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Since 1618

**HAMMERSMITH
UNITED
CHARITIES**

The Motherland calls

Ethnic Communities Oral History Project

Supporting the community since 1618

“If English is not your first and most fluent language, how do you share your life experiences with others, not familiar with yours... ‘ordinary people’s life histories deserve as wide a readership as possible.’”

Sav Kyriacou

Former project coordinator
The Ethnic Communities Oral History Project

Introduction

In the late 80s/early 90s, the Hammersmith and Fulham Ethnic Communities Oral History Project published a set of 12 memoirs chronicling the collective experiences of the communities that make up our very diverse borough through the specific stories of individual members of them.

“After nourishment, shelter and companionship, stories are the thing we need most in the world.”

Philip Pullman

Nearly a quarter of a century later, as part of our marking 400 years of bringing this community together, Hammersmith United Charities is republishing these stories. We will publish one a month, each launched at a special lunch held in a venue which also reflects the community in question. We can think of no better way of celebrating the depth and richness of the heritage of our Area of Benefit nor of showcasing the range of talents and experiences from which it benefits than through the republication of these stories.

“He who is different from meenriches me. Our unity is constituted in something higher than ourselves - in Man... For no man seeks to hear his own echo, or to find his reflection in the glass.”

(Antoine de Saint-Exupéry)

This is the full list of publications, we hope you enjoy them as much as we have.

1. The Irish in Exile - Stories of Emigration
2. Passport to Exile - The Polish Way to London
3. In Exile - Iranian Recollections
4. The Motherland Calls - African-Caribbean Experiences
5. The Forgotten Lives - Gypsies and Travellers on the Westway Site
6. Xenia - Greek-Cypriots in London
7. Ship of Hope - The Basque Children
8. Aunt Esther’s Story (with Stephen Bourne)
9. Somali Sailors
10. Asian Voices - Life Stories from the Indian Sub-continent
11. Sailing on Two Boats - Second Generation Perspectives
12. Such a Long Story! - Chinese Voices in Britain

The Motherland calls

Introduction

Our experiences as African Caribbean people who have settled in Britain are as varied as the different villages, towns and islands we have left behind. Yet there can be no denying that we also share a common identity which has marked us down for common treatment at the hands of the racists of Britain.

This collection of extracts from the lives of seven of our own are testaments to the great strength of character which has given us the will and determination to rise above the ugliness of racism - and to survive!

Brought up to regard and respect Britain as our 'Mother', we arrived to find that this 'Mother' did not even recognise us as her own: she could not provide us with adequate housing; refused us jobs; failed to allow us safe passage on her roads, access to her clubs and pubs and generally abandoned us to the tender mercies of the racist who crowded about her breast.

Little wonder then that we had to fall back on our own resources. We stood and fought the racists: we fought for our jobs, our homes, our children's education. We stood firm for our right to share in the common decencies of human society.

In their own way, in their own words, the women and men who have contributed to this book share with us their part in our struggle. This struggle has brought them the joys of simple, human friendships and the satisfaction of forging lasting links across the racial divide. These achievements are our achievements.

Christopher Woodley
Community Librarian
Hammersmith & Fulham Library Services

Connie Mark

Connie mark was born in Jamaica. She joined the British Army there during the Second World War and she was awarded the War Medal for her services in the ATS, WRAC and QARANC. In 1954 she came to England to join her husband who was here as a professional cricketer. She worked for many years as a medical secretary before retiring. "I was born British, educated British, did my ten years in the British Army, worked over 25 years in Great Britain and paid income tax all that time as well as a graduated pension, but now I am living off £5.54 per week pension."

When war was declared and more personnel were needed for the front, you had English officers who came to Jamaica. I can remember, as young as I was, it was 19 years plus, they would go into all the little corners of Jamaica and they would beg, literally beg you to come and fight for England because you see we were brought up that England was our mother country and obviously when your mother has problems you've got to come and help her. So we all felt obliged to come and everybody was very happy to come. Most of the men that came to England came from the country parts, Kingston is the capital of Jamaica and most of them had never even come to Kingston until they were going to the war. I have actually had the opportunity of going on the troop ships. The ships were so crowded there were four to a bunk and I wondered how some of these men who had never travelled on a boat before survived in such cramped conditions. It was like pushing animals because they really had the ships all cramped to make sure they get as many as they could to fight for England.

Well, I have found that a lot of people are not really aware of how involved we were in the war, in Jamaica. For instance, I went in the army, I volunteered myself as a medical secretary and I was secretary to the Assistant Director of Medical Services. When you are in the army, you may or may not know, you are on 24 hours duty. You know nothing about off duty, so I used to have my uniform hung up all the while. My mother died so I lived with my aunt and anywhere I was going my aunt had to know where I was because if a troop ship was coming in at 2am in the morning then the Military Police would come to my home, knock on the door and in five minutes flat I had to be dressed to go out. If I wasn't there my aunt would have to say she's gone to a night club here and there, the Military Police would come to get me wherever I am and I had to be down at that troop ship.

And that's really when the reality of war came home to me because you saw men leaving hale and hearty and you see them coming back on stretchers, you see them coming back in wheelchairs, some blind.

On one of my trips to meet the troopship with the returning personnel from the war zones, I remember a very amusing incident. A Corporal, who eventually became my very good friend, came up to me and said "Please do not feel insulted, but do you think I could feel the skin on your arm?". I was very surprised but anyway I told him he could. Then I said to him "Why on earth do you want to feel the texture of my skin?". He said to me that he had never met a coloured person before, and he wondered if the texture of my skin was the same as his. He told me some time afterwards that he expected it to be harder as my skin was not white, as his was. It remained a standing joke between us.

As far as the army is concerned the Queen owes me eight years of tuppence a day. That may not sound a lot to you now, but in those days it added up. I was a Lance Corporal and then I was made into a Corporal and when you are a Corporal in the British Army you get more pay, but because I was Jamaican and because I was not white I was denied that tuppence a day for eight years. So I have had my little prejudices thrown at me.

I get very annoyed that people don't want to accept and remain ignorant of the fact of how very much the West Indies were involved in the war, in the last war, and how very much we were brought up to love the King, love the Queen, to love England and to respect England and then when you come here what do you see, you see a sign saying "No Blacks, no Irish, no dogs, no children". That hurt, that really used to hurt but like most things in life, what could you do.

Now when I came here, my husband lived in a house with four other men. I came here with a daughter three months old and I just got married to my husband 18 months before that and his daughter was born while he was in England. Obviously he would like to see his child. My husband didn't come here as an immigrant, he came here as a Professional Cricketer, and he came here on a contract to Seaham Harbour, Durham. So when I came here I did not come here to live, I did not come here to better myself, I just came here because I just got married and I had this young baby and my husband want to see his child and because he was on a year's contract, I literally came to spend one year but not to live, because I didn't bring anything with me. I left all my stuff, everything in Jamaica because I was going back to my house, back to my family. Obviously we had to move because this was sort of a bachelor's house.

It was in Dunraven Road in Shepherds Bush and we got offered this room in Coningham Road and we didn't take the room because the house had no bath and the landlord said to us "Are you mad? Do you realise you are lucky to get a room, especially with a child. You don't refuse rooms here because it has no bath!" So we thought it was a normal thing that you could rent a room with a baby and a bath. Having said that we got another room in Chelsea, that was in Lots Road and that was a little tiny room and we could only bathe once a week and that was on a Thursday and the bath was in the landlord's kitchen, otherwise we went to the public baths. Those were the days Black people just did not get council houses. If you go to the council, town hall, and put your name down, the first thing they would say to you is "What are you wasting your time for, don't you know they don't give Black people flats?" The only people you see with flats is the ex-servicemen and most of them had white wives anyway. In those days it was considered literally a disgrace to be in a council flat - not like now, council flats are the in thing.

