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20th Century Migration: 1962 – A Social Revolution?

In 1962, the Commonwealth Immigrants Act limited the freedom of movement for citizens born outside of the UK. In our final episode, we explore the rise of anti-immigrant movements during the 1960s. We then look at anti-racist activism and the formation of the Black Cultural Archives.

Documents from The National Archives used in this episode: [HO 223/108](#) and [HO 221/134](#).

If you're interested in finding out more about records covered in this episode take a look at our research guides to [Home Office correspondence](#) and [Black British social and political history in the 20th century](#). For help navigating our catalogue you can watch our [top level tips on using Discovery](#).

You can find out more about the Black Cultural Archives by visiting [their website](#).

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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.

This is part three: the 1962 Commonwealth Immigrants Act.

Katherine: In our previous episode, we learned about the 1948 Act, which gave citizenship and equal rights to Britain's colonies and the Commonwealth countries. That meant anyone in those



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countries could come to the U.K. to live and work.

The 1962 Act limited those rights. Most people born outside of the U.K. were now required to go through immigration and apply for a work permit. These permits were usually limited to highly-skilled workers.

Paul: We'll come back to the 1962 Act in a bit, but this episode actually starts in 1968 with a controversial speech from a controversial politician...who of course makes an appearance in our records.

Kevin Searle: Hello. My name is Kevin Searle and I'm a modern domestic records specialist at the National Archives.

Katherine: So Kevin, we have some records at the National Archives related to an individual who is come to be strongly associated with anti-immigrant rhetoric in the aftermath of the 1962 Act. Can you tell me who was Enoch Powell? What was he remembered for, and why do we have papers relating to his career?

Kevin: Enoch Powell was a Conservative MP for Wolverhampton South West from 1950 to 1974. Powell is best known for delivering an inflammatory speech around 53 years ago in 1968, which became known as the 'Rivers of Blood' speech. The speech is riddled with incendiary language and metaphor. Powell, for instance, spoke of a nation busily engaged in 'heaping up its own funeral pyre' to describe immigration, and perhaps most famously stated, 'Like the Roman, I seem to see 'the River Tiber foaming with much blood,' to suggest a future marred by bloody racial violence, hence it gaining the name 'Rivers of Blood.' And of course, this is predication that hasn't come to pass. But it was a speech that certainly emboldened many racist groups and exacerbated racist

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violence at a very tumultuous time, and as the archive of government there are numerous records of Powell and the broader context of the speech held at The National Archives.

Katherine: So I understand we don't necessarily have the largest Powell collection—the Parliamentary Archives have quite a bit. But what we do have is pretty interesting. Can you tell me about the records we have around Enoch Powell and his public discourse about migration?

Kevin: Powell's speech provoked outrage amongst many and led to his dismissal from the shadow cabinet by the Tory leader, Edward Heath. There was, nonetheless, a huge amount of popular support for Powell perhaps most famously from the London dockers that went on strike in protest of his dismissal. And one record held at the National Archives that certainly shows some of that support is a file entitled 'Letter of Support sent to Enoch Powell, MP by Immigration official at Heathrow airport.'

Paul: If you want to look at these documents yourself, they can be found in our Home Office Collection. That same collection also holds extracts from speeches made by Powell when we was an M.P.

Kevin: But it is important to note that as the official archive of the UK government, The National Archives isn't the best place to come for records which represent anti-racist voices and organisations in the community, of which there were of course many.

Paul: Kevin recommended that we go beyond our collections and speak to a historian outside The National Archives in order to better Powell's historical context.

Katherine: So as we continue this story, we're turning over the hosting microphone to Kevin, so he can interview Dr. Camilla Schofield, Dr. Schofield is a historian of modern Britain who has written extensively about Enoch Powell in the post-war period and is the author of the book, Enoch Powell

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and the Making of Postcolonial Britain.

Kevin: Camilla, it's a great pleasure to have you along today. I've been looking through some of our records relating to Enoch Powell, he's probably best remembered for his 'Rivers of Blood' speech in 1968, but a lot happens in the decade leading up to that speech. Could you perhaps provide some more context for the speech perhaps beginning near the start of the '60s with the Commonwealth Immigrants Act of 1962?

Dr Camilla Schofield: Yeah, I definitely think you have to look backwards to understand Powell and his generation. The Commonwealth Immigrants Act of '62 ended the automatic right of people of the British Empire and Commonwealth to settle in the UK, and this was really pushing back against the 1948 Nationality Bill.

