# **Ignatius Sancho’s London**

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Ignatius Sancho is rightly considered first and foremost as a literary figure; an African ‘man of letters’ with the additional claim to fame as the first documented Black Briton to vote in a parliamentary election. But what of London, the city where so much of his life took place: how did its streets and peculiar sights and smells shape his life? How, in turn, did he make his mark on the metropolis? Sancho’s letters often seem to pay rather peripheral attention to the changing city. The scholarly literature, correspondingly, typically treats London in general terms, for instance by talking of “London society.” This is notwithstanding work like Gretchen Gerzina’s study of eighteenth-century Black London and her use of Sancho to illustrate how it was possible for a Black family to become part of both Black and white communities, and Jerry White’s deployment of Sancho as an entree to Black London in the eighteenth century more broadly.[[1]](#endnote-1) For the most part it is fair to say scholarship has been dominated by literary analysis where London plays a background role – a setting for his life, rather than a space that shaped its course.

This chapter puts geography centre-stage to argue that we can indeed consider Sancho as a “Londoner.” Recent mapping projects allow the recreation of a fuller spatial picture of the multiracial character of Sancho’s eighteenth-century London, from the granular level of buildings and streets, to neighbourhoods and regions in the city, to the capital’s myriad international connections. The portrait that emerges shows that, despite the fact Sancho was distinctive and remarkable, he was no island. He lived a London life intimately connected to numerous overlapping worlds: he was a shopkeeper in a consumer-orientated city economy; a participant in the “proto-democracy” pioneered in the heart of the Westminster “court” where urban development and political citizenship were newly entangled; a figure whose social connections were enabled by physically traversing the city’s spaces as well as corresponding from distance; and a husband and father whose familial ties shed light on the depth, diversity and geographical range of the Black urban presence. For all that made Sancho different, in many ways he was central to the period as a whole – in multiple senses of the word.

## Life on Charles Street

Sancho composed most of his letters in the years after 1773 when he ran a shop on Charles Street, Westminster. This location was not coincidental. It was 250 metres away from the Montagu House in Privy Gardens, Whitehall, the family whom Sancho had served for decades. Duke George Montagu (the 1st Duke of Montagu of the Second Creation) provided funds for the shop, a reward for many years of service working as the Duke’s valet, which often involved staying in the family’s Privy Gardens property overlooking the River Thames. Privy Gardens remained part of Sancho’s world, being mentioned in his first letter to Jack Wingrave and two subsequent occasions. For their part, the Montagu family continued as patrons of Sancho and, when he died, these connections continued through his son William and Lady Elizabeth Montagu after she became the Duchess of Buccleuch.[[2]](#endnote-2) These familial links were enabled by a longstanding physical proximity in Whitehall, which also pre-dated the shop. The Westminster Rate Books for 1762 record Sancho living on Cannon Row, just 150 metres from both Charles Street and Privy Gardens. This was four years after his marriage to Ann, when the couple already had two daughters, pointing to Sancho’s burgeoning independence even while remaining in service. All three of Sancho’s central London abodes were therefore within an area of 0.01 square miles, emphasizing Sancho’s enduring presence in the tightly focused heart of the city.

At the same time, Sancho’s world was far from parochial or insular. His shop on Charles Street was located at number 19, on the south west corner of Crown Court. It stood at the intersection of two roads that themselves were set back a short way from King Street and Parliament Street, the parallel thoroughfares that constituted the main arteries connecting Parliament, Whitehall and the rest of the city. Contemporary drawings depict a building on three levels, visible from Parliament Street and well-situated for passing trade. Many correspondents visited the shop, possibly including his two most famous associates, Laurence Sterne and David Garrick. John Thomas Smith recollected the time he and sculptor Joseph Nollekens visited shortly before Sancho’s death, detailing how “as we pushed the wicket door, a little tinkling bell, the usual appendage to such shops, announced its opening. We drank tea with Sancho and his black lady, who was seated when we entered in the corner of the shop, chopping sugar, surrounded by her little Sanchonets.” Several of his letters add to the flavour of day-to-day life, such as time a fellow “bolted into the shop” having had his cart robbed outside, and how his son, Billy, would stay in the shop and cling around his legs (Letter LV, Volume I, 20 December 1777; Letter LIII, Volume I, 24 October 1777 in Caretta, *Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho*, pp. 155-7, pp. 161-3).[[3]](#endnote-3)