When I came here if you had a house and the landlord didn't like you, when you come home Friday evening you find your things outside on the steps, so I hope people realise as bad as they think they are now, in a way they are much better off than we were when we came here in the fifties.

On one occasion I saw a room advertised on the board and I went and I was told "Oh no it's gone", you know, and then I went around the corner and I did something on purpose, to prove it to myself. I had a friend of mine who was white and she went and she was told that she could have the room. So I went back and I said to the woman "Isn't it funny how you told me that you didn't have a room and yet my friend just came and you offered her the room."

There's another incident I had where this woman in Maida Vale was advertising rooms for hospital staff, I wanted somewhere to live so I rang her and I said "I just saw on the notice board that you have rooms." She said "Oh yes! Would you like to come and see them? I know Professor McMenemy very well and I've had one of his secretaries live with me for a while." And she says "There's only one thing I have to tell you dear, don't send any coloured people." I said "Madam, you're speaking to one now!" Anyhow I told my boss and he told the hospital secretary, and that woman's name was taken off the list and she was never allowed to rent another room to anybody from that hospital because they were very annoyed and I suppose embarrassed of the fact. But I suppose I didn't sound Black according to her, so afterwards when they rang her about it she was most apologetic and she wrote a letter to me but of course the harm had already been done, that letter was just wasted.

Oh! You never get used to things like that, how could you, half the time you say to yourself "My God! What have I come to". If I were living in my country or my island I wouldn't be living like this. I tell you if people were coming from Jamaica I used to tell them not to give my home address, I was so embarrassed, I didn't want anyone to come and see the way I was living and then I realised, why should I be embarrassed? Everybody else is living the same way that I do. I mean I've got a cousin, she came to see me and she actually saw me going down and cleaning and she cried and she said "You're not accustomed to this, when you were in Jamaica I was the one that used to do the cleaning, not you." My cousin was very upset when she saw the conditions under which I was living, especially when she saw me stuck in a room with a husband and two children and I said that was the norm.

So we had it very hard, very difficult and even if you had the ambition to live in two rooms you couldn't afford it, and that's why after a time I went back to Jamaica with my two children because I wasn't accustomed to live like that. I wasn't brought up like that in Jamaica, I just couldn't take it. My nerves had gone, practically wrecked, I had to run to Jamaica for my life. Well anyway my daughter couldn't settle in Jamaica so I came back, and that is why until this day my son who was born in England is in Jamaica and I'm here because I had to leave him in Jamaica until I come back to England and sort myself out.

It was the thing to visit each other at weekends or on a Sunday and one thing I can always remember, we didn't have fridges, you couldn't have a fridge because if you lived in one room and dared to even have a radio your landlord was so terrible they would charge you extra rent and tell you how much more electricity that radio burnt. I am ashamed to say my landlords were all Black. Whenever we were having people for dinner we always set our jelly on the window outside. I think about it now and squirm and think about all those germs that must be getting inside of us but everybody did it. When anybody came to dinner as soon as you finished eating, up the window would go and in the jelly would come from the sill.

I've been here since 1954 and during the Notting Hill riots in 1958 I lived in Shirland Road in North Kensington. My husband was so scared as soon as he came in from work, in the bed, nobody would get him out. But we were very unhappy living in this house, we all lived in one room, we couldn't afford two and I had heard about another room in West Kensington. So I went out to use the phone to find out about this other room. I was so shocked the next morning when I passed that same phone box, the Teddy Boys had thrown stones in it and the windows were in splinters. I found out later that I missed it by maybe ten or fifteen minutes. People were afraid to go out into the street, they were very afraid. These were youngsters that were causing the trouble.

The Teddy Boys, you know they wear tight pants and the Brylcreem all over their hair and walking around with their big boots, they were Teddy Boys. Not the old people. The old people had their prejudices, the old people still have their prejudices but it was the younger people, the Teddy Boys, that were the violent ones.

There were riots on, our lives were in danger, they were getting at us and we had to be very careful. Then you had the younger boys, they really used to fight back, and it was from those days we really got the impression of how prejudiced the police were, because the Teddy Boys would attack the Black boys and then they would go back at them, and the police would keep blaming the Black boys when we know that they weren't the attacker, they were the attacked. Then the Black boys, more or less, went into groups, they made sure that they didn't walk alone, it was dangerous to walk alone. Of course they walked in gangs, wouldn't you? Either you do that or you lock yourself up like a hermit in a house. They were afraid to go to the cinema, afraid to go to the clubs but they said damn it I'm not going to let these people keep me from having fun! They used to go out in crowds so if the Teddy Boys attacked them then they would fight back.

I suppose I'm basically not a coward so I went out but a lot of Black people just did not go out, they were so scared. I have this philosophy that I walk with God and if I get killed, I get killed and that's it, but don't take me as typical.

Clifford Fullerton

Clifford Fullerton came to Britain from Jamaica in June 1948 on board the HMS Empire Windrush. He studied at the Tailor and Cutter and opened his own tailoring business with his wife in North Kensington, which they run to this day. "The Blues Club" was started in their basement before moving to All Saints Road and eventually becoming the Mangrove. In 1952, Clifford became the first Black Master Tailor when he was accepted by the City of London Master and Foreman Tailoring Society. During 1961-62 he studied at the London College of Music.

I came to London on 21st June 1948 on the Windrush. I came because I wanted to gain more knowledge towards the making of clothes. As a matter of fact I wanted to get down to the fundamentals of drafting. As I said to you, when I used to work on The Lady Summers, a Canadian national steamship, I used to notice the English, men especially, when they dress for dinner. I blew the call and they all went to dress in their cabins, when they came back they assembled on the promenade deck. After some experience I was able to spot an Englishman, there was always a big difference between them and the Americans. So I thought I would like to go to England to learn the art of drapery. Their suits were well styled and the drapery that was used in those suits, I admired very much. Also it was always the desire of everybody who played a brass instrument to be able to go to Kneller Hall. Unfortunately when I came here I was told that Kneller Hall was only for the army students so I had to try and go to some other institution where I could learn to develop more techniques on the trumpet. I also went to the London College of Music and studied the string bass because I used to play a little string bass in Jamaica. Dr Lloyd Webber was the Principal Director there, the father of those boys. I guess it was a privilege for any master to teach his boys.

First of all when I came over in 1948 I had to find somewhere to live. We arrived in June and we didn't have anywhere to go, we were put up in a deep shelter in Clapham, they were old air raid shelters from wartime. Most of the fellows who came with us were fellows who had been here during the war and they had made friends with girls. So when they came they thought they would be able to go back to those places. During the war the girls' boyfriends or husbands were away, but these fellows thought they could go back to the same life, but when they came they had a shock.

When we were travelling on the ship it was those fellows who were saying "I know where I'm going to, I have a nice home to go to. I wouldn't go to England if I didn't know where I was going." So we looked at them and we said "Oh, we wish we were like you." So we went to the deep shelter and we were making ourselves quite cosy while these fellows had taken off to go to their respective homes. But when we were having our supper in the deep shelter the same fellows who had those beautiful homes to go to were coming down with sad faces.

