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Aunt Esther's Story

with Stephen Bourne

Ethnic Communities Oral History Project

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Aunt Esther's Story

Compiled by Stephen Bourne & Sav Kyriacou
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INTRODUCTION

by Stephen Bourne

Black women have been living and working in Britain since at least the early 16th century. The court of King James IV of Scotland included two African maidservants to the Queen. From the seventeenth century black women found employment as domestic servants, seamstresses, laundry maids, children's nurses, cooks and street and fairground performers. However, many were forced to become prostitutes. It is a little known fact that four hundred years ago, in 1595, a tall, statuesque African called Luce Morgan, also known as Lucy Negro, ran a brothel in Clerkenwell. A beautiful and famous courtesan, some historians believe that Shakespeare fell in love with her, and they have identified her as his Dark Lady of the Sonnets.

Luce Morgan may have inspired Shakespeare, but in those days women had very little access to education, and left no written records. Poet Phillis Wheatley became the first black woman to have her writing published in Britain. Bought in a slave-market in 1761 when she was just seven-years-old, Wheatley grew up in America and came to London in 1773. Under the patronage of the Countess of Huntingdon, Wheatley's poems were published here to great acclaim, and subsequently she was befriended and entertained by members of the English aristocracy. She died in 1784.

Another slave, Mary Prince, was born in Bermuda in 1788 but, unlike Wheatley, she suffered barbaric treatment from her owners. When they brought her to London in 1828, they kept her as a slave. She ran away, preferring life on the streets, and with help from the Anti-Slavery Society she published *The History of Wary Prince* in 1831. This was the first time an autobiography had been written by a black female slave, and it became a bestseller. Prince's book played an important role in the campaign to abolish slavery.

Born in 1805 in Jamaica, Mary Seacole was an experienced 'doctress' who was forced to travel at her own expense to the battlefields of the Crimean War. Earlier, on a visit to Britain in 1854, she found her route to the Crimea blocked by one of Florence Nightingale's assistants. In the Crimean War Seacole nursed sick and wounded British troops, and risked her own life by carrying them off the battlefields. On her return to Britain in 1856 she was highly decorated for her work. She even gained the admiration and affection of Queen Victoria. Settling in this country, Seacole published her best-selling autobiography in 1857 but for almost a century after her death in 1881, Mary Seacole was forgotten. Finally, in 1973, her grave was rediscovered and restored in the Catholic cemetery in Kensal Rise. In 1984 her autobiography was reprinted with great success.

After the Second World War, many black people travelled from the Caribbean and settled here, but when my Aunt Esther, a seamstress, was born in Fulham in 1912, only small black communities existed in Britain. Aunt Esther's father, Joseph Bruce, raised her by himself. He was the Son of Guyanese slaves, and a rare example of a black man who settled alone in a white community at the turn of the century. At that time most black settlers made their homes in black communities in Cardiff, Liverpool or the East End of London. Joseph and his daughter were accepted by their white neighbours, but away from Fulham the situation could be very different. When Joseph died in 1941, Aunt Esther and my great-grandmother, Gran Johnson, "adopted"

each other and together they shared a home with my mother, Kathy.

A friendly, outgoing woman, Aunt Esther found it easy to integrate with the new multi-cultural Society of post-war Britain, and she was more than willing to collaborate with me on her autobiography. We spent many hours talking about her life, even after the book was published. One of my reasons for wanting her life story published was that hardly any documentation exists which informs US about people like Aunt Esther, and the pre-war black presence in Britain. In 1991 Hammersmith and Fulham's Ethnic Communities Oral History Project published Aunt Esther's Story. It was a success, and we received the Arts Council's Raymond Williams Prize for Community Publishing. This gave Aunt Esther a great deal of pleasure and local celebrity status. More importantly, it reassured her that her life as a working-class black British woman had meaning and significance. This is something historians and publishers should take notice of. It is important for them to acknowledge the existence of autobiographies by women like Mary Prince, Mary Seacole and Aunt Esther, and encourage more publications of this kind.

This book is a revised and updated version of Aunt Esther's Story, drawing on all the interviews I had with Aunt Esther from 1990-94. We have also included many photographs not seen in the first edition.

AUNT ESTHER'S STORY

Joseph and Edith Bruce. My father, Joseph Adolphus Bruce, was born in Georgetown, British Guiana (now Guyana), in October, 1880. He told me he was the son of slaves, John and Mercy Bruce. I believe he came to Britain around the turn of the century. He worked on the ships before he came here. He told me he travelled about the world, but I don't know why he settled in Fulham. It couldn't have been easy for him, because there weren't many black people here, but he was tough. He could look after himself. Dad was working as a builder's labourer when he married my mother, Edith Brooks, on 22 March 1912. My mother was Scottish. They lived at 15 Dieppe Street in Fulham. I was born there on 29 November 1912. They called me Josephine Esther.

