

History Topic of the Month

Windrush

On 21st June 1948, the ship *Empire Windrush* docked at Tilbury near London. On board were over 800 people who had left their homes in the Caribbean. These were some of the first post-war Caribbean migrants to begin new lives and to help rebuild ones Britain.

Many of the migrants had served in the British armed forces during World War II, most of them in the RAF. They hoped to find new opportunities in Britain. Many Caribbean people felt loyal to Britain, calling it “the mother country”. Thousands of people followed the passengers of the *Windrush*.



Contributor: Contraband Collection / Alamy Stock Photo

Empire Windrush carrying Caribbean immigrants on arrival at the Port of Tilbury on the River Thames on 22 June 1948.

Why did the Windrush generation arrive?

Britain desperately needed more workers after the war. The country needed rebuilding after bombing raids, and public services like transportation – and especially the recently created NHS – required workers.

In 1948, the British Government passed an Act called the British Nationality Act. This made all citizens of the Commonwealth – like the Caribbean – British citizens, giving them the right to live and work in Britain. The government hoped this would encourage families to migrate to Great Britain to take up work.

The *Windrush* became a symbol of this new generation of West Indian migrants. Eventually the migrants who arrived between 1948 and 1972 became known as “the Windrush Generation”.

Why do people emigrate?

People move themselves and their families for many different reasons. Sometimes, it is because they feel the conditions in their ‘old’ home are bad. Other times, it is because they feel there are more opportunities in their ‘new’ home. Often people move because of a combination of these ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors.

There were all sorts of reasons why the Windrush generation moved to Britain, but they had a huge impact once they arrived.

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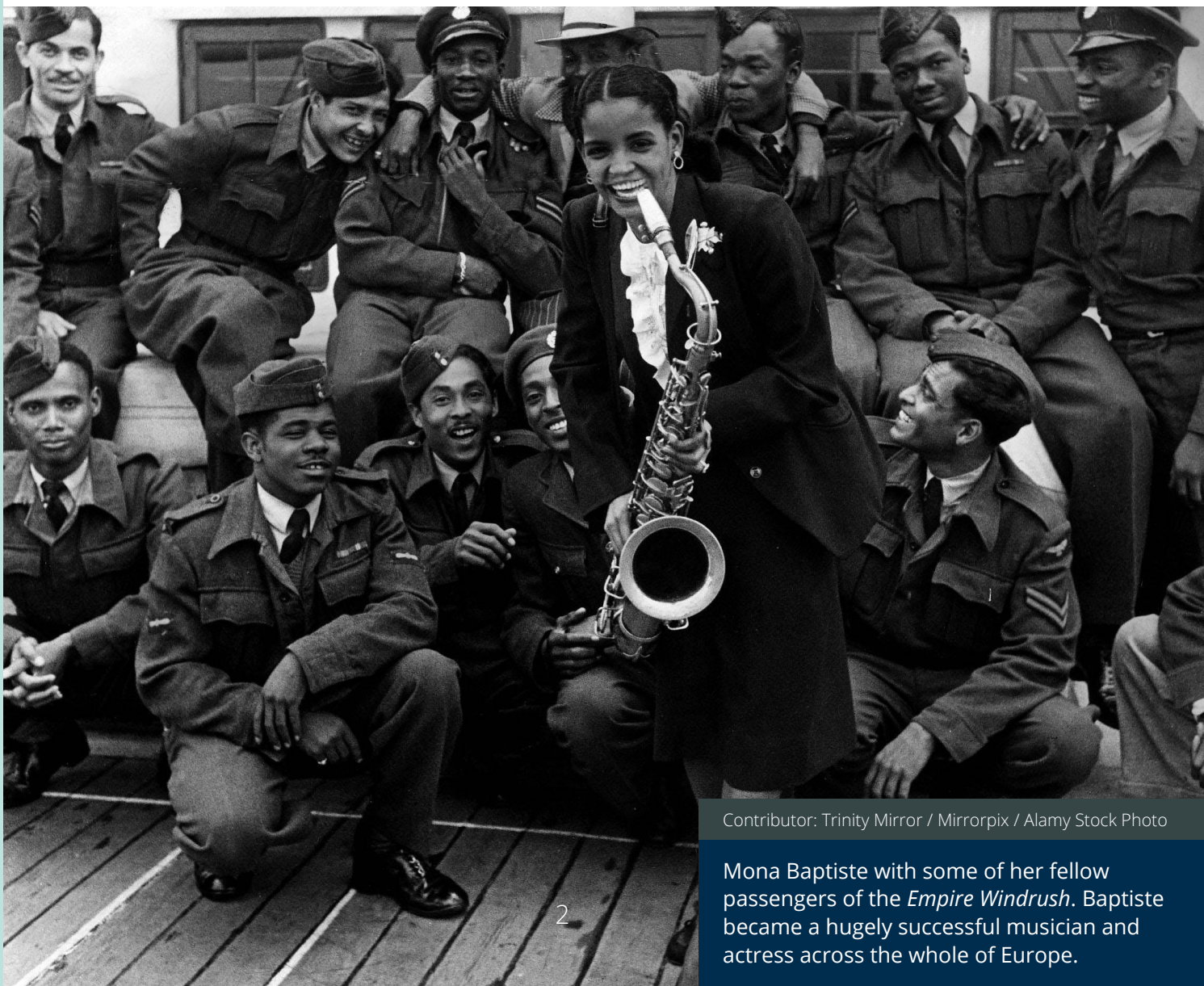


What did the Windrush Generation do when they arrived in Britain?