The shelters were run by the London Borough of Lambeth and they gave us the food. Those of us who had money paid 2/6 for a meal, if you hadn't any money you were given it free. There were about 250 of us in the shelters. You had your little grip just beside you and you had a little cot and a blanket. Imagine when you had to go up. There was a lift to take you up from the deep shelter, you go out for two or three hours, anything could have happened to your grip, it could have been stolen, ransacked, anything like that. You had to take a chance, if you came back and found your grip you were quite lucky. I was there for four weeks and every day we had to go up and go around the area and see if we could find any jobs. We went to a jobcentre, where they would try to find a job for you, and one man asked me "What work do you do?" I said "I'm a tailor". He said "We haven't got any jobs for tailors right now, would you mind working in a mine?" I said "Oh, no sir." I was anxious to get something to do, I'd do anything rather than steal. I would work anywhere. Fortunately the Salvation Army sent to the shelter to find out if there were any tailors there, so four of us got a job at the Salvation Army making uniforms. That was in Judd Street in Kings Cross.

We were shown by one of the staff what to do and when we each took up our respective garment and started to work on the machine they watched us carefully. I was given an officer's tunic to make and when I had put on the pocket the man in charge took it from me and walked around the workroom and showed it to them. It was a surprise to me, it was as if to say "Look what the Black man can do." Anyway we got on with them quite all right, we were very grateful to them for giving us a start. I went to the Tailor and Cutter after I applied for a job to cut and the man said he can't trust the people from the West Indies to cut English clothes, so I said I would go to the Tailor and Cutter. So I got myself enrolled at the Tailor and Cutter. They were quite suspicious of me, anyway they took my name and I went back the next week to start. The instructor gave us theory first and then put everyone to their respective table to draft. The week before, when we were enrolled, some Jewish boys were looking at me and saying "What he come here for?" So when we started the week after I finished my draft in about 15 minutes, so I stood up with my back against the wall.

When the instructor saw me he came towards me with a look as if to say "I knew you would be wasting our time." But when he looked at the draft he was shocked, he couldn't believe his eyes so he told me to do another one. I finished that and he told me "There is no more to teach you tonight, you can go home now." So all those that were shrugging their shoulders before, I went up and tapped them on the back, and said "goodnight." I had prior knowledge of most of the points so it was quite easy for me. I remained there for two years, I had to work in the days and finish at five o'clock and jump on the bus to Gerrard Street. I had a lovely time there and the instructor saw that I was very interested in learning more.

My wife joined me one year after I came here, we were married a long time. We had one son in Jamaica, he came with her, he was only two when he came. I lived in West Cromwell Road at the time. You weren't able to get a room on your own, sometimes there were six people in a room. You were lucky to get a room for two of you. About a month before my wife came I got a room in Penywern Road but I hadn't given up my one in West Cromwell Road. The man in Penywern Road said if I didn't sleep in this room he would have to take it away from me. But my rent wasn't finished so I had to sleep over there one night and in the other room the next, just to keep it. It was a big struggle, we had a very rough time but we were determined to fight because I was trying to learn as much as I can and pay my rent. I was getting five pounds and you had to pay three pounds fifteen in rent and one pound for school fees. When I told the people at the Salvation Army what I was paying they said that was very exorbitant.

My wife didn't go straight to the Tailor and Cutter. When my wife came here she used to do some work for somebody, tidying beds and things like that. She couldn't afford to pay and I couldn't afford to pay because I could hardly manage myself. So it wasn't until we worked and saved a little, then we were able to get a place of our own. That was in a little street by the name of Elcom Street in the Westbourne Park area. That was very near the canal and my wife was afraid our little boy might just try to fling himself down, a lot of little ones got drowned there, so we bought a little place in Kensal Rise. When we settled down there, then my wife was able to go to the Tailor and Cutter. She worked very hard, her mother had given her some preliminary training when she was young so it wasn't very difficult for her. She's a born needlewoman.

We were strongly advised not to come to this area. When we were in Earls Court Road they told us we shouldn't come to this area, it was so awful. To my surprise after settling down in Kensal Rise, when I look back it was quite nice, I don't think it was any worse than Earls Court. Only of late it get very bad.

Black people had nowhere to go to amuse themselves, if they go to the West End they reject them, they don't want them. So I used to do a big business here with the tailoring and they used to complain to me that they had nowhere to go. They said to me "You have a big place here, why don't you help us?" So I considered it, I'd been used to playing in different places, especially in my country, Jamaica, but I was afraid of disturbance. My business was getting on all right and everybody respect me so I didn't want anything to disturb it. So after a time with them pressing and pressing, I gave in. So I started a blues club, this was in 1957, but it wasn't really me who wanted to do it, two other fellows decide to manage it, to run it themselves, so I eventually gave in. It was going all right and then all of a sudden the bad elements started to creep in. They only had a drinking licence until 11pm but they kept on selling drink after eleven and the music and the girls running up and down, creating a nuisance, you know. I warned them about it. The police knew everything, they had people who told them everything about the club. The Inspector came to me and asked me what is going on down there, he knew already but he asked me as a formality. He wanted to look downstairs, we went downstairs and what he saw was a mess. He said to me "Well Mr Fullerton, you are doing a good job upstairs so you get rid of these fellows." So we had to close it, it was sad but I had to do something. These police when they give you advice, if you don't take it you are in for trouble. I came here to behave myself and learn what I can, I did not come here to break no law. The neighbours didn't like it. They would even phone me in Kensal Rise some nights, I would have to race down in my car and quieten it down, as soon as I went back it start again. I had some tenants upstairs and I wondered how these people lived with it. The place was rocking. The neighbours were very glad when I stopped it in the end, it was too much.

In the '50s most people used to have their suits hand made by me, they used to be well dressed. It was mostly West Indians but at that time we used to do a lot of the Teddy Boy suits, that's when they used to be well dressed. We had brought a lot of our styles which I incorporated in what I had learnt. When you incorporate West Indian and English styles you get a master suit.

On the 10th June 1952 I received an invitation to attend a reception to be held the following week at the Criterion Hotel in Piccadilly. I accepted the invitation sent by the President of the City of London Master and Foreman Tailoring Society. On the evening of the reception, my wife and I dressed ourselves and attended the reception. When the reception was in full swing the Master of Ceremonies came over to our table and told me that the President was about to make an announcement in my favour. I was surprised because I was not expecting anything like that.

After about five or six minutes the Master of Ceremonies gave three knocks on his table and said "Pray silence ladies and gentlemen, the President will now make a toast." The President got up and told everyone "Please charge your glasses". Everyone did so. He went on "ladies and gentlemen, let us drink to the honour of Mr Clifford Fullerton who has been accepted and made a member of the City of London Master and Foreman Tailoring Society, thereby becoming the first Black man to be made an associate member of the Society." The hall nearly fell down from the claps and cheers.

I'm very glad that I came to England because I have learnt so much, my trade, the music, the ways of people. I think we'll go back to Jamaica, we love Jamaica very much. I don't think there is anywhere like your own home. There are some things that are good here but if you try and save a bit and you go back you'll have a nice time. Then you are able to impart some of the things you have learnt to your friends. I look forward to it. When I went back in 1982 for a vacation, every tailors shop I went to they asked me so many questions.

I was born in Kingston but we would like to buy a home in the country. If we go back now we don't want to live in Kingston again. Kingston is different now from when we left it, it's not so quiet. My wife would go back today, she wasn't really interested in coming, it was just because I was here. She has a lovely home in the country part, she is dying to go back. I could have gone to America, or I could have gone to Canada, but there is something about England that all the West Indians like to come here. If they don't come here they don't feel like they have been anywhere. America is only for the money, they go there to get a few more dollars, but educationally they always look to this place as the mother country.