When Esther was born, Joseph was working away from home in France. He also missed her christening, but Edith described it to him in a letter she wrote in January 1973. The letter has survived. Edith said:

My own darling husband...We had a lovely service on Sunday for Esther's christening. Everyone was so nice and made a great fuss of baby. Mr Stokly kept kissing her and saying what a pretty baby she was. Mr Murray gave a lovely address and prayed for you. Baby was very good indeed. Now my darling god bless you and may you have a peaceful and blessed New Year. Do not worry over me dearest one, only make haste and come back to me for I miss you more every day. With heaps of love from US all. Believe me to be your loving and true wife Edie.

On 11 April 1916 Esther's baby sister Edith May was born prematurely. She died two days later and was buried in the children's section of Fulham Cemetery. On 24 October 1978, when Esther was five years old, her mother died aged twenty-nine.

4 Dieppe Street. After mother died, Dad and moved to 4 Dieppe Street and this was my home until 1941. Dad brought me up on his own. He worked for the General Bus Company as a painter. He painted buses. After school sat on the doorstep and waited for him to come home from 1910 work, even in bad weather, when it rained or snowed. When I was older, Dad gave me a key to let myself in and light the fire. Then I put the soup on and waited for him to come home. Dad did the shopping for us. Meat, potatoes. He did all the washing and ironing. Dad and lived on the ground floor in two rooms and we had a stone scullery. Our front room, where we slept, looked out onto the street, and in our kitchen we had a gas stove. Our toilet was at the end of the yard. We didn't have any carpet on the front room Floor. We had rugs on top of some lino which we washed and polished. Dad never bought me toys for my birthdays or Christmas. Instead he put some money in a post office savings account for me. But when I was little he gave me a teddy bear, and once he bought me a wax doll. She was the only doll lever had but when I put her by the fire to get her warm, she melted.

Hyde Park. When I was little, Dad and dressed up and went to Speaker's Corner in Hyde Park every Sunday afternoon. In the summer Dad wore a white panama hat, a grey suit and black

shoes. I wore a white dress, a little white hat and white shoes. One afternoon Dad and were walking through Hyde Park when a toff passed by, glanced at my Dad, looked back and called out: "Hi, boy." Dad took no notice, and we carried on walking. Then this man came up to my Dad, tapped him on the shoulder, and said: "Boy, I'm talking to you." So my Dad said: "Who the hell do you think you are? Where do you think you are? In India or Africa? When you're in England I'm no boy to you. I'm your equal so don't call me, or any coloured man, boy again or else there'll be serious trouble." Dad had a real good go at him and that's the way I've taken it. If anyone upsets me I say: 'Who do you think you're talking to?' I put people in their place. If anyone upsets me I tell them what I think of them and it's finished with.

North End Road School. I went to school in North End Road, Fulham. I wasn't treated differently. We were all together. At school, boys were taught carpentry and girls went to housewifery, laundry and cookery classes. We had a teacher called Mrs Carson. She was a funny old dear. One afternoon she said to the class: "I'm going to teach you how to talk to people." She taught us how to be polite to each other and then she said: "Now, children, when you meet coloured people, you do not talk to them. Don't lower yourself. Don't forget, you do not talk to coloured people. Remember that." When I went home Dad said: "How did you get on at school today? What did you learn?" I ignored him. He said: "What's wrong with you? Are you deaf?" I said: "No. I was told at school not to speak to coloured people." He said: "Who told you that?" I said: 'Our teacher." The next day Dad went to the school and raised the roof. Afterwards Mrs Carson was sacked.

Dieppe Street. At the top of Dieppe Street was West Kensington Station and at the other end was West Kensington Cinema in North End Road. At one end of the street was Mr Fryer the baker and at the other end was Clarks, the rag and bone shop. We took our rags to him and he gave us twopence a bundle. For that twopence we could buy a bag of chips. Catchpole's, the corner shop, sold everything and everyone went into Catchpole's to hear a bit of scandal. There were some wonderful characters living in the area. Motor Bert lived in Hilmer Street and walked up and down Dieppe Street pretending he was driving a car. He Used a penny for a steering wheel. Then we had some men who dressed up as women. They wore the most beautiful picture hats. We sat on the kerb when the organ man came round, and directly that organ pulled up, so these blokes came along dressed as women. When they danced and sang, we sat on the kerb watching them. When they finished, we clapped. Yes, that was marvellous. Amy Johnson, the winkle girl, was just like a man. She came round every Sunday in rain and snow and shouted in a deep voice: "Winkles Cockles' Then a bloke came along with a roundabout on a cart. The kids in the street ran up to him and gave him a jam jar or a halfpenny for a ride, and he pushed the roundabout with his hand. It was great. In those days we found pleasure in little things. Today's kids would think it was stupid.

In those days we could travel on a bus from West Kensington to Kensington Gardens for a penny. That's a long ride. Sometimes we walked to Kensington Gardens. It took about an hour. In the

summer, if the weather was nice, we said: "Come on. Let's take some bread and jam and a bottle of lemonade and go to Kensington Gardens for the day." All the kids in Dieppe Street wanted to go so we said: 'Go and ask your mother. It'll cost you a halfpenny.' There'd be a whole crowd of us. Kids, babies in prams. Off we went. We left Dieppe Street about ten o'clock in the morning and came home about five in the afternoon. It was great. Other times we walked to Bishop's Park in Fulham. We said: "Let's go up the Bishop's." That wasn't very far away. We loved Bishop's Park because it had a paddling pool and a sandpit.

