

# Settling In

Between 1955 and 1962 it is estimated that a quarter of a million Caribbean people settled permanently in Britain. Some had had their passage subsidised by London Transport and the hospitals of the newly formed National Health Service which were experiencing staff shortages and needed to recruit overseas.

The majority remained in London but others moved to the industrial centres of Bristol, Liverpool, the Midlands, West Yorkshire and beyond. As a result of housing shortages and racial prejudice, most were forced to live in rundown districts, reliant on white landlords like Queenie in *Small Island* who could tolerate their colour but were not above exploiting them, or moving to areas where other Caribbean people had already made their homes such as Notting Hill in London.

Black people were generally excluded from high-paid, high-skilled jobs, irrespective of their qualifications, and from industries that were heavily unionised. Work was found instead as porters, cleaners, transport workers, labourers, factory hands, within the General Post Office and, later, in businesses of their own. In *Small Island*, Gilbert has had to give up his ambition to study law and take the only acceptable work offered to him – truck driving. In an interview, Andrea Levy has said that:

*West Indians arriving at British railway station, 21 June 1959 (Science and Society/NMPFT Daily Herald Archive).*

... the big thing that happened with [Gilbert and Hortense] is that they changed class immediately. So they came from having a middle class sensibility about what life could offer them, to the limitations of being very poor in a poor country. It was struggling then to build itself back up, and finding yourself as the lowest of the low.





Queenie's neighbour, Mr Todd, is typical of the small-mindedness of some white people of the time. He sees the new post-war immigrants as an alien invasion come to take advantage of the generosity of the British National Health Service, the men a threat to any decent white woman. During the war he and his kind held similar views on the Poles, the Czechs, the Belgians, the Jews and the East End cockneys. While not playing down her anger at the injustices experienced at this time, by having black and white narrators in *Small Island* Andrea Levy shows that there were problems to be faced, adjustments to be made and misunderstandings to clear up on both sides as everyone's life was changed by immigration. She also shows that as well as cruelty, ignorance, humiliation and despair, there were extraordinary acts of generosity and inspirational shows of strength.

Despite the difficulties, most of the newcomers had begun to make the transition from being a migrant labour force to an established community within a few years of arrival. They accepted, adapted and challenged aspects of the British way of life, as they felt appropriate, and retained a sense of Caribbean identity through festivals and celebrations, the church, music, family, dress and food. Although all shared common roots and a lifetime exposure to British colonial culture, each of the islands and mainland territories had their own traditions and histories, and in establishing new communities in Britain compatriots tended to stick together, Jamaicans keeping close to Jamaicans, Guyanese to other Guyanese, and so on. In *Small Island* and her earlier novels, Andrea Levy is interested in the duality that comes from looking back to the



(Above) A Jamaican family planning to emigrate to England, 2 August 1962 (*Science and Society/ NMPFT Daily Herald Archive*).

(Left) Girl asleep in her father's arms, Victoria Station, London, 1962 (*Science and Society/ NMPFT Daily Herald Archive*).

past and the old country, and forward to the future and the new, and in the sometimes contradictory, sometimes complementary notions of what is meant by 'home' and 'identity' that result from this.

One source of potential conflict and confusion for those attempting to settle in Britain was education, once a bedrock of Caribbean aspirations. Caribbean children had largely been taught in small, well-disciplined schools with lessons based on the British system of education. Having English as their first language and a familiarity with the British curriculum, the children should have settled in well on arrival in Britain. However, the large, impersonal inner-city schools were daunting and the unfamiliar Caribbean dialects led teachers to assume the children were ignorant or lazy because they spoke 'bad English'. As a result of this misunderstanding, a disproportionate number of black Caribbean children were classified as 'educationally subnormal'.



Fireman on the 'Neil Gow' steam locomotive, 17 May 1962. *Science and Society*(Colin T Gifford).

Near the climax of *Small Island*, Gilbert gives an impassioned speech to the hostile Bernard about their common bonds as ex-servicemen. Hortense, who previously despaired of what she considered Gilbert's coarse manners and his 'rough Jamaican way' of talking, is impressed. In her narration she says:

Gilbert had hushed the room. It was not only Mr Bligh whose mouth gaped in wonder... For at that moment Gilbert stood, his chest panting with the passion from his words, I realised that Gilbert Joseph, my husband, was a man of class, a man of character, a man of intelligence. Noble in a way that would some day make him a legend. 'Gilbert Joseph,' everyone would shout. 'Have you heard about Gilbert Joseph?'

She is soon to be disillusioned as Mr Bligh says softly: 'I'm sorry... but I just can't understand a single word that you're saying.'

Hortense herself, with her overly formal language and exaggerated 'received English', is similarly adrift among the British. She is disgusted by the white working-class speech but is disconcerted when she constantly has to repeat herself in order to be understood – she who was 'top of the class in Miss Stuart's English pronunciation competition' and whose recitation of Keats' 'Ode to a Nightingale' earned her 'the honour of ringing the school bell for one week'. Failure to communicate, either because of differences in language and background or because the characters are unable to articulate their true feelings, is a theme which runs through *Small Island*, providing a source of humour but also of sadness.