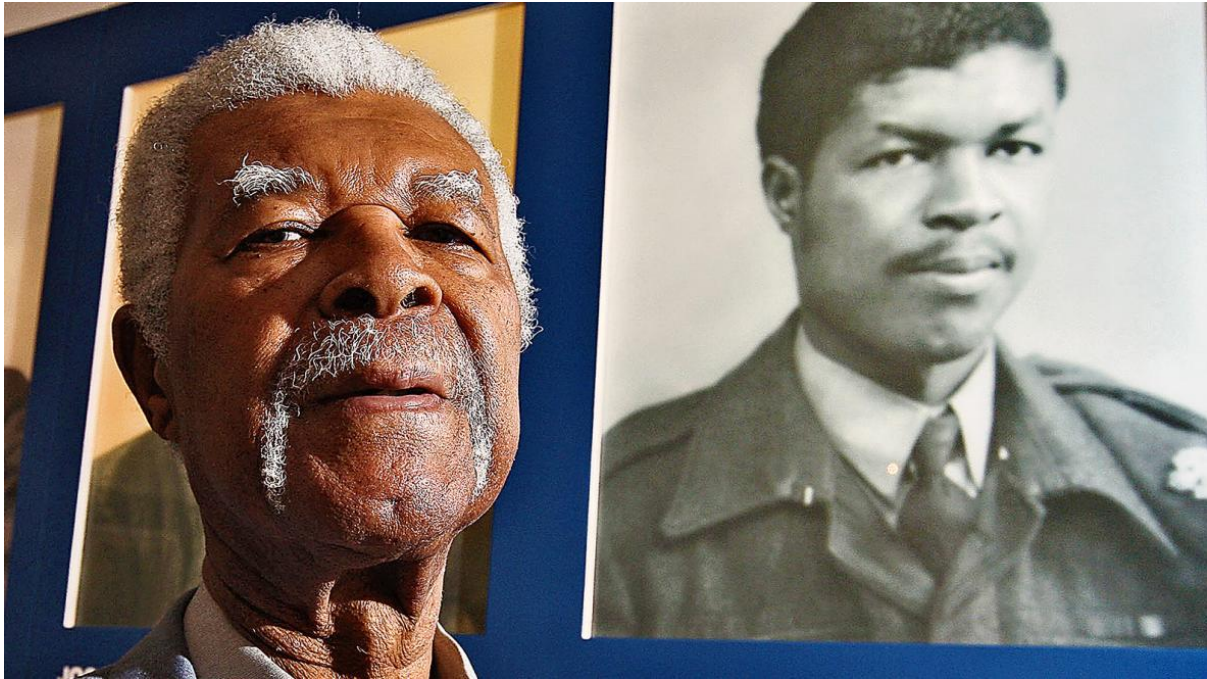


Sam King

Creator of the Windrush Foundation who helped West Indian immigrants and became mayor of Southwark

Monday June 20 2016, 12.01am, The Times



King at the launch of the War to Windrush exhibition at the Imperial War Museum in 2008. He served with the RAF

GETTY IMAGES

Sam King was one of 492 Jamaicans who arrived at Tilbury Docks on *Empire Windrush* in 1948 and went on to be an inspiration to many of the 250,000 West Indians who followed him across the Atlantic.

Anxious young people setting out to start a new life in Britain were advised, “All you have to do when you get there is go to Sam King. He will work it out.”

Decades later King formed the Windrush Foundation. His personal crusade was to give the ship the same significance as the *Mayflower*, which had taken British immigrants to the New World in 1620. The foundation collected and preserved the recollections of the first generation of immigrants, while King himself gave hundreds of talks in schools about the prejudice he had faced on arrival in Britain. He came to be known as “Mr Windrush”.

Tall and handsome with a curling white moustache, the gentlemanly King would wear a shirt and tie just to go out for a walk. He always addressed women as “Ma’am”. He had a powerful voice and proved immensely popular as a speaker. He recalled racism with levity, never portrayed himself as a victim, and encouraged children to aspire to anything they wanted to be professionally through hard work and dedication.

King first arrived in Britain in 1944 to join the RAF after his mother had told him to “go and help the mother country”. He recalled leaving Jamaica on a hot day and arriving in Greenock. “It was so cold, I thought I was going to die.”

“

He endured many hardships in Britain but laughed them off

Sam Beaver King was born one of ten siblings at Priestman’s River in Portland, eastern Jamaica, in 1926. His father ran a banana farm and Sam was expected to take it over. The war intervened. At the age of 18 he trained as an engineer and was stationed at RAF Hawkinge near Folkestone, where he repaired bombers.

