

WINDRUSH DAY

**Celebrating and commemorating
the Windrush Generation and
their contribution to British life.**

THE NHS.



In 1949 the Ministries of Health and Labour, the Colonial Office, the General Nursing Council and the Royal College of Nursing began a deliberate policy of recruiting from the West Indies

Recruitment was aimed at hospital auxiliary staff (orderlies, receptionists, cooks and telephonists), nurses or trainee nurses and domestic staff such as laundry workers, cooks and maids.

During the late 1940s and '50s papers such as the "Barbados Advocate" ran advertisements inviting young female students to apply for nursing training in the UK. Destinations included hospitals from Bristol and Cardiff, to Edinburgh, London and Manchester. Applicants had to be 18 - 30, literate and prepared to sign a 3 year contract.

In 1951 Florence Udell, Colonial Office Chief Nursing Officer met with officials in the Caribbean to recruit and select candidates for British hospitals.

Nurses would be trained to work in the UK and to develop health services in the West Indies. By 1955 there were 16 regional recruitment schemes across the Caribbean. British hospital and hospital boards also advertised directly.

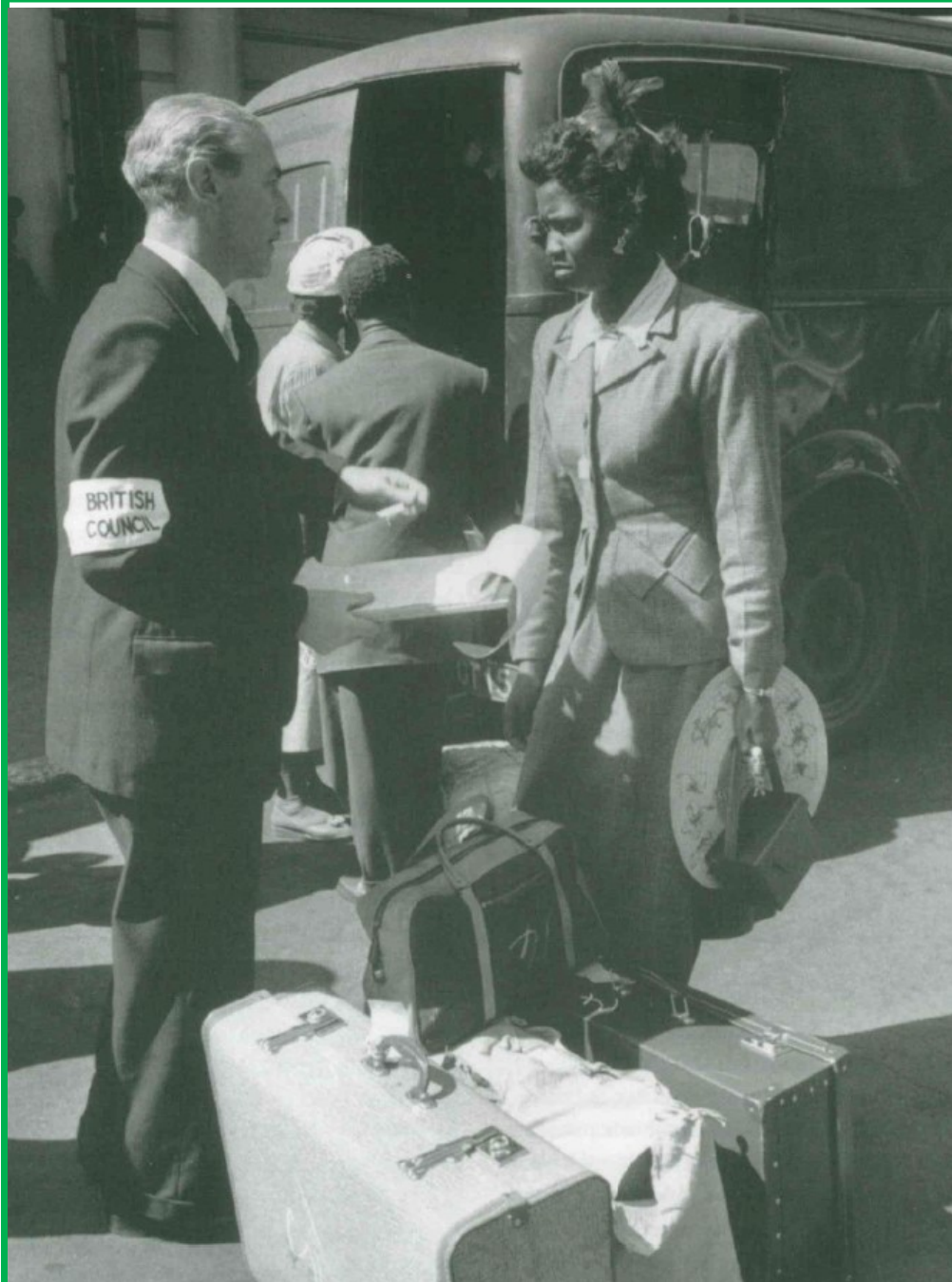


British Council worker helping West Indian women along the platform at Victoria Station, 1956.

