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My grandparents' Windrush story

For Windrush Day on 22 June, Paulette shares her family history from when her grandparents came over to England from Jamaica.

My grandparents were born and raised in Jamaica. After meeting, they had 6 children together, including my mother. But like many of the Windrush generation, they decided to come to England, where they were promised jobs and a better life.

My granny had to make the decision to leave her children with her mother (my great grandmother) to come to England. It was heartbreaking for everyone. But they promised the children that, as soon as they settled and found jobs, they would send for them. With the help of my great grandmother and the little savings that they had, they were able to pay their passage to come to England.

Mamma and pappa (what we called our grandmother and grandfather) made their way to the docks to board the ship. They were ready to start a new adventure and a new life.

It was mixed feelings of excitement and apprehension as they did not know what this place called England was going to be like. Mamma said the journey was very long and it was packed with other Jamaicans who were heading for this "land paved with gold".

When they arrived it was foggy, everything looked grey and dreary. My granny had a thin dress, head scarf and a light coat. Pappa had his suit and wore a trilby hat. My granny said the roads were "uneven" (cobble) and she kept looking for the "gold" everyone was talking about.

The next mission was to find somewhere to live. That in itself was frustrating as everywhere they went, they were met with the signs in the window "NO BLACKS, NO IRISH, NO DOGS!!" Racist landlords refused to rent rooms to them, and the living spaces they could rent tended to be unsafe and uninhabitable.

They faced racism everywhere they went: name-calling, monkey chants, the "N" word. They were regularly told to go back to their own country. Unsurprisingly, my granny had some regrets and wished she was back in Jamaica with her children. Yet my grandparents persevered despite the hostile atmosphere.

Once they both found jobs, they found a community where many people were in a similar situation. Mamma's first job was at Lyons Tea House before she moved on to the railways and later the hospitals, working in a variety of roles. My grandfather mainly worked in factories before settling into caretaker jobs.

From there they managed to save and find better and bigger accommodation - and they sent for their children one by one so that they too could have a better life.

The children furthered their education in the UK and were very successful. Two ran their own welding business, two became nurses, one became an actor (featuring in Eastenders!) and my mum did secretarial/personal assistant roles in addition to working in a library later in her life.

I am grateful for my grandparents because I am the product of that struggle. We as black people have come a long way, but we still have a mighty long way to go for equality in the UK and we must never forget those that paved the way for us.