Community. In those days we lived in a community. We were one big happy family. Dieppe Street, Hilmer Street, Eli Street and Mund Street. We had our own little land and our own little friends. If we walked along the road singing it was alright with the neighbours. Nobody minded. Neighbours helped each other if they were in trouble. "Do you want anything?" they asked. We didn't have Age Concern or Social Services. We didn't have anything like that but we knew we were going to get by because our neighbours came and helped. We helped each other. We didn't go hungry in the old days. We could leave our front doors open all day and if a neighbour walked past we'd call out: 'Come on in, love. Come and have a cup of tea.' I shall never forget New Year's Eve. Every year we went outside, stood on the doorstep and shouted "Happy New Year" to everyone. All the neighbours came out of their houses and joined in. All along the road. They were marvellous days.

The Granville. Every Saturday night Dad gave me a treat. He took me to The Granville, a music hall in Fulham Broadway. Inside it was beautiful. The carvings were really lovely. The dearest seats, which were downstairs and cost one shilling and sixpence, were red velvet, but we always sat upstairs in the gods, in the cheap seats. They were stone steps and cost fourpence. Four old pennies. We only sat downstairs if there was something big on, and then we felt honoured because we sat on proper seats. We bought a penny's worth of peanuts, or an orange. The big stage curtains were dark red and gold. There was an orchestra in the pit and as soon as they started to tune up we'd get excited and say: "Here we go. They're gonna start." It was always a variety show and lasted two hours. We saw all the great music hall stars. All the old ones like Nellie Wallace, Florrie Ford, Kate Carney and Hetty King. She impersonated men in top hat and tails. They were really classy people. Mind you, we were never allowed to go backstage and meet them, or ask them for autographs. We couldn't do anything like that. After the show we went home and baked some potatoes. Other times we went to the Red Hall, a picture house. That was at the bottom end of North End Road. It cost fourpence to go in. It was great. I remember seeing Mary Pickford in Sparrows. I always remember that film. Then there was Charlie Chaplin, Tom Mix and Pearl White. They were silent films. There was another cinema we called the Flea pit and it was a bloody flea pit. That was in North End Road. We didn't go in there very often because we came out jumping! It was a bug hole. While we were watching the film a man came round with disinfectant and sprayed us!

Jennie. After mother died, Dad wanted me to have a step-mother. So when he asked me if I had any objections to Jennie Edwards, I said no. Jennie was born in New Amsterdam, Berbice, British Guiana. She was a lovely, sweet woman who had worked as a children's nurse for an English family. She looked after two little girls and, when the family returned to England, Jennie came with them. They lived at 33 Emperor's Gate in South Kensington. Dad and Jennie were married on 15 January 1928 but they were only together for a little while when they found out she had tuberculosis. When Jennie was ill at home, and in the hospital, Dad sang Sankey songs to her. Jennie liked that. Dad had a good singing voice. Black people sing Sankey songs. They're like hymns.

Jennie died in Fulham Hospital on 7 October 1933 at the age of forty. She was buried in Fulham Cemetery. In 1994, when Stephen Bourne found her gravestone, he discovered that Joseph Bruce had acknowledged British Guiana, their country of origin, with the following inscription: "In loving memory of Jennie Rosaline, the beloved wife of J. A. Bruce (both of B.G.)"

Madame Polly's. I was taught to sew by Jennie. This helped me to get a job at Madame Polly's as a dress-maker when I left school in 1927. I worked for two old girls. "Do this, do that," they said, 'and pick all the pins up with a magnet." In those days if I wanted to earn a bit of extra money went to Baron's Court Road to the well-to-do people. I'd knock on their doors and ask: 'Can I clean your door-step for a tanner?" If I did a couple of them I'd be well-off. A lot of women did that to earn extra money.

Racism. In the old days some white people rubbed a black person's head for luck but nobody ever did that to me. I wouldn't let them! But I touched a sailor's collar for luck. I remember doing that a few times! I know there was a colour bar in some parts of London but I didn't experience it. I could go into a pub at any time. I never had any problems. I always worked and only lost one job for being black. I stayed at Madame Polly's for about one year and then I went to work as a dressmaker for John Barkers, a department store in Kensington High Street. I worked there for three years. One day I was told to go to an office in Young Street. I thought I was going to get a rise. Instead the new manager, his name was Skinner, called me into his office and said: "We don't need you anymore. I'm going to let you go." I said: "Why? What's the trouble?" He said: "I'm sacking you because you're coloured and I don't want coloured people working for me." I said: 'You can't sack me like that. How can I go to the Labour Exchange and tell them you've sacked me because I'm coloured?' So I went home and told my Dad. He was very angry and went to the office the next day. He raised the roof. He even wrote a letter to our MP, John Wilmot at the House of Commons, but that's as far as it went. We didn't hear anymore. I've never forgotten that. When I was sacked I felt insulted. He insulted me because I am black. Did he know his manners? No. I lived with poor people, but they didn't treat me like that. I said to myself. This is England. This is what I've grown up to. I learnt a hard lesson. In this world you've got to stick up for yourself. It doesn't matter who you are, stick up for your rights. You've got to let people know that you're not frightened of them. You've got to say: "I'm as good as you."

