with the whole group at monthly workshops to look at progress, share experiences and support each other
December 2022 - May 2023	Community heritage fiction writers submit regular stories to the British Library for consideration for inclusion in the Untold Lives Blog	British Library
May 2023	Community heritage fiction writers submits their completed short stories	Brick Lane Circle
May/June - July 2023	Project coordinator collects and collate factual and background information relating to all the short stories written	Brick Lane Circle

June 2023	Training on the usages of spices during the Elizabethan time - one cooking session based on actual recipes and the other on medicine, scent and perfume	Cooking session by Tiffinwali On medicine, scent and perfume by TBC
June - July 2023	Drama with ten additional community volunteer participants	Brick Lane Circle will work with Arts Without Border
March - May 2023	Book editing, designing and printing	Brick Lane Circle
April - May 2023	Exhibition editing, design and printing	Brick Lane Circle
June 2023	Project completion celebration at the Rich Mix Centre, including presentations, drama performance, video documentary, workshops and exhibition for one month	Rich Mix Centre
July 2023	Book distribution, presentations, drama performance, workshops and exhibition for one month	Woolwich Central Library
August 2023	Book distribution, presentations, drama performance, workshops and exhibition for one month	Brady Arts & Community Centre during
August 2023	Final project details uploaded on Brick Lane Circle website. Video documentary uploaded on YouTube and the links shared widely through the social media	Brick Lane Circle

Who should apply?

We invite applications from members of London's diverse communities from different walks of life, particularly people living and working in East London.

This project is particularly suitable for individuals interested in bringing evidence-based history to life and sharing widely through quality research and creative imagination, using short story-writing as a method.

We will directly work with individuals over 18 but can work with younger people through schools or community organisations.

We are not looking for professional writers, academics and researchers to join the project.

@HeritageFundUK, #HeritageFund, #NationalLottery. The project 'made possible with The National Lottery Heritage Fund, with thanks to National Lottery players.'