

## The Black Contribution to the World Wars in Wiltshire School Resources Pack

These resources have been developed for teachers to give an overview of the Black contribution to the world wars to aid in the development of teaching Black History and to help decolonise curriculums. If you have any suggestions on how we might improve these resources or anything that could be added we would appreciate to hear your thoughts.

We would also recommend you visiting our *Lest We Forget: The Black Contribution to the world wars in Wiltshire* exhibition at Wiltshire Museum (10 November 2023- 17 February 2024) to supplement your students learning.

### Use of Racial Language in this Resource

*Content warning:* The text below includes discriminatory historical terms relating to ‘race’, which may cause distress.

Many of the documents and objects relating to the period the exhibition is set in uses historical language that today is largely considered as racist, discriminatory, inappropriate, and harmful today.

We have consulted with members of the Black community on our use of language and our selection of objects, media, and quotes.

We have excluded the term the group considered the most offensive, and decided not to include texts or objects where this word is used, due to the weight of historical oppression it carries.

The historical term “negro” was used differently by white and Black writers; a classification of race by historic white writers – as a classification of people racialised by white people, but importantly was a term that was being reclaimed by Black writers of the time. This word, although considered offensive today, is included here in a historical context only.

The terms “coloured” and “half-caste” are largely considered to be offensive today (although they are sometimes used by a minority, often older generations, in rural parts of Britain). Although these words appear in the historic documents displayed and the quotations taken from them, in our interpretation we encourage the use of the terms such as “Black”, “mixed” and/or “mixed heritage” as we understand that these terms are more inclusive and largely accepted by people with this heritage.

The Museum is committed to addressing outdated and discriminatory language and does not support the contemporary use of any of the aforementioned terms.

**Disclaimer:** We have taken the approach to the language outlined here in order to try and authentically represent the mixed experiences, including racial discrimination the Black community had during the world wars. We also aim to be sensitive to people’s lived experience today. We acknowledge that terms can mean different things to different people, and there are multiple perspectives when it comes to preferred terminology, and that language is always changing.



## World War One

### **Caribbean Involvement In WWI**

Over 15,000 Caribbean men enlisted in the British West Indies Regiment. Initially this regiment was used as labour forces, due to the racist view that Caribbean men did not have right spirit to fight, but eventually two battalions were posted to the front line in Palestine.

The Lord Mayor Sir Charles Wakefield addressed the soldiers saying: *“I have inspected you this morning...and I am greatly struck by your fine physique. Not only are you physically strong, but you are strong in moral quality, because you have left your wives, your homes, your businesses, and other interests to come here, thousands of miles overseas, to fight for your King and your country”*.

Many soldiers died before they got to the Front, including those posted to Salisbury plain for training. Flu and pneumonia particularly affected soldiers from around the British Empire, many of whom had not been exposed to European strains of these killer diseases.

Not only did the soldiers have to adjust to the colder climate of the UK, but they were living in damp conditions. A total of a third of all deaths in WWI were attributed to disease or infection.

### **For further resources see:**

National Army Museum- Caribbean Soldiers: <https://www.nam.ac.uk/schools/learning-resources/west-indian-soldier-interactive-timeline>

## World War Two

### **UK Government Debates US Segregation Laws**

After the bombing of Pearl Harbour in 1941 the USA decided to join the Allies during the Second World War. Troops were sent over to the UK in 1942, mostly to prepare for the invasion of France, and approximately 240,000 of them were African Americans. There was a fear from white Americans in arming the Black population, so they were mainly given roles in maintenance, building, cleaning and cooking.

In the USA segregation between races was strictly enforced, and as part of the deal of supporting the Allies they required their laws to be followed whilst they served in Europe. The UK Government did not have official segregation laws, and a secret debate began:

“the War Office finds itself on a razor’s edge and its attitude has been to endeavour to maintain a nice balance between the conflicting views” – P.J.Grigg, Secretary of State for War.

The Secretary of State for the Colonies, Robert Gascoyne-Cecil, argued that under the principle of the Empire and keeping the peace within the population of the colonies, Britain could not be seen to support segregation. John Simon, the Lord Chancellor, agreed and expanded by arguing that the British population would not allow this level of discrimination. Other politicians highlighted the need for the US soldiers and tried to suggest ways that this could be contained to just the US forces.

Grigg goes on to suggest a vague solution to let the British Army officers decide what to do on an individual basis: “it will be left to Army officers as occasions arise to interpret the facts orally to those serving under them. There is of course always the risk, in absence of written instructions, of varying interpretations and of misrepresentation of what has been said. But the objection to written instructions is so great that the risk is the lesser evil”. It is this principle that the Government finally decided to follow.