Marcus Garvey. One day I was walking along North End Road when I met Marcus Garvey. He was from Jamaica. He was a big built chap and lived in Fulham. He said: "Why don't you come to my house so we can have a chat?" I said: "Yes, by all means." So I went to his house a few times and chatted to him. There was a big corner house where the Post Office is in North End Road, and that was where Marcus Garvey lived. He was a nice chap. Very, very kind. But he knew what the English people were up to. He wasn't treated with respect like I was because he said: "The English are no good. No good." And I said: "But there are some good people in this world." Then he told me he was going home to Jamaica and I never saw him again.

Marcus Garvey was a middle-class gentleman, and didn't make many friends in Fulham. He would say: "Good afternoon" and raise his hat to people but I wasn't like that. I would say: "Hello, love," or "Hello, mate," because that was the way I was brought up. When I went shopping in North End Road market and met the costers they would say: "Hello, Esther. How are you keeping? What are you having today, love?" But if you were middle-class they wouldn't have a conversation with you. They'd just serve you, and that would be that. Marcus Garvey was middle-class and the costers wouldn't speak to him. It was a class difference. It didn't matter what colour you were. We were working-class. We had our own tongue. People like Marcus Garvey didn't speak the same language as us.

The Jamaican nationalist leader Marcus Garvey settled in Fulham in 1935. He did not return to Jamaica. At the time of his death at the age of fifty-three in 1940 he was living at 53 Talgarth Road.

Film extras. There weren't many black people living in Fulham before the war. Apart from Marcus Garvey there was Old Mr Fahmey who lived at 29 Dieppe Street. He was African. A tall, distinguished-looking bloke who was over six foot tall and very thin. He dressed very smart and was a friendly, outgoing chap. All the kids talked to him. He must have been about one hundred years old but nobody knew exactly how old he was. He earned a living working as a film extra. Now and again Mr Fahmey asked Dad if he would like to earn a bit of pocket money working as a film extra. They were in *Chu Chin Chow* with Anna May Wong and *The Thief of Bagdad* with Sabu. They also appeared as spear carriers in some of Paul Robeson's films including *Sanders of the River*, *Song of Freedom* and *King Solomon's Mines*. Sometimes whole families appeared in the same films. Dad said they came from all over the place. Cardiff, Liverpool, the East End. When Dad appeared in *Sanders of the River* he told me that the little children cried when they saw their Mums and Dads take their clothes off and pretend to be African natives. Today people would think it was offensive, and they'd be right, but in those days black people earned good money working as film extras, sometimes a guinea a day. When we went to see these films it was impossible to recognise Dad and Mr Fahmey. There were so many people in the crowd scenes! But Paul Robeson was marvellous. He had a smashing voice. We all liked him. I could have been in *Sanders of the River*. They needed lots of extras for that film, and the money would have come in handy. But when my Dad asked me if I wanted to go with him to the film studio, I said no. I didn't want to take my clothes off in public.

Elisabeth Welch. In 1935 went to work as a dressmaker for Miss Mary Taylor in Markham Square which was off King's Road in Chelsea. That was a nice job and I stayed there for quite a time because Miss Taylor was very good to me. She owned the house. It was a big place. She lived upstairs. I worked in the basement. It was mostly handwork and used all kinds of fabrics. I didn't use a sewing machine very much. Miss Taylor was very kind. She paid me well, and now and again we went to the pictures in the afternoon. If there wasn't a lot of work she'd say: 'Shall we go to the pictures, Esther? I think we'll knock off. Make a cup of tea, then we'll go to the pictures.'

When I worked for Miss Taylor we made dresses for Elisabeth Welch and other famous people. Elisabeth Welch was a beautiful American singer who lived in Cottage Walk which was off Sloane Street in Knightsbridge. She was elegant. A very classy lady. She appeared in West End shows and made films and records with Paul Robeson. Often listened to her singing on the wireless. Now and again Miss Taylor said: 'Go on, Esther, take this dress to her house for me.' Sometimes took little Kathy with me for company. So I met Elisabeth Welch. She was a lovely person and always treated me with kindness.

In 1997, when Aunt Esther's Story was first published, Stephen and Esther sent a copy to Elisabeth Welch who was still living in Knightsbridge. She told Stephen she remembered Aunt Esther as "the friendly coloured lady with the cockney accent." In 1992, when Aunt Esther celebrated her 80th birthday, Elisabeth Welch sent her a signed photograph.

The Blitz. When the Blitz started in September 1940 my Dad stayed in the house. He took a chance, a lot of people did. But I went to the public shelter in Eli Street with the neighbours. One night we all had to get out of there because the Germans surrounded it with incendiary bombs and one of the bombs hadn't exploded. It had landed right behind the shelter. The air raid warden came in and told us we had to get out. Poor old Mrs Clark was sitting next to me. She said: "Will you take me to the shelter at the other end of the street, Esther?" I said: "Of course will, love." But it was quite a long way to the other shelter and the Germans were going hell for leather. Bombs were falling everywhere. Mrs Clark was hanging on to me. So we got out of the shelter in Eli Street and went with the neighbours through the air raid and into the one in Hilmer Street. It was packed. As for being scared I just didn't think about it.

