

# The Windrush Generation

There has been a black presence in Britain for thousands of years. Black people originally came to the country as merchant seamen, servants, slaves, stokers, labourers, artists, students and entertainers, and as sailors, soldiers and airmen during the two World Wars. Many stayed on and black communities developed in isolated pockets in cities such as Cardiff, Liverpool and London during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.



Waiting to disembark at Tilbury Docks, 1948 (Science and Society/NMPFT Daily Herald Archive).



A Musical Club, 1808, artist unknown (© The Royal Institution of Cornwall: PEemi001). The black musician depicted here is thought to be the composer Joseph Emidy who lived in Falmouth and was a former slave. He was born in Guinea, West Africa in 1775. He died in 1835 and is buried in Truro.

The 1948 Nationality Act marked the beginning of a new era in black immigration as it stated that every Commonwealth citizen was also a British subject and, therefore, guaranteed the right of entry to the United Kingdom. An 'open door' immigration policy remained until 1962 when the Commonwealth Immigrants Act introduced a quota system and restricted admission to those holding employment vouchers. During the early post-war period, the number of immigrants arriving from the Caribbean each year was in the low hundreds and this did not increase significantly until the mid-1950s when the McCarren-Walter Act limited immigration to the USA, the preferred destination for many.

In June 1948 the British troopship *ss Empire Windrush* arrived at Tilbury Docks in Kent carrying 492 civilian passengers from Jamaica, including Andrea Levy's father. Many of these Jamaicans were young men who had served with the Allied Forces in Europe during the war and were keen to return, having had a glimpse of the opportunities Britain could offer.

Few expected to remain in Britain for longer than five years, but in the event most stayed on and settled here and were later joined by their wives and families. In *Small Island*, Hortense joins Gilbert a few months after his arrival, expecting him to have sorted out suitable accommodation that will be in keeping with her lofty expectations of the British way of life. She is shocked by the squalor of the attic room he is renting in Queenie's house, failing to appreciate that this is the best he is able to provide in difficult circumstances. In his frustration Gilbert tells her:

**This room is where you will sleep, eat, cook, dress, and write your mummy to tell her how the Mother Country is so fine. And, little Miss High-class, one thing about England you don't know yet because you just come off a boat. You are lucky.**

Author Mike Phillips has written that the early migrants' mood 'veered between regret and expectation, but largely, attitudes were hopeful and optimistic'. Phillips continues:

Caribbean migration to Britain was simply the logical conclusion of Caribbean history and Caribbean life up to the midpoint of the 20th century. The historical, economic, social, cultural and linguistic relationship with Britain had created and shaped the region. The hopeless economic conditions of the islands pushed its people outwards rather than holding them in place, and for a group of nations, which had been called into existence by Britain, migration to Britain was, in a sense, like coming home.

*Small Island's* Gilbert had already experienced British life during the war and was aware that the Mother Country was not the paradise the people in the colonies had been led to believe. The food was bland, the skies grey, the people dreary, he was stared at in the street and called abusive names, and although he had been taught everything there was to know about Britain in school, no one here even knew where Jamaica was or



showed any interest in finding out about it. Having unquestioningly answered the call to defend her, he describes his shock at first seeing the shabbiness of the Mother Country:

The filthy tramp that eventually greets you is she. Ragged, old and dusty as the long dead. Mother has a blackened eye, bad breath and one lone tooth that waves in her head when she speaks. Can this be that fabled relation you heard so much of? This twisted-crooked weary woman. This stinking cantankerous hag. She offers you no comfort after your journey. No smile. No welcome. Yet she looks down at you through lordly eyes and says, 'Who the bloody hell are you?'

He is also soon to learn on his return in 1948 that his RAF uniform and the wartime spirit had previously shielded him from the worst excesses of British racism. Yet despite the bleakness of the present situation, he is unable to leave as there is nothing to go back to, even if he could afford the fare. He remembers too well the disappointment of returning to Jamaica after the war:

... instead of being joyous at this demob I looked around me quizzical as a jilted lover. So, that was it. Now what? With alarm I became aware that the island of Jamaica was no universe: it ran only a few miles before it fell into the sea. In that moment, standing tall on Kingston harbour, I was shocked by the awful realisation that, man, we Jamaicans are all small islanders too!

*(Left) The arrival of the Windrush at Tilbury Docks, Essex, 22 June 1948 (Science and Society/NMPFT Daily Herald Archive).*

*(Right) Young Jamaican boy looking after his family's luggage, September 1954 (Science and Society/NMPFT Daily Herald Archive).*

