

from Kampala to Leicester

The Story of Leicester's Ugandan Asian Community

In August 1972 the Ugandan dictator Idi Amin gave ninety days' notice for the Asian community to leave the country. The Asian community was well established and had to leave behind their businesses, homes, relations and friends.

Some of the Asian community had Ugandan citizenship and some had British citizenship.

It was a struggle to obtain the correct visas and airplane tickets and people faced constant harassment from Ugandan soldiers and officials.

Nearly 30,000 of those expelled arrived in the United Kingdom, where some faced a period of living in resettlement camps. About 10,000 came to Leicester at various times in the following months and years.

IDI AMIN ANNOUNCEMENT 4TH AUGUST 1972

'Last Friday I announced the decision of my government to ask the British government to take over the responsibility for the British citizens of Asian origin living in Uganda who were sabotaging the economy of this country.'



The Asian Community in Uganda

Uganda had a small Asian community from the 1890s, when men had been hired as labourers to work on railway construction.

The Asian population survived and prospered and by the time of Ugandan independence in 1962 they played a vital role in the Ugandan economy.

On August 4th 1972, Ugandan dictator, Idi Amin gave the Asian community 90 days notice to leave.

Faizal Kapasi remembered:

"We never expected that he would do it to his own citizens, because a number of Asians were Ugandan citizens, but the man that he was very unpredictable and his reason was that he got a dream."

Asian families were only allowed to take out fifty five pounds and forced to leave almost everything behind. Some families were temporarily split up whilst paperwork and accommodation were arranged.

Long queues for exit visas and plane tickets were just one part of the trauma that the community faced. Looting and theft were widespread in the towns and villages. Even on the final journey roadblocks were set up on the road to Entebbe airport where people were searched, robbed and sometimes assaulted by Amin's soldiers.



Kitenge African shirt



Jinja Sugar Factory, 1960s



Asian community leaders meet with Idi Amin

As young boys Pares and Bhauresh Vaja remembered

"basically they (the soldiers) wanted all the money or gold that the Indians had collected and they came to the coach and said 'ok whatever you got, let us have it'. One person, there always has to be one, there was one person who had a chip on his shoulder and thought he was bigger than them and started having a go. And he was like refusing and he was creating a problem for everybody else."



Workers at Ford Factory Kampala, 1960s



Jaffer Kapasi and his classmates in Uganda, late 1960s



Plane ticket for immigration to England, 1972



Ugandan coins

Arrival in the United Kingdom

Evacuees who held a British passport could come to the United Kingdom. On arrival they still faced a bewildering prospect. Those who did not have relatives to stay with were taken to resettlement camps. These were old army and Royal Air Force bases spread throughout the country.

Aruna Karelia remembered:

“There was no Asian food at the camp so chefs took over and started going out to...to get shopping and start cooking our food for us.”

These camps provided basic accommodation and food but were only a short term solution.

Leicester already had a significant Asian community and it proved a popular place to settle, but this was not always welcomed by local people.

Fear of overcrowding in schools was just one of the concerns voiced by local councillors and in July a deputation lead by Councillor Mrs Davis went to Whitehall. In September the council took out an advertisement in the Ugandan Argus which strongly urged people not to come to Leicester.

New arrivals often went to the Highfields, Spinney Hill and the Belgrave areas. Plans to create an urban motorway in the Belgrave area had led to slum clearance and a drop in the market value of houses and businesses. This made houses more affordable to families arriving in Leicester.

To deal with the rapid increase in school children Moat School was redesignated and catchment areas redrawn. Mrs Gordon who taught many of the new Ugandan Asian pupils at a school in Bridge Road remembered:

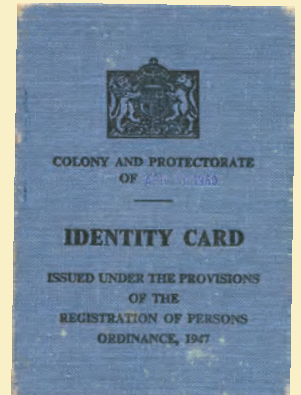
“I loved it, I never got tired of teaching the children because they were so receptive, so keen to learn. Sometimes a bit too keen, you know they all wanted to be brain surgeons you know and doctors but you got used to that.”