Thousands of West Indian women travelled to the UK to join the health service, travelling by plane or ship, sometimes for up to three weeks. Some already had posts waiting in specific hospitals, whilst others were posted or submitted applications on arrival. First impressions could be daunting from the grey, cold climate, to bland food and housing of varying standards (some still affected by wartime bomb damage.)

Some fortunate new arrivals were met by friends and relatives. From 1950 those without contacts were assisted by the British Council. Hospital matrons were also known to welcome students arriving at railway stations, however many recruits were left to make their own way to their training hospital.

(Picture: Picture Post)



A British Council worker talking to a West Indian immigrant at Victoria Station, 1953.

By 1956 Caribbean women wanting to undertake nursing training the UK had to be 19 - 30, qualified to matriculation level (equivalent to modern GCSEs) and English speaking.

Most candidates either responded to advertisements or applied directly to matrons in British NHS hospitals. Written applications were sent to a selection board, together with testimonials or references.

Successful applicants had an interview and some had to do a preliminary General Nursing Council training course. Application forms were approved by the Colonial Office in Britain.

There was some government sponsorship but most recruits paid their own travel fares and training expenses, often helped by their families. From 1955 the British government offered travel loans but these had to be repaid in weekly instalments.

(Picture : Picture Post)



Prize-winning student nurses in south London, 1954.

Nurses were recruited throughout the British Commonwealth but during the 1950s and '60s the majority came from the West Indies. There are no exact figures for 1949-69, however by 1954 over 3000 Caribbean women were training in British hospitals and union figures from 1968 refer to over 6450 West Indian trainees.

300-600 Commonwealth nurses are said to have arrived each year between 1964 and 1967 but thousands more came to be trained in the UK as nurses or midwives. Of the 16,745 trainees who arrived in 1966-7, nearly 75% were from the Caribbean.

(Picture: BlackHistory365)



West Indian nurses meeting a visiting dignitary at a British hospital, 1962.

The majority of Caribbean nurses came from Barbados, Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago, however there were also recruits from St. Lucia, St. Vincent and British Guiana (now Guyana.) Many had wanted to be nurses from childhood, sometimes influenced by family members with medical experience. The majority of trainees had undergone secondary education and were in their late teens or early twenties when they travelled to the UK. However some were as young as 15 when they made the 4000 mile journey.

(Picture: Merseycare NHS)



A Caribbean nurse pictured with a young patient at Christmas time, Wembley Hospital, 1950s.

The first generation of Caribbean health workers were trailblazers. Through determination, initiative and hard work they not only overcame the challenges of a new life and career but also prejudice and discrimination. With the encouragement of family, work colleagues and friendly senior staff they were prepared to seek further training and apply for posts in a range of hospitals to develop their careers. As matrons, midwives, health visitors and specialists they made an invaluable contribution to the NHS. They also paved the way for future generations of health care workers, established support groups and helped to raise awareness of ethnic health issues such as sickle cell anaemia.

(Picture: Brent Archives)



Practical nursing class, Mile End Hospital, 1960s.

There were limited opportunities for those wishing to follow a medical career in the Caribbean. It was hard to gain the necessary higher qualifications and promotional opportunities were often skewed in favour of white British expats, who held most of the senior positions. Since Britain offered the chance to become qualified whilst also gaining work experience, relatives often encouraged young people to emigrate. Many trainees intended to return to the Caribbean once they had progressed in their career, however 70% of those who joined the NHS between 1948 and 1969 settled permanently in Britain. They were not only dedicated to their work but developed a love of the country and started families of their own in the UK.

(Picture: Royal London Hospital Archive)



**Student nurse at St. Clement's Hospital
psychiatric unit, Bow. London c.1970.**

Some student nurses felt homesick and isolated during their early training, particularly in hospitals with few black staff. Recruits from overseas would support each other and Irish nurses, many of whom had faced similar challenges, were also said to be very welcoming towards the Caribbean trainees.

