

Reminiscences of Barnet Residents from the African- Caribbean Community

Iris

Eleanor

Enid

Angelina R

Leonard

Edith

Archibong

Angelina

Kenneth

Veronica

The reminiscence project was carried out at the Multi-Cultural Centre, Algernon Rd, Hendon NW4, between September and November 2007. A series of group reminiscences were held on the theme of "Moving to England". My sincere thanks go to all members of the Barnet African-Caribbean Association who were kind enough to share their time and their reminiscences, as well as many others who I was fortunate to chat with informally. My thanks also goes to Maurice Archer and all the staff at the centre for their support and to the canteen staff whose cheerfulness was really infectious.

The whole experience was most rewarding and it was quite by chance and fortunate to have captured such a range of accounts representing so many Caribbean Islands. I hope that this small project grasps some of the challenges faced by young people starting out on a new life, without the family network for support as much as a preview of a lifetime contribution to post-war reconstruction and to Barnet's development.

Living in Barnet

All those members who were interviewed had arrived in England between early 1950s and 1960s. Many were long term residents in the Borough of Barnet, having moved here quite early on or settled directly in the Borough. The majority of people who had come from the West Indies, were very young and looked forward to the challenge. Everyone found work almost immediately, finding opportunities for work came easily as many remarked, “In those days it was easy to find work”. In a project such as this one can only hope to capture a snapshot from a lifetime of memories and experiences.

Angelina: (West Indies) I thought all the houses were factories, as there was smoke coming from the chimneys, so I thought everybody come to them to get a job. I came in March and the trees were quite naked without any leaves and so I thought they were all dry woods. I was very pleased anyway to be here.



Kenneth: (Barbados) I didn't think much of England, I thought it was old fashioned. There were so many factories and houses. In Barbados we all had our own houses. Apart from that, like I said in Barnet, it gave me a good impression.

Eleanor: (Jamaica) First thing that really struck me was, that there wasn't any respect. The children used to call the grown ups by their Christian names. When we used to call people Mr..., I used to think, Oh this is a funny country that the children don't acknowledge the grown ups.

Angelina R: (Grenada) I thought it was lovely. I joined in all the activities that my local church put on.

Edith: (Jamaica) I don't even know, I think, looking back at the time now, I just accepted the way things work, You didn't expect it to be this or that, you found what it was and dealt with it, that's how I managed things and managed myself.

Settling In



Leonard: (Barbados) The reason that I settled down so quickly here in England is that I had spent five years in the United States, working amongst all nationalities, specially with the Polish, they were very nice people. The only thing I didn't like in America is that I loved my freedom and as a black person I had seen that freedom was not there. I had been back to Barbados and then came here to England. I was working for London Transport. I fitted in quite quickly. Well what made me happy is, as long as I had money, I could go on to any place, any restaurant anywhere, they would pull a chair for me and say, "what would you have sir". And when I heard words like that coming from Britain, I knew I was in a happy place and today I am quite happy and would go no other place so I will stay here.

Veronica: (Guyana) I can associate with what you say. In a way because we were from an English speaking country, it wasn't all that difficult to fit in. Might be difficult really to fit in, to build up relationships with people who have their own ideas, or people from the West Indies or what have you. But I didn't find much of that, I fitted myself in as it were. And got on with it and then went to Trent Park to do my teacher training. And then went on teaching and retire as a school teacher. I suppose the other thing that appeal to us was there was so much Englishness really, that was taught and reared in Guyana as a whole, so when you came it wasn't a surprise, because you were brought up in this culture and you practised that culture. Apart from tea in the afternoon or something like that.



Iris: (St. Vincent) I couldn't get my food here, I used to go to Brixton market to get my food. I remember once when I was fetching the baby, I was to be put on a diet. The dietician said, eat your own food, get your own West Indian food, that will help you. I had put on so much weight. I used to go to Brixton and then I used to go to Wood Green and get sweet potatoe, banana. Well the weather, the only thing I complained about was the weather. I have got accustomed to the weather now.

Enid: (Trinidad) I got chilblains.

Veronica: Me too, I think we all got chilblains. It's putting your foot against the heat, that sort of thing.

Kenneth: The weather was a bit different, if you dressed sensibly, you can combat the winter. People were very nice to me, I never had worries with people. I kind of fitted in. Anyway using my common sense, that's all it was. Like my friend here (Eleanor) I never drank or smoked so that it didn't create any problems I used to see girls smoking, I knew it was not in that girl's interest to smoke like that.

Eleanor: Then again the weather, I just took it in my stride. My sister doesn't like the cold at all. She wanted to go straight back home, which my mother wasn't too pleased about. Anyway she stuck it out. She went into nursing and well, I got married early.