**Activity suggestion:** Download the secret government documents discussing whether to allow the USA army to impose their segregation laws whilst their troops are in the UK. In small groups ask the students to discuss the document they are reading, then as a full class discuss the different viewpoints posed and their opinions on it. Then get them to vote which scheme the UK Government finally decided to follow.

Download documents from The National Archives: <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/>. Here is a list of documents that could be used for the debate:

- CAB 66/29/21
- CAB 66/29/22
- CAB 66/29/35
- CAB 66/29/36
- CAB 66/29/40

## **African American Presence in Wiltshire**

When African American troops arrived in Wiltshire many local people had not seen a black person before, except on screen in cinemas. Locals, who remember the US camp at Dilton Marsh, remember as children going up to see the African-American soldiers. They noticed that the black men were segregated near the canteen area and were prevented from talking to them by white US soldiers.

When local people were able to interact with the African-American soldiers they were well-liked due to their good manners.

“The general consensus of opinion appears to be that the only American soldiers with decent manners are the Negroes”- George Orwell (Writer).

“We found the blacks to be far more polite. If you were walking along the street and they were coming towards you they would say ‘get off the sidewalk and let the lady go past’”.

“I like them Yanks, but oo be they white chaps they’m brought with them?”- an older man from Bradford upon Avon.

### **Further resources:**

- SEEME project at the Wiltshire and Swindon History Centre: <https://wshc.org.uk/seeme.html>
- From Blackout to Bungalows . . .: WWII Home Front Wiltshire and the Austerity Years 1939-55 by Julie Davis.

## **Lydiard House and Park**

Lydiard Park was one of the many country estates that had been requisitioned for the war effort and was used as a base for US troops. The government requisitioned the house, and Lord Bolingbroke moved from his large house to a cottage on the estate.

The house was in such a poor state, however, that it was not fit for purpose, but the grounds were used to build an American army camp and the Ministry of Supplies took large amounts of timber from the estate.

Lord Bolingbroke made the difficult decision to sell in 1943 and the estate was later purchased by the Swindon Corporation who had plans to make it into a cultural centre after the war. After American soldiers broke into the house and caused vandalism to it, they installed Mr Gough, the verger at the local church, as caretaker.

At the Lydiard Tregoze Church it is recorded that African Americans would sing “Negro spirituals”, possibly referring to gospel music.

## **Segregation In Wiltshire and Wiltshire's Resistance to US Segregation Laws**

There are numerous incidents throughout Wiltshire where white Americans confronted African American soldiers if they saw them in pubs and dance halls mixing with white people. This often led to fights.

By December 1943 Trowbridge, where the US Military police were stationed, had a mix of white and African American military police, working with the British Police to prevent fights. Fights also broke out between white US soldiers and British troops— mainly over women as the US soldiers had more money to spend and so their company tended to be preferred.

At the major US Army base and munitions depot in Savernake Forest, they ensured that the black and white forces did not mix at all. In Marlborough the dances were on different days to avoid confrontation- Monday was for black soldiers, and Friday was for white soldiers.

At the Three Horseshoes pub in Burbage the African Americans would entertain the locals by playing jazz on the piano at the back of the pub, whereas the whites sat in the main bar, neither group mixing. The segregation and race issues that were sparked through the presence of US soldiers in Wiltshire eventually spilled over to affect the Black Commonwealth servicemen, who were also serving in the county.

Around 10,000 Caribbean men volunteered to join the Armed Forces and inevitably many were sent to Wiltshire for training. In Chippenham in November 1944, an incident took place where a group of Caribbean soldiers were prevented from entering a dance hall due to their ethnicity.

Headlines in the Daily Mirror sparked national outrage. The football club, who had admitted the soldiers earlier in the day of the incident, invited them back to the club for a friendly football match with a meal and entertainment after to try and show them that they were welcome in the town, despite what happened at the dance hall.

Nationally there was push back to the US segregation laws being enforced in the UK. This had been anticipated by Robert Gascoyne-Cecil, Secretary of State for the Colonies in 1942, in secret government documents from the War office where he stated “any lead given to the British people in this country, asking them to adopt the attitude of the American Army towards coloured people, whether American or others, is likely to cause serious resentment among our coloured people in this country”. This is backed up by the Lord Chancellor John Simon in his own statement.

Wiltshire residents felt similarly about the treatment of treatment of black soldiers as seen from an article written by “Two Wives of Prisoners of War” who describe that during their attendance to a Wiltshire restaurant they saw American Military police telling three African American troops that there was no food left, which was untrue. They clearly stated their objections to this discrimination by saying “After all if they are good enough to fight side by side with our men, why the bar on colour in public restaurants... Is this what our husbands are fighting for?”

