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ANNIVERSARY



WINDRUSH SUNDAY

Windrush – What’s it all about

Introduction

There is little doubt that the docking of the Empire Windrush ship at Tilbury in Essex, England on 22 June 1948 marked a significant moment in the history of modern Britain. The ship had several hundred West Indian (as they were known at the time) passengers who would in time represent the transformation of Britain from a largely mono-cultural country to one where people of different ethnicities have helped to turn Britain into a multi-ethnic and diverse society.



History

Many of the Caribbean folk who arrived on the Windrush had no initial plans to stay in the UK. What they all shared were hopes and dreams to ‘make it’ in Britain. Some would realise those dreams; while for others they would become a nightmare. A number of historians suggest that those settlers believed that the ‘streets of London were paved with gold’, but a closer reading of the accounts at the time revealed that most were never so naïve. The majority of the Windrush Generation had had a thorough British education and knew more about this country’s history than they did their own. They believed that Britain would reward them fairly for their hard work.

Over 200 of the Windrush passengers ended up staying in Clapham South deep shelter in southwest London. According to some historians, the shelter had been used during the Second World War to hold German and Italian prisoners-of-war. As the air raid shelter was a stone’s throw from the closest job centre in Brixton, many naturally gravitated towards this part of south London. Equally, many landlords in Brixton - African and Caribbean ones in particular - were more disposed to rent accommodation to the new arrivals. As a result, Brixton became the first real ‘home from home’ for Black settlers. (To mark the 50th anniversary of the Empire Windrush and its impact on Britain, a public open space in Brixton, opposite Lambeth Town Hall, was renamed Windrush Square.)

During this era, it was common to see lodgings for rent with the stipulation ‘no Blacks, dogs or Irish’ in the window or on the door. Accounts also show that slum landlords took advantage of the need for lodgings and made their houses multiple-occupancy and charged exorbitant rents. It was therefore not uncommon to see several people sharing one room or rotational bed policies for shift workers.

Life in England

Those who arrived that sunny June were ill prepared for the snow and ice of a cold December. They had switched a tropical climate with its two seasons for a temperate one with four. What was



equally jarring was the sight of White people carrying out manual work as porters and cleaners. In the Caribbean at that time, most White folks regarded labour of this kind as beneath them. However, the greatest shock was that of institutional racism. There was little legislative protection at that time against racism for the newly arrived Caribbean settlers. And whilst it was true that many found few problems securing work on buses, trains, and in factories, mills and in the newly established National Health Service, they had more problems accessing pubs, working men's clubs and churches. As a result, some went on to establish their own institutions with dark cellars doubling as makeshift nightclubs and front rooms as house churches.

The impact of the Windrush on Britain

Many of the Windrush Generation had only planned to stay in this country for five years, although a British Government minister at the time assured them that they would not see out that year's winter. Indeed, there were debates in the British Parliament about the arrival of the ship. (Some of the Windrush's passengers believed the British Government was planning to turn the boat around - in the Atlantic - and send them all back.) However, during that period, there were no immigration restrictions on the movement of citizens within the British Empire; legislation controlling immigration was initially passed in 1962.

Akin to all travellers, the Windrush Generation brought aspects of their culture which they sought to transplant into their new environment. In the first few years after Windrush, this culture was the preserve of towns and cities with a sizeable Black community. However, with the passing of time, virtually every area of the country, irrespective of whether it has a Black presence, has been indelibly impacted by Black culture in regard to religion, literature, academia, language/dialect, music, politics, drama, dance, sport, food, etc.

Equally, Windrush helped to redefine what it means to be British. The Windrush Generation regarded themselves as British, and called these shores the Mother Country. The fact that most indigenous White Britons saw them as 'immigrants', 'foreigners' and 'strangers' did not deter many of those pioneers. In fact, part of the reason why many 'dug their heels in', was this sense of 'Britishness'. It must be remembered that many Caribbean countries at that time were under British jurisdiction, and there was little real sense of Caribbean national pride. As a result of the Windrush Generation, it is now possible to be considered 'African-British' or 'Asian-British'. And although the struggle for real acceptance still continues, only the most ignorant would deny Black, Asian and minority ethnic folk, born or resident in this country, the right to call themselves British.

The Windrush Generation also helped Britain become a fairer, more just society. History shows that racism and a whole range of discriminatory practices curtailed the freedoms of Black people. Revd Dr Martin Luther King Jr once famously said, 'We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed.' These first pioneers joined trade unions and established organisations that lobbied the powers that be for a change in legislation. The passing of 'race relations' acts to protect Black and minority ethnic people from racism and related prejudices was a direct result of the hard work and campaigning efforts of those trailblazers.

We are now a more enlightened, culturally-rich society because of the events following the Windrush Generation. Although the situation is far from perfect for most people from minority ethnic communities, Britain is arguably the most progressive nation in Europe regarding the treatment of minorities. Again, we have the Windrush Generation to thank for this change in mindset.



Who were the passengers on the Windrush?

News reports at the time suggested that all the Windrush's passengers were Jamaican. Indeed, a young English journalist at the time named Peter Fryer, who went on to write the seminal publication on Black people in Britain, *Staying Power*, reiterated this misconception in his early reports in June 1948. In fact, several hundred of the passengers came from other Caribbean islands and territories.