Paul: ...that's the British Nationality Act of 1948, which we covered in our previous episode.

Camilla: So people currently living as British subjects in the Empire as well as those who had once lived under British imperial rule who are now Commonwealth citizens had to apply for work vouchers. So one's right of entry was weirdly under this new law, based on where your passport was issued. If you had a British passport issued in the UK, you had the right to enter. If your British passport was issued in a Crown colony, you had to get a work permit. And these work permits were typically only for highly skilled workers such as doctors. So it was hugely restrictive. And another important thing to say about this is this act was widely recognised as being racially motivated or racist, as the restrictions were targeted against people of Asian or African descent who had British passports, while at the same time there was no restriction on Irish migration to Britain.

This moment of what was described as a 'colour bar' around migration and citizenship in Britain

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had really profound effects at this moment. One is that it produces a national conversation about this question of race and citizenship or who gets to be a full citizen of Britain. And so, you have really the emergence of Black community organising and anti-racist activism taking a national stage at this moment.

The passing of the Act and opposition to the passing of the act helped bring about new politics of anti-racism in Britain. It brought about new Black community organising. And this didn't sort of come out of nowhere. In the 1950s as well, you see local community organising on the ground, particularly in the aftermath of the White riots against Black people in Notting Hill in London and Nottingham, but it really becomes a national conversation in the aftermath around the passing of this bill. And Claudia Jones, who's a really important activist at this moment, was leading in opposition to the bill. She was Trinidadian born and an organiser in Notting Hill. She described the act as "establishing a second-class citizenship in Britain for people of colour in Britain". There was a very clear articulation that this was bringing a 'colour bar' to what it meant to be British.

In a way, that Act and the emerging conversation set the stage for what happens in the 1960s. Not only do you have the emergence of Black resistance, but you also have groups that are opposing the rights of migrants from the Commonwealth and Colonies. In a way, the passing of that signals that they can make gains politically. Groups like the Monday Club, the Immigration Control Association, the Racial Preservation Society, particularly the Monday Club, it is made up of influential members of the Conservative Party. They are throughout the 1960s influencing the discourse and the approach and thinking about immigration within the Conservative Party on the kind of far right of that party. I've said a lot, but I can say more about the 1960s if you want.

[laughs]

Kevin: Well, please do because you've begun to answer the next question I had which was to really

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expand on some of the other key events that took place in the '60s because, of course, 1964 was a key year as well. But I'll let you expand.

Camilla: Yeah. 1964, the Smethwick election campaign involved the use of a racist campaign slogan-- which in using a different language, was basically "If you want a Black person as your neighbour, vote Labor."

Katherine: That slogan, which used a racial slur to describe Black people, was created by supporters of Peter Griffiths, who went on to win the seat.

Schofield: I will say the Conservative Party leadership really pushed away from this...that campaign and he even distanced himself from the slogan. But it signalled that there was a movement on the ground, or there was political gain to be made by that kind of racist politics.

And in reaction to Smethwick, you have Malcolm X coming to Britain to speak and contributing to the emergence of a kind of Black political organising that does have a voice at the government level, particularly.

I see it as the first generation of civil rights activism in Britain. By the late '60s, it's seen as a bunch of people who aren't radical enough, who are sort of pushing an anti-racist agenda but very much within the institutions of the state or working with the Home Office. And they really pushed for the passing of the 1965 Race Relations Act, which is something that I am working on in my research. There was these groups that are again coming out of this effort to... I mean, this is really talking about the experiences of migrants once they're in Britain, facing profound discrimination. But this is sort of happening at the same time through the 1960s. And really, by the mid-60s, you have these quite well-established organisations pushing for civil rights.

Katherine: So we have this context of increasing activism both in opposition to and in support of

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migrants in Britain. And that brings us back to Enoch Powell.

Camilla: One thing that's often forgotten about 'Rivers of Blood' speech in '68 is that he's talking against freedom of movement of Commonwealth and colonial British subjects to come to Britain, but the immediate instigator or catalyst of the speech is actually the 1968 Race Relations Act. That act made it illegal to discriminate against people based on their race, ethnicity, or national origin in housing and employment. It was a major expansion of the original '65 Act, which only talked about whether restaurants or pubs were refusing service to people. It was thinking deeply about the institutional racism of British society, and he was pushing against this.

