There are over 900 years of immigration records available for research here at The National Archives. Over the next three episodes, we're exploring the rich history of migration in the 20th century.

In this episode, we're looking at two different migration experiences shaped by the British Nationality Act of 1948. For our first story, we explore the challenges faced by those arriving in Britain on board the Empire Windrush. We then follow the story of a young man who leaves Pakistan in search of adventure and opportunity.

Documents from The National Archives used in this episode: BT 26/1237; CO 875/59/1; LAB 26/198; LAB 26/198; HO 334/1489/19981

You can read about the hostel riots in our blog, 'Before Notting Hill: Causeway Green and Britain's anti-black hostel riots'.

If you're interested in finding out more about records covered in this episode take a look at our research guides to Passenger lists and Immigration. For help navigating our catalogue you can watch our top level tips on using Discovery.

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Transcript

[Teaser clips, montage from episode interviews]

Paul Dryburgh: This is On the Record at The National Archives: uncovering the past through stories of everyday people. I'm Paul Dryburgh.

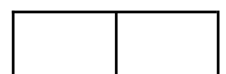
Katherine Howells: And I'm Katherine Howells.

Paul and I are both historians at The National Archives in Kew, West London, where we research, look after, and help our audiences better understand the Archives' collections of historical government and public records.

Over the next three episodes, we're exploring the rich history of migration in the 20th century.

Paul: We've organised this series around three major sets of legislation passed in 1914, 1948, and 1962. Each set of laws represents a shift in policy around migration and citizenship that would have a profound and lasting impact on citizens and non-citizens alike throughout Britain, its Empire, and the Commonwealth.

Katherine: In this episode, we're looking at two different migration experiences shaped by the British Nationality Act of 1948. For our first story, we've enlisted the help of Kevin Searle, a Modern Domestic Records Specialist here at The National Archives.



Please note this episode does contain descriptions of racially motivated violence.

Paul: Kevin, before we get into some of the fascinating Windrush records we hold, what exactly was the 1948 Act? What changes did it make and why was it necessary?

Kevin Searle: The 1948 Act created the status of ‘Citizen of the United Kingdom and Colonies’ for people born or naturalized in the UK or one of its colonies.

Katherine: In other words, the Act gave the status of ‘citizen’ to everyone who had previously been considered a ‘British subject.’ And it recognised their right to work and settle in the UK and to bring their families with them.

Paul: This meant that in theory, the Act of 1948 gave a person the same legal rights in Britain whether they were born in Britain, a British colony like Jamaica, or an independent commonwealth country like Canada.

Kevin: And of course this, with the severe post-war labor shortage, provided key pull factors leading to migration. When we look at the push factors if you like, or the factors in the sending countries or Caribbean, it was an extremely difficult period. There was, for instance, large-scale unemployment with nothing really in the way of social security, a sharp rise in the cost of living during the war along with a particularly severe hurricane in 1951 which hit Jamaica especially badly. And of course there was the 1952 McCarran-Walter Act in America as well which drastically limited immigration to the US and closed down that option.

Katherine: The need for labor in Britain after the Second World War and the new legislation around citizenship led to an event characterised as the foundation story of mass migration to Britain during the 20th Century. In 1948, the SS Empire Windrush arrived in England, carrying over

800 passengers whose last residence was listed as the Caribbean. These travelers arrived in England before the act was passed, but they were largely responding to the news of the new law that would give them the right to work in Britain.

Paul: Kevin, what can our records tell us about the passengers of the SS Empire Windrush and their migration experience?

Kevin: I mean, The National Archives is a great place to come to research the Empire Windrush as it actually holds the original passenger lists of the ship as well as the passenger list of other ships that actually predated the Windrush such as the Ormonde. And they're fascinating documents to view, as you can see the names of many of the early pioneers such as Aldwyn Roberts better known as the calypsonian Lord Kitchener who famously sung “London is the Place for Me” expressing the optimism that many had in journeying into what was often seen as the mother country. Another name that immediately jumps out at me when I look at it is Sam King, who would become the first Black mayor of Southwark.