Photograph of Mrs Gordon and a class of her primary school pupils in the 1970s

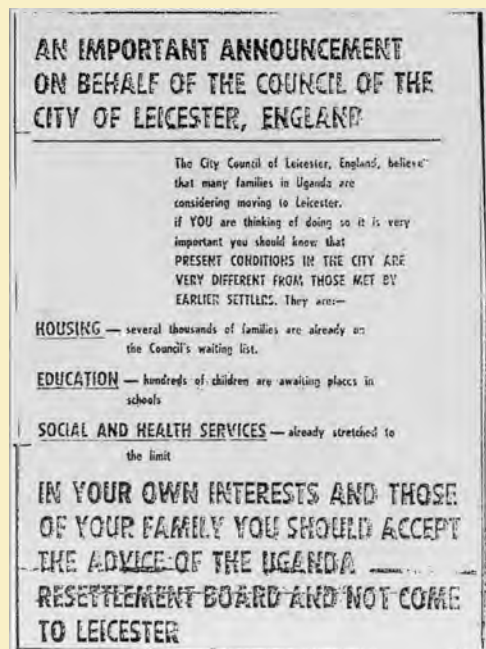


Pestle and mortar made of stone

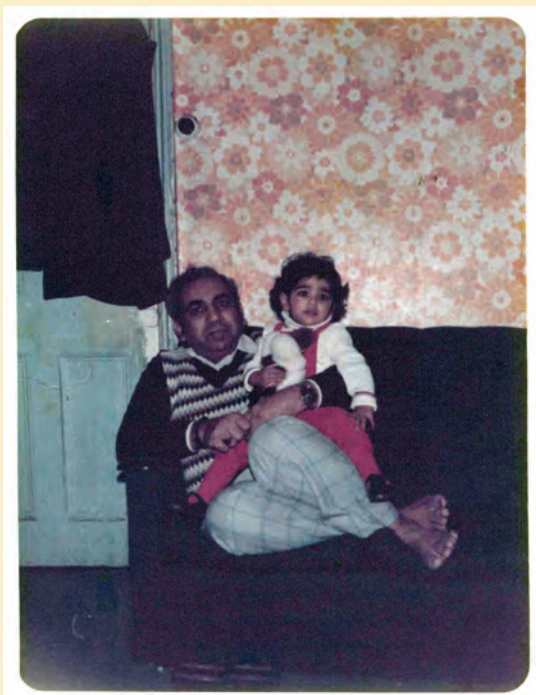


British Subject Identity Card, 1960

When talking about her early school days in England, Bala Thakrar recalled about going to school in England
“I suppose going into the school was that was a frightening thing. I went to a school where there weren't many other Asian or African children so that was for me was the biggest shock that I saw just all white children”.



Advert Taken out by Leicester City Council in Ugandan Press, 1972



Making a home in Leicester, 1970s

Finding Work

Members of the Asian community in Uganda were engaged in a number of different occupations and businesses. Asian businessmen were very influential in the Ugandan economy, running businesses as large as sugar processing factories and as small as shops and cafes. Asians also held technical and professional posts such as engineers in large factories like Ford, or in government or educational premises. They did not always find it easy to find equivalent jobs in the United Kingdom.

Mr Singh had been an electrical engineer at Makerere University but initially found in England that employers were reluctant to employ him because of his race and religion. One manager told him: *“My difficulty is that my people may not like to work under the Asian and I do not like to have the union trouble in my firm”*

In comparison to some areas of the United Kingdom, Leicester had a relatively healthy economy with a range of major industries. The most popular factories to work at were British United Shoe Machinery, Imperial Typewriters, GE Lighting and Walkers Crisps. These all employed large numbers of workers and often offered extra hours and bonuses.

Leicester had a long history of female employment in the hosiery and footwear factories. This was not the normal practice in Uganda where women usually stayed at home, but many Asian women now worked in factories for the first time, to add to the family income.

Some people saved their money until they could afford to start their own businesses again.

Having left almost everything behind in Uganda it was vital to be able to get low interest loans or credit to start up in business. Those who had previous experience in Uganda may have found it easier to set up in business by using their knowledge and contacts.



A protest march against racism at the Imperial Typewriters factory in Leicester, 1974

H Chandarana began by buying a petrol station.

“We started our own business... we bought another petrol station after 18 months. I used to work from seven in the morning until eleven, seven days a week. Slowly, slowly I make fourteen garages”.



Workers at the Henderson shoe factory in Leicester, 1980



British United Shoe Machinery Company, 1965

The Economic, Social and Cultural Impact of the Ugandan Asian Community on Leicester

As Leicester's Asian population grew more shops and restaurants were started to cater for their needs. Some of these businesses established a reputation throughout the region and became a regular part of Leicester's wider social scene.

Once people had established themselves and saved up money they often looked to set up in business either on their own or in partnerships with relatives or former colleagues. Asian businesses had a major impact on the city's economy with industries such hosiery receiving a boost. Today one of the city's major employers is the Leicester Paper Company employing 900 people at its factory in Hamilton.

