Windrush Legends & Legacy

HMT Empire Windrush docked at Tilbury in Essex on 21 June 1948. The following day, 492 British subjects from the Caribbean were among the 1027 passengers who alighted to start new lives in the country identified as their motherland.

The ship was travelling from Australia to England via the Atlantic and docked in Kingston, Jamaica, to pick up service men and women who were on leave. It was far from full, and an advertisement was placed in Jamaican newspaper 'The Daily Gleaner', offering cheap transport to those wanting work in the UK.

With the promise of prosperity and employment, Windrush passengers brought with them a wide range of trades and skills. Most paid a fare of £28 10s and they included mechanics, carpenters, tailors, engineers, welders and musicians. There were two stowaways on board and, with the presence of calypso artists Lord Kitchener and Lord Beginner, the atmosphere on the voyage was reported as jolly, boisterous and hopeful.

The majority of the new arrivals from the Caribbean were male, and many were veterans who had fought for Britain in the Second World War. More than 10,000 West Indians had volunteered to fight against Hitler and thousands more served as merchant seamen. The RAF recruited more people from the Caribbean than any other part of the British Empire, with around 400 air crew and 6,000 ground staff.

The arrival of the Empire Windrush is heralded as the beginning of muti-culturalism in this country, but there was a greater black presence in Britain in 1944 than in 1948. Around 130,000 African American GIs were stationed here, in addition to the service men and women from British colonies.

At the end of the war in 1945, the British workforce was decimated. The new Labour government looked to citizens from the colonies and from Europe to rebuild the country and regenerate the labour market. There was a particular need for workers in its newly formed National Health Service.

That year, a Pan-African Congress took place in Manchester, instigated by George Padmore. An open letter was addresed to the new Prime Minister Clement Attlee. It read "We wish to welcome Labour's great victory, for which we, as colonials, have hoped and worked alongside Britain's workers."

In 1948, the British Nationality Act granted the status of British Subject to citizens of the UK and Colonies, stating that "the expression 'British Subject' and the expression 'Commonwealth Citizen' shall have the same meaning."

Four years earlier, major hurricanes in the Atlantic had had a disastrous effect on the Caribbean's agricultural economy and this, combined with wartime experience of travel, contributed to the decision of many newly-acknowledged British subjects to take up the invitation to find work abroad.

The 'Windrush Generation' referred to today are the people who emigrated from the Caribbean to Britain between the arrival of the Empire Windrush and the passing of the 1971 Immigration Act, which ended large scale immigration from the Commonwealth.

Windrush Legends & Legacy celebrates local stories of members of the Windrush Generation and their descendants in Haringey. They are stories of commitment and contribution to democracy, education, business, culture and general life in the borough, often with far greater significance beyond.