So I think it's important in this history to understand that precarity around one's right to be in Britain was absolutely fundamental to this story, but alongside this was organising on the ground to fight systemic racism throughout British society. And these two things were seen as very bound up together. And in 1968, there was a second Commonwealth Immigrants Act which increased restrictions, decreased the number of work vouchers offered, but alongside it, passed this Race Relations Act. And so the idea was that a tolerant British society could only be produced if numbers were decreased and discrimination in certain instances was made illegal. They were always seen as bound up together.

Kevin: Thank you again, Camilla. We started off this series looking at policies and laws around migration in the early 20th century, the tail end of what some historians have referred to as Britain's Imperial Century, but by the '50s and '60s, many former territories had gained independence. What impact did this have on British policy towards migration?

Camilla: Well, it was huge, and I think it's right to see the late '50s and early '60s as a major transition point at the level of State - this true reckoning with the end of Empire. You know, if we go back to the previous episode where you were talking about the British Nationality Act of 1948

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that was very much conceived of as a way of putting Britain at the centre of a global community. And there was very much an effort in 1948 under the Labor government, this idea of remaking the Empire into a global partnership, a partnership built on democracy and racial equality and economic partnership. This was going to be the Commonwealth. There was a sort of hope on left and right that the Commonwealth would be the Empire remade as a kind of liberal project.

By '61, there's a sense that this isn't working. You have South Africa under an apartheid regime. You have newly independent states India, Pakistan, Ghana pushing against the membership of South Africa being a part of the Commonwealth, so this is fracturing within the Commonwealth itself. And you also have the Jamaican electorate voting against being part of the West Indian Federation which was seen by, again, the British colonial office as that kind of an opportunity to Britain to develop new economic relationships with the Caribbean or continue those economic interdependence.

The passing of the '62 Commonwealth Immigrants Act only happens after the Jamaican electorate vote down the West Indian Federation and say, no, we want a national independence. All of the cogs in the state apparatus are really thinking about diplomacy, thinking about trying to maintain these international relationships with newly independent assertive states.

Another part of the story—and this I think is very similar to people who are familiar with the history of the civil rights movement in the United States and the Cold War—that there is a kind of a cultural diplomatic anxiety about how Britain is perceived internationally—again, trying to maintain these relationships globally with new Commonwealth independent countries. That particularly in the aftermath of the Notting Hill riots, Britain has always presented itself as tolerant; it doesn't have the history the United States has. It doesn't have to deal with the history of slavery even though obviously, its relationship to the Caribbean slavery is ignored. There is perceived to be a race

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problem in Britain - White riots against Black people in '58- this is seen as a real diplomatic nightmare. This kind of international context is hugely important, determines when these acts are past, determines how policymakers approach it and not wanting to appear racist in the immigration policy. This is why the history of decolonisation is so interesting and important, I think.

Kevin: It's fascinating. Thank you. Are there any particular National Archives records from this period that have struck you?

Camilla: I think any researcher that wants to understand the history of immigration in Britain really must go to The National Archives to look at the Colonial Office papers, to look at Cabinet papers, to look at Home Office papers. It's these debates, these sense of tensions and uncertainties at work and these forces, the international aspect, the sense of emergent violence on the street and this kind of perception of social problem around migrants. You can see those debates happening in the minutes of the Colonial Office, the Commonwealth Affairs Office and the Home Office.

Kevin: Okay. Obviously, The National Archives as the government archive largely represents the voice of officialdom. What other archival sources could researchers use who are interested in community voices that resisted Powell, 'Powellism', and that broader context of racism in the '60s?

Camilla: There's so many archives. I would consider looking at city-based archives, so really getting a sense of what's happening at local government and at the community level. The London Metropolitan Archives is incredible. It has police records, it has community organiser's records. I would definitely go to the Manchester City Library because that has all the official Institute of Race Relations, which was very much in conversation with the state around these questions and actually originally emerged in South Africa and then became focused on race relations in Britain. So I'd go to Manchester. I'd go to local record offices across the country. Nottingham has

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incredible records around this, particularly around the emergence of community relations committees.

