

WINDRUSH: BEFORE 22 JUNE 1948

Windrush Foundation focuses on events in Britain mainly from 22 June 1948, but this summary paper highlights the experiences of very many people of Caribbean heritage before then.

After WWII ended on 8 May 1945, more than three thousand Caribbean men decided to remain in Britain. Windrush Foundation includes them among the early Windrush Generation, in terms of their goals and expectations, which were no different from those who arrived on 22 June 1948. They were the ones who advised relatives and colleagues back home to move to the UK, even though life was not easy for them in the mother country. I spoke with 'Jimmy' Leigh, a WWII RAF serviceman and a Windrush passenger, who confirmed this. After arriving on 22 June 1948, he immediately went to stay with colleagues in West Bromwich, West Midlands. George McPherson, age 17 in 1948, who had never left Jamaica before then, had friends also in the West Midlands. They were all members of the early generation who laid the foundation for those who arrived here later.

Faced with a great labour-shortage, estimated at 1,346,000 at the end of 1946, it was the government's intention to obtain ex-prisoners of war, Polish ex-servicemen, and eventually the European Voluntary Workers (EVW) scheme, as workers.

"This scheme sought to recruit displaced persons, between 1947 and the early 1950s, in an effort to alleviate the severe labour shortage in Britain, and aid those made homeless during World War II. The programme was deeply discriminatory and, given the EVWs' status as aliens, they could be directed to, and kept within, certain understaffed, and frequently undesirable, sectors of employment. This status clearly differentiated them from Caribbean migrants, who, as British citizens, were exempt from such controls..."

Thousands of Caribbean workers had contributed to the war effort either as volunteers in the armed forces or technicians, and while some remained, the majority were demobbed and returned to the colonies. The housing of a number of the new settlers in the vicinity of their employment was organised by the National Service Hostels Corporation (NSHC), which was set up by the Ministry of Labour and National Service in 1941.

NSHC Disturbances

"The records of the NSHC report disturbances at their hostels from 1946. The West Bromwich hostel, home to predominantly Irish and Caribbean tenants, witnessed some disorder on 25 December 1946, instigated by the Irishmen's dislike of black men dancing with white female members of staff at the Christmas party:

31st December, 1946.

West Bromwich Hostel.
West Indian Residents.

We continue to have a certain amount of trouble at West Bromwich owing to our having 70 West Indians in this hostel. The trouble arises largely owing to the fact that the West Indians dance a good deal with the female members of the staff and this leads to strong feelings on the part, principally, of the Irish residents.

The Manager has had to call in the police on a number of occasions to stop fights and to avoid serious injury. It is necessary to mention that plain hints have been dropped by the West Indians that they intend to protect themselves and in doing so they may resort to the use of lethal weapons.

NSHC correspondence. Catalogue ref: LAB 26/198, 31 December 1946

Letchworth Hostel in Hertfordshire saw a disturbance in late February 1947, following, 'a "round robin" signed by 350 white trainees demanding the instant removal of all black personnel from the Centre.'

Letchworth Government Training Centre

Trouble has flared up between black and white in the Canteen at the Letchworth G.T.C., followed by a "round-robin" signed by 350 white trainees demanding the instant removal of all black personnel from the Centre. Mr. Pillinger, A.R.C., accompanied by Mr. Hawkins and others, with Mr. Hedley, the Hostels' Corporation Hostel Manager, and Mr. Ward, the G.T.C. Assistant Manager, have spent all day Tuesday, 25th February, in session at Letchworth seeking to vacate the rival factions. Ft. Lieut. Howard Maclaren of the Colonial Office joined in in the afternoon at my suggestion. No report of events is yet to hand.

It is believed that the initiation lay with a white extremist and in the melee iron bars were thrown as weapons and some cuts and bruises ensued. I informed Mr. Pillinger and Mr. Hawkins that we were strongly opposed to yielding to a policy of segregation. A suggestion that West Indians should be sent to Hanlow Camp was made. This is now a Maintenance Unit, seven miles away, and the Air Ministry have refused to let these West Indians, who have been released for training, continue in their camps as they are no longer under Service discipline, and rely solely on the civilian set-up for pay and allowances, etc.

NSHC correspondence. Catalogue ref: LAB 26/198, 26 February 1947

"The Greenbanks Hostel in Leeds faced trouble on the 25 January 1948, where, in the words of the manager, 'The cause appears to be racial prejudice – black men associating with white women'. Disturbances had previously been recorded there in September and December 1947. The Sherburn-in-Elmet Hostel, Yorkshire, records a disturbance on the 30 November 1947, as well as a number of other 'outbreaks of one kind or another' Three months later, problems arose at Pontefract Hostel in Yorkshire..."

<https://blog.nationalarchives.gov.uk/before-notting-hill-causeway-green-and-britains-anti-black-hostel-riots/>

Arthur Torrington, Director, Windrush Foundation, July 2020.