

Boston now a 'lot angrier'

Some 75.6 per cent of Boston voters wanted to leave the European Union in the June 2016 referendum -- the highest figure in the UK -- which highlighted unease about the effects of a rapid immigration boom in this otherwise overlooked town

AFP | Boston, United Kingdom

In the 2016 referendum, the market town of Boston in eastern England was the epicentre of the Brexit vote that shocked the world.

Fast forward to now and voters are furious that Brexit has been delayed due to gridlock in parliament, while integration between locals and Boston's thriving new east European population remains a struggle.

"Boston is a lot angrier than it was," said Judith Churrah, 66.

"Two and a half years on and we are no further forward. The anger is not against migrants



We're almost entirely reliant on EU migrant labour, as the whole of the UK horticulture sector is. We have nothing but positive things to say about them. They have a fantastic work ethic, are model employees and we would be lost without them

J. A. COLLISON AND SONS

government dried up, meaning the influx was not matched with infrastructure expansion, fueling the Brexit vote.

The Office for National Statistics estimated that in 2017, 20,000 of the 68,000 people in Boston were foreign-born, up from 6,000 out of 57,000 in 2004.

Breaking bread together

The referendum outcome triggered attempts to bridge the divide between older and newer Bostonians.

Saint Botolph's Church, Boston's towering landmark, hosts regular food and drink events to facilitate cross-community chat.

"Through learning about each other, we become more comfortable with each other," said Adam Kelk, the church's operations

14, the day before the more famous US Boston Marathon.

Data shows around half of those who did the simpler five-kilometre fun run have Boston postcodes.

"Each year, more and more of the immigrant population are getting involved," said Austin.

Shopping at different times

But just as those bridges are tentatively built, another divide could be emerging with the surge of Romanian and Bulgarian immigration after transitional limits were lifted in 2014.

Asked what has changed about Boston since the referendum, locals and longer-term east European residents in the big market square mostly cite the Romanian influx.

Fruit and veg seller Kelly Brandon said older English people predominantly visit in the mornings and younger eastern Europeans in the afternoon once their early work shifts are done. "This market would be finished if it wasn't for them. 100 percent," said Brandon, whose family have run the stall for 25 years.

"The longer-term ones that came in on the first wave -- we know them by name, we have watched their children grow up and employed their sons.

"They're similar to us, apart from the language."

Employers lament uncertainty

The farms and factories that have proved such a migrant magnet feel left in limbo by Brexit.

Belmont Nurseries, Britain's largest outdoor tulips grower, imports its bulbs from the Netherlands and has started stockpiling lest post-Brexit paperwork imposes transit delays that would spoil the

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'Too small to cope'

Back in Boston, West Street, now dominated by shops servicing the eastern European community, is bustling.

People queue outside a packed remittances agency, while customers frequent the stores filled with imported home comforts, and grab lunch in Lithuanian restaurants.

Some feel the heavy concentration around West Street has not helped integration.

Jaidas Stirbys, 34, a food factory worker, came to Boston from Lithuania 12 years ago for work and better money, and quickly decided to stay. He now speaks five languages.

"I am happy with my situation. I just hope the UK would stay in the EU," he said.

Born in Morocco with Berber roots, France-raised Cafe de Paris owner Anton Dani has been in Britain for 24 years and married a Pole.

But he is more than just a Brexit-voting cafe owner. Dani is also a local councillor and he believes newcomers should do as he did: study English, become British and adopt UK culture.

"Integration is not happening. It's very slow motion," he said.

"Everyone gets isolated and starts living in their own communities.

"The Bostonians say they don't hate migrants; it's just that the town is too small to cope."



Workers from EU countries sort tulips at J. A. Collison and Sons

but against the politicians," she explained.

"Burn down parliament."

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Boston is a hub for the vast,

fertile Fens inland.

The town changed dramatically after eight ex-communist nations entered the EU in 2004, with thousands, particularly from Poland and the Baltic states, drawn by ready work in Britain's food-producing heartland.

But the migration surge collided with the 2008 financial crisis, when the money from central

manager.

The annual Boston Marathon was also launched in 2016 in an attempt to promote cultural integration.

"Sport and common activities are by far the best way of addressing the problem, integrating and reducing tensions," said the event's chairman Richard Austin.

This year's event ran on April