Evidence from the Westminster Historical Database provides less immediately evocative but arguably just as instructive details about life on Charles Street. Sancho was one of 53 rate payers living there in 1774. The rate books calculated amounts of tax payable by residents by assessing the nominal average annual rental values of each property. These sources, therefore, give an indication of the size and status of each household. The average on the street was £18.68, whereas Sancho’s property was assigned a rateable value of just £12. This amount was typical for the five other shopkeepers listed on the street (in 1774 Sancho was listed as a tea dealer, while his neighbours traded in food, drink, coal and other goods). By 1780, however, Sancho’s property was assigned a rateable value of £23, above the £20.83 average for the street. Among the 25 people to have been recorded in both surveys, Sancho’s property increased by the far largest amount.[[4]](#endnote-4)

By 1780, Sancho was recorded in the Poll Books as a “grocer.” These labels reflected both how people described their occupation and the perception of parish officials. In Sancho’s case, this generic category seemed to reflect reality: he lamented his struggles trying to procure high quality sugar in one letter, his business card promoted the sale of his “best Trinidado” tobacco, while Smith described the shop as a chandler’s. Diversification of this sort, moreover, was typical for traders trying to navigate a consumerist economy buffeted frequently by international headwinds (which, in the 1770s, stemmed from the American Revolution in particular). Sancho was, therefore, fairly typical: the average rateable value for grocers like him in 1784 across Westminster as a whole was £26, placing them fifth highest among the 20 most common occupational categories.[[5]](#endnote-5)

The rate books also show the demographic diversity of life on Charles Street. Alongside fellow shopkeepers were meninvolved in manufacturing, construction and agriculture. Five residents, meanwhile, were categorized as rentiers/gentry (Westminster Historical Database). That lower, middling and higher status sorts lived in proximity seems unusual to modern eyes, but it was fairly typical for Westminster in this period. To be sure, late-eighteenth century London was a place of sharp divisions between rich and poor, but the Industrial Revolution had not yet fully hardened socio-economic divisions into more recognizable hierarchies of class; nor had these stratifications become so connected to specific streets and neighbourhoods as later in the nineteenth century. There was much about Sancho’s life that was remarkable, therefore, but his story culminating in the ownership of a shop on Charles Street has a historical logic to it. Westminster’s growth was fuelled by out of town immigration and the emergence of a modern consumer-driven urban economy, where people of different backgrounds and status comingled on the same streets. Sancho the shopkeeper sat firmly within the variety of life on 1770s Charles Street.

Yet Sancho’s socio-economic world was also part of a political one. The very existence of rate books in the first place stemmed from the need to record propertied male heads of household in order to levy rates (taxes). This, in turn, conferred the right to vote in parliamentary elections. In Sancho’s London, therefore, matters of political citizenship were inextricably bound up with questions of urban development. Westminster (still distinct from the older City of London, although the term “London” was often used to encapsulate both) was the largest political constituency in the country at this time. As the seat of parliament, it became a key battleground in election years. The growth of government meant this western part of London grew rapidly as a municipality; its rising population and political importance, in turn, meant the district pioneered new methods of urban governance that only became familiar in other parts of country decades later. This all occurred at a time when most Britons could not vote at all. Westminster was, to borrow Penelope Corfield’s phrase, a pioneer of a “proto-democracy” where all adult male rate payersqualified to vote – especially noteworthy during a time of both widespread disenfranchisement and uncontested parliamentary seats. Women, for example, were not eligible to vote until the early twentieth century, although they headed around one in ten households in Sancho’s Westminster – a reminder that eighteenth-century barriers to the franchise were even more fixed on lines of gender than they were on race.[[6]](#endnote-6)

Westminster’s growth posed challenges for the devolved parish-level modes of governance the city had inherited from its medieval past. In response, the city passed one of the country’s first paving acts in 1762, which regularized the layouts of streets, sanitation and eventually created street lights. This was the reason the rate book evidence exists of the Sancho property on Cannon Row in the same year, making it likely he and his family lived there before this date, possible beginning after his marriage in 1758. Rates also contributed to poor relief, a problem that grew in political salience as the century progressed. Sancho’s money, therefore, directly contributed to the development and governance of his city. With this in mind, it is revealing to return to one of Sancho’s own (somewhat reluctant) comments on the duties of urban citizenship. In 1779 he wrote to Daniel Braithwaite, the clerk to the Postmaster General, asking to have a post office located in his shop. Part of his reasoning cited his unsuitability for other duties in the parish offices, “for which I am utterly unqualified through infirmities-as well as complexion.” This hinted at potential discrimination, but Sancho also made reference to his weight. He invited Braithwaite to consider the comic sight of him “waddling in the van of poor thieves and prostitutes-with all the supercilious mock dignity of little office,” before warning of the danger to his health by being ‘summoned out at midnight in the severity of eastern winds and frosty weather’ (Letter LI, Volume II, 17 December 1779 in Caretta, *Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho*, pp. 248-9). Sancho’s request was unsuccessful, but the letter gives a revealing glimpse into how he had to respond (and try and navigate to his best advantage) to his status as an urban citizen, a position involving responsibilities as well as conferring rights. It also demonstrates how the Montagu family’s Whitehall location meant Sancho acquired independence at a very particular time and place, and emphasizes the often-overlooked reality that his national-level claim to fame as the first documented Black Briton to vote in a parliamentary election depended on profoundly local circumstances.