So as well as the passenger lists, there are many documents held at The National Archives which can tell us a great deal about the experiences of the Windrush generation? One lesser known document is the booklet ‘A West Indian in England’ produced in 1950 by the Central Office of Information and co-authored by Dudley Thompson, one of Britain's first Black pilots who served during the war and would go on to become an anti-colonial activist and leading politician in the People's National Party in Jamaica. So the booklet was designed to give migrants some idea of what Britain was like and with passage's like “with so many faces all minding their own business, save for those who have come to meet friends and are watching intently for the sight of a familiar face, it is small wonder that you feel completely lost than helpless.” It certainly served as a

sobering wake-up call to the aforementioned optimism of many new arrivals and certainly makes me think of the title of Sam Selvon's book, 'The Lonely Londoners'.

Katherine: 'The Lonely Londoners' is a 1956 novel by Trinidadian author Sam Selvon that used fiction to explore the experiences of the Windrush generation in London in the late 40s and early 50s.

Paul: There was a rise in anti-immigrant rhetoric and even violence during this era in response to Britain's increasing multiculturalism. Our listeners may be familiar with the Notting Hill Riots, which were a series of racially motivated riots that lasted for several days during 1958.

Kevin, you've been looking at a file in our collection related to a similar set of attacks that are less well-known. What can you tell me about them and how they fit into the larger historical context at the time?

Kevin: Yeah. Another file that struck me that certainly says a huge amount about racism is a file that was created by the Ministry of Labour and National Service in 1955, and it's titled 'Disturbances in National Service Hostels Corporation Hostels Due to Incompatibility of Various Nationals.' So, as a bit of background, the National Service Hostels Corporation was set up in 1941 to provide accommodation for workers employed away from home in essential industries experiencing a labor shortage. After the war it was used to provide accommodation for migrant workers including some from the Caribbean as well as those recruited as part of the European Volunteer Workers or EVW scheme, which sought to recruit displaced persons from the continent often Ukraine, Poland, Latvia after the war in an effort to alleviate the labor shortage in Britain as well as aid those made homeless during World War II.

So this scheme was very discriminatory. And given the EVW status as aliens, they could be directed

to and kept within certain understaffed and frequently undesirable sectors of employment. So they didn't have the same legal status as Caribbean migrants.

Katherine: The European migrants didn’t have the same status and rights as the Caribbean migrants, as the people from the Caribbean were Citizens of Britain.

Kevin: However, when we read through the file, what unfortunately emerges is a pattern of racist violence at a number of the hostels. These include disturbances at West Bromwich in 1946, Letchworth Hostel in Hertfordshire in 1947, Leeds in 1947 and 1948. And unfortunately, many more. And the correspondence within the file gives us some indication of the causes.

In Letchworth, for instance, a letter describes a round robin signed by 350 white trainees demanding the instant removal of all Black personnel from the center. It goes on, that it's believed that the initiation lay with a white extremist. And in the melee, iron bars were thrown as weapons and some cuts and bruises ensued.

In Leeds, a letter written by the manager states the cause appears to be racial prejudice, Black men associating with white women. And hostility towards interracial relationships appears as a recurrent theme with different groups sometimes Irish, sometimes Polish highlighted as instigating attacks on Black residents.

And this is certainly the case with the largest outbreak of violence, which takes place at the Causeway Green Hostel in Oldbury, West of Birmingham in 1949 where an outnumbered by around four to one group of Jamaicans were attacked by the Polish residents staying at the hostel. The document describes there being 235 Poles and 65 Jamaicans, and this is a very serious event with the report into the violence describing, "Serious fighting developed. Considerable damage was done to hostel and resident property. Many missiles were thrown out and into the block

occupied by Jamaicans. These included large lumps of concrete, whole bricks, bottles, etc."