Joseph Bruce killed. In March 1941 Dad was killed when he was going to work. He was knocked down by a taxi in Abingdon Street, Westminster, just by the House of Commons. The cab driver didn't see my Dad in the blackout and sent him flying. Dad was seriously injured. Because the air raids were so bad they put him in an ambulance and sent him to a hospital in Windsor. But the bumping about on the journey finished him off. The next day he was gone. It was the taxi driver's fault, not my Dad's, but all received was twenty pounds compensation. I arranged for Dad to be buried in the same grave as my mother in Fulham Cemetery.

Moving in with Granny Johnson. After Dad was killed, I was left on my own. I'd never lived

on my own before and I hated it. So Granny Johnson asked me to come and live with her at 13 Dieppe Street. We'd been neighbours for years. She said: "Come over here and live with me, Esther." The war had started and food was rationed. It made sense. So I moved into 13 Dieppe Street and shared a room at the top of the house with Granny. She was like a mother to me. She was an angel. I knew her family very well. Before he died in 1940, her son Bob was a coalman. When his daughter Kathy was little, he took us all over Fulham on his horse and cart when he delivered coal. Bob's horse was called Nobby. Every year, when we went to Regent's Park for the horse parade, Bob painted the cart and decorated Nobby. He spent hours polishing the brass and weaving ribbon through its tail. When he finished, Nobby looked smashing. Then we all bundled on top of the cart and went to Regent's Park.

Life in the shelter. When I came home from work and went to the air raid shelter found Granny cooking our tea. She said: "What do you want, love? Sausages and a baked potato?" I said: "Yes. O.K." We had a good time in the shelter. It was warm. We had sing-songs and bunks to sleep on. When a neighbour came in we welcomed them. Everybody was equal and pulled together. If somebody came into the shelter who we didn't know we said: "Hello, love. Where do you come from?" We didn't turn anybody away. Sometimes during an air raid the bombs came a bit too close and it got scary, but I don't think the shelter would have stopped a bomb from killing us if one had hit it.

Rationing. Times were hard during the war. Food was rationed. There was no fruit. Things were so bad they started selling whale meat, but I wouldn't eat it. I didn't like the look of it. We made a joke about it, singing Vera Lynn's song with new words: 'Whale meet again!' Often Granny said: "We could do with this. We could do with that." So I wrote to my Dad's brother, Uncle Sam, in British Guiana. I asked him if he could send US food. Two weeks later a bloody great big box arrived. Everything was in it including my favourites - oily peanuts! You couldn't get them in Britain! After that I asked Granny: "What grub do we need?" So I wrote more lists and sent them to Uncle Sam. We welcomed those food parcels.

Conscription. In 1941 they introduced conscription for single women and I was told I would have to leave Miss Taylor and do war work. I didn't want to leave Miss Taylor, but I said: 'O.K. I'll do war work.' So I went to register and they said: "We'll put you in a munitions factory in Newcastle." I said: "I'm not going to Newcastle. I'm not leaving home." They said: "Do you want to join the land Army?" I said: "No. I don't want to get up at half past five to milk cows. That's not for me." They said: "Well, what war work do you want to do?" So I said: "I'll have a bash in a hospital." They sent me to work as a cleaner in Western Hospital. That was an isolation hospital in Seagrave Road. It was just like going into a big prison. I said to the nurse: "What do I have to do here, please?" She said: "You don't mop the floor, you get down on your hands and knees and polish it with cotton wool because this is an isolation hospital." I said: 'No.' I chucked that job in before I even started it!

Cleaning the Forces Ward. After working as a cleaner in Fulham Hospital, where Charing Cross Hospital is today, the Labour Exchange sent me to work in Brompton Hospital. The staff were very nice. I cleaned three wards. One was called the Forces Ward. This is where they put boys who had been wounded serving with the Army, Navy and Air Force. I had a smashing time in there. The pranks those boys got up to. There was a chap called Dennis who was in the Air Force. He was the worst. He had a bed in the corner. In those days had to clean the Ward the old fashioned way. Down on my hands and knees with the polish and bumper. One day noticed Dennis had thrown little bits of paper and orange peel all over the floor by his bed. I said: "Look at the mess you've made! Look at it! I've just polished this ward. You know what you can do, don't you? You can get out of bed and pick up all those bits of paper and Orange peel. I'm not leaving this ward until you do!" was carrying on like this, and the boys in the ward didn't say a word. I said: "I'm going to get Matron- so watch it!" Then all of a sudden these bits of paper and orange peel disappeared! Dennis had tied them together with a bit of cotton. The boys fell about laughing and Bob, who was also in the Air Force, said: "We've been having a game with you.' I saw the funny side of it. I enjoyed a laugh and a joke. But what a carry on! had a lot of fun in the Forces Ward. When the boys knew I was coming back on duty at six o'clock for the evening shift they asked me to bring them fish and chips. Then Matron came in and said: "Nobody is having soup tonight. You've all got fish and chips!" Eventually grew tired of cleaning hospital wards so asked if I could do something else. I told Brompton Hospital had been a seamstress before the war so they put me to work in their linen room. That was the best job I ever had. It was really great. I worked there for nearly fourteen years.