Thomas Joseph

Thomas Joseph, prior to coming to the United Kingdom, was heavily involved with Trade Unions in Guyana. He came to Britain in 1965 and immediately found himself drowned in Trade Unionism once again. He is involved in many organisations catering for blind and other disabled persons. He started writing poetry immediately after his rehabilitation for blindness in 1979. He was also active in the struggle to keep Guyana free from Venezuelan invasion in the '80s.

My name is Thomas Joseph, I was born on the 9th of December 1919 on the Essequibo Coast of Guyana, South America. My mother died when I was three months old, my father when I was nine, leaving a brother and a sister, Henry and Estelle. I grew up with my grandmother until I was six years old, then went to live with my uncle who was married but had no children. About two years after, two girls were born to my uncle, the Corporal. He died when I was eleven years old and I was compelled to leave school at that age to seek employment to maintain the family. My school was very, very strict. My headmaster was very strict, discipline was at the highest. School commences at 8.30 in the morning and five minutes after 8.30 you arrive late you are made to stand outside while the roll is called to ascertain whether all the children in the register are present. You were made to stand outside, after the roll is finished calling then you are allowed to go in and you have to give a reason why you are late; if not the cane, the leather or the strap will get it out of you. We had a schoolmaster who used to say to the children "Your parents have sent you here to learn, if you can't take it then I'll burst your brain and put it in." That's how it was.

We had a large variety of subjects: grammar, arithmetic, geography, nature study. We played cricket, marble, pitching marble, litties, gutchie, hopscotch, hide and seek, rounders. I used to be a fast bowler, I couldn't bat at all. I was a good outfielder and fast bowler but I couldn't bat.

At leisure a gang of us used to go hunting and whatever we bag, if it is a moonlit night, we have a big cook up. All the boys gather round, some bring the rice, some bring whatever is needed and we sit around in the moonlight, playing guitars and singing and eating and drinking.

When the Second World War broke out the British recruited from Guyana, and after hearing this I felt this could be a good opportunity to go overseas and be trained because I desperately wanted to study Industrial Law and Injuries

Insurance, to become a lawyer in short. I arrived in the city to report to the Evely Barracks which was the main barracks for recruitment. But somehow or other somebody grassed on me, one of my fellow workmates at the time. They told my parents that I intended to join the army. When I arrived in the city, there they were, my foster-mother and her brother to meet me and they said "No way are you going there" and they imprisoned me, I could not have left the house to go anywhere. They were afraid that if I had left the house I would have gone straight to the barracks.

My second attempt at coming over was when they were recruiting for the RAF ground staff. I got an application form which required somebody of position to sign the form as a recommendation. They stated a priest, magistrate or a judge, police inspector and so on. At the time I knew none of these people personally. So I filled out the form and I carried it in on the day of selection. They said that I hadn't got a signature and I said I didn't know anyone of that category who could have signed it. They directed me to a police station with a note to a Sergeant there. I went in to the police station and the Sergeant signed the application but by the time I had reached back to the recruiting centre they were finished recruiting. They said "The next batch". The next batch has not yet come. [Laughs]

I worked as a sheet metal worker until 1965, when I decided to join my family in the United Kingdom who came here in 1961 and '62 respectively, my wife in '61, my daughter in '62. I came and joined them here. When I came to Britain I flew from Georgetown Atkinson airport to Gatwick. My first impression was that it was too damn cold. If it was possible I would have turned back immediately. My wife was here before me and she laid the foundations, she prepared for me before I arrived here. So I had no problem with accommodation. She was here 4 years ahead of me. My main intention when I came over here was to study Industrial Law and Injuries Insurance, thinking I could have got through the back door easily, I had no school certificate leaving school at that early age. Anyway, six weeks after arriving in London, I found my first employment with Handley Page, the aircraft manufacturers in Cricklewood making heating radiators. Then I was given a three years course at London University to read Industrial Relations but at the completion of the first year I enquired from my tutor what kind of certificate I would get. He said none, only a recommendation and if I want to further my studies I would have to do it on my own with no certificate to back me or anything and that would have cost me a lot of money. Having come here in such a short space of time I hadn't the backing so I decided to call it quits. I left Handley Page and worked with Lampson and Paragan in Colindale, a packaging firm making paper bags. I was dismissed from there because of my trade union activities because I was trying to organise a branch there of the Transport and General Workers Union.

This was brought to the notice of management and I was given my marching orders. After that I found employment with British Rail as a freight guard, stationed in Brent. I left there because of an incident which occurred there one night. When the passenger guards are short, British Rail usually take the freight guards and have them guard the passenger trains. I was asked one night to take a train from Kings Cross to Luton. We were dispatched ahead of an express train, we were supposed to be travelling on the fast lane and change over from fast to slow at Elstree. After we passed Elstree Station, before the signal box, the train broke down in the fast lane. Snow was falling heavily. The regulation was that the guard of the train has to run back so many yards laying detonators as he goes, so when the oncoming train rolls over the detonators they explode and warn him that there is an obstacle ahead. The driver told me "you run ahead to Luton", we weren't far from Luton, "you run ahead and I'll go back laying the detonators." I had my danger lamp red, running, slipping, sliding and falling in the snow, getting up, running on. It's a good thing that Luton having seen the train not arrive on schedule rang up Elstree who told them the train had left a long time ago and should have arrived by now. They sent up a light engine, an engine without cars behind it, and as the driver saw me with the red light flashing he hooted and pulled up. No sooner had we got the broken down train off the fast lane, when the express whizzed pass. I said "Uh, uh! This is too much responsibility." If that express had run into that stationary train many lives would have been lost so I decided it was too much of a dangerous job for me.

I left there and joined the Metal Box Company in Acton. After three months I was elected a shop steward. There I was encouraged by my district officer to pursue my course in Industrial Law and Injuries Insurance through correspondence from Scotland which I did and completed two courses together in eighteen months. Because of this success within such a short period (it would have taken most students three years to complete the two) I was recommended for a scholarship to Ruskin College. While they were considering my application, that very year - 1974 - I went completely blind, but an operation soon after restored a little sight in one eye. I considered I would have to do quite a lot of research, reading and the limited sight I had would not have permitted me to do that, so I had to forgo it. I was sent to the rehabilitation centre in Manor House, Torquay, South Devon, where I spent twelve weeks. While I was there I was taught basketry, woodwork, typing, light engineering etc. Well the typing came very useful to me because I began to write poems and using a tape recorder when the idea comes to me at night in bed, I record it and the next morning I type it on the typewriter.

In work I had a few discriminations against me. The first was when I applied to the labour exchange and registered as a sheet metal worker. About two days

before vacancies appeared in the newspaper for metal workers in a certain firm in Holborn. When I went to the labour exchange they gave me a card to go to this job. I went and the security guard at the gate took the card from me and he read it and immediately handed the card back to me saying that the vacancies were filled. So I went back to the labour exchange and the man couldn't understand it and he said "I wonder why?". I said "Don't ask me why, I know why!" Anyway I left him and I found that job at British Rail.