So the report is fascinating as it also includes some comments by some of the people involved. And this one statement by a man described as a Jamaican spokesman strikes me as particularly poignant as it raises lots of questions of Britishness, citizenship, race, and so forth. Now he's recorded as stating, "They were British subjects, most of them having fought for this country and have been brought here or permitted to come by the British government. When certain types of women were friendly with German prisoners of war, there was not much reaction. There was no resentment against foreign workers. But as soon as a colored man was seen in company with a white woman, much resentment was in evidence. And insults relating to their color and parentage were shouted around." So, again, it emphasises the role of the hostility to interracial relationships in fueling the violence.

Katherine: This theme of violence and discrimination in reaction to inter-racial relationships has come up in our podcast before, in the story of Jamaican sailor James Gillespie in our episode “Love Divided,” and the story of Lorne Horseford in our episode “Resist: Black Power in the Courtroom.” So have a listen to those episodes if you want to further explore how those individuals persevered in the face of discrimination.

Paul: So Kevin, how did the hostels’ management respond to these disturbances? Were there any legal repercussions for the attackers?

Kevin: In spite of the acknowledgment in all of the disturbances in the correspondence that the West Indians were not the aggressors, the ensuing official correspondence in every instance included the idea of transferring the Caribbean talents elsewhere. And after the disturbance of Causeway Green, the National Service Hostels Corporation actually brings in a quota that initially

limits the number of Black people allowed to stay at their hostels to 12. However, this soon comes in for criticism. Amongst NSHC officials, it's argued it could damage the reputation of the organisation if grounds are given for the accusation of color prejudice. It's pointed out that the hostels could vary in capacity from over 1,000 places to under 100, and it's criticised as it frustrates efforts to direct labor to underserved industries. So the rule of 12 is then expanded on and the final policy drawn up. And the final policy drawn up in the document was that hostels could accept Black men up to 10% of the total capacity subject to a maximum ceiling of 30. If regarded as trouble spots, they'd have a lower ceiling of 12 Black people. And thirdly, the hostels might not be considered suitable for Black people at all.

Paul: And so what conclusions can we draw from these events?

Kevin: Well, clearly, the reaction of the National Service Hostels Corporation to remove and to set a quota on the numbers of Black people allowed to stay at their hostels served to legitimise the rioters and therefore racism itself. What's also very sad is that although the European Volunteer Workers and Black labourers shared a general experience of migration, a similar position in many of the least desirable jobs in industry, and a feeling of estrangement in a new country, this didn't appear to lead to much of a sense of class-based comradeship. In fact, it seems sentiment against interracial relationships played a vital role in the unrest at Causeway Green and in many of the hostels before.

But the story does actually provide an important example of resistances; the Caribbean tenants were certainly never passive victims of the attacks or management policy to remove them as many refused to be moved on. And this narrative of resistance in the face of racism, of course, serves as a recurrent theme throughout Black British history.

And of course from a research or a methodological standpoint, it also highlights that The National Archives has many stories related to the Windrush generation and of course many others. And this includes stories that might now be relatively well-known and of course others such as the hostile disturbances which are still waiting to be uncovered.

[Musical transition]

Paul Dryburgh: Our second story for this episode takes place in 1960, just before the first of several laws were passed to limit the rights given by the 1948 Act. It's the story of a young man named Ifthikar who left Pakistan for adventure and freedom. To tell this story, we're relying on a National Archives staff member who has a personal connection to our subject and the records related to his migration.

So let's get right into it.

Iqbal Singh: My name is Iqbal Singh and I'm working at The National Archives. I'm the regional community partnerships officer and my role taking that kind of work that we do at the National Archives and engaging communities up and down the country so that it doesn't feel like it's just a London centric archive.

Katherine: So, Iqbal, you have a unique contribution to this episode. Your father came to England in 1960, and even now at almost 90 years old, he has a strong memory about that time in his life and what it was like to move from Pakistan to England. So what motivated his journey and decision to apply for naturalisation? And why Britain?