Privileged. During the war Brompton Hospital had private wards for the rich. I cleaned them, too. I had to knock before entered and when they had porridge, they had it with cream. Other patients had milk. If they wanted it, rich patients could have chicken for their dinner nearly every day. They could afford it. So the war didn't change anything for the rich! They were greatly privileged, while the rest of us had to make do with rations. Now and again Sister said: "Esther, look at all that good food left over, and going to waste. Do you want some of it?' I said: "Yes, please. I'll take it home for my dog.'

Doodle-bugs. In 1944 the Germans sent doodle-bugs over. The engine had a low, humming sound. When I heard it I knew I was safe, but when the engine stopped wondered where it was going to drop. It was really frightening because they killed thousands of people and a lot of them dropped on Fulham. I remember one terrible incident. The air raid sirens warned US that doodle-bugs were on their way so off we went to the shelter. We were waiting in the shelter for the all-clear when suddenly there was a terrific explosion and the shelter shook. A doodle-bug had flattened some of the houses in Dieppe Street. People were killed and many were left injured and homeless. Luckily our house was alright, even though it was number thirteen! At first they wouldn't let us go back home because it wasn't safe. They'd hit the gas mains. So we all had to go and stay at the Lillie Road Rest Centre until it was safe for US to return to our homes.

Life with Granny Johnson. Granny Johnson was a hard-working woman and a great lady. It didn't matter who you were or what troubles you had, if you went to Granny Johnson she would put you wise. She helped anybody. If you were ill she came and sat with you. Anybody died, she was there to lay them out. In those days babies were born at home and women like Granny Johnson were asked to deliver them. She was the local midwife. On went her big white apron and off she went to deliver a baby. Granny Johnson was good to everybody. She was a really marvellous woman.

Granny Johnson and went to St. Andrew's Congregational Church in May Street. When we came home she said: "Come on, Esther, let's have a sing-song." Then we sang all the hymns we'd just sing at church, it was just like a church service. Every week Granny went to a woman's hour at the church and put our names down for all the outings. She came in, found me sitting there, and said: "I've booked an outing for U.S. Mostly we went to Eastbourne or Southend and whenever we went on these outings Granny always took a little bottle of whiskey with her. She wore a little black hat and a big coat because she was a big woman. She packed some sandwiches in a bag and we were made then for the day. When we got to the seaside we went in a pub and had a drink with our sandwiches. Then we went for a walk along the seafront and Granny bought some rocks for the others at home. Then we came home on the coach. They were better days than they are now. We'll never get them back. I couldn't dream of them coming back. Things were never the same after Granny died in 1952. I left Dieppe Street in 1960 and shortly afterwards it was pulled down by the council. The neighbours moved away. I went to live in a flat in Fulham Court. That was that. Then moved to Wandsworth Bridge Road.

Windsor Castle. After the war many people came from the Caribbean to live in Britain and some white people didn't like it. I remember the Notting Hill riots in 1958. It was a terrible time for black people. I didn't think anything like that would ever happen in this country. Afterwards noticed a change in some white people. In 1959 my cousin Leon and his family came from Guyana to live in this country. He told me he wanted to see a bit of England so I took him out on trips. One day we went to Windsor Castle and had a look around. Afterwards Leon said: "Come on, we'll have a drink." We went into a pub and several other people were there but the barmaid said: "I'm sorry. We can't serve you. We're closed." I said: "But you've got all these other people here." She still refused to serve us, so Leon said: "Come on, love. They don't want us." I said: "I don't want them. I can do without them. I'm British, and they don't treat me like this. We'll go to another pub."

Making curtains. Stopped working in the laundry room at Brompton Hospital in 1956. After that made curtains at a place in Shorrold's Road in Fulham. I worked there until I retired at the age of sixty in 1972, but I hated being retired. It was boring. I knew about this place in Battersea where they made curtains. So I went and stood outside and watched the girls working through the window. They were mostly black, Vietnamese and Chinese women. One day I went in and said to the boss. "I'm a pensioner but do you want anybody to help out?" He said: "Yes. What

hours can you do?" I said: "Ten fill four." So he took me on there and then and I loved it. Paul, the boss, didn't take any notice of colour but when white girls applied for a job he said to them: "I don't want you to cause any trouble." Gay men worked there too and we all had a great time. We were always laughing and joking. Paul treated everybody the same. He was a smashing chap. I worked for him for fourteen years, until I was seventy-four. I stopped working in 1987 because my eyesight let me down. I didn't want to stop working and if I could go back there tomorrow I would. Every Christmas Paul sends me a card and ten pounds. I'll never forget Paul. Never.

