

Immigration stories

Here is the story of one of the early Jamaican immigrants to Britain.

My journey to England

I was born in the district of Belvedere, in the parish of Westmoreland, County of Cornwall, Jamaica, West Indies on the 28th September 1931. I was the eldest of four children; there were two boys and two girls. I went to a small infant school in Belvedere. At the age of seven, I went to the Kew Park elementary school until I was 15. After school I went to work for the Local Government, checking stones which were used for road building, for the public works department. I then worked as an Air Engine Operator at a sugar factory near Montego Bay.

On the 28th of December 1954 I boarded the Napoli, a ship that was used as a troop carrier during the Second World War, and travelled to England. Quite a few Jamaicans boarded the Napoli that day. We sailed out of the Kingston harbour at exactly 1pm. From the deck of the ship I waved goodbye to friends and relatives and sailed off into the unknown.

After leaving Jamaica our first stop was Tenerife in the Canary Islands. On the Saturday we sailed across the Azores. Six days later we reached Genoa. The following morning, Friday, we boarded a train and journeyed through France to Marseille. There was a ferry waiting to take us to Dover. In Dover we got a train into Victoria station. I stayed with a friend for a few days in Hearn Hill, South East London. The following morning I went to the Labour Exchange in Brixton. I was offered a job as a bus conductor in Huddersfield. I had just enough time for a meal and to collect my luggage. I boarded a train to Huddersfield accompanied by the Superintendent of the Huddersfield Transport Department, a Mr Barran, along with seven more recruits.

I am very proud to say I was one of the first West Indian bus conductors in Huddersfield. I have also worked in Nottingham and Derby and was called up for National Service in March 1955. Working on the Railways at the time I was exempted from military service but joined the Territorial Army.

In England I have made many friends and I have many treasured memories. I am retired now, but I still see my old friends all the time. I still remember some of the food of Jamaica, such as ackee and saltfish, curry goat and rice and peas.

Wesley Wiggan Johnson 1954

Questions

1. Why do you think Mr Johnson left Jamaica?



2. Was it easy for Mr Johnson to get a job in England?



3. What challenges did Mr Johnston face as a Jamaican in England in the 1950s?



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Age range

- Years 3/4 (SP4/5).
- Years 5/6 (SP6/7).

Resources

Copies of the worksheet.

Using the worksheet

After the war and by the end of the 1940s, there were already large numbers of foreign workers entering and settling in Britain. They came from Poland, the Ukraine, and even Germany. The 1948 Nationality Act was an important development for Caribbean migrants. It made them more than mere citizens of the Empire, effectively conferring UK citizenship to any member of Britain's colonies.

Not all white Britons welcomed the black Britons. Many found that the colour of their skins provoked unfriendly reactions. For example, despite the desperate shortage of labour some West Indians still found it difficult to get good jobs. Often they were forced to accept jobs which they were over-qualified for, or they were paid less than their white colleagues.

West Indians also experienced difficulties in finding suitable places to live. Since few had much money, they had to find cheap housing to rent near to their workplace. This was often in the poor inner-cities. Even if they did have enough money to rent better quality housing, West Indians had to face the fact that some landlords refused to rent to black people. They would be confronted with insulting signs in house windows that said 'Rooms to Let: No dogs, no coloureds'. This meant that West Indians had little choice but to rent homes in a slum.

In 1958, in areas where bigger numbers of West Indians lived, there were outbreaks of violence against them. In particular, in Nottingham and London mobs of white people attacked black people in the streets, smashing and burning their homes.

West Indians had been invited to come to Britain, so they also felt that it was their home too. To be discriminated against was a shock which they had not been prepared for. Some returned to the West Indies, but many remained – despite the difficulties they faced. They have worked hard and made a contribution to British life.

Younger students

You may like to have the students answer

the questions as part of a class discussion on immigration in the 1950s.

Mr Johnson does not give a reason for why he left Jamaica. Many people came to England in search of a better life, better work or simply for the adventure of being in a new place. You may want to remind students that there was a severe labour shortage in England at the time and so there were plenty of jobs available. But you can point out how easy it was for Mr Johnson to get a job.

The story does not say exactly what challenges Mr Johnson faced, but students can imagine what it would be like to start life over in a new place. They would have to make new friends, find a place to live, possibly put up with people being mean to them because they were different, etc. At the end of the story Mr Johnson mentions food – the immigrants would also have had to get used to different foods than they were used to – and different weather.

Outcomes

The students can:

- Understand why some immigrants may have come to the UK in the 1950s.
- Understand a little of what life was like for the early immigrants.
- Think about challenges faced by immigrants in the 1950s.

Older students

You may have the students answer the questions on their own or as part of a class discussion. Students may like to research other stories of real-life immigrants.

Outcomes

- Understand why some immigrants may have come to the UK in the 1950s.
- Understand a little of what life was like for the early immigrants.
- Think about challenges faced by immigrants in the 1950s.