

# THE IRISH IN BRITAIN HISTORY CENTRE



76-82 Salusbury Rd, London NW6  
Tel. 01-624-7438

## IRISH MIGRATION TO BRITAIN

Today there are over 850 000 Irish born people living in Britain and as such they constitute the largest immigrant group. The majority have settled since the second world war but the history of the Irish in Britain is a very long one—stretching back to the sixth century when christian missionaries first travelled to Scotland.

Modern migration from Ireland began with the destruction of the Gaelic political system by the English in the 17th century. The refugees fled to all parts of Europe and as commercial links developed they were joined in Britain by Irish merchants and traders. A constant stream of seasonal workers as well as the periodic settlement of soldiers and sailors added to their numbers and by the early 18th century Irish colonies had been established in all of the major ports.

Large scale 'permanent' immigration, however, began towards the end of the 18th century when severe economic pressures in Ireland drove thousands of Irish from their homeland. Although America was the main destination, many were drawn to the industrial revolution in neighbouring Britain. Immigration remained significant and steady until the mid-nineteenth century but then the great hunger of 1847 changed the pattern dramatically. Hundreds of thousands desperate Irish arrived at British ports in these years making immigration very immediate and spectacular. The Irish born population of England and Wales rose from 291 000 in 1841 to 520 000 in 1851 and in Scotland it was 207 000: almost 7 per cent of the total. The catastrophe drove the Irish to all parts of Britain but they settled primarily in Lancashire, London, the West Riding, South Wales and Scotland where they found work in the factories, coal mines, on the docks, on the huge construction projects of industrial Britain and as casual street sellers and traders.

Heavy immigration continued until the 1880's after which levels fell although significant numbers were still coming to Britain right up until 1914. The first world war and the struggle for Irish independence halted the tide of emigration, but only for a short while. The Free State government (26 counties) which emerged after the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 was beset with economic difficulties and by the 1930's emigration levels were rising again.

The most recent phase of heavy immigration began during the second world war. Thousands of Irish served in the British forces while many more helped this war effort working in the munitions factories and air-fields. Most of these subsequently settled in Britain and they were joined in 1945 by more immigrants recruited to fill various labour shortages. They played a vital part in post-war reconstruction—in the emergent national health service, in transport and on the many building projects undertaken in these years. During the fifties the availability of jobs in post-war Britain contrasted starkly with the bleak economic prospects at home and immigration figures reached record levels. About 40 000 were leaving Ireland in these years, the majority of them settling in Britain with London and the Midlands being the favoured destinations. Most were young active workers who stayed on to build their lives over here.

These immigrants make up the Irish community of today and amongst their children—the 'second' and 'third' generation, there are thousands who are conscious of their heritage and who actively promote and participate in Irish cultural activities. For the Irish here have been able, through a wide network of clubs, societies and cultural activities, to preserve an interest in their homeland and a pride in its traditions.



The Embarkation, Waterloo Docks, Liverpool  
Illustrated London News 6th July 1851

## THE IRISH IN BRITAIN HISTORY GROUP

Although the Irish have been settling in Britain in such large numbers since early in the last century, it is only during the last twenty years that historical study has begun to examine their particular experience of migration. The Irish in Britain History Group was formed in 1980 and organised a conference in order to highlight this recent research and to encourage further work. The speakers explored a number of themes — for example the important impact made by the Irish on the socio-economic and political life of Britain, the diversity of the immigration experience and the emergence of distinct Irish communities both in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Despite this landmark, it was clear that much important work could still be done if we were to further develop the understanding of our own particular history. We therefore continued by organising monthly lectures which provided a forum for debate and discussion.

There was particular concern about the scarcity of sources and the gaps in our knowledge of the post-war period — the most recent phase of 'mass' migration. The possibility of an oral history and reminiscence project which might fill some of these gaps was important if a popular and community based history was to be produced. It was also vital that an archive was set up to store all types of material which would reflect the full range of the Irish historical experience in Britain. In 1984 we achieved this aim when we established the first Irish historical archive in the Brent Irish Cultural and Community Centre.

The archive has hundreds of published volumes, papers, reports, pamphlets and other items of memorabilia (including complete volumes of *The Irish Post* newspaper). We are also compiling a photographic collection which, together with the recorded tapes, will go towards the creation of a truly popular history.

