

A SHORT INTRODUCTION TO

BLACK

HISTORY

IN

BRITAIN

It's no secret that the version of Black History we're told in school during Black History Month is generally not a good representation of our actual history. So much is left out and so much is altered to fit the narrative the school curriculum wants to portray.

This Black History Month, I want some of the Black British history which has been left out to be told. This is not an exhaustive list of events, just an introduction to some of parts of history which have often been excluded.

I urge everybody who reads this to do just a little bit of their own research and learn a bit more of our extensive history!

Britain's role in the Transatlantic slave trade

Britain was involved in the transatlantic slave trade from 1562, and by the 1730s, **Britain was the largest slave-trading nation.**

British ships transported over **3 million Africans.**

Parliament passed more than 100 acts supporting the slave trade.

46,000 Brits were slave owners on the day the 1833 abolition act was passed. Around **800,000 Africans** were 'freed' upon abolition.

The abolitionist movement gained traction in the late 1700's.

Former slaves told their stories, making wider society aware of the horrors of the slave trade.

The abolition of slavery

Olaudah Equiano (c.1745-1797) was a significant voice in the British abolitionist movement. His autobiography, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, described his experience of enslavement and freedom. This book helped to change public opinions of slavery.

Ottobah Cugoana (c.1757-1791) and **Mary Prince** (1788-1833) were both former enslaved people living in Britain who shared their experiences of being enslaved and were vocal abolitionists.

The **Act of 1807** ended the trade of enslaved people, but did not free those who were already enslaved. In 1833, the **Slavery Abolition Act** was passed, abolishing all slavery in the British Empire. However, this act included **£20 million (£17 billion in today's money)** of compensation for slave owners.

Colonisation

Britain built its empire largely for **financial gain, power and raw materials**.

The first successful British colony was set up in 1607 in Jamestown in the USA.

The empire existed for **nearly 400 years**, and spanned the **Americas, Africa, Asia and Australia**.

There were significant financial gains of colonisation for Britain. Estimates state that the **British Empire generated more than 35 trillion pounds**. (For more information on money generated by the British colonies, read Jiang (2023), first link on slide 17)

The British Empire meant that those living in the colonies often **lost their languages, religions and lifestyles**, having these replaced by the English language, Christianity and British systems.

The British Empire met its end in the 1980's, but the **lasting legacies of colonialism** are significant for many of the former colonies.

The World Wars

During the two World Wars, Britain called on citizens of their colonies to assist in their war efforts.

World War 1

The **British West Indies Regiment** was formed in 1915 and was comprised of over **15,000 men** from the Caribbean.

Despite their contributions to the British war efforts, they faced **widespread racism and were often kept in menial roles**, doing hard labour.

Black units were **barred from fighting on the Western Front** because there were fears that allowing soldiers from the Commonwealth to fight alongside and against white Europeans would undermine British colonial rule.

Despite promises of equal pay, once the war ended, they were **denied the pay rise that others recieved**.

The World Wars

World War 2

More than **16,000 men from the Caribbean volunteered** to fight, alongside millions from across Africa and other parts of the empire.

Many of these volunteers felt a **sense of duty to Britian**, due to education and imperial ties.

Around **6,000 Caribbean personnel** served in the RAF. Over **500,000 men from the Caribbean and Africa** served with the British and Commonwealth forces.

Black servicemen and women often faced **barriers caused by racial inequality**. They were frequently **relegated to support roles or kept from combat**. Veterans often struggled to recieve the same recognition and support as their white counterparts.

Today, **the black commemorative poppy**, often worn in November, recognises and remembers the contributions of black, African and Caribbean communities to war efforts.

The Windrush Generation

The people who came from **the Caribbean to the UK from 1948 until 1971** are known as the Windrush Generation. The Empire Windrush was a ship which docked in 1948 and carried over 1000 passengers from the Caribbean to the UK. It was the first of many ships to do so.

In 1948, the British Nationality Act **gave people from the colonies the right to live and work in Britain**, with no time limit on how long they could stay. The government needed workers to help **fill post-war labour shortages and rebuild the UK**.

Many of the people who came to the UK worked as **drivers, manual workers, cleaners and NHS nurses**.

However, those who arrived on ships from the Caribbean often **faced difficulties securing jobs and accommodation**, with signs stating 'no blacks' often hanging in windows.

Estimates state that nearly **600,000 people** came to the UK from Commonwealth countries between 1948 and 1973.

Notting Hill race riots

In August and September of 1958, Notting Hill was the scene of **racially motivated riots**, where white members of the public were hostile and violent towards the Black community. Around 5000 black people had made Notting Hill their home but **white individuals were attempting to drive them out of London.**

On the 29th of August 1958, around **350 white people** were seen attacking the homes of black residents.

Police soon arrived, but instead of protecting black residents, many of them were arrested, despite being under attack. **35 people were arrested, half of whom were black.**

In May 1959, **Kelso Cochrane**, a 32 year old carpenter from Antigua, was **murdered in a racially motivated attack** in Notting Hill by a gang of white men. To this day, no one has been convicted for his murder.

In 1959, in response to the riots and race relations at the time, Claudia Jones arranged a '**Caribbean Carnival**' at St. Pancras Town Hall. This carnival grew, and is now the Notting Hill Carnival.

