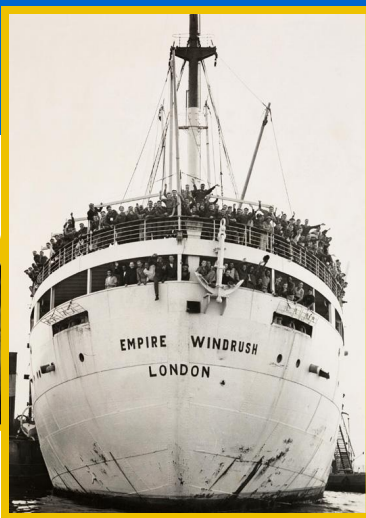




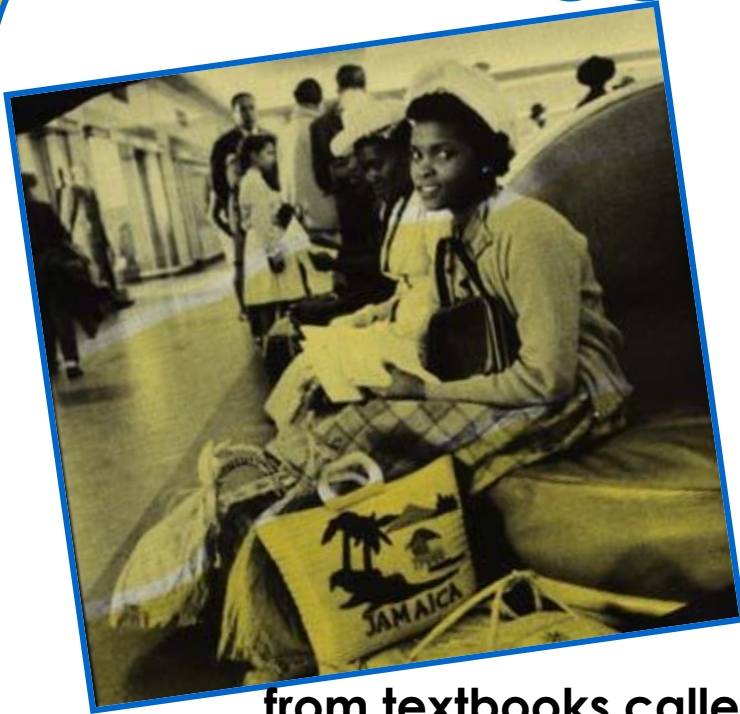
MUSEUM
IN DOCKLANDS

HORTENSE COMES TO LONDON: Post-war migration from the West Indies

Which choices would you make?



Meet Hortense



The story of Hortense, is based on experiences of the 'Windrush Generation:' the young men and women who left Britain's West Indian colonies, to find new opportunities and a better life in England, after the Second World War.

She has grown up in a tropical 'little Britain' of pounds, shillings and pence, English schoolteachers, and lessons from textbooks called Royal Readers. She stood in crowds cheering the men who left to fight for Britain in the war – she is proud to call herself a subject of the British Empire. The story of Hortense, and her journey from Jamaica to her new life in London, is a chance to understand some of the challenges they faced as new arrivals in Britain.

Image: Book cover 'Black Women: Bringing it all Back Home,' © Museum of London

The Decision to Leave

“Those men who left for the war with spirited cheer, returned looking around them as bemused as convicts. Returning to England was more than an ambition for Gilbert Joseph. It was a mission, a calling, even a duty, He told me opportunity ripened in England as abundant as fruit on Jamaican trees. And he was the man to pick it. He saw the notice about a ship that was leaving for England, the Empire Windrush. The cost of the passage was only twenty-eight pounds and ten shillings.

‘Of course that is twenty-eight pounds and ten shillings I have not got,’ he said... ”



Small Island, pp. 84 and 99

Image: Empire Windrush, © National Media Museum / Science and Society Picture Library

Dilemma One

You are Hortense. You are certain that England offers you the chance of a better life. Your job as a teacher has allowed you to save a little money from your pay each month, enough to buy one ticket - what do you do?

Option 1: Keep your money and forget about England.

Option 2: Use the ticket yourself, and tell your Gilbert he must wait behind.

Option 3: Tell Gilbert that you will pay his fare.



Image: View of the city of London, 1963, © Museum of London

Keep your money and forget about England.



High unemployment and low pay have been the cause of economic migration from the British colonies since the late 19th century. A job in England will not only support you and Gilbert, it will provide money for your family 'back home' in the West Indies.

WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENED? ►

Image: The West Indies Today Pamphlet, 1939, © Museum of London

Tell Gilbert that you will pay his fare.

Hortense does not want the opportunity for a better future to pass her by.

'I will lend you the money, we will be married, and you can send for me to come to England when you have a place for me to live...'