## In the ‘Court’ and Across the City

These links between urban life and political participation go back to the ancient world (to the origin of the word “citizen” itself) but the connections were especially direct in late eighteenth-century Westminster. This was an era when the relationship between crown and parliament was still being defined and occasionally contested, especially as revolutionary events overseas in America and continental Europe reverberated at home. This relationship had a physical corollary on the city’s streets: politicians would often begin their day in the residences clustered around St James’s Palace (the King’s official residence) before travelling the half-mile distance south to attend parliamentary business later in the day. Politics in the “court” was both formal and informal: it was conducted through debates and discussions in parliament, but also in coffee houses and taverns, theatres and dining rooms. Crucially, therefore, politics was conducted across (and blurred the boundaries between) private and public realms and involved women as well as men. This was, as Hannah Greig and Amanda Vickery put it, a “dense campus” of political activity and movement that spread throughout the public and private spaces of the ‘court’ and which had day-to-day rhythms and seasonable patterns.[[7]](#endnote-7)

Understanding Sancho the Londoner requires placing him at the heart of this vibrant but contested political world. Charles Street was two-thirds of the way on the one mile journey from St James to parliament. Sancho’s shop was visible from the main thoroughfare of Parliament Street, as well as positioned on the intersection with Crown Court for anyone seeking a short-cut. Yet Sancho did not just let the political world of the court come to him; as much as the image of him sat at the back of his shop writing letters “to the ringing of the shop-door bell” is alluring, it is rather static. Sancho was constantly moving through the city, even as his debilitating illness hampered his movements in later life. Travelling around the city, moreover, was also central to what it meant to be a “Londoner” in this period. It is estimated half of residents were born outside the capital in the eighteenth century. Part of the process of moving through and coming to belong in the growing metropolis, therefore, involved learning the city’s streets, dialects, social mores and codes of behaviour, especially where those elements differed from other parts of the country or world (Letter XLI, Volume I, 9 February 1777, in Caretta, *Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho*, pp. 134-5).[[8]](#endnote-8)

There was breadth and depth to Sancho’s knowledge of the city. Before Charles Street, he lived within and moved between several Montagu properties on the outskirts of the London area, from Blackheath in the east, to their villa in Richmond on the banks of the Thames to the west. Within the city, Sancho most likely spent time at the family’s dilapidated property in Bloomsbury and a newer house in Grosvenor Square. In later life, meanwhile, Sancho’s letters reveal a knowledgeable insider – in both literal and figurative senses – of a more focused social world in and around ‘the Court’ and the ‘Town’ of the West End. Although correspondents were often in other parts of the country or even overseas, the letters were not just a means of keeping in touch; many were connected on a more day-to-day basis and lived locally for periods of time. For example, Lydia Leach resided on Jermyn Street, Laurence Sterne rented a house on nearby Old Bond Street (until his death in 1768) and a couple of streets away stood John James Barralet’s art academy, with whom Sancho’s regular correspondent John Mortimer was associated. The Haymarket theatre, which Sancho visited along with his children, was nearby and other theatres visited by Sancho stood to the west around Covent Garden (where his friend John Mortimer’s art academy was located) and Drury Lane. All these locations within half a square mile of each other, a walkable distance even for Sancho. Rather than merely providing a contextual background for the associations in the letters, therefore, this tight-knit urban geography played an active role fostering Sancho’s social connections.