In 1969 I found a job with a firm in Tottenham, they used to make neon signs. I started work there at 8.00 in the morning, by lunch time the manager called me and said he could not retain me because my work was unsatisfactory. I said "You tested me before you took me on and you found me satisfactory, then how come now you have found my work unsatisfactory?". He said things change and I told him I didn't accept his explanation. He said "Have no fear, I'm going to pay you for the entire day." I said "That is not the point, the point is I want you to come clean, why are you giving me the marching orders after being satisfied by my test prior to employing me?". I said goodbye but my intention was to go to the labour exchange and report this but as I was going out he called me back and he say "Mr Joseph, one word." I went back and he said "I'll tell you the truth, it was not my doing" he said, "those men you see there they have been with me, some for fifteen, some for twenty years and they told me in no uncertain terms that if you are kept on in employment here they are going to quit. In other words they have pulled me over the barrel for employing a Black man." It was as clear as that. If I had the knowledge I gained after studying Industrial Law I would have him up the chute. But at that time I was ignorant of the laws, so he escaped.

I cannot say that I have faced any other major racial prejudices because I have been the senior shop steward for the Metal Box Company for seven consecutive years and we had all nationalities working there. So if there was any racial prejudices the white people that were there would have objected to me being in such a position because I had my own office on the company's premises.

Along with thousands of others we are still being discriminated against, and I include myself, because of our disabilities. Disabled people presently are being discriminated against. There are positions which talented disabled people can fill but because of their disability they find some incompetent able-bodied ones to fill. Those which cannot do as much, because I can assure you there are disabled people out there in the community that can do as well if not better than those who are holding positions. This is where I believe I am still suffering discrimination, because of my disability.

Albertha Blackman-Thomas

Albertha Blackman-Thomas was born in British Guiana. After doing some teaching she became a nurse. She then opened her own school and became the founder president of the British Guiana Kindergarten Teachers Association. She came to London in 1961 after her second husband died. She retired in 1975 as a social worker with the London Borough of Tower Hamlets.

My husband died in 1960, the 14th July 1960 and I had a school, a nursery. My only son, he being in London he thought it best that I should come over for a holiday with the grandchildren whom I'd never met before, and they were eight and six years respectively, the boy eight years old and the girl six. And so after long consideration, a year or something, I decided well I'd take a holiday in London for six months and then return back because I loved working with my school and I loved being the mistress of my own self, I didn't want to have anybody to dictate to me what to do or what not to do. The Teachers Association, when I told them that I was leaving, they were very sad because I worked untiringly for them.

Well it was a crisis the day I left for England. As we left we landed in New York, it was one of the coldest winters ever and we had a long stay, about three or four hours at New York airport before we got the clearance to come to London. Well I was lucky because I had bought a coat from a person who'd lived in London before leaving. I was with my coat as I got to New York and it was so cold I wore my coat but there were many others who had no coats and they were shivering. But as we left, while in the air we learnt from the pilot there was no accommodation in London at any of the airports for us to land, neither Heathrow, Gatwick nor Luton and perhaps we will be bound for Manchester. So in the air not knowing where I am going to be landed, of course I'm not speaking for myself alone, everyone was a bit shaky at the time. As we left for Manchester the pilot again broadcast in the plane "We're not landing at Manchester because that airport too is covered with snow, we might land in Scotland". There was one woman sitting next to me, she started to weep bitterly, I was a bit shaken but I think I had a little more faith than her, I had to comfort her and tell her "We are all in it, and let us pray that God land us safely at Manchester." I think it was eight to twelve hours we were up there from New York because the time varies but at the end we landed at Manchester Airport at 2pm in the afternoon from leaving New York early that morning.

Well when we landed everybody was happy, I was happy, I was glad but I was more excited with the white snow. I saw snow in our Royal Reader books when we read about it and saw it in pictures but you never see it in person. Well the first time I'm seeing snow, I never expected it to be so white and falling so heavily on the ground. Well the men and women who were at the airport were very, very nice to us and they sympathised with us in coming to one of the worst winters they were experiencing, the last day of December 1961. At 6pm the coaches came to take us away and we all took our baggages, they were packed in the coaches and we travelled down to London.

It was a never-to-be-forgotten scene for me because I had never before in my life seen this scenery, and I looked as I travelled all the way in amazement. We had to go to a grill and before that we saw plough shares clearing the way and the snow piling both sides of the road we were going, high and white, and it was indeed a marvellous sight to me. I was cold but not so cold I could not enjoy that scenery.

We landed at a grill, I can't remember the name of the grill but they gave us supper. I had to walk in the snow with the summer shoes that I had on, well that proved a bit difficult for me, as I go step by step in the snow begging God to guide my footsteps because there was nothing to lean on, you had to go on your own. We reached the grill and we had a lovely supper, then we went back into the coach and we travelled down to London and at midnight, nearly midnight I was sitting in front with the coach driver and I asked him if we could sing Auld Lang Syne, on New Year's night we are accustomed to singing that. He said we could and I did but not with gusto, because I was still a bit cold, but with happiness in my heart that I know that God has blessed me to come into London as well as to welcome the New Year - because at home we all go to church Old Year's Night and when we come out we welcome the New Year and sing Happy New Year to each and everyone around.

Well we travelled along and we came into London, and then we passed through Trafalgar Square and the coach driver said to us "Here is where on all New Year's Nights there are grand festivities welcoming the New Year, but tonight it is not like that because as you can observe the snow is heavy." When we got to Victoria my son was waiting, happy to see me, and we cried but he was happy to know I landed safe and sound in London Town. Just as we gathered together and I was chatting to my son about the way in which we would be getting home that night he saw a friend passing in a car and he hailed him and he said "Hey! My mother she has just come from Guyana, would you take us home, I'm in Coningham Road." He says to my son "That I will gladly do, where is your mother?"

And he introduced me to him and he took my grips and put them on the back of the car, we entered the car and headed for 82 Coningham Road, Shepherd's Bush, London W12. And there is where I landed happy to see my grandchildren in a lovely warm room and I cuddle into bed with my blankets and give my grandchildren a kiss each.

What really surprised me, thinking how I was coming on New Year's Day we would have had a family get together as we did in Guyana, lo and behold my son and his wife they are preparing to go to work. I said "Are you working all year and New Year's Day?" They said "Yes, it's not a holiday in London." Well then I felt a bit faint at heart because I thought New Year's Day would be such a grand reunion day, to eat and drink and celebrate, but it wasn't to be. I had to wait until they returned home for the celebration. I brought some toys and games and that helped me to spend the day with the grandchildren. But I must say at this time I longed to be back home in Guyana. I didn't welcome the New Year in London as I thought I would have and so my spirit just went back to Guyana thinking of the lovely songs we would have been singing, thinking of the guitar music that was passing along the road and even the masquerades, thinking about the lovely spread and drinks we would have had and you're calling in your friends and neighbours and having a nice time. It really hit me hard and I wanted to be back home that very day if it was possible. But that didn't stop me from making my grandchildren happy because we started to play the games, Lotto I brought and Chinese Checkers and we started to play until my daughter-in-law first came in and then my son and we all had a happy New Year Night and I enjoyed it a lot.

During the days to come, everybody's going out to work and the children back to school, I started to feel a bit sad that I had left home. They took me to Olympia, they had a circus there, I went there and then my niece took me to Wembley and I saw the Wizard of Oz on ice and I enjoyed that very, very much. I thought of my homeland where I had my Christmas concerts and my May Pole and the dressing up of the children for May Fair and crowning of the May Queen, it brought back the memories of the happy days with the children. So I decided, I told my son "Six months is a very long time to sit down here on my own, I don't think I will like it, I will have to seek employment." He said "Mum, what employment? I will take you to Hythe House, there in Hammersmith and you are a widow and they will give you some money because you're a British Guianese, they will pay a little rent for you and you will be happy and we will make the most of it, I will take you around to see London as much as I can." So he did take me but the thought of going there, I said when I go there can I ask them if I can get a situation and he said "Yes you can."