Asian culture also received a boost with a wider range of activities being promoted. Cinemas had presented some Indian 'Bollywood' films since the 1960s, and clubs and dance centres were also popular. The influence of Bollywood movies was very strong and one of Leicester's most famous restaurants, Bobby's, is named after a famous film.

Education was highly valued in Asian society, and many of those who grew up and were schooled in Leicester went on to make a significant impact on professions such as law, health, education, photography, public service and the media.



Golden Mile, 1980s



Opening of Bobby's Restaurant, 1976

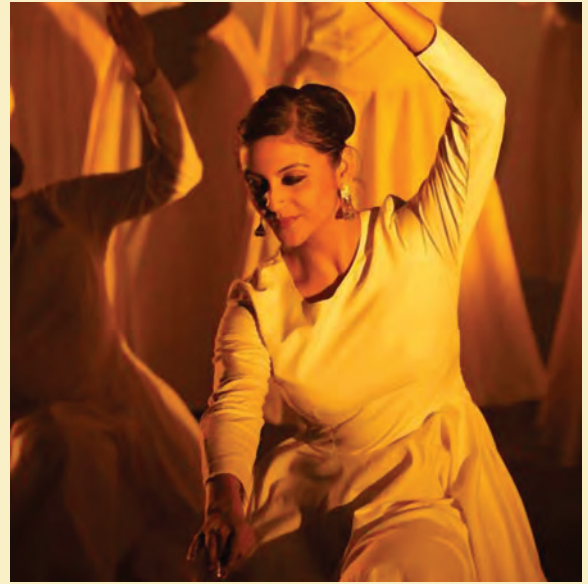
In the early days of the community, religious services usually took place in a private house or hired venue. As the size, wealth and religious diversity of the Asian population grew so did the number, variety and importance of their places of worship.



Radio presenter Rupal Rajani on an outside broadcast



Mr Pal Singh Lotay displays his certificate awarded by the University of Leicester, 1985



Kesha Raithatha, daughter of Priti Raithatha, a classical dancer born in Uganda

Moving On

The Ugandan Asian community has been a major force in shaping the profile of Belgrave, and enriching it for the benefit of the whole city. This area has always experienced change and will continue to evolve in the future. As local businesses and professional people became more successful many moved out to more affluent suburbs such as Rushey Mead, Oadby, Stonegate, and Syston. Some shops and offices have also relocated following their customers out to the suburbs, and new places of worship were built.

Belgrave has hosted many 'new' communities from the Irish in the late 1800s and 1950s to Somalis in the 2000s and Sri Lankans today. As one community moves on another moves in, each demanding new shops and places of worship to meet their particular needs.

Forty years after the expulsion of the Asian community from Uganda how does that community see itself?

Local community worker Ranjan Saujani describes herself as African by birth, Indian by origin, British by nationality, and a citizen of Leicester and the United Kingdom.

Charity executive Bala Thakrar believes that: *"Coming to a different country gave us different options and choices".*

In the 1990s Uganda attempted to reopen its economy to foreign investment and enterprise. Former Ugandan Asians were encouraged to return to start up businesses as Ugandan politicians recognised that Idi Amin's policy had been a grave mistake.



Mrs Parmar visiting Murchison falls, Uganda 2008

Businessman Jaffer Kapassi O.B.E. was one of those who led a trade delegation back to Uganda. He had mixed feelings when asked if he would like to return to the country of his birth.

"My response was that I would love to come back to Uganda and live and develop the country but my children who were born in the UK are more British than the British themselves and they would not accept an alien way of life and it will be very difficult to part with my family. But when I do retire I may think of coming back".



Sri Lankan owned shop in the Belgrave area



Somali Café, Wharf Street North Leicester



Mr Jaffer Kapassi O.B.E. revisits Masindi Primary School, Uganda 1991

Asians migrated to Leicester from many different towns and cities in Uganda; some of which are marked on this map.

Did you or your family migrate from Uganda?

Can you find the place you migrated from?



- 1. Arua
- 2. Masindi
- 3. Lira
- 4. Soroti
- 5. Mbale
- 6. Tororo
- 7. Bugiri
- 8. Iganga
- 9. Jinja
- 10. Kampala
- 11. Entebbe
- 12. Masaka
- 13. Mbarara

- 1. Arua
- 2. Masindi
- 3. Lira
- 4. Soroti
- 5. Mbale
- 6. Tororo
- 7. Bugiri
- 8. Iganga
- 9. Jinja
- 10. Kampala
- 11. Entebbe
- 12. Masaka
- 13. Mbarara

To find out more about the Ugandan Asian experience please visit:
www.leicester.gov.uk/ugandanasianstory