Sancho was a regular presence in the “town,” a useful short-hand for the West End district centred around Piccadilly. This area developed many of its modern features in Sancho’s lifetime. For example, although theatres had been located in the area for a long time, the London stage increased in popularity during the eighteenth century. There is doubt over whether Sancho acted himself, but many productions had multiracial cast members and dealt with contemporary questions of empire, citizenship and race – albeit in ways highly distinctive to the period. The built environment was redeveloped to cater to new consumers and their leisurely pursuits, with the growth of fashionable Bond Street a prime example. Sancho did not live to see John Nash’s development of Oxford Circus and Regent Street, but his London was a world where public sociability and consumerism were already interwoven. The boundaries between social, cultural and political life were especially porous in the eighteenth-century tavern and coffee house. Sancho rarely mentioned it directly, but he was clearly au fait with these worlds too. For example, Letter II makes a reference to Ashley’s punch, associated with James Ashley’s Coffee House and Punch House on the northside of Ludgate Hill near St Paul’s cathedral (Letter II, Volume I, 7 August 1768 in Caretta, *Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho*, p. 78).

Sancho remained connected to the rest of London even as his health deteriorated. One of his final letters referenced the “airings” he took in open spaces to try alleviate his symptoms. He visited Greenwich to the east, and Newington and Clapham to the South, likely travelling to the former by river and the latter locations via carriage across Westminster Bridge. As he put it bluntly to John Spink in the penultimate letter before his death, “Walking kills me” (Letter XCI, Volume II, 1 December 1780 in Caretta, *Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho*, pp. 297-8). Yet through his enduring, albeit increasingly curtailed, ability to move across the city, Sancho can be read as a newly modern type of Londoner. The ability to walk the city’s streets, to travel between its districts by carriage, to journey across its eastern and western hinterlands by boat, all meant Sancho was embedded within what Miles Ogborn terms London’s evolving “spaces of modernity.” This emerging modern city was a public space to be known, understood, enjoyed and consumed – all of which centred on the visual journey undertaken from “spectator to spectacle.”[[9]](#endnote-9) Having achieved independence as the male head of his household, and as a literate figure with social connections into the elite London worlds of the aristocracy, intelligentsia and arts, Sancho participated and contributed daily to this distinctly modern creation.

## Slave-ownership and Black London

This is not to say Sancho was an archetypal “everyman” able to cross London’s evolving boundaries of class and race without comment, incident or restriction. The *Letters* themselves contain a possible passing reference to Sancho being subjected to negative racially-motivated attention. Writing to Roger Rush in 1777, Sancho described a “Vauxhall evening” with his family, almost certainly a trip to Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens just across the river. They had much enjoyed the music and company but, on the way home, were “gazed at-followed … but not much abused.” This suggests possible racist intent, but Sancho signed off without elaborating. The only direct account of Sancho being directly challenged on racial grounds comes from a posthumous anecdote from his friend and correspondent, William Stevenson, who recorded how:

We were walking through Spring-gardens-passage, when a small distance from before us, a young Fashionable said to his companion, loud enough to be heard, “Smoke Othello!” This did not escape my Friend Sancho; who, immediately placing himself across the path, before him, exclaimed with a thundering voice, and a countenance that awed the delinquent, “Aye, Sir, such Othellos you meet with but once in a century,” clapping his hand upon his goodly round paunch. “Such Iagos as you, we meet with in every dirty passage. Proceed, Sir!” (Caretta, *Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho,* pp 147-148).

This vivid scene mirrors the wit associated with Sancho’s letters, portraying him as an urbane and assertive figure, comfortable within his racial identity and willing to stake physical claim to his place on the city’s streets. This was, moreover, a period when it was not uncommon for members of the London “mob” to intimidate people perceived as socially superior and for the city’s streets to be used as arenas to challenge behaviour and conduct disputes. These could, on occasion, lead to larger levels of disorder, as Sancho himself described during the Gordon Riots in 1780. Where this encounter took place is also possibly instructive: Spring Gardens was a “fashionable quarter” for politicians and civil servants just off Whitehall, less than 500 metres from Sancho’s house in the part of town where he was most at home.[[10]](#endnote-10)

These encounters remain somewhat ambiguous, but London was a undoubtedly a city where racial dividing lines could be stark. This was most obviously the case with slavery and slave-ownership. Many planters were part of London society: Stevenson detailed as much in another part of his letter, describing how Sancho was eyed “disdainfully from head to foot” by a West Indian Planter to whom he had been sent by the Duke of Montagu. No mention was made of who this was, but there were plenty of enslavers to choose from. Alongside those travelling back and forth across the Atlantic were absentee landlords and thousands of others with financial stakes in slavery through investments, acquired debt or inheritance. Recent scholarship excavating the depth and breadth of the slave-holding presence in Britain has demonstrated vividly that it was not just an overseas phenomenon, but permeated multiple aspects of domestic life.[[11]](#endnote-11)