So I made up my mind I'm going for the dole, to register for the dole, but I had a grandfather who was an Anglican Catechist and he always told us that we, the children of the righteous, would never beg bread and the seed will never perish and I held that in my mind.

I didn't want to have dole, I don't want dole. I'm poor because my husband died a year and some months ago and I lost that money but still I didn't want dole. So they told me they would put my name down and I said I would like to get something to do and the lady told me to go to a canteen, I can't remember the name of the canteen but when I went for the job it had already gone. So I said to my son "I am not going to the DHSS to take any dole, I don't want dole." So he said "Well Mum, it's your life and you do what you want." So he came and told me about a week after that I should try London Transport and I went. When I went there for this job I think I was too grandly dressed. But you see in Guyana you have lots of gold, Guyana is the land of the El Dorado and El Dorado means gold, so I had three pairs of bangles on, a lovely gold chain, lovely gold ear-rings and lovely rings on my fingers. I approached the officer who was in charge of having interviews and we chatted and he opened my passport and he saw "Teacher" and he looked at me and he just told me "Mrs Blackman, all that I can offer you is a cleaner's job." So I said "A cleaner's job!". He said "That's all the vacancies we have got." When I heard that quickly I remembered some poetry from The Royal Reader, I think the fourth standard book, The Two Crossing Sweepers and one of the verses said:

*Though poor, they were too proud to beg,
Too upright for to steal,
And gladly did they sweep and clean,
To gain an honest meal.*

So I said "That's for me, I will have it Sir." He was shocked, he said "You will take it?", I said "I will." Just like that the poem came to me, I took it. When my son came to get me, I took my passport from the man and got my note to go to 55 Broadway and I took it and I went down, my son came down and I wouldn't say a word until we got down the steps. I said "Do you know where you have to take me?". He said "Where?" I said "To 55 Broadway, St. James' Station and I am to see the Superintendent and he will give me a lovely situation." I made it as a joke. He said "What lovely situation, Mum?", I said "A cleaner." He said "Oh Mum, you take a cleaner's job?" I said "I take it, I don't want to be on the dole, get me straight son I am strong, in the meanwhile I will apply to the GLC for a job with the children." And he said "If you want it Mum, what can I do, let's go."

That was my first job, my first experience, I soon found favour with everybody, saying Good Morning to everyone. Then I left those offices in June I think, I worked some time there and then I went over to Baker Street and had my course there and then went to Victoria Station canteen. Well there, there were lots and lots of my own people, West Indians. Well I didn't find it an amiable place to work because I don't use bad language and there were lots of people coming in from the bus using their language and you can't stop them from using those words so I found no favour in working there. When I was coming home one day with my friend Julie and she said "Terry, what are you doing here, why are you doing this job?". I laughed, I said "Because I don't want your dole." She said "Well if I had your qualifications I would never have been doing this kind of a job." I said "I'm Black and you are white but still I am not sorry for what I am doing, do feel happy with me because I am happy."

Randolph Beresford

Born in Guyana, before coming to Britain Randolph Beresford MBE went to America as a carpenter, maintaining accommodation for farmworkers. He came to Britain in 1953 and was shocked at the state of housing and accommodation. He fought for the betterment of working people through his trade union activities and as a councillor. He became Mayor of Hammersmith and Fulham in 1975/76. He is now Chair of several school governing boards, highlighting his interest in education, and former Chair of the local Council for Racial Equality.

I was born in Guyana in 1914. My father was a carpenter contractor and that is how I became a carpenter, I learned my trade with my father. My mother didn't work, in those days women never worked, they were housewives. My home was very religious, respectful, it was in New Amsterdam, that's in one of the counties. Guyana has three counties, Berbice, Demerara and Essequibo, and New Amsterdam happen to be in Berbice.

The school I attended was a church school, a missionary school. I enjoyed school very, very much although I wasn't fortunate enough to do higher education, I came out of school at fifteen years of age after qualifying the school leaving exam. Then I went straight into my trade, which is the trade of my father, and I never looked back since. I served as an apprentice, I worked in Guyana at an American airbase in 1942 when the Americans were fighting the Japanese. They built a base there which is the national base now for Guyana. I worked there for two years and then went to work with the Canadians who owned the largest Bauxite company in the West Indies.

I came here in 1953, in December. I spent Christmas at sea, in those days we came by boat. I travelled three weeks on the boat and I arrived here on 27th of December. I came alone and nine months after my wife followed me. I decided to leave Guyana because before I came here I took an opportunity to go on a contract to the United States of America, it was a contract to go as a farm worker.

I knew nothing at all about farm working but I just wanted to be adventurous and it so happened that I ended up doing maintenance in the barracks where the farm workers lived, that was in Connecticut, in the early '50s.

So I had a look in, in the States during the fifties, and then when my contract was over I went back to Guyana and I thought why not venture again to England, since at the time we were British subjects, Guyana had not become an independent country yet. So I told my wife, I said "I'm off to England", and here I am.

Well my first impressions, being travelled widely, I've worked in Guyana with more white people than Black because I've worked on all the largest concessions, and I learned my trade on a sugar plantation where it was governed or run by white managers and overseers; I worked at an American airbase with Americans; I worked with the Canadians, so when I came here the only difference that I found here is the type of white or English people that you see in the West Indies or Caribbean was people with managerial ability, skills not ordinary carpenter or labourer. I saw a white porter when I landed in Liverpool, but being intelligent I realised well this is the Englishman's country and he has to fill in, in all walks of life, I mean you don't only see people in the offices but you see the road sweepers. In those days everything was done by the host community. It wasn't a surprise, it was an experience, I hadn't met the working class before. I had never met a white carpenter working shoulder to shoulder with me before.

One of the biggest problems that faced us was in regard to accommodation and in fact that is the reason why I bought this place, because nine months after my wife came, and then a year after she got a baby and we had problems in finding accommodation, so I thought it best as this place was part vacant and all I wanted was somewhere where I could be with my wife and family. I remember living in a Polish man's house, at the same time my wife was coming and I told him my wife was coming and I had two solicitor's notices at the end of the week. I ask him what's wrong, he said he consulted his solicitor and he said he shouldn't allow me to have my wife living there with me. In those days, although you rent, the landlord comes in. In the first place I lived, the landlord, if anyone come to the door, he would open the door and that was just a room with a bed and a chair and if I had more than one visitor, in he comes to see where the visitor was sitting and if he or she was sitting on the bed he'd tell you off about it. Just after 10 or 11 o'clock he would come and knock on the door and tell you that it's time your visitors should leave.

In those days London, or England, needed skilled people, the demand was there, we were doing a service. I arrived on the 27th of December and on the 1st January I had my first job. In fact I was intelligent enough to work with a box of tools. The first thing the clerk at the labour exchange said was "Have you got tools?", I said "Yes". He said "Well there's a job right away in Kensington High Street". I started work.

I'll tell you a story now. Before I was elected on the council I went to the labour exchange looking for carpentry work, well they said come back Tuesday or Wednesday and sign in and we see if there is a job vacant for you. The day I went in was the same day as the local elections and I was all dressed up as I was helping the Labour Party that day. When I went in the clerk at the labour exchange said "There's a job here but they don't want coloured folks because they try you people and you're no good". So I said "Where's the job?" and he said "Hammersmith Council". So I said "I don't believe you, Hammersmith Council is a socialist council. I come to this country, I am a member of my trade union, I represent my trade union on the Hammersmith and Fulham Trades Councils and the London Federation of Trades Councils and I am a member of the Labour Party".