In the first ten years of migration to Britain after the Second World War, it was common for West Indian men to travel on their own to find work and somewhere to live before sending for wives and families. Many of them settled in London. Racism and the struggle against it lie at the heart of their story.

Image: A man on the doorstep of terraced house, 1961, © Museum of London

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT? ➤

Use the ticket yourself, and tell your Gilbert he must wait behind.



In 1948, the converted troopship, Empire Windrush, brought 492 West Indian passengers to England – only 2 of them were women.

WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENED? ►

Image: Empire Windrush, © National Media Museum / Science and Society Picture Library

Finding a Home in London



“... ‘Come, Hortense,’ he said. I had to grab the banister to pull myself up stair after stair. . . I was palpitating by the time I reached the door where Gilbert stood grinning saying, ‘Here we are. This is the room.’ All I saw were dark brown walls. A broken chair that rested on one uneven leg, one the Holy Bible, a window with a torn curtain and Gilbert’s suit hanging from a rail on the wall. . . There was a sink in the corner, a rusty tap stuck out from the wall above it. . . Gilbert spoke so softly I could hardly hear, ‘This is it Hortense. This is the room where I am living.’ I had to sit on the bed. My legs gave way. ‘Just This? You bring me all the way for just this?’... “

Small Island, pp. 19-21

Image: Novel front cover, 1959, © Museum of London

Dilemma Two

You are Hortense. You have crossed the Atlantic dreaming that your home would be modest but nice – with a dining room, living room, and a small kitchen. Instead you find that you and Gilbert will share this cramped single room - what do you do?

Option 1: Refuse to stay another moment.

Option 2: Get help from authorities.

Option 3: Stay and make the best of a bad situation.

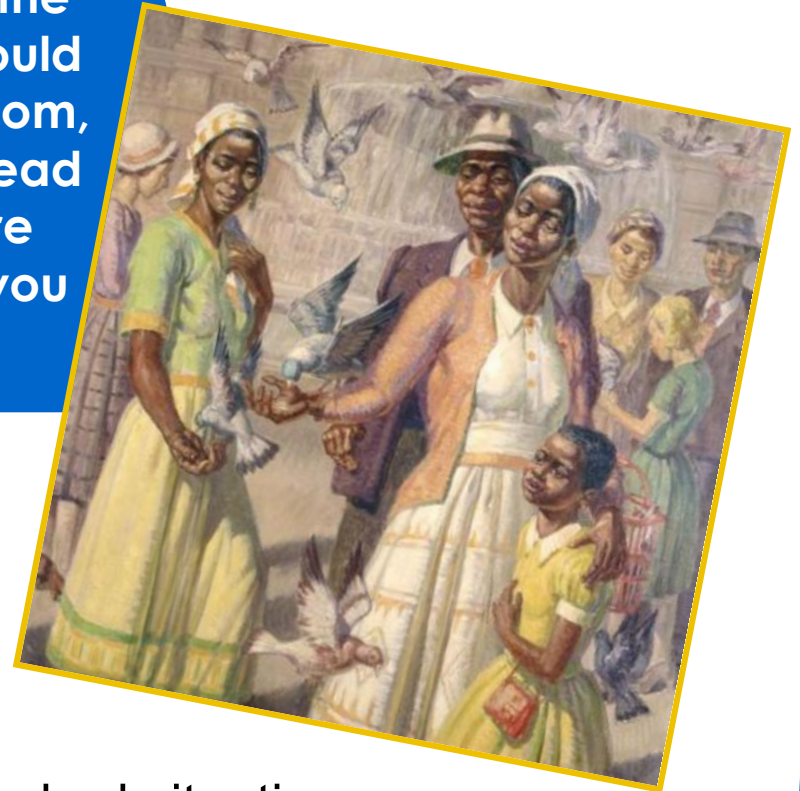


Image: Caribbean family in Trafalgar Square , 1950-62, © Museum of London

Refuse to stay another moment.

And do what? You have no friends or family in London. You and Gilbert cannot afford to buy your own home yet, so you must rent. But most West Indians are finding that because of colour prejudice they are forced to accept poor and over-crowded living conditions.



WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENED? ►

Image: *Street scene in the Latimer Road area, 1957, © Museum of London*

Get help from authorities.

Unless individuals could afford to take complaints to court, there was little or no help to be had from local authorities before the 1st Race Relations Act (1965 and 1976).