Iqbal: Yeah, this is a really important question about why migrants move, why people leave. And I can only start this answer by saying that actually, you need to go further back. My father was born

in British India whilst the British Empire was still very much alive and kicking as it were. He was born in 1931. He was educated in British India. His education was in English. And certainly, once he hit the age of 16, he was then starting to read about Keats and Wordsworth and Shakespeare and he was learning English from a very earlier age than that as well. And then he proceeded on to university. He came from an Indian-Muslim middle-class family and went to Aligarh University, which itself had been modeled on Oxbridge, and it sort of had that kind of quality to it of educating the elite to basically govern.

I think this is really important context to this story. And the thing is that Partition came and my father was about 16 or 17 and they were affected hugely. And my father's family, whilst they were very much ancestrally their links were with India–as a result of the Partition, key members of the family started to move over to Pakistan.

And my father was the eldest son and I think for him in particular, because he'd been influenced a lot by that early years in India, he did miss India and when he left to come to Pakistan, he was an Urdu-speaking man coming to a beautiful city called Lahore in Punjab, but that's very much the heart of the Punjab. And culturally, it was a huge clash. And I think he felt very, very unsettled.

He came to Lahore in 1955 and this is again, this is a very important background because of that sense that he's already a migrant in a way before he comes to Britain.

He did somehow manage, though because of his education and his contacts to get himself a very good job in a British firm called Lever Brothers, and that again kind of speaks to this ongoing relationship, post-Partition and Independence, British influence was still very much there.

He was getting a job as a pioneer salesman and the idea was that he was going to sell detergents and all these other items that Lever Brothers were producing for the Pakistani population. He

loved the job because he loves talking, he loves traveling, and he was able to visit more than 50 cities in Pakistan and travel around. And he was earning a very good wage at the time and certainly. But there was something about Pakistan that for him felt very uncomfortable and it was in 1960, five years after arriving in Pakistan, that he decided that he would make his way out. He felt on some levels trapped culturally, socially; I think the family were also putting pressure…there were things about the eldest son getting married. There were certain traditions that he felt that he didn't want to be part of. And also, I think that sense of adventure.

And the decision to come to Britain, I think, on one level was quite easy. He knew about Britain. He'd grown up with Britain very much in his imagination.

Katherine Howells: What was the process like for your Dad to enter the country? And how was he affected by the 1948 Act?

Iqbal: The process then in 1960 was also very, very easy. You just needed a Pakistani passport and you needed some savings and you needed some kind of education or schooling that you were going to go to. That was principally how you would get your entry into the country.

The 1948 Act was very much a chance to revisit this ambition that the Empire always had of bestowing upon all its people an imperial citizenship. And my father I think was benefiting from that because post ‘48, he was able to use the act to come to Britain without very much hassle. He had the money. He had the place at Glasgow, some kind of university or college in Glasgow he said that he was going to study at and he'd saved up a lot of money. I think he saved up £500 pounds, which was a lot of money. He was part of that class of Indian or Pakistani that was able to come and make something of that ‘48 Act. Because in principle, the 1948 Act would have allowed hundreds of millions of people to come but the reality was for many, they just would never have made that.

Katherine: What would the journey have been like for him at the time?

Iqbal Singh: The move itself is really, really important because that was him going on a ship. And this is the first time my father is leaving India or Pakistan. It's the first time he's traveling abroad. And for him, I think that sense of adventure really came to life.

Paul: Here's Iftikhar Husain himself speaking about the experience, as recorded recently by Iqbal.

Iftikhar Husain: So I was on the deck there. I've never been to ship before, so it was a real experience for me to be on the ship, because I never thought the ship will be so big. There were two swimming pools, there were bars there, there were dancing halls there, and the rooms were all separate rooms with attached bathrooms and all this. So in the nights I just went to the deck there and enjoying the sea in the moonlight.

Iqbal: It was on that ship that he met his future wife, my mother. He also, on that ship, met many other people, not only South Asian, but people from other parts of the world. And he tasted wine for the first time.