He was treated differently after the war ended. “When we were in uniform we were reasonably respected. When the war was over people said, ‘What are you doing here? You should go home’.” King was demobilised and returned to Jamaica in November 1947. He struggled to adapt to life back on the farm.

After five months, he paid £28 and 10 shillings (about £1,000 at today’s prices) to secure his passage on *Empire Windrush*, a former troopship. After the ship set sail, a female stowaway was found, and King and several others used some of the money they had saved for their new life to pay for her passage.

He recalled being served tinned mashed potato for lunch. “If you didn’t eat it, they would serve it in the evening mixed with cabbage. If you didn’t eat it then, they would serve it fried in the morning as bubble and squeak.”

The cabins were reserved for the women; the men huddled on deck under blankets. They would play dominoes and stage boxing competitions or impromptu dances. After dinner, groups would gather round King to ask him questions because he had already been to Britain.

King rejoined the RAF, but found civilian accommodation was the biggest challenge. At the first place he visited he was greeted with a sign that would become depressingly familiar: “Room to let. No Irish, No Coloureds, No Dogs.”

When he found a place there was no bath. Like many fellow Jamaicans, he relied on the public baths of Camberwell and Brixton, queueing for half an hour on Friday evenings.

He was determined to buy his own house and became only the second West Indian in London to do so when he took the deeds to a property in Sears Road, Camberwell. The manager at his local bank had refused to give him a mortgage even though he had a job and saved up for a deposit. The rejection letter advised him to “go back to the colonies”. The RAF lent him the money to be repaid in ten years. King paid it back in five.

Married in 1952, King’s wife, Mavis Kirley, had left her family’s sugar plantation in Jamaica to train as a nurse. They had two children: Michael, who works in property services, and Althea, who was the first head girl of Dulwich Hamlet School and is now a community worker. One of his nephews is Ledley King, who played professional football for Tottenham Hotspur and England.



Sam King spent some of his savings paying the fare of a female stowaway
TIMES NEWSPAPERS LTD

King decided to leave the RAF and become a policeman. He had had little schooling in Jamaica but, with the aid of private study and his RAF training, he passed the entry exam. When he came before the selection panel he was accused of wanting “easy money”. A few days later he received a rejection letter. He became a postman and worked for the Royal Mail for the next 34 years.

All the while, he kept in touch with his fellow passengers from the *Windrush*, sending postcards every year. As such a well-connected figure, he was a highly effective treasurer of the Caribbean Carnival, a forerunner of the Notting Hill Carnival.

The festival was founded by Claudia Jones, editor of the *West Indian Gazette*, to promote better race relations after the Notting Hill race riots in 1958. King used all his contacts to raise money for the first carnival to be held at St Pancras Hall on January 31, 1959. It was held every year until 1964. The Notting Hill Carnival started in 1966.

Always active in local affairs, King was a “moderate socialist” and a member of the Labour group in Southwark. To his amazement he was told in 1983 that the party wanted to put him up as a candidate to become Southwark’s first black mayor. He got more votes than the other two candidates put together. His wife, whom he called his “best friend”, persuaded him to accept the nomination. She said: “Sam, you’re disciplined, you’re capable and you can do anything.”

She died soon afterwards of cancer. When King took the chain of office, he received death threats. Mary Bailey, a local candidate for the National Front, was convicted of racially abusing him and sentenced to five days in prison. He detected signs of change when a local police commissioner asked for his advice on how to encourage more black people to join the Metropolitan Police.

One of his initiatives was to start up a black gospel radio station in Brixton. He raised £80,000 for the venture, and promised on occasions to stand in as a disc jockey himself. When doubts were raised over whether Leon Britton, the home secretary, would grant it a licence, King, a devout pentecostal Christian, responded with biblical language. “The Pharaoh,” he said, “cannot keep us from bringing the music to the people, no more than the king of Egypt could keep God’s people from the Promised Land.”

After the death of Mavis, he married Mertle Kirlew, a distant cousin of his first wife, a teacher who was a fellow parishioner at the Church of the First Born in Brixton.

In later years King campaigned for June 22 — the anniversary of *Windrush*'s arrival at Tilbury — to be made a public holiday to mark the contributions of immigrants to British society. Paying tribute to him, the Labour MP Diane Abbott said: “Someone like myself, who was fortunate to become an MP, stands on the shoulders of people like Sam King.”

He had endured many hardships to settle in Britain but laughed them off because he believed that later generations would benefit. “We came here to stay,” he said, “and in the long run it’s been a success story.”

Sam King, MBE, founder of the Windrush Society, was born on February 20, 1926. He died on June 17, 2016, aged 90

<https://www.thetimes.com/uk/article/sam-king-2dhdpn9rh>