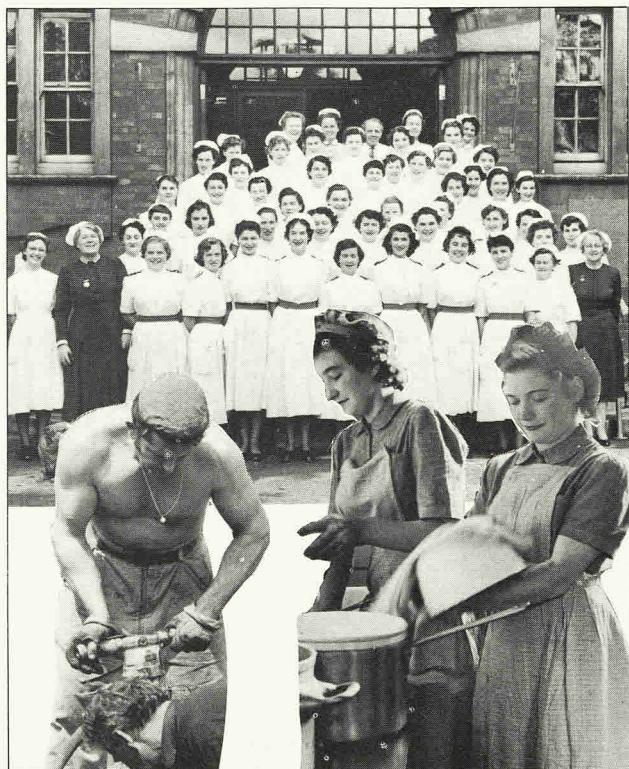
You can participate in the creation of this history by contributing your old magazines, letters, programmes, diaries and photo albums. We particularly welcome photographs as they enhance the history of a community and we are always happy to copy and return these. All donations to the archive may be sent to the address overleaf but we can also arrange to collect them if you wish.



# THE IRISH IN BRITAIN HISTORY CENTRE

## AIMS OF THE HISTORY CENTRE

1. to provide a central resource for use by all groups and individuals who have an interest in the Irish experience in Britain through the years.
2. to highlight the positive contributions made by the Irish to the socio-economic, political and cultural life of Britain.
3. to document this area of popular history which has been, until recent years, largely invisible.
4. to give a voice to those people whose history would otherwise be lost forever and in so doing, help to change the negative attitude that exists about the Irish in Britain.





## **ACTIVITIES**

### ***Publications Project:***

Community based publications drawing on materials from the archive.

### ***Development of a Historical Archive:***

The archive is the first of its kind and we are currently collecting books, diaries, manuscripts and photographs as well as other items of memorabilia which illustrate Irish life in Britain.

### ***Displays and Exhibitions:***

We have developed a number of ways of making archive materials accessible, having assembled photographic displays and exhibitions which are used in local libraries, schools, community centres and at various Irish and local history events.

### ***History Meetings and Courses:***

Each month we organise a history meeting with speakers on a whole range of topics. We also present courses of lectures on the history of the Irish in Britain.

If you would like to receive regular information about the centre and its activities please fill in the slip below and return it to the address overleaf.

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Name \_\_\_\_\_

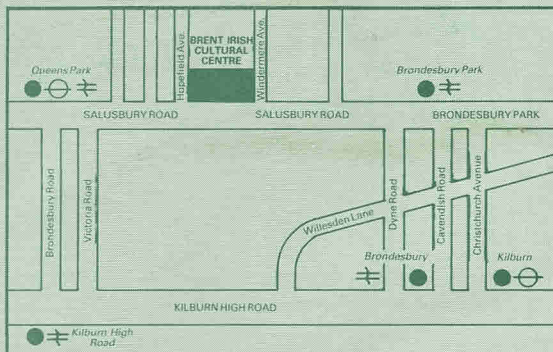
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Organization \_\_\_\_\_

(If any) \_\_\_\_\_

## LOCATION

The Irish in Britain History Centre is based in the Brent Irish Cultural and Community Centre in Kilburn.



### Address

The Irish in Britain History Centre, 76-82, Salusbury Road, London NW6 6NY

### Telephone

01-624 7438

### Centre Opening Hours

10am-4pm Monday-Friday (Please ring for an appointment)

## PUBLICATIONS

### The History of the Irish in Britain: A Bibliography.

Containing over 700 references this will be of special value to anyone interested in the history of the Irish in Britain and Irish studies in general. With a subject and chronological index.

**Price: £2.50 (+30p p&p)** available from the above address. Cheques and postal orders payable to **The Irish in Britain History Group**.

**The Irish in Britain History Group is a registered charity (Number 293844)**

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