A geographical approach again helps to consider Sancho’s connections to slavery. Data collected by the *Centre for the Study of the Legacies of British Slavery* shows over 2,500 associations with slave-ownership in London, across various categories of involvement. The connections obviously adapted over time, but two broad geographical patterns stand out. The first in a cluster of ownership in the north-west corner of central London, spreading up from Whitehall, through the court around St James to the newly emerging prosperous parts of the city around Marylebone. The second is further east in the older City of London, which was then, as now, the centre of banking, insurance and financial services. This geographic distribution, therefore, offers a powerful corollary to the point that slave-ownership permeated both politics and business.

In terms of Sancho’s world, there were 11 known associated addresses within just the small 0.05 square mile radius of Charles Street. Among them were banker Joseph Biddulph of Spring Gardens, compensated upon emancipation in the 1830s for 10 estates in Jamaica. George Lodowick Wilder, a Colonial Office official, lived two blocks from Sancho on Downing Street (this street became home to the Prime Minister around forty years before Sancho set up shop just 125 metres away). Wilder was one of 13 individuals awarded compensation as trustee of the marriage settlement of his sister-in-law for 146 enslaved individuals. Shortly to the south on Great George Street, the claimants included Alexander Grant 5th Baronet, part of a large Scottish family with multiple involvements with Caribbean slavery. Grant built a business in Jamaica before returning to London where his enterprises including trading in drugs, sugar, naval supplies – and enslaved people. When he died in 1772, probate documents recorded property including 672 enslaved people in the Caribbean and the slave ‘factory’ on Bunce Island off the coast of West Africa. How much Sancho knew directly about these individuals, some of whom he pre-deceased, is unknowable, but these micro examples illustrate a macro picture. Slave-ownership came in different forms, from the direct involvement of people like Grant, to more indirect routes like Wilder’s. Some Londoners were actively involved in the trade in the time of Sancho, while others’ entanglements only surfaced when they claimed compensation after emancipation in the 1830s. A comparison can be made, therefore, between the role of slavery in Sancho’s letters and his local neighbourhood: across both his literary and geographical worlds, this presence was not always explicit and central, but it was there nonetheless, permeating his world and shaping his place within it.

Slavery was also, of course, one of several reasons for the Black presence in Sancho’s London, variously estimated between five and twenty thousand out of a total population that rose to one million by 1800. In addition to those brought back from the Caribbean, there were usually around one thousand visitors from the North American colonies at any time, many of whom brought enslaved people to act as their servants (White, *London in the Eighteenth Century,* p. 130). More broadly, determining whether some Black Londoners were employed as servants, bound in service and/or enslaved, is often a murky question, hampered both by lack of evidence for payments of wages as well as the ambiguous legal status of domestic slavery (the bequests from the Montagus to Sancho offer unusually clear evidence of his free status, yet even for him, matters are less clear-cut for his early life). What is clear is that Black people, mostly but not exclusively men, became “fashionable” and visible figures serving “downstairs” for many aristocratic eighteenth-century families. On the streets, meanwhile, the Black presence also became more visible as the century progressed. This was especially the case after US independence, when many Black Americans drawn to fight for the British for the promise of freedom ended up moving to the capital after defeat. The “alarmingly conspicuous” presence of these former soldiers, some of whom fell into destitution, coincided with more negative racialised commentary on their presence in London, including becoming the pejorative subjects of popular jokes (Jarrett, ‘“A Welshman Coming to London”’).

Although perhaps ironic to modern eyes, this hardening of racial divisions occurred in an era when the abolitionist movement gained traction: both developments were, in fact, connected. Justice Mansfield’s 1772 judgement in the well-known case of James Somerset (a Black Bostonian living in London who successfully avoided being re-enslaved) was not the definitive ruling against domestic slavery which some perceived. It did, however, energize a wider movement within which Black Londoners were involved. A newspaper account, for example, detailed how 200 of them gathered at a Westminster pub to celebrate the verdict, signalling an increasingly visible and assertive Black presence in the city’s heart that takes us beyond the iconic singularity of famous figures like Equiano, Sancho and Francis Barber (Samuel Johnson’s “manservant”).[[12]](#endnote-12)