Bristol Bus Boycott

The Bristol Bus boycott of 1963 was caused by the Bristol Omnibus Company **refusing to hire black or Asian bus crews** in Bristol, despite reported labour shortages. The boycott was inspired by Rosa Parks' actions and the Montgomery Bus Boycott in the USA.

The boycott was led by a youth worker **Paul Stephenson OBE** and the **West Indian Development Council**, an action group formed of Roy Hackett OBE, Owen Henry, Audley Evans and Prince Brown.

Stephenson proved that a colourbar existed by setting up an interview for a young worker, Guy Bailey OBE. **When the company found out that Bailey was West Indian, the interview was cancelled.**

The boycott of the company's buses lasted for **four months** until the company overturned the colour bar.

The boycott gained national attention and was influential in the passing of the **Race Relations Act 1965** and the **Race Relations Act 1968**. The former made "racial discrimination unlawful in public places" and the latter extended this to employment and housing.

Brixton race riots

On the 10th of April 1981, rumours of **police brutality against a black man** led to a crowd of people confronting the police for a number of hours before the protests were contained.

However, the next day, an arrest was made. This led to Brixton erupting in violence, with fighting taking place between the **Metropolitan Police and protestors**, who were mostly black men.

The black community felt like the **police were treating them unfairly and targeting them**, often using the 'stop and search' law, which meant that police could stop and search anyone if they thought they were going to commit a crime.

The **riots lasted for three days** and saw fights with police, attacks on buildings and cars being set alight. Over 300 people were injured and damages came to around £7.5 million.

A public investigation into the riots found that, despite racial disadvantages existing, there was **no institutional racism found in the Metropolitan police force**.

Many black people believe that the riots led to society finally listening to them and their concerns. The riots told the government that they **could not treat non-white communities so poorly and without dignity anymore**.

The Windrush scandal

Commonwealth citizens who arrived in the UK from 1948 to 1973 were granted the right to remain indefinitely. **In 1973, UK immigration laws changed** - Commonwealth citizens were no longer allowed to stay in the UK indefinitely but were instead granted temporary residence.

However, many of the immigrants who arrived before 1973 were **never given proper documentation** and the **Home Office had not kept records** of their immigration status.

In 2018, it emerged that many members of the Windrush generation were being **denied access to public services, being detained at borders or unlawfully deported**.

In April 2018, the government admitted that these **individuals had been treated unfairly**. The National Audit Office found that the Home Office **failed to protect the needs** of the Windrush generation.

The Home Office attempted to resolve the scandal by issuing documents to confirm individuals status but there is no way to know how many people were impacted.

Growing up black in Britain

Growing up black in Britain in the 1960s, 70s and 80s was not easy. Below are some stories from some of my family members which highlight their experiences.

“I experienced repeated racism whilst growing up, often **from strangers but also from people I knew well**. To them it was acceptable - normal, mostly consisting of **name-calling**.”

“I was about nine or ten on a school camping trip. I was brushing my teeth before bed. I was too short to see myself in the mirror and had white toothpaste around my mouth. A teacher picked me up so I could see my face, then **gleefully told everyone I looked like a “gollywog”**. She and the other children thought it was hilarious, they all laughed for what seemed like an eternity. That was my name for the rest of the camping trip.”

“In 1977, the mini series Roots was broadcast on TV. The stuff I had to listen to on the Monday mornings...certain **people calling me Kunta Kinte** (the main character's African name), and then **Chicken George** (his grandson), also asking me to “lick their boots” after they saw particular scenes the previous evening.”

Growing up black in Britain

“As a kid, some people would comment and say I had **rubber lips**, especially as the comedian Jim Davidson would highlight black people's lips and generate a lot of laughs. There were also **comments at school about my (big in the eyes of some idiots) backside and nose.**”

“During a football match in 1984 I was called a **black b*****d** by an older opponent. The referee heard the comment and sent the player off - women refs were a rarity but she had no hesitation in dealing with him. **He was quite shocked to be dismissed** but it was comforting to know she thought that sort of behaviour unacceptable. To be fair, some of his team mates agreed with the decision.”

“I also remember as a child being out with my mum, who was white, and hearing **strangers call her deeply offensive names because she had Black children**. She had left Ireland when she was young. After her first marriage ended, she met my father and had three mixed-race children with him. She stayed apart from her Irish family for most of her life because she felt she could not return to Ireland with us to visit them. **She actually never went back to Ireland after we were born.**”

Current times

Despite the black community fighting tirelessly for so many decades, **racism is still prevalent in our society.**

The rise of the far right and the influence of voices such as Tommy Robinson and Nigel Farage sometimes makes it feel as if we're going backwards. However, the brave black individuals of past and present remind me that **hate doesn't always win.**

We must come together to show the far right and those filled with hate that **we will not stand for their racism.** Black communities, people of colour and all of our allies need to stand together.

I hope that **conversations about Black History and what it's like to grow up black in Britain can be started** not just this month, but every month.

Learning Black British history is so incredibly important and this post is just a short introduction to this. **Black History is British History** and it should be celebrated every month, not just in October.

Notable figures in Black British History to research

Mary Seacole

Walter Tull

Ignatius Sancho

Sergeant William Robinson Clarke

Stephen Lawrence + Baroness Doreen Lawrence

Olaudah Equiano

John Edmonstone

Lilian Bader

Other things to research this Black History Month

The Underground Railroad

Malcom X

The lasting impact of colonisation on health and disaster management in former colonies (one of my main interests)

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