

## Colonization in Reverse: How the Windrush Generation Rebuilt Post-War Britain

On 4 December 2000, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), taking into account the large and increasing number of migrants in the world, proclaimed December 18 as International Migrants Day. The day was selected to mark the anniversary of the 1990 adoption by the UNGA of the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights all Migrants and the Members of Their Families. With over two million individuals in the Jamaican Diaspora and the majority residing in the United Kingdom (UK), it is important that we acknowledge the sacrifices they have made to seek a better life for themselves and their families, after leaving home to forge a new path in the unknown.

*What a joyful news, Miss Mattie*

*I feel like me heart gwine burs*

*Jamaica people colonize*

*Englan in reverse,*

*By de hundred, by de tousan*

*From country and from town,*

*By de ship-load, by de plane load,*

*Jamaica is Englan boun.*

The above is an excerpt from renowned Jamaican folklorist Louise Bennett-Coverley's 1966 poem "Colonization in Reverse", which describes the mass exodus of Jamaicans to the UK between 1948 and 1971. Due to the labour shortages in the health and transport services at the end of the Second World War, officials from London, in desperate need of a work force that could not be replenished by its own people, turned to the 'New Commonwealth' (i.e., colonies like Barbados and Jamaica), and set up offices there to entice West Indians to migrate. It was this first wave of immigrants that we now know as the 'Windrush Generation'. 'Windrush' refers to the ship, *MV Empire Windrush*, which brought workers from Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, and other islands, heralding almost three decades of continued migration from the Caribbean to the UK.

The Daily Gleaner, on 15 April 1948, advertised "Passenger Opportunity to United Kingdom" on the troopship *Empire Windrush*. Fares ranged from £28 to £48, a princely sum for many who wished to

travel to the UK in search of a better life. Despite the high price, another article published on May 14 of the same year estimated that the number of deck tickets bought reached three hundred and eighty-one. Most of those hurrying to book a passage were young Jamaicans with the same story: "Conditions anywhere else must be better than they are in Jamaica." People – mainly young – left the Caribbean for a range of reasons. However, they were primarily attracted by job vacancies in the UK and were also seeking new opportunities for a different life. Some left to escape societal oppression, to evade familial restrictions or to escape poverty; others found the decision to leave harder than they had imagined as, for many, it involved leaving close family and friends behind.

Four hundred and ninety-two passengers made up that initial voyage that docked in Tilbury, Essex on 22 June 1948, signaling the start of the Windrush Generation. Many consider the arrival of the Windrush a significant moment in the development of a multicultural Great Britain, a melting pot of different peoples and cultural backgrounds, all trying their best to navigate this new and unforgiving place. From 1948 to 1952, between one thousand two hundred people entered Britain each year but, by 1961 – according to the national population census – the number of people living in England and Wales who were born in the Caribbean was just over one hundred and sixty-one thousand to ninety thousand men and just over seventy-one thousand women.

As stated before, men and women were needed to rebuild an economy weakened by the war years, especially in those sectors crucial to the reconstruction programme, which included the production of the raw materials, such as iron, steel, coal and food. In the service sector, both male and female workers were needed to run public transport and to staff the National Health Service (NHS). Most Caribbean men found jobs in manufacturing, construction, as well as public transport, and Caribbean women found employment in the NHS as nurses and nursing aides, in public transport and in manufacturing, especially in the growing white goods (appliance) industries. Despite possessing some skill and excellent employment credentials, many were restricted to jobs that the local population considered undesirable, including street cleaning and general labouring, or to jobs that demanded antisocial hours such as working night shifts. Over half of the men from the Caribbean initially accepted jobs with a lower status than their skills and experience qualified them for, and was restricted from opportunities for promotion and access to better paid jobs with greater responsibility and prospects. However, these early post-war workers made a huge contribution to the British economy and economic growth, not only in the immediate post-war period but also over decades of continuous employment. As the British economy recovered, the demand for both skilled and unskilled labour continued to grow throughout the 1950s.

Employers and managers began to recruit from the Caribbean, paying workers' fares to the UK and then recovering them through a deduction from their wages – a common practice that tied economic migration to particular employment and which continued throughout the succeeding years.

Despite their contributions to the rebuilding of the UK, those who travelled in the Windrush Generation faced harsh prejudice from the wider British society. Even with a difficult work environment, West Indian migrants continued to take pride in their work because they were determined to achieve the goals they set for themselves when they initially travelled to Britain. After seven decades, West Indian migrants continue to be key contributors to British economic growth and to a substantial shift in British culture and social attitudes.



Jamaican migrants arriving at Tilbury Dock Essex on 22 June 1948 being briefed by English officials

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