

Windrush Events

Friday 13 June - Sunday 29 March

From War to Windrush @ Imperial War Museum, Lambeth Road, London

Sunday 22 June

Windrush 60th Anniversary... @ Tilbury Docks, London

Sunday 22 June

10:30am

60th Anniversary Commemoration @ 14-16 Lynwood Road, Tooting Bec, London

Sunday 22 June

3:30pm

Windrush 60th Anniversary... @ London

Sunday 22 June

6:00pm

Windrush 60th Anniversary... @ Birmingham

Friday 27 June

2:00pm

Honoring the Elders @ Longfords, Longford Park, Rye Bank (off Edge Lane), Chorlton cum Hardy, Manchester

Windrush Anniversary 60 22nd June 2008

Introduction

There is little doubt that the docking of SS Empire Windrush at Tilbury in Essex on 22 June 1948 marked a significant moment in the history of modern Britain. The ship had 492 West Indian (as they were known at the time) passengers who would in time represent the transformation of Britain from a 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 this country. What they all shared were hopes and dreams to 'make it' in Britain. Some would realize their dreams; while for others they would become a nightmare. A number of historians suggest that these settlers believed the 'streets of London were paved with gold', but a closer read of the accounts at the time reveal 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 Britain would reward them fairly for their hard work.

Over 200 hundred 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 local 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 SS Empire Windrush and its impact on Britain, 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 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 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 the 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 the time against racism for the newly arrived West Indians. And whilst it was true that many West Indians found few problems securing work on buses, trains, factories, mills and in the newly established Na

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 Government minister assured them that they would not see out that year's winter. Indeed, there were debates in Parliament about the arrival of the ship. (Some of the Windrush's passengers believed the Government was planning to turn the boat around 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 passed in 1962.

Akin to all travellers, these arrivals 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 regards 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 these 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 or a real feeling of belonging. 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 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. 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 organizations 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 is a direct result of the hard work and campaigning efforts of these trailblazers.

Britain is 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 in regards to the treatment of minorities. Again, we have the Windrush generation to thank for this change in mindset. Britain has come a long way – but it still has a long way to go.

Who were the passengers on the Windrush?

News reports at the time suggested that all the Windrush's West Indian 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, over 100 of the passengers came from other Caribbean islands and territories.

Many of the passengers were former service men – 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. Added to that, hurricanes and bad sugar harvests had decimated the agrarian economies of these already poor

countries. 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.

The 492 passengers on board the SS Empire Windrush were as diverse as their countries of origin. Some, such as Trinidadian-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 SS Empire Windrush. King would later become Mayor of Southwark in the 1980s and was a prominent figure within the Church. The youngest passenger on the ship was 13 year-old Vince Reid. Reid, who was born in Jamaica, would join the RAF and eventually ended 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, 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.