

An Introduction

Bradford and its surrounding area have a long and rich history. There is much to learn about the first settlers in the area and how its population changed over time. In this study, children will gain an understanding of how Bradford became the place we know and love today.

What you need to know

In prehistoric times, the area now known as Bradford was frequented by nomadic hunter-gatherers who left behind flint tools, including scrapers and blades discovered in the garden of 2 Wheatlands Grove. By the Neolithic period, around 4000 BC, communities began to farm and domesticate animals, producing more sophisticated polished stone axes. Several of these axes, unearthed in gardens along Bolton Road, have been traced to the Langdale quarries in the Lake District, attesting to long-distance trade networks.

Around 2500 BC, settlers from mainland Europe introduced metalworking to the region, inaugurating the Bronze Age. Finds from this era include a flanged bronze axe recovered in 1931 at Ashbourne Gardens, alongside flint arrowheads and burial urns. In the subsequent Iron Age, the territory fell under the influence of the Brigantes tribe, who erected hill forts such as Castle Hill near Huddersfield. Although no Iron Age artefacts have yet been uncovered within Bradford itself, a Roman road later traversed the locality, likely linking to the fort at Elslack. The discovery of Roman coins—from as far afield as Greece and Egypt—indicates Bradford's integration, albeit peripheral, into Imperial trade routes.

Following the arrival of Anglo-Saxon settlers around AD 500, a hamlet emerged in the valley where three streams converged. One fording point, at the site of modern Church Street, gave rise to the village of Broad Ford—later Bradford—its name commemorating the “broad ford” of Bradford Beck, which still flows beneath the city. Christian missionaries from Dewsbury are believed to have founded a chapel on this site in the early medieval period; this evolved into the Parish Church of St Peter, now Bradford Cathedral, a rare survivor from those early centuries.

After William the Conqueror's invasion of 1066, northern England endured the ‘Harrying of the North’. The Domesday Book of 1086 records Bradford as “waste”, reflecting widespread devastation, and its lands were granted to Ilbert de Lacy under the feudal system. Steady growth resumed after Edmund de Lacy obtained a Market Charter in 1251, establishing Bradford as a market town renowned for its wool trade, tanning and leatherwork. By the 14th century, fulling mills and corn mills dotted streets such as Kirkgate, Westgate and Ivegate; in 1461 the town secured rights to two annual fairs, drawing merchants from across Yorkshire.

In the 16th century, despite outbreaks of plague in 1557 and 1558, Bradford's weavers produced coarse kersey cloth in their homes, later refining techniques to create finer worsted textiles. By 1810 the town was the leading centre of worsted production in the West Riding, earning the nickname 'Worstedopolis'. The Industrial Revolution accelerated this transformation: the turnpike road of 1734, the Bradford Canal of the 1770s and the arrival of the railway in 1846 each eased the movement of goods and people. Between 1801 and 1851 the population swelled by some 700 per cent, straining housing and sanitation, and prompting reformers such as Richard Oastler to campaign against child labour. In 1853 mill owner Titus Salt established the model village of Saltaire to provide healthier homes for his workforce.

During World War 1, Bradford answered the call to arms on the 3rd of September 1914, when the Lord Mayor invited local men to form the Bradford Citizens' Army League. By the 8th September, over four hundred volunteers—the 'Bradford Pals'—had enrolled at the Mechanics' Institute. They trained at Skipton, Ripon and Fovant before marching past Valley Parade en route to Port Said in December 1915. Transferred to France in February 1916, they took part in the Battle of the Somme on the 1st July 1916, suffering over a thousand casualties on that single day. Further losses at Rossignol Wood in February 1917 and the advent of conscription led to the battalions' disbandment by early 1918. When the Armistice was signed on the 11th November 1918, more than 37,000 Bradford men had served and over 10,500 had fallen. To honour them, the Bradford War Memorial—inscribed with the names of the Missing of the Somme on the Thiepval Memorial—was unveiled on the 1st July 1922, and a Roll of Honour remains on display in Bradford Central Library.

In World War 2 (1939–1945), Bradford again contributed on both the home front and the battlefield. Children were evacuated to Nelson, Mirfield and Harrogate, and air-raid shelters were built across the city. On the night of the 31st August 1940, over one hundred bombs struck Bradford—blasting a 30-foot crater in Hammerton Street and injuring 111 people—and a further raid on the 14th of March 1941 dropped 29 high-explosive and 556 incendiary bombs. Local factories such as Phoenix Works employed mainly women to produce ammunition, while men of the West Yorkshire Regiment served in campaigns from Burma to Italy. Bradford Cathedral's Book of Remembrance commemorates the 682 residents who died, and the city's war memorial was updated to include the dates 1939–1945. In November 2024, Bradford became the first location outside London to unveil a Commonwealth War Memorial.

From its earliest days, Bradford has been shaped by successive waves of migration. Roman coins testify to Imperial connections; the Anglo-Saxon name reflects settlers from Germany and Scandinavia; and

in the 12th century Flemish weavers introduced worsted-making techniques. During the 19th century the town's population grew from some 13,600 in 1801 to over 103,000 by 1851, as people arrived from Ireland—welcomed at St Mary's Catholic Church from 1825—and from Scotland, Germany and other parts of Yorkshire. A synagogue opened in Little Germany in 1873, serving a growing German-Jewish community. In the mid-20th century, post-war labour shortages brought migrants from Central and Eastern Europe, Jewish refugees and, from the late 1940s, South Asians. The first mosque opened in 1958, and by 1964 there were around 12,000 Pakistani residents. A purpose-built Sikh temple followed in 1972, and in 1985 Mohammed Ajeeb became Bradford's first Asian Lord Mayor. Recent decades have seen further arrivals from the Caribbean, Syria and beyond. Today, landmarks such as the Mughal Gardens in Lister Park and the Grand Mosque, opened in 2014, reflect Bradford's richly multicultural identity.

Resources

Our key enquiry questions, sources, PowerPoints, activities, and other resources will help to build children's understanding of their local area of Bradford and answer the question 'How has Bradford changed over time?'

Get in touch

Is there an area of local history you'd love to see on our Local History Hub?
Get in touch to learn how we can work together! Email

LocalHistory@tpet.co.uk
to find out more.



Teacher's Pet



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Historic England and Teacher's Pet have come together to bring you a collection of free resources that you can use in your local history teaching.



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Teacher's Pet

Who are Teacher's Pet?

Teacher's Pet have been providing downloadable and playable educational content to early years and primary school teachers for over 14 years. We cover all areas of the curriculum and use a team of in-house teachers and designers to create engaging and memorable concepts, that the children will love.

Why local history?

At [Teacher's Pet](#) we want to empower primary school teachers by giving them the tools they need to deliver inspiring and thoughtful lessons about the local area and its history. We believe local history teaching has such an important part to play in a child's wellbeing – helping to give children a sense of pride in where they live.

Our Local History project is designed to provide teachers across the UK with everything they need to successfully carry out a full scheme of teaching about their local area, through key enquiry questions and source led activities.

Working with [Historic England](#) gives us access to archived maps and photos for resources and information from knowledgeable local historians, as well helping us to provide the content to you free of charge.

For more information about our Local History project or to find out more about Teacher's Pet Classroom Resources, please visit our website.