Pursuing this wider picture of Black London, moreover, helps expand the focus beyond slavery. Parish records of baptisms, burials and some marriages provide the fullest, albeit incomplete, picture of this presence. Over three thousand people of African, Caribbean, Asian and Indigenous (used to include Native American and Aboriginal Australian people) backgrounds have been identified by the London Metropolitan Archives’ *Switching the Lens* (STL) database from parish records, spanning a period from around 1560 to 1840. The City of London and waterside parishes to the east are especially well-represented. This gives a glimpse of the historical reality, but also reflects where most scholarly research has been conducted thus far. One north-western exception to the database’s concentration in the east is the parish of Saint Marylebone where 285 baptisms have been unearthed, dating back to the 1690s but predominately from Sancho’s era. Corroboration of a substantial Black presence in this corner of town comes from contemporary accounts of Black visitors regularly patronizing another pub, the Yorkshire Stingo, 800 metres from the church. It is also no coincidence that slave-ownership was prevalent in this growing and wealthy part of London. The Duke and Duchess of Buccleuch (Henry Scott and Elizabeth Montagu) were among the many aristocratic families in the district: their house in Grosvenor Square, where Sancho almost certainly visited, was just two-thirds of a mile from Saint Marylebone parish church. In Westminster, however, most parishes have not yet been systematically studied, including St Margaret’s Church where Sancho was married and where his children were baptised. The fact that Olaudah Equiano’s baptism took place here provides one instant example of what was surely a much larger Black presence in the area. In any event, baptismal records are both a help and hindrance to the effort to recover the Black presence in eighteenth-century London. Across the city, Black people show up more frequently in records in the second half of the century, partly because baptism came to be seen – largely erroneously – as a way of asserting one’s free status. The increase in archival visibility thus reflected demographic changes, but also how racial categorizations became more important in a period when questions of ‘whiteness’ and ‘blackness’ acquired new legal and political meanings across the Atlantic.

Yet if baptismal records only capture a partial picture of Black London, genealogical approaches allow us to work backwards to earlier decades when racial signifiers were used less frequently by parish clerks. Sancho’s extended family provide a case-in-point. Ann Sancho’s family, the Osbornes, had a longstanding presence in the Whitechapel area in the east of the city. Her parents, John Osborne and Mary Clark, were married in St Mary’s church in the parish in 1732, where Ann and her siblings were also baptised. The family lived on Lambert Street when Ann was born in 1733 and on Petticoat Lane when her brother John arrived in 1743. Land tax records show John Osborne Sr owning property on nearby Buckle Street through the 1740s. None of this evidence makes reference to these individuals’ racial backgrounds, making us consider how many other racially diverse family trees in the 1700s await discovery (Mapping Black London).

The Osborne and Clark families’ backgrounds cannot be identified definitely (although a connection to the West Indies has been suggested), but their presence in the East End fits with other emerging evidence of Black London in the eighteenth century. 123 other burials and baptisms of non-white Londoners were recorded at St Mary’s in the period between the 1660s and 1820s, hailing from places including St Lucia, Antigua, Jamaica, Suriname, the Gold Goast and the American colonies. Even in this one parish, we get a snapshot of the growing international diversity of London as a heart of empire, and of the lives people were carving out for themselves in the city. Crucially, the Sancho-Osborne-Clarks show this included not just enslavement but property ownership and the formation of families and enduring kinship networks to connect them. Even within the immediate family of a famous Black Briton, we can cut through the celebrity to glimpse the diversity of Black historical life and, crucially, explore its wide-ranging geographical dimensions.

The breadth of Ignatius Sancho’s London encompassed more than its Westminster epicentre. By following his family after his death, the depth of the Sancho presence in the city also becomes clearer. Ann spent several more years on Charles Street, where she also paid rates to the parish, before eventually moving with her son, William, to a book shop at the Mews Gate on Castle Street. The entire family, and William in particular, remained associated with the Montagu family (styled the Buccleuchs after the death of Duke George) who paid for William’s apprenticeship to Edward Jeffrey, a bookseller on Pall Mall, before he went to work for the Vaccine-Pock Institute as it trialled methods for using cowpox to inoculate against smallpox in nearby Soho. The last known surviving child, Elizabeth Bruce Sancho, was recorded living on Old Tothill Street in the 1810s, before moving in with her second cousin, William Priddie Lyons, on York Street in the parish of Christ Church, Surrey (subsequently part of Southwark) at the time of her death in 1837. While it has been known for some time that Black London was not divided between a presence as slaves and servants in the west and a free population of sailors and runaways in the east, Sancho’s wider family further disrupts any tendency to apply neat categories to Black Londoners’ lives.[[13]](#endnote-13)

