

Black British history

October is Black History Month in the UK. Watch historian David Olusoga explain what he thinks black British history really is about.

Tasks

Do the preparation task first. Then watch the video and do the exercises. You can also read the transcript.

Preparation task

Match the definitions (a–j) with the vocabulary (1–10).

Vocabulary

1. to edit something out
2. the Industrial Revolution
3. a mill
4. a heritage site
5. an export
6. a raw material
7. interaction
8. slavery
9. the Scramble for Africa
10. marginal

Definition

- a. the time when work began to be done more by machines in factories than by hand
- b. the system of forcing human beings to work without pay or basic human rights
- c. when two or more people or groups communicate with or react to each other
- d. small or not very important
- e. a product that you sell in another country
- f. to remove part of a text, film, etc. before it is published
- g. the invasion, occupation, division and colonisation of African territory by European powers
- h. a building or area which is historically important to society
- i. a material such as cotton or oil in its natural state, before it is processed
- j. a factory which produces something like cotton or paper

Task 1

Write a number (1–6) to put the ideas in the order they are mentioned.

_____ Black British history shouldn't just be of interest to black people – it belongs to us all.

_____ Black British history explains the diversity of people in Britain today.

_____ A history of the cotton industry is incomplete if it doesn't include the enslaved African Americans who produced the raw materials.

_____ Britain's interaction with Africa, such as the Atlantic slave trade, is often not explained.

_____ Cotton clothing was Britain's biggest export in the Industrial Revolution.

_____ Black British history is more than just the story of black people in Britain.

Task 2

Complete the sentences with the words in the box.

central	edited out	explains	importantly
marginal	miss out	partial	shared

1. This is the history that why Britain looks the way it does today.
2. It's also a story that's been of British history.
3. We've got in the habit of telling histories that bits of our history.
4. Over and over again, the story of Africa and Africans has been very to British history.
5. Black British history isn't a subject.
6. Most of all, it's a history.

Discussion

What did you learn from the video?

Transcript

Black British history has meant lots of different things at different times. It tends to mean the story of black people in Britain, but I think it means something much bigger than that.

I think it's Britain's relationship with Africa and Africans, both here in Britain, in the Caribbean and in North America, and also in Africa itself. And the reason I think it's important is because these are the stories and this is the history that explains why Britain looks the way it does today, why the faces that you see when you walk through the streets of our cities are so varied.

The African story, the story of black people, is part of that complicated mix that's created the country we are today. The great Jamaican British philosopher and academic Stuart Hall once said, 'We are here, because you were there.' These are the stories that make sense of why there were people like me in Britain, black British people. But it's also a story that's been edited out, in lots of ways, of British history.

For example, when we talk about the Industrial Revolution, we often talk about the way the factories and the mills worked. We learned about spinning jennies and water frames and Factories Act and child labour. We go, many of us, as children, to heritage sites where we have explained to us how those mills work. But there's one bit of the story of the Industrial Revolution that we rarely talk about, which is that the four and a half thousand mills of Lancashire and southern Scotland that are at the heart of the Industrial Revolution, producing cotton clothing, which was Britain's biggest export, employing directly or indirectly maybe one in five people in the 1850s, the cotton in those four and a half thousand mills comes from North America and it's produced by 1.8 million African Americans, who are living lives as slaves.

We can't tell an honest, wholehearted, full-blooded history of the Industrial Revolution unless we tell the story of where the raw materials in the mills came from, and we've got in the habit of not doing that. We've got in the habit of telling partial histories that miss out the bits of our history that explain and show how our interaction with Africa and Africans have been repeatedly central to the British story.

There's the story of the Atlantic slave trade in the 17th, 18th century. There's the story of American slavery of cotton in the 19th century. There's the story of the Scramble for Africa in the 1870s, 1880s and 1890s. Time and again, over and over again, the story of Africa and Africans has been very central to British history.

So black British history isn't a marginal subject that is only about and only of interest to black people. It is British history. It's at the centre of our story and, most importantly of all, it's a shared history. It's a story of interaction and it's a story that belongs to all of us.

Answers

Preparation task

1. f
2. a
3. j
4. h
5. e
6. i
7. c
8. b
9. g
10. d

Task 1

- | | |
|----------|---|
| <u>6</u> | Black British history shouldn't just be of interest to black people – it belongs to us all. |
| <u>2</u> | Black British history explains the diversity of people in Britain today. |
| <u>4</u> | A history of the cotton industry is incomplete if it doesn't include the enslaved African Americans who produced the raw materials. |
| <u>5</u> | Britain's interaction with Africa, such as the Atlantic slave trade, is often not explained. |
| <u>3</u> | Cotton clothing was Britain's biggest export in the Industrial Revolution. |
| <u>1</u> | Black British history is more than just the story of black people in Britain. |

Task 2

1. explains
2. edited out
3. partial | miss out
4. central
5. marginal
6. importantly | shared