He had dinners on this ship. It was quite plush. You were traveling in quite good style. And in the evenings with his future wife-to-be, they would sing music. That's how they basically became friends because my mother was actually boarding the ship from India, a Sikh woman; my father, a Muslim man. So, these kinds of interactions were only ever going to be possible in this way.

Paul**:** It was a long and eventful journey to England, during which Iftikhar got to stop in many new and exciting places he'd never been to before. After an 18-hour train journey from Lahore to Karachi, where he boarded the ship, the vessel stopped at Aden in Yemen, went through the Suez Canal, then stopped in Egypt and Naples. From Naples, Iftikhar made his way up to Genoa, where he caught a train to Paris and then finally a ferry across the Channel to Dover.

Iqbal: He said people were very nice, people were welcoming. It was, for him, a very warm experience of arrival. And then he took the train from Dover to Victoria. And there in Victoria, he suddenly was struck though because one of the things that I don't think he ever realized and only anyone who ever lives in London or lives in England can realize that the weather can sometimes be quite not very nice.

Iftikhar: Everything looks very dark, black, even the buildings were black. It was cold, rainy. For me it was very, very cold. You shiver in that. It was September when I landed there in London Victoria Station.

Iqbal: So, he comes to a dark and rainy day in September, but he's still full of that sense of adventure and a taxi driver speaks to him in Cockney, he's East London and my dad recalls. He says, "I couldn't understand a word he was saying." Anyway, dad did somehow manage to give the taxi driver the directions to take him to Shepherd's Bush. I think the taxi driver thought cha-ching because he charged my dad five pounds at that time for the journey from Victoria to Shepherd's Bush, which is a very short journey considering that's nearly a weekly wage. But anyway, he's arrived and I think he's really, really enjoyed those first months that he was here. I say the month, he says it was a month that he spent basically traveling around, looking at London, really taking it in, and really having that sense of adventure that meant so much to him.

Katherine: Brilliant. Such an amazing story. Reflecting back on that time in his life, does he frame it as a challenging time or a positive experience or some kind of combination of the two?
Iqbal: I think there's a bit of both, Katherine. I think the thing is that for my father, there's certainly a sense that coming to Britain was on one level a freedom and opportunity.

The challenges were there. I think in 1960 when he arrived, I don't think the challenges were maybe as formidable. He certainly wasn't able to work immediately on the front line as it were, so

he took a job up in Selfridges and, basically, the rule at the time was that somebody like him, somebody ‘colored,’ should basically be in the back room. They weren't able to serve customers. There were certainly some issues around race that he was picking up, but I think the thing for him was that that sense of adventure and generally, that sense of warmth and welcome was still there. I think things did gradually change and I think things were changing. I know that we might talk later about the 1962 Act, but in many ways, this is again a change that's occurring on the back of more and more people coming from the Commonwealth or from colonies, who are non-White. And I think some of those challenges then started to appear in his life particularly later on.

Iftikhar: In March ‘61, I came back again to Selfridges and they gave me a permanent job. From ‘61 to 1986, I worked permanently in Selfridges.

Iqbal: And did you in those few years, how would you summarise those few years 61 to 63, 64?

Iftikhar: It was quite interesting actually. It was a different world you live in. Things were completely different than if you compared to Pakistan. Things are more organised. Buses were running there, tubes were running there. Shops are full of goods there. You can buy anything you like to. Wages were very low at that time. I was getting £10 a week from Selfridges. And with £10, I used to pay rent for my room, pay for fares, I used to get food, everything in that money. And I actually saved one or two pounds weekly. So things were very cheap at that time, very cheap. I could just manage it.

Iqbal: Now I think that’s a really important point to note is that the story of the immigrant isn't always one of just coming into a position of hostility and negativity, but there can often be real opportunities and real ways in which people can grow, develop, see new things, do new things. And that sense of adventure that my father had is really, really key because he was able to travel all around Europe. He loved traveling and I think that sense of adventure was already there in him.