## Conclusion: Sancho’s London and Black and British History

Any consideration of Sancho the Londoner should conclude with what he said about the city. This theme has not loomed large in Sancho scholarship, not least because London often does not feature explicitly in his letters. Yet although he was no chronicler of city life in the mould of Samuel Pepys, there are revealing references nonetheless. For example, in a letter to Francis Crewe, Sancho lamented “the town” is empty; the only ones left were “a few sharks of both sexes, who are too poor to emigrate to the camps or watering places, and so are forced to prey upon one another in town”. He made a similar point to Roger Rush, describing how the latter’s forthcoming return would lift his spirits, “for, large as the town is, I cannot say I have more than one friend in it.” Other letters also connote feelings of antipathy towards, or even estrangement from, the city. To James Kisbee he complained: “Trade is duller than ever I knew it--and money scarcer;--foppery runs higher--and vanity stronger;--extravagance is the adored idol of this sweet town.” To John Spink he described in even fuller terms that:

I am far from being sorry that you have not been in town this autumn--for London has been sickly--almost every body full of complaint--add also that the times are equally full of disease--Luxury! Folly! Disease! and Poverty! you may see daily riding in the same coach--the doors ornamented with the honours of a virtuous ancestry topped with coronets; surrounded with mantle ermined--and, alas! Corruption for the supporters (Letter LXII, Volume 1,14 May 1778; ; Letter V, Volume II, 31 July 1778; Letter XXXVII, Volume I, 28 August 1776; Letter XLVIII, Volume II, 21 November 1779, in Caretta, *Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho*, p. 176, p. 195, p. 131, p. 245).

These comments were part of the sentimental literary conventions associated with Sancho’s writing, but they can also be mapped on to real-world urban developments: the occasional “emptiness” of the city corresponded to episodic patterns where people in “the court” left and returned according the rhythms of parliament and the aristocratic season; wars and the economic crises that accompanied them were all-too-real problems for those seeking to make their way in London’s burgeoning consumer economy; and problems and pathologies associated with corruption, poverty, crime and disease were fast becoming central to the modern urban-industrial experience. Sancho was both a literary *and* historical figure responding (not altogether positively) to the collisions among the city’s varied constituencies at a time of rapid urban growth.

It is fitting that some of Sancho’s most vivid descriptions of London life in his *Letters* came a few months before his death when describing the Gordon Riots in June 1780. What became the most violent urban unrest in British history began just a few hundred metres from Charles Street when Lord Gordon, the President of the Protestant Association, led several hundred supporters in a march on Parliament to present a petition calling for the repeal of the 1778 Papists Act. For about a week afterwards, anti-Catholic mobs burned chapels and attacked property, killing several hundred. Sancho described memorably how: “the shouts of the mob--the horrid clashing of swords--and the clutter of a multitude in swiftest motion--drew me to the door--when every one in the street was employed in shutting up shop.” A map produced by the Quartermaster General, responsible for the deployment of over 10,000 troops to suppress the disturbances, recorded one of the biggest conflagrations in Sancho’s immediate neighbourhood. While condemning the violence, Sancho went on to describe how, “Hyde Park has a grand encampment, with artillery … St James's Park has ditto … The Parks, and our West end of the town, exhibit the features of French government.” In other references, Sancho describes events further afield, including how Newgate Prison in the City of London was “partly burned, and 300 felons from thence only let loose upon the world,” and the “two fires in Holborn now burning.” Sancho was not, therefore, giving just an eyewitness account, but providing second-hand reports of events and adding his own interpretations and allusions (Letter LXVII and Letter LXIX, Volume II, 6 June and 9 June 1780, in Caretta, *Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho*, p. 270-5).[[14]](#endnote-14) That he did not visit all these places personally is not the point: more important is that Sancho was speaking about, and condemning the destruction of, a city he had experience and knowledge of going back decades. In other words, he was writing as a Briton, an African, *and* a Londoner, while ensconced in the heart of the city where these identities were conjoined.

Applying an urban-historical approach to Sancho, therefore, helps us better understand not only his life and letters, but that of the city, nation and wider world to which he was connected. Sancho’s story take us to the central parts – in multiple meanings of the word – of the most important forces in London’s development and, by extension, that of the British state and its evolving place in the world. These contests included the clash between slavery and freedom (and a variety of ambiguous states in between); the transition to modern parliamentary democracy, within which tensions were fought over on the streets as well as in oratorical debates; and the growth of an urban metropolis on the cusp of full industrialization, connected to the wider world by innumerable commercial and political ties. Considering Sancho as a Londoner – as an urban citizen – therefore provides essential context to read his letters, but it also does something more: it provides an important reminder that neither “Black History” nor “British History” make proper sense when considered in isolation from each other.