## **Inter-racial Relationships and the “Brown Babies” Scandal**

With the influx of African American troops there were concerns of relationships forming between them and local white women, and secret government documents discussed the issue.

The Lord Chancellor, John Simon stated that “*Barring American coloured troops from canteens, clubs, &c., will not reduce the risk of association with white women in the least- rather the opposite.*”, but he dismisses concerns believing that most white women would not be interested in relationships with African American soldiers anyway.

Often it was in rural areas, like Wiltshire, that inter-racial relationships flourished. This was despite the UK government encouraged a brief friendship, which allowed a dance between white women and African American soldiers, but discouraged romantic relationships. The Defence of the Realm Act was used to prosecute women if they were found with Black GIs on military premises.

President Eisenhower stated “*To most English people, including the village girls- even those of perfectly fine character- the negro soldier is just another man, rather fascinating because he is unique in their experience, a jolly good fellow and with money to spend*”.

Herbert Morrison, the Home Secretary, warned that this could lead to mixed children and that this would cause “a difficult social problem”, although he does not clarify what these problems might be.

As a consequence of these inter-racial relationships, it is estimated that 2000 babies were born in the UK and in general the reaction to them and their mothers was negative. Most women who gave birth to mixed babies were pressurised into giving their children up resulting in them going into children’s homes.

The African American GI’s were prevented by the US army from marrying their sweethearts forcing the children to be born as illegitimate. The soldiers would then be transferred away from where the woman lived.

Some father’s wished to take their children back to the USA, but the UK government blocked this using the Adoption Act of 1939, which only allowed adoptions by British subjects or relatives. With no DNA testing at the time, fathers could not prove their paternity.

Those women who kept their children were often disowned by their families and were even spat at in the street. Often, they were unable to work as no one would offer employment to the mothers, and even if they could, they did not have childcare whilst they worked. Even housing was challenging to find; in 1965 89% of London private rental housing advertisements would still state “no coloureds”, and this would apply to their mixed children.

### **Further resources:**

- Britain’s “Brown Babies” by Professor Lucy Bland.
- Mixed Museum “Brown Babies” online exhibition: <https://mixedmuseum.org.uk/brown-babies/>
- Documentary on Channel 4: Secret War Babies [Watch Britain's Secret War Babies | Stream free on Channel 4](#)

## **Windrush**

Following the Nationality Act in 1948, which allowed colonial subjects to receive the status of British citizen, Britain actively recruited workers from the Caribbean to replenish the workforce after the war.

On 22nd June 1948 the ship HMT Empire Windrush arrived in Tilbury, near London, bringing 492 Caribbean people to the UK. More ships arrived, in addition to planes, and by 1971 thousands of people from the Caribbean arrived in the UK to work.

Many of these were servicemen from WW2 who wanted to rejoin the Forces or work in the country they defended. Others worked in manual jobs or joined the newly created NHS.

When they arrived in the UK there was plenty of work, but clashes occurred due to the lack of housing and racism against Caribbean people, despite their contribution to the war effort.

In 2018 it was discovered that the UK Home Office had failed to keep adequate records of these arrivals and many of their landing cards were destroyed in 2010. This led to many people being unable to prove that they came legally to the country, preventing them from being able to work, in addition to accessing healthcare and housing. At least 83 people were unfairly deported from the UK.

An inquiry was issued and a report in March 2020 was published with 30 recommendations to be followed, which the government agreed to follow. As of January 2023, three of those recommendations have been dropped and the Windrush generation are still fighting for justice.

### **Further resources:**

- The Forgotten Generations <https://theforgottengenerations.com/en Generations>
- BBC Bitesize (years 1 and 2): <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/topics/z8ftp4j/articles/zmmr4xs>
- English Heritage: <https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/inspire-me/the-story-of-windrush>
- Royal Museums Greenwich: <https://www.rmg.co.uk/stories/windrush-histories/story-of-windrush-ship>

### **General Topic Further Resources:**

- Black Poppy Rose: <https://blackpoppyrose.org/>
- Deed: <https://deed.org.uk/deed-key-topics-in-british-black-history>
- National Army Museum- Black Poppy Rose (video): <https://www.nam.ac.uk/schools/learning-resources/blackpoppyrose-national-army-museum>
- National Army Museum (school learning resource): <https://www.nam.ac.uk/schools/learning-resources/black-history-national-army-museum-collections>
- National Army Museum- The Story of Walter Tull (video): <https://www.nam.ac.uk/schools/learning-resources/walter-tull-soldiers-story>