Many of these newly arrived people stayed in London to search for work. There was such a big demand for workers that most did not have to wait long. London Transport hired many as bus and train drivers and conductors. By the 1950s, the London Transport Executive was offering to loan migrants from Barbados their fares to Britain, so they could work for them.

The NHS recruited many of the Windrush generation as nurses, to fill its hospitals and help look after its patients. It was such a success the NHS continued to recruit doctors and nurses not only from the Caribbean but also places like India and Pakistan.

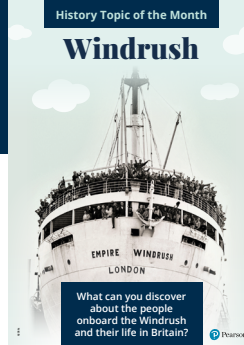
One of the most famous passengers of the *Windrush* was the musician Aldwyn Roberts HBM DA, best known by his stage name Lord Kitchener and as "the grand master of calypso". Kitchener became a regular performer on the BBC and his records were a huge success. Kitchener helped the Windrush generation find its own culture in Britain, his songs celebrating events like the West Indian Cricket team's first ever win over England.



Contributor: Trinity Mirror / Mirrorpix / Alamy Stock Photo

Mona Baptiste with some of her fellow passengers of the *Empire Windrush*. Baptiste became a hugely successful musician and actress across the whole of Europe.

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How did the British respond?

While businesses were pleased to hire new workers, they often put the immigrants in low-skill and low-paid jobs (although they were still earning more than they would in the Caribbean). It was very hard for many to get promotions, or to use the skills they had learned in the Caribbean.

The Windrush generation also found it hard to find homes. Many landlords refused to rent to West Indian migrants. This meant most had to live in cramped, dirty and expensive homes in the parts of cities where fewer people wanted to live.

Racism was something they faced every day, in the workplace and their neighbourhoods, with a sad growth in race riots and violence. Although many people in Britain were appalled about this, racism and the threat of violence was an everyday concern for many immigrants.

Windrush celebration

Racial tensions remained a problem in the country. After the race riots in Nottingham and Notting Hill in 1958, the growing Afro-Caribbean community wanted to celebrate its culture and place in British society. Trinidadian journalist and activist Claudia Jones wanted to “wash the taste...out of our mouths” of the race riots. In January 1959 she founded the first Caribbean carnival to try and bring the community in Notting Hill together.

Televised by the BBC the carnival celebrated Caribbean music and culture, including calypso and jazz, with performers like Cleo Laine. Some of the money raised from the event was used to help young people – white and black – affected by the riots in Notting Hill.



The event was a huge success, and the tradition of an annual carnival was established. It later became known as a street festival, known as the Notting Hill carnival. Today the event lasts for a whole weekend and attracts over 2 million visitors, keen to celebrate Afro-Caribbean culture and its role in British society.

Contributor: Trinity Mirror / Mirrorpix / Alamy Stock Photo

The first ever Caribbean carnival, created in response to the previous year's racial riots in the area and the state of race relations at the time.

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What is the legacy of Windrush?

Despite facing some prejudice, thousands of members of the Windrush Generation played a huge role in Britain becoming a richer and more diverse country. A British Caribbean community grew up, and descendants of the Windrush generation have become leading businessmen, politicians, entertainers and sports people.

In 2012 the British government passed a new law to control immigration. This forced many migrants to prove they had a “right to remain” in Britain. Many of the Windrush Generation – and their children – had arrived in the 1940s as citizens so they had not been asked for documents. Many people found it impossible to find the “proof” the government wanted from almost sixty years ago. Some members of the Windrush generation were no longer allowed to claim pensions and benefits. Others were arrested and deported back to countries they had not seen for sixty years.

In 2018 the Government apologised for this “Windrush Scandal” and announced an investigation. But many of the Windrush generation are still waiting for compensation.

The history of Windrush reminds us that migrants can bring many benefits to countries – but also that it can be a difficult to beat racism and prejudice.

Discussion points

- Why do you think people from the Caribbean migrated to Britain?
- How has the Windrush Generation changed Britain?
- Why are some people hostile to migrants?
- Why do you think the Windrush Scandal upset so many people?
- How did the lives of migrants change when they moved to Britain?
- Do you know where the Caribbean are? Take a look at a world map to see where the migrants travelled from.
- Sam Beaver King MBE migrated to Britain on the *Empire Windrush* in 1948. What can you find out about him?
- Evelyn Wauchope was a passenger on the *Empire Windrush*. What can you find out about her?

About the author

Alistair Nunn, Pearson's Product Manager for Humanities Teaching and Learning resources created this worksheet using various sources including Pearson's Key Stage 3 textbook *Exploring History* and the websites included in our reading list below.



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Reading list



Books

Black and British: A short, essential history
by David Olusoga (1 Oct, 2020)

Small Island
by Andrea Levy (2004)

Bloody Foreigners: The Story of Immigration to Britain
by Robert Winder (May 2013, first published 2004)

Exploring History Book 1
by Rosemary Rees, Darryl Tomlin, Simon Davis, 2017



Institutions

[The Migration Museum](#)

[The British Library](#)

[The Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants – Windrush Scandal Explained](#)

[The Postal Museum](#)

[The Windrush Foundation](#)



News items

[Who Exactly Was on the Windrush?](#)
(BBC News 21st June 2019)

[Windrush generation: Who are they and why are they facing problems?](#)
(BBC News 31 July 2020)

[Page BreakGovernment under pressure over treatment of Windrush kids](#)
Blog published 16 April 2018



Other

[What become of the windrush stowaway Evelyn Wauchope](#)