

Understanding Slavery Initiative

Windrush

The Windrush Generation

London is the place for me/ London that lovely city/ You can go to France or America / India, Asia or Africa / But you must come back to London City ...

Lord Kitchener (Aldwyn Roberts), Calypso singer and composer, 1948

On 21 June 1948, 492 West Indians arrived at Tilbury Docks, Essex on the SS Empire Windrush. The event prompted debates in Parliament about the immigrants being allowed to settle in the country, and the ship's arrival marked an important moment in modern British history.

'As we got closer to England,' recalled Sam King, one of the passengers and ex-RAF officer, 'there was great apprehension on the boat because we knew that there was a national debate in Britain as to whether the boat would be allowed to dock.'

Finding work

A significant number of ex-servicemen were on board. Some of them were returning to jobs in the RAF, and others were hoping to find work – there were few or no prospects of employment in the West Indies at this time. They knew that there was work in Britain because the country needed rebuilding after the war.

The other settlers had never been to Britain before, but were confident that they could find jobs and make a good living. Three weeks after arriving, it was reported that:

76 have gone to work in foundries, 15 on the railways, 15 as labourers, 15 as farm workers and 10 as electricians. The others have gone into a wide variety of jobs, including clerical work at the post office, coach building and plumbing.

Those who did not find work immediately did not have to wait for long. In fact, in some industries the demand for labour was so strong that Black workers were recruited in their home countries. The National Health Service welcomed West Indian nurses, and London Transport recruited bus and train drivers and bus conductors. A labour exchange (employment office) could be found in Brixton, south London. Many people found homes and settled there.

Discrimination

The West Indians took their British citizenship, by virtue of the British Nationality Act 1948 seriously, and believed that they had been answering the call to arms of the 'mother country' during the war and later to rebuild the UK. Everything they had learned in school encouraged the belief that they, too, were English men and women, and so they were shocked and disheartened with the negative treatment they received from the White population in the UK.

Windrush pioneers often speak of the difficulty they had in finding accommodation, in not being able to open a bank account or secure a loan or mortgage and with racism at work or on the street. Many West Indians got together and instead used systems they were familiar with from home, such as the 'pardner', a cooperative method of saving money to buy homes. In addition, they established their own organisations such as the West Indian Standing Conference, which represented their interests in the community.

Today, the arrival of the Windrush is viewed as a turning point in the recent history of Britain and has come to symbolise the many ways in which Caribbean people have contributed to and transformed British life. The Windrush pioneers, their children and grandchildren have all played a vital role in creating a new concept of what it means to be British.