The National Front and Mrs Thatcher. I still say if they'd stopped Enoch Powell and the National Front right at the beginning they wouldn't have got a hold. Then Thatcher came along. She was no damn good for this country. She dragged this country down. She put us in the gutter. And we're still in the gutter because John Major is making one hell of a mess. We haven't picked up yet. It's getting worse and worse. I have always voted labour.

Being British. My cousin Leon once said to me: 'You're a funny girl. You're British but you tell people you're from Guyana, the same as me.' I said: "Why not? I'd rather say I'm from Guyana the way this country is at the moment. I prefer to tell people I come from there than say I am British." Britain isn't what it used to be. The people have changed. I've watched this country go down and down and I don't think it's going to get any better. No way. In the old days the people of Fulham were one big happy family and we helped one another but today people are selfish. We were poor but people cared about each other. They were friendly and that meant a lot. People should be more friendly. Very often sit here and think of the good old days and how things have changed.

KATHY'S STORY

Childhood. I was born on 2 August 1931 in 13 Dieppe Street. At that time Mum and Dad were lodging with my grandmother, Gran Johnson, a large woman with big arms and lovely rosy cheeks. She always wore a navy shawl around her shoulders. had two younger brothers, Michael and David. I was eight years old when Dad died and I wasn't prepared for that. He worked as a coalman and had trouble with his ears. The coal dust got into them. The doctor sent him to Fulham Hospital for observation but he was only there for a few days. I only saw him one more time. It was on a Sunday. Esther said: "Where's your Mum and Gran?" I said: "They're up the hospital." And she said: "Oh, they should have taken you with them." I said: "No. I'm not allowed to see him." She said: "Come on. I'll take you to see your Dad." So I went to the hospital with Esther and we stood at the door of the ward and Esther said to one of the nurses: "Her Dad's down there. Do you think she could wave to him?" The nurse said it would be alright but she would not let me go to him. Children were not allowed to go into hospital wards in those days. The nurse told Dad I was standing at the door of the ward with Esther. He sat up in bed, smiled and shook his fist at US. That was the last time we saw him. He died the following day. Easter Monday. He was buried in Fulham Cemetery but Mum couldn't afford a headstone. She bought a wooden cross instead, and Esther paid for a stone angel for his grave.

Esther. I was evacuated to Wales with my Mum and brothers during the war, but after left school in 1945, came back to London to live with Gran and Esther. They were happy together. They never argued. When friends or relatives visited us, Esther was accepted as part of our family. She was one of US. She fitted in. There weren't many black people living in our area in those days. There were Italians who stayed here after the war, including a few prisoners of war who didn't want to go back to Italy. There were quite a number of people from Cyprus, Malta and Turkey living near us. Irish people too. As far as I can remember, Esther was the only black person living in our area. She was part of our community. People knew her. She didn't go very far to work. She made friends with everyone. She was always chatting to somebody in the street.

Outings with Esther. When I was young, Esther took me out on trips. It started when was a baby, and Mum let her take me out in my pram. Esther liked going out on trips. She always wanted to go out and about. She took me to places in London like Kensington Gardens, which wasn't very far away, Hyde Park, Battersea Park, Regent's Park, Buckingham Palace, St. James's Park, Green Park and St. Paul's Cathedral. Sometimes we took a picnic and travelled on the Green Line coach to Brighton, Windsor or Fulmer in Buckinghamshire. I remember Esther taking me to Elisabeth Welch's house in

Knightsbridge to deliver dresses before the war. There was always somewhere to go. We were glad to get out of the two rooms in Dieppe Street although we enjoyed living there. It was nice to feel a bit of open space. When I went out with Esther we never experienced any racism. We were never stopped from going into places because Esther was black. Now and again people stared at US but that mostly happened outside London in places where they hadn't seen a black person.

Gran and Esther. Every week Gran went with her friends to the Congregational Church. They were given a cup of tea, a biscuit and a congregational hymn book. They had a natter and sang a few hymns. Sometimes Gran brought the hymn book home so that she could learn a new hymn for the next visit. When Esther and I came home from work Esther said: "What hymns have you learnt today, Gran?" She said: "This one. Jesus Bids Us Shine. It's lovely." Then she would sing it for us and Esther would join in. Sometimes when I went to bed at night could hear Gran and Esther in their room at the top of the house singing hymns like Count Your Blessings. In the summer Esther went on outings with Gran and the other old women from the church. We called them Gran's "Little Army." Mostly they went to Southend because it wasn't a long journey for them. Esther said the outings to the seaside were hilarious. They had a sense of fun and knew how to enjoy themselves. Esther was much younger than Gran and the other women but she enjoyed herself. Gran and Esther got on well together, and they were together for a long time. Gran was like a mother to Esther. In 1952 my mother remarried and settled in Peckham on the other side of London. She wanted me to go and live with her but Gran didn't want me to go. She hadn't been all that well. She had fallen at a bus stop in North End Road and it frightened her. She didn't want to leave the house. So I said to Esther: "I won't leave her. Tell her I am not going to leave her," but Gran began to fade. Esther took time off work to look after her but Gran didn't

want to get out of bed. This upset Esther. She did as much as she could for Gran, staying with her all day and night. She didn't go to work and it was a bit worrying because she could have lost her job. Gran passed away on 7 November 1952 aged seventy-five.