Many of the passengers were former servicemen – the RAF in particular – who, only a few years previously, had fought for King and country in the Second World War. With the Caribbean being a British territory, most of its dwellers regarded themselves as British and thought it their patriotic duty to fight against tyranny and despotism. (It is estimated that as many as 8,000 West Indians volunteered to be part of the war effort.)

Many of the servicemen travelled back to the Caribbean after being de-mobbed, but found the economic stagnation and general poverty of their home countries off-putting. The Caribbean, akin to most of the world at that time, was suffering the repercussion of the war. Many ex-servicemen did not need to hear a second call from Britain about her need for workers to help rebuild her war-ravished country.

Those passengers on board the Empire Windrush were as diverse as their countries of origin. Some, such as the Trinidad-born, Aldwyn Roberts, who was better known as Lord Kitchener, was a Calypso singer who went on to record the celebrated 'London is the place for me'. Others like Jamaican-born, Lucile Harris, were travelling to meet loved ones in Britain. Harris became a homemaker, raising five children with her husband in Brixton, south London. Then there was Edwin Ho, who was Guyanese (of African, Indian and Chinese extraction), and a boxer who would gain a reputation in Britain as a pugilist of some renown. And there was Jamaican, Sam King, who first came to Britain in 1944 to join the RAF. After being de-mobbed, King returned to Jamaica, only to come back to Britain on board the Empire Windrush. King would later become Mayor of Southwark in the 1980s, and was a prominent figure within the Church. One of the youngest passengers on the ship was 13-year-old Vince Reid. Reid, who was born in Jamaica, would join the RAF and eventually end up working as a college lecturer.

The *Daily Mail* newspaper, often regarded as hostile to 'foreigners', initially welcomed the new arrivals in its article on Tuesday, 22 June 1948, and suggested that '52 of the Jamaicans will volunteer for the RAF' once they are settled. However, other newspapers were more wary, with some suggesting that the 'arrival of the West Indians was the thin end of the wedge'. And some in the media predicted all manner of catastrophic events such as social breakdown and moral chaos because of these new foreigners.

The history of the ship - Empire Windrush

The Empire Windrush was a German-built passenger cruiser that plied its trade in tourism between Hamburg, Germany and Buenos Aires, Argentina. During the Second World War, Germany used the ship to first carry its troops, and then as a floating hospital. It was subsequently captured by the British, and was subsequently renamed Empire Windrush in 1947.

The Windrush was travelling from Australia to Britain when it made a stop at Kingston Harbour, Jamaica in 1948. Prior to its arrival, the major newspaper in Jamaica, the *Daily Gleaner*, had run adverts encouraging Jamaicans to take advantage of the 'cheap passage' to work in Britain.



The Empire Windrush set sail from Jamaica on 24 May 1948 with many of the passengers who paid the £28 and 10 shillings (a lot of money for most at the time) keen to take advantage of the apparent labour shortages in Britain. The ship took under a month to arrive, docking at Tilbury on 22 June 1948. One of the most iconic images in post-war British history are the photos of the Caribbean passengers disembarking from the Windrush. Nearly every man is pictured wearing a wide-brimmed hat (and an even wider smile), a snazzy suit and a fancy white shirt. The women - there were fewer of them - were dressed as if attending a Buckingham Palace garden party.

Black people in Britain before Windrush

It would be wrong to think that Britain had never experienced a Black presence prior to 1948. Academics have shown that the first Africans arrived as part of the Roman regiments in the 3rd century AD when a division of Moors from North Africa were stationed near Carlisle, England, and were charged with defending Hadrian's Wall. The noted Septimius Severus, the Libyan-born emperor, was also based in the north of England in the early 3rd Century.

Over a millennium later, both King Henry VII and VIII employed a Black musician in their royal courts. This man who was called 'John White' played the trumpet, and the King paid him eight pence a day for his services. Equally, the first group of Africans arrived in England in 1555 from what is now Ghana. Many historians are uncertain about how these men arrived in this country, but assume they were not enslaved, as England only began slave trading in 1562 under Sir John Hawkins.

By the end of the 18th Century, Britain had more than 15,000 people of African descent. Some worked as servants, while others were runaway enslaved people who lived on the streets. Then, there were those like Olaudah Equiano and Ottobah Cugoana who worked to end the slave trade and slavery itself. Many of these British-based Africans, akin to their enslaved brothers labouring on plantations in the Americas, played an involuntary role in the socio-economic development of Britain.

Historical symbolism

Nearly all of those who arrived on the Empire Windrush were the descendants of the enslaved Africans who had been forcibly taken from Africa to work on plantations in the Caribbean. The journey from Africa to the Americas on slave ships was known as the Middle Passage. It was ironic that their descendants left the Caribbean for Britain on ships - on a journey that some called the *Final Passage*. This was the voyage to the Mother Country from where the slave ships first travelled, and to whom all the wealth derived from slavery ended up. Britain at that time was seen as the Promised Land which offered milk and honey in the form of a new life and work opportunities.

Caribbean folk have always been journeying people because of the poverty, and a lack of real opportunities in their countries. Prior to the mass migration to Britain in the late 1940s onwards, many Caribbean folk had previously journeyed to North, South and Central America for similar reasons.