

Scotland's Black Pioneers: Forgotten Figures from History



LANGUAGE LEARNING

The Scottish English Podcast – Episode 37

Transcript & Upper-intermediate and Advanced Vocabulary Guide

Below is the transcript with all selected B2, C1, and above vocabulary and phrases in **bold**. After the transcript, you'll find a table with definitions, British English pronunciation, and useful collocations/idioms for each highlighted word or phrase.

Transcript: Scotland's Black Pioneers: Forgotten Figures from History

Hello and welcome back to the Scottish English Podcast, where I bring you the history, culture, and voices of Scotland, while helping you along your English learning journey.

This October in honour of Black History Month in the UK, I'm **devoting** a special series of episodes to the stories of Black Scots: stories that are often missed from the **mainstream** history books, but are absolutely **vital** if we want to understand Scotland's past, present, and future. And while I'm not a Black Scot, I want to support the sharing of their stories.

I also encourage you to seek out Black Scottish creators as well. There are plenty out there doing great work.

And as always, if you haven't done so already hit that subscribe button so you don't miss out on any upcoming episodes or if you're a big fan, consider supporting the show's creation by leaving a tip or becoming a member. I've added more about that in the description.

Today we start with Scotland's Black **pioneers**. We'll explore the extraordinary lives of Black Scots from the 18th century through to the modern day. People who shaped our literature, our sport, and our justice system.

Many of them were firsts in their field. The first Black doctor or the first Black professional footballer in Scotland. They faced **prejudice**, but they also **carved out spaces** of **recognition** often against impossible odds. So let's step into their stories.

Early stories of Black lives in Scotland.

It might surprise you to know that Black people have been living in Scotland for centuries. Records show African individuals in Scottish towns as far back as the 16th century, often arriving through **seafaring** or the early networks of empire.

One of the most famous early figures is Joseph Knight. Knight was kidnapped from Africa and **enslaved** in Jamaica, before being taken to Scotland in the 1760s by a wealthy Scottish plantation owner named John Wedderburn. But, Knight's story does not end there. He fought back, not with weapons, but with the law.

In 1778, Knight brought a case before the Scottish Courts, demanding his freedom and he won. The court ruled that slavery was not recognised in Scots law, and therefore Knight could not be kept as a slave on Scottish soil. Now let's pause on what that meant. It didn't abolish slavery across the empire, but it was a powerful declaration: in Scotland, the law would not support enslavement. Joseph Knight's case is still taught as one of Scotland's landmark legal moments and his courage set a **precedent** for freedom.

Scholars and writers.

Another pioneer was James McCune Smith. Born in New York in 1813, James was incredibly bright, but because of racism, American universities refused to admit him as a medical student. So, he travelled across the Atlantic, straight to Scotland. He studied at the University of Glasgow, and in 1837 became the first African American ever to receive a medical degree.

Now, imagine him a young Black man, walking the cobbled streets of Glasgow, studying Latin, philosophy, chemistry, and medicine. Not only did he qualify as a doctor, but he became a leading **intellectual** and activist. Although he later returned to America, James McCune Smith's Scottish education armed him for a life of **abolitionism** and reform. His **legacy** is still honoured at Glasgow University today.

And of course Scotland's national poet, Robert Burns himself, wrote **admiringly** about the abolitionist cause. But it is striking how rarely the voices of Black Scots themselves were preserved.

Pioneers in sport and music.

If we fast forward to the 20th century, voices and pioneers become much more visible. In sport, we have Andrew Watson, a name that deserves far more attention than it has. Watson was born in Guyana, but moved to Scotland as a young man in the 1870s. He became the world's first Black international footballer when he captained the Scottish national team against England in 1881. Not just a player but the captain. He was admired for his elegance on the pitch, yet for decades his story was nearly forgotten.

Today **campaigns** are underway to celebrate him with memorials and fuller **recognition** in Scottish football, including a mural of him and Shawlands, Glasgow.

And in music, Scottish culture has been **enriched** by artists of African and Caribbean descent who brought reggae, calypso and later hip hop and soul into Scotland's sounds.

This continues in the 21st century with award-winning bands like Young Fathers who proudly identify as Black Scots and push boundaries of what Scottish music can sound like.

Why these stories matter.