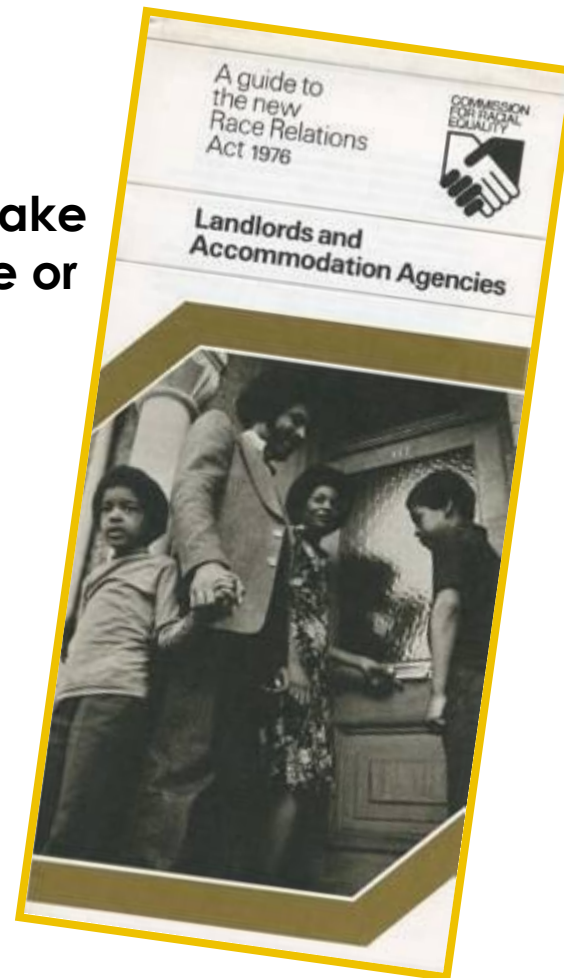


Image: Commission for Racial Equality Pamphlet, 1976, © Museum of London

WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENED? ►

Stay and make the best of a bad situation.



It may be hard to accept, but the prospect of a job in England is still a better future than you could have hoped for in the West Indies.

"I determined to make this place somewhere I could live – if only for this short while..."

Many new arrivals were forced to rent rooms in the city's poorest housing. It was also common for vacancies to suddenly become occupied when a Black would-be tenant came to enquire about them. Some landlords and landladies were quite open about their colour prejudice, displaying signs saying 'No Coloureds'.

Image: courtesy of
www.connections-exhibition.org

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT? ►

Earning a Living in London

"...This was the day I was going to present myself for a position as a teacher at the offices of the Education Authority. My two letters of recommendation each contained words that would open up the doors of any school to me... If you would read the letters,' I said, 'one will tell you about the three years of training as a teacher received in Jamaica, while the other letter is concerned with the position I held as a teacher at –' She did not let me finish. 'The letters don't matter,' she told

me. 'You can't teach in this country... It doesn't matter that you were a teacher in Jamaica,' she went on, 'you will not be allowed to teach here.' She shook the letters at me. When I did not take them from her hand she rattled them harder at me. 'Take them,' she said, so loud she almost shouted. And all I could utter was 'But -'..."



Small Island, pp. 448-449

Image: Children with a mother and teacher at a playgroup, 1968, © Museum of London

Dilemma Three

You are Hortense. Your plans for your new life rest on using your qualifications to get a teaching job. You had no idea that your training and teaching experience would count for nothing – what do you do?

Option 1: Give up and go back to Jamaica

Option 2: Get the Teachers' Union to help you.

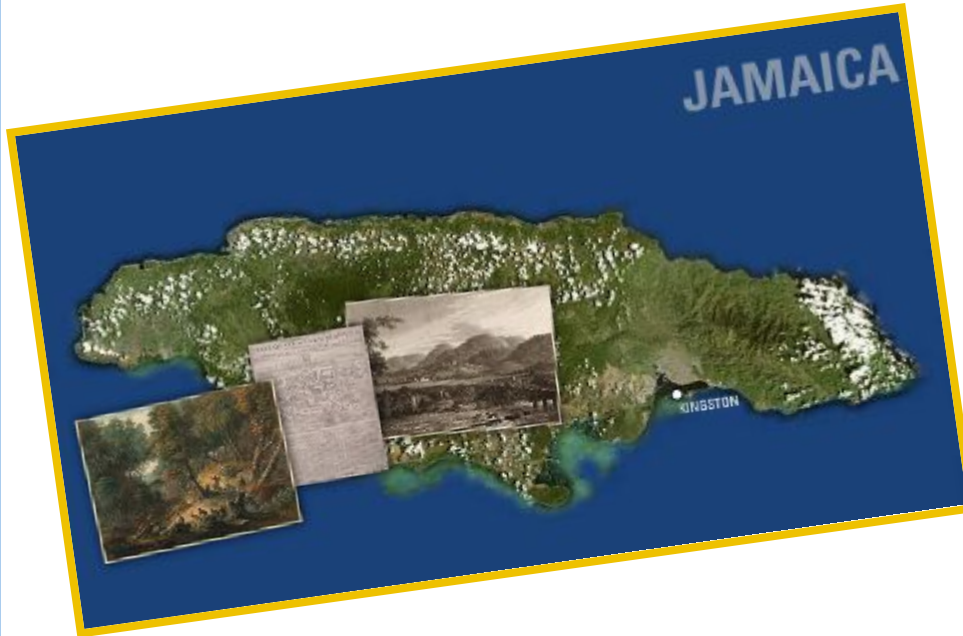
Option 3: Forget about teaching for the present and take any work you can find.



