

Windrush 2020

by
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22nd June 2020 marked 'Windrush Day' a commemoration of the 'Windrush generation' – those who moved to the UK from the Caribbean, following a successful campaign led by Patrick Vernon which brought about the first commemorative event in 2018. The date was chosen to mark the date of the Empire Windrush ship bringing its first group of migrants to the UK from Jamaica to Tilbury Docks. As British subjects, many regarded the departure as a move to the 'Mother Country'.

They moved to the UK partly because of invitations by the British government to help join the efforts to rebuild the UK after the desecration and devastation after World War II; Enoch Powell as Health Secretary invited scores of Jamaican nurses to work in the NHS. Others became bus drivers and helped to rebuild British industries. The 'Windrush generation' refers to those who travelled and settled in the UK from the Caribbean between the period 1948 to 1971.

My parents travelled as youngsters to the UK in 1960 (though not together and not to the same destination; they would meet as adults a decade later). It was not unusual for one parent to travel to England and settle before bringing over the rest of the family, sometimes not all at once. My mother aged 10, made the journey from St. Annes, Jamaica to the UK in 1960 alongside her 11-year-old sister by airplane. Separated from siblings, some would not see each other for many years. This tale was common among some larger families settling in the UK (Anim-Addo 2000).

My father travelled from Clarendon, Jamaica as a teenager to join his adult sister and brother in the Midlands by ship. An amusing anecdote shared is that upon arrival in Birmingham, his sister asked him if he would like a cup of tea; he was shocked to see her go into the kitchen herself to make it, for as limited as their funds were in Jamaica, most families had helpers or servants.

A Black presence before Windrush

It should be noted, however, that there was a Black presence in Britain long before 1948. Examples include: John Blanke who served as a trumpeter in the court of Henry VII.



Taken from Westminster Tournament Roll (1511) The National Archives

Queen Elizabeth I whilst having black personnel in her service, grew wary of the numbers of African persons in England, many of the troubles of the times were blamed on these Africans in the towns and cities. She sent public letters and made proclamations aimed at denouncing them for problems caused and urging that they ultimately be deported.

'late divers blackmoores brought into this realm, of which kind of people there are already here to manie... those kinde of people should be sente forth of the land'
(Queen Elizabeth I 1596, National Archives)



Dido Belle, daughter of Sir John Lindsay, raised at Kenwood House by her uncle William Murray, Earl of Mansfield, (pictured left with her cousin Elizabeth Murray) painted circa 1779.

Another example is that of Liverpool. The Black community in Liverpool is regarded as one of the oldest black communities in Europe. There are records of Black settlers in Liverpool from the 1750s; including freed slaves, sailors and African students. Black soldiers served in parts of the British army including in Britain as well as the wider British Empire. Enslaved Africans were offered freedom if they fought alongside the British during the American Revolutionary War and some of those ultimately settled in parts of London, Liverpool and Dublin upon arrival. Artwork and print work shows a Black presence in London in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century including guards at royal palaces and professional showmen / beggars – including Joseph Johnson and Billy Waters having failed or been dismissed from life as a sailor in the Navy (English Heritage, undated).

A romanticised view?

Lowe (2018) questions the romanticised view of early Windrush arrivals and the portrayals in the media. Not everyone who travelled on the Empire Windrush came from Jamaica as many reports state, and there were perhaps double the amount on board (rather than the 492 passengers often cited) passenger lists show 1027 passengers which includes stowaways (who are rarely mentioned!) and European passengers / refugees (Rodgers and Ahmed 2019).

Whilst we celebrate Windrush Day, it should not be missed that many of those who moved faced racist attitudes, were shunned from employment in industries for which they were qualified, as well as suffered from 'over policing' where attitudes towards Black people was modelled on the treatment of colonised persons within the empire. Continued harsher treatment by the police has led to campaigns, demonstrations, action and riots: (Collings-Wells 2019) including Brixton 1981, Toxteth (Liverpool) 1981, England 2011 (following the death of Mark Duggan) as well as global demonstrations and protests in 2020 following the killing of George Floyd 2020.

Forgotten ships before Windrush

What of those who were earlier 'pioneers' travelling from the Caribbean on earlier ships? Why is so little attention paid to earlier ships and travellers in this period including the 108 passengers travelling on the Ormonde in 1947 or the Almanzora, which carried a number of passengers who had served as soldiers in the British army? (Fitzgerald 2017, Lowe 2018, Evaristo 2019). The Empire Windrush carried a number of passengers to the UK from the Caribbean (not just Jamaica) and is fondly remembered as the start of the multicultural movement in Britain; but it was not the first and neither should the Black presence in Britain centuries before the eponymous Windrush generation be forgotten.

As important as the Windrush celebrations are, it is important to recognise that a Black presence has been in the UK for a long time, and possibly, if more widely recognised, could have had a positive impact on sometimes strained UK race relations.

Author Biography

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