So why tell these stories? Because history is often **selective**. School books have sometimes presented Scotland as culturally **homogenous**, but in reality, Scotland has always been more **diverse** than that. These pioneers are proof: people of African and Caribbean heritage were shaping Scottish society long before modern debates around immigration.

By remembering Joseph Knight, James McCune Smith, Andrew Watson, and so many others, we **enrich** our understanding of who counts in history. We see Scotland not as an island apart from the world, but as part of a global web of movement, culture, empire, and **resistance**. The stories of Scotland's Black pioneers matter. They show courage in the face of injustice, brilliance in the world of science and sport and **creativity** in art and music. They're not just add-ons to Scottish history. They're **central threads** in the fabric of Scotland's story. And although I am discussing Black Scots stories here, you should go and follow the thousands of Black Scots creating content and telling you their stories directly.

In the next episode, we'll move into one of the most surprising historical connections: the hidden stories of Black Jacobites. Yes, Black men and women caught up in Scotland's **legendary uprisings**. Thanks for listening or watching. Remember to like, follow and subscribe, and I'll see you in the next episode of the Scottish English Podcast.

Vocabulary Table

Word/Phrase	Definition	Pronunciation	Collocations / Idiomatic Phrases
Pioneers	People who are among the first to explore or develop	/ˌpaɪəˈniəz/	<i>pioneer spirit, pioneer work, technology pioneers</i>
Devoting	Giving all or a large part of time or resources to	/dɪˈvəʊtɪŋ/	devoting time to, devoting effort, devoting oneself
Vital	Absolutely necessary or important	/ˈvaɪtl/	vital role, vital importance, vital signs
Mainstream	Ordinary or conventional; accepted by most people	/ˈmeɪnstriːm/	mainstream media, mainstream culture, mainstream society
Recognition	Acceptance or acknowledgement of something's existence	/ˌrɛkəgˈnɪʃən/	seek recognition, public recognition, formal recognition
Prejudice	Preconceived opinion not based on reason or experience	/ˈpreɪdʒʊdɪs/	racial prejudice, social prejudice, overcome prejudice

Carved out spaces	Created or established areas or opportunities	/kɑːvd aʊt speɪsɪz/	carve out a niche, carve out a role
Seafaring	Traveling by sea, especially regularly or professionally	/ˈsiː.fəərɪŋ/	seafaring life, seafaring tradition
Enslaved	Made someone a slave	/ɪnˈsleɪvd/	enslaved population, enslaved people
Precedent	An earlier event or action regarded as an example	/ˈpreɪsɪdənt/	set a precedent, legal precedent
Abolitionism	Movement to end slavery or a practice	/əˈbɒlɪʃənɪzəm/	abolitionism movement, abolitionist cause
Intellectual	Relating to the intellect or understanding	/ɪntəˈlektʃʊəl/	intellectual debate, intellectual pursuits
Legacy	Something handed down from the past	/ˈleɡəsi/	leave a legacy, cultural legacy
Admiringly	Expressing approval or respect	/ədˈmaɪrɪŋli/	look admiringly, speak admiringly
Campaigns	Organized activities to achieve a goal	/kæmˈpeɪnz/	run campaigns, political campaigns

Enriched	Improved in quality or value	/ɪnˈrɪtʃt/	enriched culture, enriched soil
Selective	Tending to choose carefully	/sɪˈlektɪv/	selective process, selective memory
Homogenous	Uniform or similar in composition	/həˈmɒdʒənəs/	culturally homogenous, homogenous group
Diverse	Showing variety or differences	/daɪˈvɜːs/	diverse community, diverse backgrounds
Enrich	Improve or enhance the quality or value	/ɪnˈrɪtʃ/	enrich understanding, enrich lives
Resistance	Opposition to something	/rɪˈzɪstəns/	armed resistance, passive resistance
Creativity	The use of imagination or original ideas	/kriːɪˈtɪvɪti/	creative process, foster creativity
Central threads	Key elements or main parts	/ˈsentrəl θɛdʒz/	central thread of argument, central thread in fabric
Legendary	Very famous or well known, often in a traditional sense	/ˈlɛdʒəndəri/	legendary figure, legendary story

Uprisings	Rebellions or revolts	/ˈʌpraɪzɪŋz/	popular uprisings, armed uprisings
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