But I think that that journey from Pakistan to London had really given him an appetite for seeing more and more places. He would go to Europe on a scooter or a three-wheeler, even once he would travel with a little camping thing with him. He had that real sense. He was 29-30. It was that age that I think for him was the golden age. He certainly was full of that.

I mean, the other challenge, obviously, is the sense of home. What is home? I think that remained with him. Where is home? And that's always being with him as a question that he's really struggled with because his sense of home in India had gone, his sense of home in Pakistan had gone in a way, and even here, he was feeling a certain sense of uncomfortableness because there was something about, his mother would write to him and say we're missing you. All his family were still back in Pakistan, the people that were his loved ones. And so for him, I think that sense of home was quite split and that must have been extraordinarily challenging. And in 1965, when he does eventually get his British passport, he actually puts on the form…the form is one of the records that's in our collection at The National Archives. My father applied for his naturalisation certificate and that form is in our collection. And in that form, there is a space to say: Is there a reason why you need to have your passport a bit earlier? And my father has written in that, "I want to go back to Pakistan to see my family." Because I think he was basically desperate to go and see his family.

Katherine: Thanks for that. I was going to ask about the 1962 Act, as you mentioned. Your dad moved just two years before the Commonwealth Immigrants Act of 1962. How did that new legislation affect other migrants from Pakistan and the rest of the Commonwealth?

Iqbal: The main thing was that the way in which my dad was able to enter was no longer allowed. The system that was then introduced after '62 was a voucher system, a tiered system, and you had to make a case as it were, you know? It wasn't just free open entry and so the numbers certainly

did come down. My father, as I said, came with a Pakistani passport. That was going to be disallowed. You just couldn't come with a Pakistani passport and just turn up. There were going to be other ways in which you would have to do it.

The other thing that also affected my father, I mean, if he had known at the time in 1960, he could have got his passport a lot quicker. But after ‘62, the rule was that it had to be five years. You had to have been here five years before you got your passport. So certainly, people were affected by the ‘62 Act and numbers were affected in terms of the numbers coming in.

But the fact of the matter is that there were other ways in which people were able, through the tiered system, to still come into the country and the numbers still remained in the tens of thousands regularly coming in annually as it were, of people coming from South Asia and the Caribbean.

So I think the ‘62 Act in some ways, was trying to play a careful game. This dream of Imperial citizenship was still very much there but the fact of the matter was that there was real concerns that were being raised in Britain about this idea of, again, ‘coloured’ immigration, non-White immigration.

This is something that goes to the heart of the matter, in some ways. It was somehow, “It's okay if you're over there and we're happy to call you as one of the British Empire, but we just don't want too many of you coming over here because of that sense that you're different. You're not quite like us."

But certainly my father's story and I think this was also the story of many who did come they did adapt, they did try and find ways in which they could fit in. They brought their own rich culture as well, and I think some of those things get lost in some of those kind of ‘black and white’

discussions that took place certainly from the '60s onwards, which did change things for that latter generation that started to come in.

Katherine: Thanks for listening to On the Record, a production of The National Archives at Kew.

In the next episode of our series on migration, we'll hear about the rise in anti-immigrant movements from our own records expert as well as historian Camilla Schoefield. Then we'll turn back to the themes of resistance, resilience, and community building as we hear about the founding of the Black Cultural Archives and how they're preserving stories of Black British history.

If you're interested in locating records on immigration in our collection, you can start with our Immigration research guide, which can be found with our other research guides on our website, nationalarchives.gov.uk. Just select "Help with your research" at the top of our homepage to start browsing our set of research guides.

To find out more about The National Archives, follow the link from the episode description in your podcast listening app or visit nationalarchives.gov.uk.

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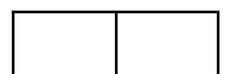
Katherine: Thank you to all the experts who contributed to this episode. This episode was written, edited, and produced by Hannah Hethmon for Better Lemon Creative Audio.



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