Initial expectations were often disappointed, as students who had planned to go into general nursing were instead directed to psychiatric wards, geriatric or chronic healthcare hospitals - tricky placements which were less popular with white nurses. Despite the difficulties, many Caribbean nurses rose to the challenge, becoming very skilled in these treatment areas.

(Picture: Royal London Hospital Archives)



Pupil nurse Mabel Corbin receives instruction in drug dispensation at the London Hospital, 1967.

During the 1950s and '60s there were two levels of nursing qualification, one for a pupil or State Enrolled Nurse (not recognised in the Caribbean) and the more advanced staff or State Registered Nurse (vital for career progression.)

West Indian trainees were invariably placed on SEN training before progressing to SRN. This added at least two years to their training but there were few opportunities to challenge the decision. It seems likely that at this stage NHS training may have been biased in favour of white nurses.

Some senior staff blocked the promotion of Caribbean workers, or their transfer to specialist fields of care. Trainees also had to face prejudice from patients, some of whom refused to be touched by black nurses. Unions were also slow to respond to complaints and it was not until the 1970s that anti-racist legislation was introduced.

(Picture: Royal London Hospital Archives)



(Picture: The Observer)

“When I was a little girl in Grenada, I used to do little deeds of kindness. People said to me “Oh you’re a very kind girl, you would be a good nurse.” This stuck in my mind. Then, when the quota came from England asking for West Indian girls to come up and help the NHS in a time of short supply, I took advantage. I came over in 1966 and got a very good training in Farnham in Surrey. Then I went to London and worked in several hospitals before ending up at St. George’s... where I stayed until I retired in 2005.”

Cecilia Brown was born in Grenada and joined in NHS in 1966. She later became a senior staff nurse at St. George’s Hospital in Tooting

“Black people, we were treated differently...but we didn’t worry because we knew what we wanted to achieve and what we had to do and we did it, and we did it by making jokes with each other and laughing and doing our work properly”

Linda McDonnell, “Going Home.”

“I liked my job very much. They were strict with us when I trained, but very nice. If you were making the beds and the fold in the sheet was not in the middle of the centre of the mattress, God help you - you’d have to undo it and redo it in the sister’s presence, and you’d be shaking like a leaf. When I went to London it was much more relaxed, but I’m glad I had that strictness trained into me....For me training on the job was a good way to learn. Then you could build up your knowledge.”

Cecilia Brown, recruited to the NHS in 1966 from Grenada
The Observer, “Life as an NHS nurse in the 1960s”

“Over my career, I did cardiac, medical and surgical nursing. The most pressurised was cardiac - you had to be very good with people with heart problems...it’s a very nice job, because the patient comes in at death’s door, and the nurses and doctors work on them, and when you see them go through the door walking again, you feel great...”

The NHS is one of the best organisations in the world. Every country envies it...[nursing] is one of the most rewarding jobs...In my day we got hardly any money. But I enjoyed the nursing and I praise the NHS for having me here... My only regret is that I had to retire.”

Cecilia Brown, recruited to the NHS in 1966 from Grenada
The Observer, “Life as an NHS nurse in the 1960s”



“I was a nurse in Guyana...so I was already qualified...I came over on the 10 December 1955 by boat, the SS Columbie and I was 22 years of age. I had one friend who was here, we were batch mates from nursing, she came up a year ahead of me and I thought I would follow her.”

Thelma Lewis trained and worked as a nurse in Guyana before travelling to the UK. She initially worked as a Psychiatric nurse in Houghton Hospital, Epsom. In 1956 she qualified as a medical laboratory technician, covering everything from cell structure and blood, to bacteria and parasites. Her work involved everything from blood tests and antenatal clinics, to blood transfusions. Much of her working life was spent at St. George's Hospital but she also worked at the Royal Dental Hospital, London until retirement in 1984.

(From “Many Rivers to Cross: The History of the Caribbean Contribution to the NHS. Picture: Wimbledon Times)



(From “Many Rivers to Cross: The History of the Caribbean Contribution to the NHS.

Picture: Wordpress)

“ I chose England because my father served in World War Two here and I wanted to see what the country was like...My father felt that nursing was a very underpaid profession and ...I should complete my A levels and enter the teaching profession. I disagreed with him...he had to sign my passport because you had to be 21 before you could sign... For me it was quite a bit of...exploration... when I think back now I don't know how I had the courage to do that, but I did.”

Dr. Neslyn Watson-Druée CBE was born in Jamaica and travelled to England by plane in 1969, aged 19.

She trained as a nurse in Tunbridge Wells before moving to Kingston-upon-Thames Hospital, where she qualified as a midwife. She later became a health visitor and lecturer.

