

## Let Me Tell You

The 1940's and 1950's were an important time in regards to the immigration of the first non-white British people to Britain. The feelings of those who immigrated from the commonwealth are often overlooked and so I went out and investigated what people felt about the time it happened.

Many of the people who immigrated from the commonwealth came over with the intention of earning money for a better life than what they had in their native countries. Some of them wanted to go back after a certain time period, but many of them remained in Britain, started families and settled down. Where many of those that came over were seeking better lives, the "...Conservative Governments of the 1940s and 1950s were racist" towards them for a number of reasons. One of the most obvious reasons was that a lot of those who came over ended up in jobs straight away and this angered the British public. However, the jobs that were being distributed were the jobs that the British people did not want to do, so therefore they couldn't justly complain about it. However, there was an increasing demand for labour in Britain anyway.

I spoke to my very own grandmother who currently resides in Highgate, just outside Islington; about what her views were when she entered the country in the early 1960's on what type of reception she received. "It wasn't nothing special really", she started off by saying with the Trinidadian accent she has kept since moving to London from Trinidad. "People were used to it... a minority could be a bit racist but it wasn't anything to worry about." Even though it was a long time ago, it really touched me to know that she was strong enough and broad minded enough to rise above anything that wasn't what she believed in. "I made a lot of friends but as I worked in a factory, I was around Greek people a lot of the time. They had been in England just before me and I think they had come for a better life. I don't think I can say I came for a better life, as the one I had in Trinidad was great and if I could go back and live I would". Confused I was until she added shortly after, "It was better opportunities I come for. I felt as if I would be able to do more in England than in Trinidad and by seeing what England had to offer I went back and brought my youngest daughter over with me after a while."

As for those who were born here or those who emigrated here all of the stories were quite similar. There are famous individuals such as Andrea Levy the writer, Lenny Henry the comedian and Diane Abbot the politician who all grew up during that period. Lenny Henry, whose family emigrated here in the 1950's was one of only three black boys in his school and remembers being "different" and noticed. He is now one of Britain's most loved comedians and television figures and works tirelessly for the charity comic relief. Andrea has written various novels and the one published in 2004, titled 'Small Island' is a story about learning to be British in a land where British used to mean white. She also talks about the discrimination her parents faced and how they became used to tolerating it. Britain was seen in the commonwealth as 'the mother country' or the 'motherland' which shaped the life of the colonies and the lives of those who came over here. Most of those in the commonwealth thought of Britain as being all rosy and good before they actually arrived and faced the cold smoggy conditions.

Even though most of those who emigrated from the commonwealth came over here for work and a better life, not all of them gained jobs right away. For some it took up to six weeks before they were able to find work. There seemed to be a lot of mixed emotions between those who came over here as Rennie Gray, who came over when he was 17, explained that in Jamaica “...there was more freedom, you were a bit happier”.

Brenda May Gordon, who came to England in the 1950’s, was “anxious” before her journey to England but described it as “luxurious” as she came by plane which was paid for by her husband-to-be who had travelled to England by boat before her. She recalls getting on a train to Huddersfield and watching the sunset and children playing outside. Her only reasons for not returning to Kingston, Jamaica to live was because she didn’t know if Winston, her husband “...had any idea how to cultivate the land” in Jamaica as it was hard work to do so.

James Alcide talks about how he came to England on his own for economic reasons but his first job wasn’t a highly paid one and was about the same amount he would have been earning if he stayed in St Lucia. Shockingly, he said that “In London we found places where it said, ‘No Blacks, No Dogs Allowed’”. The Irish and the Jewish which he made friends with more so than the English had received the same treatment when they first came over to England. The worst memory that he remembers is when he “went to Hopkinson’s, and the chap told me point blank, ‘we don’t employ Black people’”. According to the guy, he could get away with it.

All in all, ‘let me tell you’, all of the experiences of those who immigrated here between the 1940’s and 1950’s were quite similar, with nearly all of them sharing the same idea of seeking a better economic life. Racism did exist but it didn’t really faze the immigrants as they most probably expected it in some ways. If it wasn’t for the Windrush and those who travelled here after it, Britain wouldn’t be what it is today.