Changes. After Gran passed away the family got together for a conference. I had promised my mother I would join her in Peckham, but Esther said: "I'm staying put." So Esther stayed in the home she shared with Gran. I had been working as a window dresser for British Home Stores and they agreed to transfer me from Fulham to their branch in Peckham. I married Arthur Bourne in 1954 and we had two children, Linda and Stephen. Now and again took the children to Fulham to see Esther and other members of the family. Then heard Fulham Council were going to demolish Dieppe Street and build a new housing estate on the site. Dieppe Street was pulled down at the beginning of the 1960s. It's called Gibbs Green now. I felt sad because I didn't want to visit Fulham and find Dieppe Street gone. It was hard for Esther. She moved into a council Flat in Fulham Court. We all ended up in them. But Esther never got used to the isolation. She missed the feeling of belonging to a community.

AFTERWORD

by Stephen Bourne

The first edition of Aunt Esther's Story was launched at the Centre 181 Gallery in Hammersmith on 14 October 1991 and, afterwards, Aunt Esther became something of a local celebrity. Hammersmith and Fulham's Mayor, Joan Caruana, attended the book launch, and a photograph of the two women appeared on the cover of their local newspaper, the Fulham Chronicle. Unaware of this, Aunt Esther was sitting in her local laundrette when an elderly woman approached her. "Aren't you good," she said. Esther looked at her suspiciously: 'Who are you? What are you after?' she asked. The woman said: "I saw your picture in the paper." Esther said: "Why? What have I done?" The woman replied: "Don't you know? You're on the front page of the Fulham Chronicle. You're famous!" A few weeks later the Mayor arranged an outing for Aunt Esther, a guided tour of Fulham Palace. She was taken in the Mayor's chauffeur-driven car from her home in Wandsworth Bridge Road to the Palace, but afterwards, on the way home, Aunt Esther found herself stuck in a traffic jam. Not one to mess about, as the car approached Fulham Broadway, Aunt Esther told the Mayor's chauffeur to stop. "Let me out," she said. "I've had enough. I'll get the bus home from here. I've got my bus pass. It'll be quicker!"

More media attention followed. The feminist magazine Spare Rib photographed Aunt Esther for their cover, and enthusiastic reviews appeared in, amongst others, Family Tree Magazine, Gay Times; The Voice; Everywoman and City limits. We also appeared on BBC radio's Caribbean Magazine, broadcast on the World Service. Aunt Esther and I were excited when we heard that our book had been shortlisted for the Arts Council of Great Britain's Raymond Williams Prize for Community Publishing. Sadly, ill-health prevented Aunt Esther from attending the awards ceremony at the London Welsh Centre on 14 July 1992. I attended with Sav Kyriacou from the Ethnic Communities Oral History Project, and my mother, Kathy. I was thrilled when we were awarded the runner-up prize, and this was presented to me by The Lord Morris of Castle Morris. Aunt Esther was very impressed when I described the event to her. From 1992-94 an exhibition of photographs from Aunt Esther's Story toured all over London and, among the many venues which displayed the photographs were Southwark Libraries, the Black Cultural Archives in Brixton and The Museum of London in their splendid 1994 Peopling of London event.

Aunt Esther's cousin Leon passed away on 30 January 1994. He was eighty-five. We attended his funeral but a few weeks later Aunt Esther suffered a heart attack. During her stay in hospital the African women who cleaned the wards or pushed the tea trolleys made a big fuss of her, and braided her hair. Aunt Esther loved that. When they called me her "son" and made a fuss of me, she laughed. On our final afternoon together, took her for one last ride in her wheelchair. We visited the little Chapel which was situated inside the hospital. Aunt Esther looked up at the beautiful stained glass window in front of us and said: "Thank you, God, for bringing my Stevie to me." I choked back tears as I found a place for her in the aisle, and I sat down next to her on a bench. I held her hand. At the end of my visit that afternoon broke a flower from a bunch in a vase on the window sill, and gave it to her. As I combed her hair for the last time, she looked up at me. "When are you coming back?" she asked. "Soon," I replied. "Make sure you do," she said. As I left the ward I turned and waved to her. I always did that. She smiled and waved back. I knew I

wouldn't see her again. Aunt Esther passed away in her sleep on Sunday morning, 17 July 1994. She was eighty-one. At her funeral Mum and Isang Jesus Bids Us Shine" with the congregation, and wept. This was one of the hymns Aunt Esther enjoyed singing with Granny Johnson. A few weeks later | accompanied my mother to Fulham Cemetery, and we scattered Aunt Esther's ashes under a tree on the site of her parent's Unmarked grave. Granny Johnson rests nearby.

Jesus bids us shine with a pure clear light,
Like a little candle burning in the night.
In the world is darkness; so we must shine -
You in your small corner, and I in mine.

Jesus bids us shine first of all for Him;
Well He sees and knows it if our light grows dim.
He looks down from heav'n to see us shine -
You in your small corner, and I in mine.

Susan Warner (1819-1885)