In the '60s, as well as the passing of anti-discrimination law alongside these new laws against discrimination, they set up community relations committees in cities across the country, which were a form of Black representation that was supported by the state. And these are really, really interesting files. But I guess I wanted to say alongside looking at those city archives, also archives emergent from Black resistance itself are really important. And from the 1980s onwards, you see archive activism; people archiving their own movements. And Black Cultural Archives is a really, really important example of that. And to really see the history of Black resistance, you have to go there.

But I would say that there is something special about going into the files of officialdom in terms of telling the story of immigration and the story of Black Britain, in that you can read these files against the grain, you can see what people were fighting against, and you can see something of the kind of institutionalised racism within the state apparatus which is really really important for us as historians to understand and see.

So I think that if anyone wants to research Black British history, they should both go to those archives of resistance, but also go to the archives of the state to understand the history of surveillance and these kind of embedded forms of nationalism and racism at the highest levels.

[Musical transition]

Katherine: Dr Schofield mentioned activist archives and the Black Cultural Archives. We wanted to learn more. So we called up Hannah Ishmael, Collections and Research Manager at BCA, which is

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based in Brixton, South London.

Paul: Hannah, can you tell me why the Black Cultural Archives were founded? Why was there a need for an archive focused specifically on the Black experience in Britain?

Hannah Ishmael: The Black Cultural Archives is an independent archive. So we were founded in 1981 by a group of teachers, educationists, and parents who were concerned about the educational attainment of mainly Caribbean children who were either born in the UK or had recently migrated from the Caribbean, but also African students as well. And because of the racism that was within the British school system. So there was a book that was published in the 1970s called 'How the West Indian Child is Made Educationally Sub-normal in the British School System', which highlighted a lot of issues within the education system. Our founders decided that education, finding resources, finding histories, which would give positive celebration and role model, positive histories of Black and Caribbean and African people in Britain particularly, would be a really important milestone of education essentially.

1981, as some may know, is also the year of - we call them 'The Uprisings' because, within our organisation, language is very important—but also known as the 'Brixton Riots' or the 'Brixton Disturbances'. And one of the catalysts for the uprisings was the lack of educational attainment. So there's a double whammy going on, there's the issues around policing and racism and educational attainment, it all came together, and spurred our founders on to create our institution.

Paul: Obviously Hannah my guess is that the Black Cultural Archives collections are very, very diverse and in different formats. Could you perhaps tell us a little more about how they were collected, which communities are represented, and how the Black Cultural Archives came into being as an archive?

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Hannah: Yeah, of course. One of our founders Len Garrison, as part of his previous work history, he was very much involved in education. He was never a formal teacher, but he was very interested in education. And he was very interested in anti-racist multicultural education. So prior to the Black Cultural Archives, he had founded an organisation called the African-Caribbean Educational Resource Project or ACER for short. And part of the ACER project was to develop multicultural, anti-racist teaching materials to use in school, so working with White teachers and Black students. He developed a number of resources to get around anti-racist education. And when he started developing these resources, he discovered that he could very easily, well relatively easily, find material relating to the African-American histories. But he found it really hard to find materials relating to Black British communities, even though he had a very strong sense that this history existed. So he began to collect this material himself for use in his resources. So he became really friendly with a number of antique shops, second-hand book dealers, some junk shops, as well.

So many of our early collections are from Len Garrison's personal collecting with this use around anti-racist education. And when the Black Cultural Archives was founded, some of this material became part of the Black Cultural Archives collection, and then once Len Garrison passed away, additional material also came into the collection. So our early collecting history is very much tied up in this education, anti-racist movement, as I discussed as well.

And because the founders were looking for any material that spoke to British and Black British presences, they collected what we would like to think of traditional manuscript material, but they also collected library books, also collected, ephemera, they also printed objects. So for a very long time, the organisation was the board of trustees, and then one director who did absolutely everything. So it wasn't until 2010 when the collection was formally catalogued using Heritage

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Lottery Fund money. And that's when the division came into this, when archivists were employed and moved more towards manuscript collecting.

Paul: I actually remember...started my first archival job in 2011, so I remember the Black Cultural Archives were making real waves at the time. Can you tell me more about the types of materials you collect? Do you have a sound archive as well or a film archive?

Hannah: From the very early collecting, along with the traditional manuscript material, our founders were very keen on oral histories. So we have oral history collections that date from the mid-1980s, which means that quite a lot of our collections are on multiple formats. We have VHS, we have cassette, and so they were interested in capturing audio as well, as well as video or history. I think it might be an early intervention capturing videos of people. And because of this idea of absence and stereotyping, the founders wanted to really ensure that people's personal histories, people's personal experiences were captured.