In 1988 she set up a career development company for ethnic minorities and is Chair of Kingston Primary Care NHS Trust.



Lynette Richards-Murray pictured during an awards presentation in the 1960s.

(From “Many Rivers to Cross: The History of the Caribbean Contribution to the NHS.)

*“I came over by ship...it took three weeks to get here...
For the first month I didn't hear from my parents and I was inconsolable...
My father was my guiding light.
He used to advise me...”*

[My salary was] only £9 a month...I used to send home half of that and live on the other half...it sounded like a lot of money but I didn't realise they were going to take money out for taxes, superannuation, national insurance, board and lodging.”

Lynette Richards-Murray worked as a civil servant in Guyana. In 1959, aged 20, she came to England to train as a nurse. She became a staff nurse, then a midwife in Greenwich. By 1977 she had worked her way up to become director of nursing in South London. She retired in 1992 and now helps a range of Guyanese health organisations.



Gloria Fallode, top row (far right) pictured with fellow nurses in the 1960s.

(From “Many Rivers to Cross: The History of the Caribbean Contribution to the NHS.)

“In the West Indies all you hear about is BBC English. I was never exposed to any other dialect...and I couldn't understand what they were saying!... We didn't like the food...At Christmas time...everybody's parents used to send them pepper sauce , it was like gold dust!..

...they used to wake you up as you were on duty at 7am...we had chains with a key...it went straight into your pocket and then you put your belt over it ...for safety. Your duty was to talk to the patients...listen to them and report anything strange to the sister.”

In 1960, aged 23, Trinidadian Gloria Fallode sailed to England. She trained as a psychiatric nurse, then qualified as a State Registered Nurse in 1965. She later became a midwife, then worked at Queen Mary's, Roehampton. She retired in 1994.



*“I was homesick for home all the time... I got my first job in the NHS at King’s College Hospital in 1964, but at the end of 1963 I was doing locum work...I did casualty and venerology (treatment of venereal disease). I was anxious to work. I was feeling good. It was 8 to 12 hours per day and I was paid £8 to £12 per month**

*[equivalent to £137 to £205 in 2019 .]

Dr Eddie Adams was born in Guyana and travelled to England on the SS Colombie in 1953, aged 27. He was awarded a grant to study medicine at King’s College, London and qualified as a surgeon. His first job was at King’s College Hospital in 1964. He worked as a surgeon in major hospitals across London, including Lambeth Hospital and St. Thomas’s. In 1977 he opened his own practice in Streatham, London.

25 year old Eddie Adams pictured during his student days in Guyana

(From “Many Rivers to Cross: The History of the Caribbean Contribution to the NHS.)



A Caribbean nurse pictured in the Children's Ward, Wilson Hospital, Mitcham.

It was smiles all round in April 1962, when the supervisor from the local Woolworth's store presented a giant Easter egg for the young patients on the ward.

(Picture: London Borough of Merton)



Performing at a staff concert entitled “ Not in the Nurses Handbook!” Morden, 1953.

These nurses from Nelson Hospital, Merton Park, were helping to raise funds for the hospital. Fetes and raffles helped to boost the funding provided for the NHS, which was still only five years old.

Can you name any of the nurses pictured?

(Picture: London Borough of Merton)

St. Helier Hospital, Carshalton, Surrey (862 beds).

There are vacancies in the Nursing School of this Hospital. Students enter in January, April, July or October. The Hospital is a modern one within easy reach of both London and the beauty spots of Surrey.

The 'Block System' of training has been in operation since the opening of the Hospital, which is also recognized by The Central Midwives Board as a Part 1 Training School.

Student Nurses are paid a Training Allowance of £200 for the first year, £210 for the second year, plus £5 bonus after passing the Preliminary State Examination and £225 for the third year. Of this £100 will be payable to St. Helier Hospital for board and lodging. They will receive medical attention and the use of uniform.

Forms of application and other particulars can be obtained from Matron room T1 who will be pleased to arrange interviews with girls and their parents.

Advertisement from The Times dated 11th January 1950



Nurses from St. Helier Hospital, Sutton, 1960s.

Pictured are (centre) Joyce Raymond from Trinidad, with her Ghanaian colleagues Mary Boateng (left) and Beatrice (surname unknown) on the right.

Joyce Edmund now lives in Georgia, USA with her husband.

(Source: St. Helier Memories)



Nursing staff at St. Helier Hospital, Wrythe Lane, Sutton, 1971.

This photo was added to the St Helier Memories website by Christine Hyatt-Steel
(Picture: St. Helier Memories)