Image: London Transport workers, 1963, © Museum of London

Give up and go back to Jamaica.

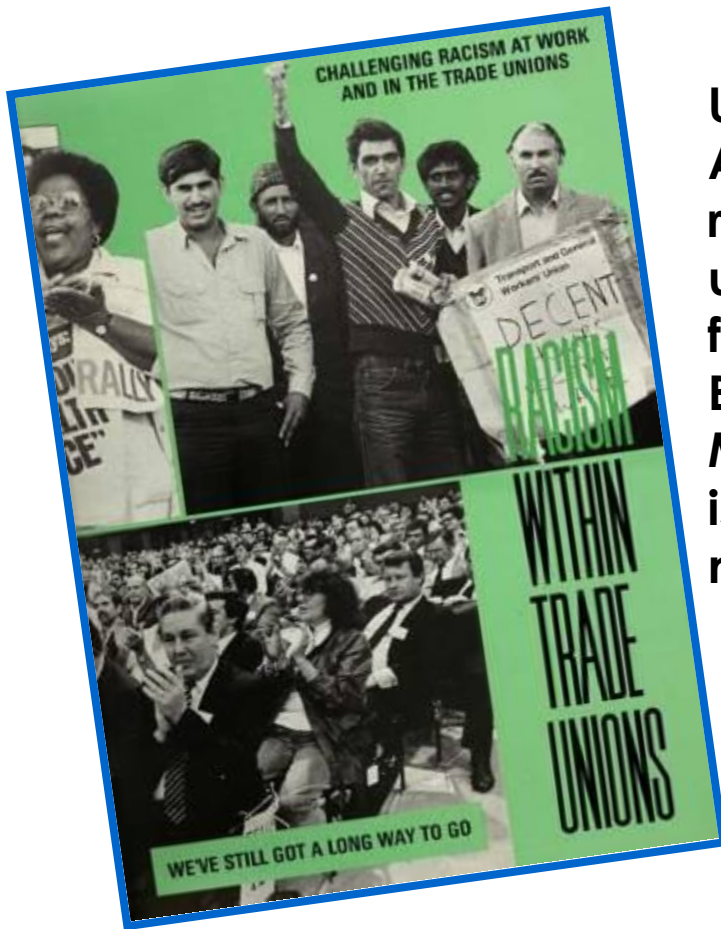
You have spent your savings on your ticket to England. and even if you had the money to return to Jamaica, you don't want to feel like a failure, and you don't want to be a disappointment, or a joke, to people you thought you had left behind.



WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENED? ►

Image: Colonies game map image, © Museum of London

Get the Teachers' Union to help you.



Until the 1970s, those of African and Asian decent were excluded or received limited support from trade unions. In the 1980s, under pressure from the organisations such as the Black Trade Union Solidarity Movement, unions began to take issues of racism in the workplace more seriously.



Image: (L) Trade union booklet, 1984, (R) TUC workbook, 1983, © Museum of London

WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENED? ►

Forget about teaching and take any work you can find.

Lots of men and women arriving from the West Indies are finding that British Employers do not recognise their job qualifications. But, even jobs that you are massively over-qualified for – cooking, sewing, cleaning – will pay more than you can earn in the West Indies.



Increasingly, as racism was exposed in social institutions, individuals came together in community self-help, protest and campaigning organisations. The need to combat racism was placed firmly on the establishment agenda. Multiculturalism and diversity came to be seen as defining features of contemporary London and Britain.

Image: Women working at Wall's sausage factory, 1959, © Museum of London

Further Reading & Resources

- “Small Island”, by Andrea Levy (2004)
- Empire Windrush 1948 – Exploring 20th Century London:
www.20thcenturylondon.org.uk/server.php?show=conInformationRecord.42
- BBC History – Windrush – the passengers:
www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/modern/windrush_01.shtml
- Moving Here – Migration histories:
www.movinghere.org.uk/galleries/histories/caribbean/journeys/journey.htm
- Bound for Britain – Experiences of Immigration to the UK
www.learningcurve.gov.uk/snapshots/snapshot11/snapshot11.htm
- The Immigrants Project – People – Leo Jones
www.theimmigrantsproject.org/people/jones/