In many of the projects that we do - because we often work in partnership with individuals, communities, and organisations - there is often an all history element to those projects as well.

Many of our collections come through collective organising. Our biggest collection is The Runnymede Trust, and they have a collection of material, and they are race relations, or what used to be now social justice think tank who were established in the 1960s. That's our biggest collection by volume. Our most popular collections are material relating to the Black women's movement and the Black Power movement which are a number of different individual collections.

We have lots of collections that come from individuals, but they speak to each other. So when people are researching, you'll often find people researching across different collections, because they're people involved in the same movements, or the same organisation, or the same broad

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political or community groupings. Education is particularly strong and then Black Power, broadly defined, Black Panther UK, specifically.

Paul: What does the Black Cultural Archives collection have to tell us both broadly, and specifically, about Black migration to the British Isles and the history of Black British community and culture?

Hannah: I think, as with all collections, our story is very nuanced and sometimes quite difficult to pin down. So because of the nature of our collecting, our collecting is very strongly influenced by being South London, being in Brixton. So, very much speaks to the communities that come from South London and the changes within communities. I think there's a division between what we collect, but also the stories that we are trying to tell. And I think this is most visibly seen in actually our physical building, which is at a grade two listed Georgian building which is on Windrush Square. And Windrush Square is an area of Brixton that had been redeveloped in the 1990s and was named after the iconic ship. But as a Georgian building, and we sit next to a part of Brixton that used to be called Tate Gardens and if I look out of my window, I can also see a statue to Sir Henry Tate, who is of the sugar manufacturers, Tate & Lyle. And whilst Henry Tate himself was not involved in transatlantic slavery with the movement of peoples of African descent from Africa to the Caribbean, sugar still obviously has a very entangled history in the later plantation system. And being in a Georgian building, as in a Black organisation, I also think it really helps us think about these entanglements of Empire. So again, not to say that the owners of the building that we're in were ever involved directly in the transatlantic slave trade, but the wealth that was generated through the 1700s and the 1800s and onwards speak to these kinds of Empire entanglements.

As I mentioned, we collected objects - we don't collect them anymore, but one of our oldest objects is a coin that bears the likeness of a Roman emperor called Septimius Severus. Septimius was of North African heritage and spent a lot of time in York. So again, we start thinking about the

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presence of Black histories and Black communities. So whilst the vast majority of our material speaks to the post-Windrush era, with greater levels of migration, some of the earlier objects that we have, even where we exist, physically, in Brixton, speak to these kind of histories of Empire. And that's one of the things that I think that our collections are quite good at, speaking to and also making us confront. With the Windrush scandal of a couple of years ago. What does it mean to be British, who do we exclude when we think of Britishness? Often with Britishness, right, people try to make Britishness and Whiteness synonymous, but our collections are much more about the Empire and how Britain as a place and as an idea, and as a concept and as even as a nationality has always been deeply intertwined with migration and Empire.

Our collections also speak to individual experiences. So whereas collections you have at The National Archives speak to moments where communities interact with the state, and within the histories of Black communities, that interaction is not always but often negative interaction, our collections speak to the more positive experiences. So whilst campaigning against deportations, whilst campaigning against police brutality and harassment is really important, and those are represented in the archives like The National Archives, we capture that, but we also capture birthday parties and swimming lessons and Carnival, and I think this is a new research area, moments of joy and moments of being happy. And I think it lends a much more rounded picture of what it's like to be a Black person in Britain. And not to say that we present the only instance of that, but we help to try and unpack what that might have meant in the 1930s, what it might have meant to be Black in the 1980s, and what it might mean to younger generations doing this kind of research now.

Katherine: Thanks for listening to On the Record, a production of The National Archives at Kew. Stay subscribed so you don't miss our next episode on some of the fascinating LGBTQ stories in



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our collections.

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.

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Paul: Listeners, we need your help to make this podcast better! We need to know a bit more about you and what themes you're interested in. You can share this information with us by visiting smartsurvey.co.uk/s/ontherecord, that's [repeat]. We'll include that link in the episode description and on our website. You can also share your feedback or suggestions for future series by emailing us at OnTheRecord@nationalarchives.gov.uk.

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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