1. Jerry White, *London in the Eighteenth Century: A Great and Monstrous Thing* (London: The Bodley Head, 2012); Gretchen Gerzina, *Black England: Life Before Emancipation* (London: Allison & Busby, 1999), p. 65; The original research for this chapter was conducted for the *Ignatius Sancho’s London* project that collated mentions of specific places mentioned by Sancho to his correspondents, demographic data about neighbourhoods and genealogical records of his extended family. Funding is gratefully acknowledged from the NULab for Texts, Maps and Networks, the College of Social Sciences and Humanities and the Office of the Provost, all at Northeastern University. Special thanks are due to Libby Collard for her background research and to Jo Langston for information on the Priddie-Lyons side of the Sancho family tree. I am also grateful to the other projects that granted access to their geospatial data, including the London slave-owners’ addresses collected by the *Centre for the Study of the Legacies of British Slavery* and the London Metropolitan Archives’ *Switching the Lens* dataset of non-white baptisms, marriages and burials. Interactive maps featuring all locations referenced in this chapter can be explored at [www.mappingblacklondon.org](http://www.mappingblacklondon.org). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Letter I, Volume I, 14 February 1768; Letter XXV, Volume I, 14 August 1775; Letter XIV, Volume II, 1 January 1779, in Vincent Caretta ed., *Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho, an African* (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2015), pp. 73-75, pp. 115-6, p. 206. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. John Thomas Smith, *Nollekens and his Times* (London: Richard Bentley and Son, 1895), pp. 51-53. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Corfield, P. J., Harvey, C. Edward, Green, E. M. (2000). *Westminster Historical Database, 1749-1820; Voters Social Structure and Electoral Behaviour.* UK Data Service. SN: 3908, [DOI: 10.5255/UKDA-SN-3908-1](http://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-3908-1); One possible suggestion for this deviation above the market rate is that, by 1780, Sancho had acquired the next door property at No. 20, which would also explain why Smith placed him at that address, but this is not definitive. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Charles Harvey, Edmund Green and Penelope Corfield, ‘Continuity, Change, and Specialization within Metropolitan London: The Economy of Westminster, 1750-1820’, *The Economic History Review*, 52:3 (1999): 469-493 (p. 486). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Penelope J. Corfield, ‘Proto-Democracy in Eighteenth-Century London: Summary’, in *London Electoral History: Steps Towards Democracy* (2013), accessed at [British Electoral History during the Eighteenth Century (P. Corfield) (penelopejcorfield.com)](https://www.penelopejcorfield.com/british-history/electoral-history/) 28 March 2023. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Hannah Greig and Amanda Vickery, ‘The Political Day in London c. 1697-1834’, *Past and Present* 252:1 (2021): 101-137. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Simon Jarrett, ‘“A Welshman Coming to London and Seeing a Jackanapes...”: How Jokes and Slang Differentiated Eighteenth-Century Londoners from the Rest of Britain’, *London Journal*, 43:2 (2018): 120–136. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Miles Ogborn, *Spaces of Modernity: London's Geographies, 1680–1780* (New York and London: The Guildford Press, 1998), pp. 108-9. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Robert Shoemaker, *The London Mob: Violence and Disorder in Eighteenth-Century England* (London: Hambledon, 2004), p. 111; White suggests the Vauxhall incident was racially motivated. *London in the Eighteenth Century*, p. 127. See ‘Spring Gardens’ in British History Online’s ‘Survey of London’, <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/survey-london/vol20/pt3/pp58-65> Accessed 28 March 2023. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Catherine Hall et al., *Legacies of British Slave-ownership: Colonial Slavery and the Formation of Victorian Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. *London Packet,* June 26-29, 1772. The article did not record the name or precise location of the pub. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Norma Myers, *Reconstructing the Black Past: Blacks in Britain, c. 1780-1830* (London & Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 1996), p. 63. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. ‘Disposition of the Troops and General View of the Patroles in and About London on Account of the Riots, 1780’, accessed at [https://www.bl.uk/learning/timeline/item104674.html 28 March 2023](https://www.bl.uk/learning/timeline/item104674.html%2028%20March%202023); For discussion of the role of place in these letters see Banjo Olayeye, ‘Locating Sancho Through Westminster: A Topographical Reading of *The Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho, an African*’, *Cankaya University Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* (2020).

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**Further Reading**

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