So I went to meet my colleagues who were standing for election, some of them were already councillors, so I said to them "Here am I working for you and I'm being told that you are not employing Black folks." They advised me to go to the Housing Manager to complain about it. I complained and they told me that the job was gone but I could have another job in a couple of weeks. A couple of weeks later was the Trades Council Annual General Meeting, I attended the meeting and I spoke about it and it was published in the press "LOCAL TRADE UNIONIST ACCUSES HAMMERSMITH COUNCIL OF RACIAL DISCRIMINATION" and they called me all kinds of names but that stopped it. I doubt whether the council had that policy but the clerk at the labour exchange was carrying out that policy in the name of Hammersmith Council.

William Henry

William Henry was born in Trelawny, Jamaica, in 1934. He came to England in 1960 because he wanted to work and better himself. He now lives in Shepherds Bush and works for the Water Board. William has been going to night school for the past four years and has learned to read and write.

My name is William Henry, I was born in 1934, January 26th, in Jamaica, Trelawny Parish. That was in the country. My home was all right but my mother died when I was nine days old so I grew up with my father and grandmum. I had brothers and sisters from a marriage before. I learnt to be a mason, here they call it plasterer or brickie. In Jamaica one man did the plastering and the bricklaying.

I was twenty-five when I left Jamaica. I came here for work because I thought I would make some money in this country. I came to work for ten years and then go back to Jamaica. There is work in Jamaica but you don't make as much money as you make in this country, some people make plenty, some don't.

I came on my own, I came on a ship called Begona. The journey was OK. I stopped in Spain for three days, Tenerife for one day. We finished up landing in Southampton after sixteen days of travelling. It was OK, your belly was full all the time, you could eat and leave food. Nice swimming pool; church; music, anything you wanted was on the ship. It was very good on the ship. The fare was eighty pounds, it was a problem to raise that in Jamaica, that's why I went to America, to get that money together and come away. I went to America twice to cut sugar cane, pick oranges, pick cotton, pick peas, break corn, all different work, just working for a farmer. That was to raise the money to come here. I had a half sister here in Britain but no one came to meet me, no one. I took a taxi from Waterloo to Shepherds Bush, 49 St. Stephen's Avenue. That was no good, coming into a stange country with no one to meet you, that was bad. But I had travelled to America twice, I had the experience of travelling. Travelling is like education, it makes you have more sense.

I stopped with my sister's daughter for a while until I got a place to stay. When I got a place it wasn't right for me so I had to look for another place. But as soon as I landed I got a job straight away and I have been working until this day, that's from 1960 until now which is 1989.

My first impression of Britain was that it was cold, but I was used to the cold from America so it wasn't too bad for me, and I was a young man trying to make a life for my wife and kids. They were still in Jamaica at the time, they came afterwards. Two of my children were born in England and four were born in Jamaica, that makes six altogether.

I had problems finding accommodation, when my wife came it gave me a little problem but I found a place eventually. You couldn't get a room to rent, rooms were very scarce. The white people were not renting, so it was only the Black people and most Black people's houses were full already, so they had no room. You had to get the room through friends, that's why it was so hard.

It was easy to find work, I worked in a rubber factory. The job was waiting for me when I came. My sister's daughter's husband got it for me. When my wife came she started work the next week as well, because I got a job for her. In this country I never had a problem with jobs, I always got a job. I never wanted to carry on my trade in England, it was too cold to work outside.

I got a factory job so I worked inside, but then I worked outside, for seventeen years now I've been working outside. My first job in this country was in a rubber factory, that lasted nine months, I worked in a laundry for a year and I worked where they make baths. Then I worked for the Water Board fixing water pipes when they break in the road; putting new supplies in houses and flats, from the main to the pavement. If any big water main bursts in the road then we repair it, dig the road up and sort it out.

I worked and saved to get our own house, me and my wife. Both of us worked and saved to buy it. We got the mortgage from the GLC at that time.

I've had no problem with language because they speak English and I understand English. I speak English just like they do but they reckon it's not as good as their own, I can't help that. They take the mickey out of me "What are you talking about, I don't understand it?". But intelligent people don't say that.

I have faced discrimination but that does not bother me, I don't have that problem, because I have problems with my own people as well. Colour means nothing to me, because Black people don't like Black people, white people don't like white people, Indians don't like Indians, there are problems with every nation, so it doesn't bother me.

I came to Britain with the intention of going back in ten years time, but I'm still here. I've been back three times already and I'm going again because I want to retire back in Jamaica within the next two years, three at the most but I must be back in Jamaica for good. I'll do my own farming, if they send me a pension it will be good, if they don't send it I will still live because I am going back to set myself up. I don't think I will be a failure because I have a house out there and I intend to build another and buy one as well, two to rent out, and I'll have my own little business in Jamaica.

What I like about Britain is when you work you get paid, in Jamaica when you work certain times they tell you they have no money and you have your wife and kids to look after, so it's bad. But when you work here you get paid, if you are willing to work you will get money, but you must work. Whatever colour or creed, you must work otherwise you can't earn money.

There is nothing I dislike in Britain but there's sun all the time in Jamaica and I want to get right back to my roots. You don't watch the clock in Jamaica, you don't need an alarm clock to wake you up to go to work. When you are abroad you stay for a time, then you want to go back. I have a cousin out there, an uncle and one brother. I came from Jamaica to make a living and I make it by working hard. Nobody gave me anything, I worked for everything I have. I think I've been successful for a man who could not read nor write and have come out better than many people who go to college. I think I have done well for myself, and have a good wife as well. She works and helps. I think I have done well for myself because people with an education are still down under my feet now. It's not the education it's what you plan to set out to do. Education is one of the best things you can have but you have men use it and still end up behind bars.

Sandra Knight

Sandra Knight was born in St. George's, Grenada. She came to England in 1960 after spending a few years as a child in Trinidad. She is an active member in the Black community involved with the Black Cultural Archives and the Notting Hill Carnival. Sandra is an Archive Conservator for the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham.

I can't remember that much of my life in Grenada, I left when I was really young. I think I was about two, and we went to Trinidad where I went to school for a while before coming to England.

I remember going to school when I was four, I think it was called St. Mary's and we all had to wear a uniform. Children started a lot earlier, and by five you'd know your alphabet and your tables and things like that off pat. My brothers and sister were over as well, I was really young then so there's not much I can remember. I lived with my mother and grandmother and aunts and we used to play a lot along the street there, it was quite safe, all the children were out, it was really nice.

I was nearly six when we left Trinidad. We travelled by boat from Trinidad to England, it was an Italian ship and I had my sixth birthday on the way over. I'm not sure when we left or how long the journey took, it seemed like forever, but on the way over my mother was taken ill so we were looked after by the people who looked after the nursery. I remember once we were locked in the nursery, I don't know where this woman went to but she locked us in and my mother had a real fit because if the boat sunk or something we'd all be locked in there. On my birthday during dinner we had a cake and everything. We played out quite a lot on the deck, it was a nice crossing, I enjoyed it. When we actually arrived it was October, we came into the port and my mother had forgotten something on the boat and she left us all on the side and rushed back on this boat to get whatever she'd forgotten and we all thought she was going to leave us. I don't remember what the weather was like or anything like that or even whether it was night or day, I can't remember.

We had a flat on the Ravenscourt Road, we didn't stay there very long. My parents bought a house which wasn't very far away and we moved in there shortly afterwards.

I don't know why we came to West London in particular, at that time there weren't that many Black people in that area, not on the Hammersmith side, more on the Shepherd's Bush side. We were the first Black family on our road. My mother didn't work for a while, my father was a mechanical engineer at the time. When I was about seven or eight my mother went out to work, she was a secretary at Lyons, the ice cream people. She was there years, she's retired now, they're both retired now.

We went to Flora Gardens School but before we went there my mother tried to get us to go to John Betts, which was a lot nearer for us, but at that particular time there weren't any Black children in the school and I think that was why we didn't get in. So we went to Flora Gardens which was a mixture of children. I was very aware of being Black at that school although they tried to cover up a lot of things. I remember one incident where we were told to draw what people look like in the Caribbean and draw beach scenes and stuff like that. Everybody had to do it, English children did slides and water chutes and that kind of stuff, I just did kids playing on the beach and I remember the teacher coming up and saying "Where's the grass skirts?" and this sort of thing. I couldn't understand what she was talking about and she said people have grass skirts and bones through their noses and things like this. Also we weren't allowed to have homework, which my mother couldn't understand because we were used to doing school work, we just weren't encouraged to take any work home because it would disrupt their methods of teaching. There was endless sports days and plays, another incident was when they were doing a play about Vikings and I wanted to be a Viking and this teacher said "Vikings have red hair." That's when I really started realising what was going on, even when you're that young, seven or eight, you can still feel things.

Another thing about primary school I remember was I could never understand why the children used to talk about "When I leave home and buy my own flat", this was like children of about eight and nine talking about leaving home and buying flats. You were not encouraged to do that in Black families, it was always expected that you would stay at home as long as you wanted to but it was "Oh yes, my mum wants me out when I'm sixteen or eighteen." I used to think this was very strange. Also we were never allowed to play on the streets with other children, my mother used to say there were four of us and we could play together, I suppose that was her way of protecting us. If the kids did want to play they would have to come to our house and play out in the back, we were lucky enough to have a garden.

When I was eleven I went to the famous at the time Holland Park School, it was supposed to be very liberal and very open minded and modern. It was nothing of the sort, it was just under a new guise.

They had a grading system, there were H-forms and P-forms.

They didn't admit to this but most of the P-forms were Black kids, very, very few Black kids were in the H-forms. The H-forms consisted mainly of privileged kind of people like Wedgie Benn (that's what we used to call him), his son went, all those people were always in there and they came straight out of boarding or public school and into this "trendy" school. There was definitely a class divide because even if a lot of the children didn't have the ability they were still put in H-forms, it was really obvious. I used to play the piano and when I went to Holland Park I tried for years to get into the music productions, they were always doing these grand productions at Christmas and the teacher who held all these classes he'd always say "Waiting list, waiting list." In the end I just gave up, what I should have done was stick it out and insisted. They used to have really huge productions like the Mikado which used to be on the television at Christmas, you know "A Holland Park Production" and it was always the H-forms that were in it.

I had one white friend, we were in the same class. I don't know what happened in the playground, we were just swinging on a bar and something happened, she turned around and called me a wog and ran off. So I chased after her and we ran into the foyer of the school where there was this big dignitary meeting going on and I just laid into her. That was it, I didn't have any white friends after, I just didn't want to know. Also at the school there was the Black Power movement coming together and a lot of the children were becoming very conscious of being Black and having a pride in their Blackness, that was quite an exciting time.

The skinhead fashion was very much in then but in those days it wasn't associated with the violence that you get now, it was more a clothes and music scene, it was ska and reggae, I remember Jimmy Cliff was very famous. It was a totally different image to what they have now. They had the short hair and the trilbys but they didn't have that violent NF 'bovver' boot image to it.

A lot of Black children were encouraged to do domestic sciences and sports, high jump and running and that sort of thing. I rebelled in the end, I just didn't want to know. Everybody was put into a little niche, what they were expected to do. It was very stereotyped, it kept you back, it kept you down. When these H-forms were busy doing their languages, Classical Greek, Latin etc., a lot of them were exempt from sports so they could have extra lessons in Maths or whatever, everybody else would be running up and down tracks and that sort of thing. It was a class and racist system.

I went to Hammersmith and West London College, I was trying to do my 'o' levels but it was too much like school for me. I did art in the end. I left there and went into the Libraries as a library assistant. This was about fifteen, sixteen years ago and since then the library has totally changed. There was only one other Black person in the library. I stayed there for two years and then I came to the Archives where I have been ever since.

I've always had some kind of involvement and commitment to the Black community. In the past six years I've been involved with the Black Cultural Archives which is based in Brixton, Coldharbour Lane. The objectives of this project are to promote Black history and the Black struggle throughout history. This is an area that has not been received or recognised to its full potential by the establishment. It has had quite a hard upward struggle, I just feel it would go somewhere so I'm sticking with it because there is definitely an interest from the Black community but little financial commitment from grant giving bodies.

I've faced racism at work, there was a person who used to work here when I first started, she used to goad me a lot. Every morning she would come in moaning about somebody at the bus stop and it wouldn't be "That woman behind me" it would be "That Chinese woman" or "That Black woman" this sort of thing. At first it really used to make my blood boil and after a while I just ignored it. She used to do things like that all the time, "This Black person's done this" or this Chinese or Indian or whatever. I remember once her grandchildren were coming to the office and she was saying to me I've told them that you're Black and that they shouldn't be scared. She was so ignorant there is no way you can argue with people like that really. These things don't prey on your mind at the time so much, it's afterwards when you think about things and you start to analyse them.

I think it must have been very hard for my parents coming from the West Indies especially coming from one of the smaller islands where everybody knows everybody and you're brought up with quite a strict upbringing. It must have been really hard for them to have to cope with us as children, adjusting to English ways of life and wanting to do everything that English kids did. It was very hard for them to have any discipline with us really, we wanted to be out late at night like everybody else and we wanted to go to the cinema and go here, there and everywhere. They let us do a certain amount in the end but only together, the four of us or two of us, never on our own until we got a lot older. I think it must have been hard for them to adjust to the English way.

When we first came here there were a few Grenadians, I don't know how everybody found each other here but you would get a little group of Grenadians here, a little group of Trinidadians there and they seemed to know each other from back home. The Jamaicans were the largest community. We always used to go everywhere with our parents. If they went to parties in the evening the kids weren't left at home, you'd go too. Children were catered for in every way, so I grew up knowing everything that was relevant to my culture. I think a lot of Black parents give up, it must be very hard. Quite a lot of the people I've met, British born Blacks, are used to the British way of life, they want things British but they are not accepted as being British. When people say to them you should go home they say "Where?" I think it was very hard for my parents, a struggle all the time.

They always said they would go back when they retire, they've retired now and they haven't gone anywhere. At that time most people went to the USA, Canada or England, they were totally different climates to what people were used to, totally different in every way. In the case of England they heard this thing about Mother Country and all the rest of it. My grandfather had this wonderful image of England, and how welcome he would be here because he fought in the First World War and contributed towards the Second. At that particular time they were hailed because they wanted them to do their dirty work for them but as soon as that finished and there wasn't enough work to go round they just wanted everybody to go back where they came from. He couldn't understand this when I used to try and explain it to him. I think my parents came because they were young, the excitement of coming to somewhere different and the opportunities were supposed to be endless and all that sort of thing.

When I first came to the Archives Department from Hammersmith Library I had to train for two years. I enjoy the work, it's quite varied. Every year I go on a conference, when I first started going there were no Black people on the course and very few women. It hasn't changed much in 14 years, there are a lot more women now but very few Black people.

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