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Accommodation

Many people had a common experience of multiple occupancy, of living in single room accommodation and though used to less restricted life style back home, soon acclimatised to the situation.



Enid: It was hard at the beginning to get places to live. We always got places to rent. You had to pay, but you had no problems. You may not get a big place, but you got somewhere. Two rooms maybe. I stayed where I was until I got something better, because I didn't have the children. My children were in Trinidad. When I got a big place, then I sent for the children

Iris: We lived in Lichfield Grove which was in Finchley Central and I moved from there to a council estate in Coppetts Close, Finchley/Friern Barnet. My house was a very large room when I came over here, I had to cook in it and sleep and everything. But that was good, it was a very large room and then I move onto a flat, two rooms and a kitchen and then I moved onto a council house with three bedrooms with the children. It was a good experience.



Leonard: I was put up in a section near North Finchley. Which was a house kept by an Irish lady. I served there for a little while and then I moved to rented accommodation that was nearer to my workplace which was Hendon Garage (London Transport). I lived there for some considerable time and then I moved to more permanent residence in West Hendon area, which I love very much because at that time it was mostly Jewish. I am happy to be still in the area after my retirement. I came in 1967. On listening to my friends here, housing conditions have improved immensely. So I had no problems after I came here. I was put up by the liaison officer who was looking after The London Transport employees that came. After looking for my own residence, I found I had no problems because of the hard harsh things I heard people had to go through. I was very fortunate, that I had not met..., my conditions were perfect.

Eleanor: We came to Howard Road, Cricklewood Broadway. When we got here, the housing was very peculiar. I don't know. We all had to share one room and then there were no dogs, no Irish, no Blacks, no children. We stayed together and moved around a bit. Always in Cricklewood area. I think it was Camden then or Brent. My mother lived in a house and several people lived there. Then I had my daughter in 1961. I got married in West Hendon Baptist church. Moved around a bit and after I got married we moved to Shoot Up Hill. We were there for about eleven years and then we went on to the housing list. It was Camden there, in Shoot Up Hill. They had

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no housing there, they showed me a flat in Barnet so we took it. We have been there now for 33 years.

Edith: When I came here first, I think I was a little bit disappointed with the living conditions, very disappointed. The houses you lived in didn't have a bath, didn't have a shower, nothing. It was difficult in that way. If you wanted a decent bath, I had to go to public baths, which I didn't want to go to for sure. I think that was the most difficult thing to deal with.

Angelina: I was very pleased anyway to be here and to meet different nationalities, all tell different stories from their countries. Because we were all living in one room, where we all share and so many different countries live together (in one house) where we just had one room.

Kenneth: I had friends of mine here, in Southgate. I stayed there for 3 or 4 years. Then I lived in Hutton Grove, Finchley and Finchley Central and then Margaret Road, New Barnet. I was married from Barnet at the registrar office in Wood Green. I was 24 years old.

Veronica: We stayed with a Guyanese friend in Chalk Farm and then Barnet. We didn't buy, we always rented. Drivers & Norris, I still pay Drivers & Norris (estate agents) rent. We never lived in Haringey, only taught there, I lived in Barnet.

Angelina R: When I first came to this country I was living in a place called Paddington. After Paddington, we worked our way and bought a house in Neasden. From Neasden, I had my son and I got married and then from then there was no turning back. Everybody was nice.

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Work

Clothing Trade

Coincidentally, though many of the ladies came from different Caribbean Islands and were not known to each other, more than 50% of them worked initially in this trade. Some remained as professional machinists and dressmakers till retirement. The garment industry was expanding, it had hauled itself from the austerity of the war years and post-war shortages into the period of re-construction and rising economy. The work place varied from working at home to working at West End or East End garment manufacturers. Labour shortage applied to all services and scope for employment was wide.

Enid: I came to England in the 1950s to meet my husband who was already here in 1948. I came as a dressmaker and it was quite easy for me to get a job. I can leave one job at mid-day and get another one. It was very easy. And I am quite contented and happy here. My husband and I, we helped each other, we were in the same trade, the rag trade, he was a tailor as well, and I was a dressmaker. He worked up in the East End and I used to work in the female dressmaking trade in the West End. I sewed from home. A dressmaker at home, as long as you were a good dressmaker, you get work. You cut your own work, make your own dresses.



Angelina R: I came from Grenada in the 1960s, I came to meet my brother. Two days after I came, I went to the West End and found work myself. In those days a job was no problem. I found a job

immediately. They asked me what I was doing, there were people from Cyprus, they will come and ask you if you want a job or what sort of job you want in those days, they come and meet you in the airport or station and they ask you what work you want. I was a machinist at first, dressmaking and then I joined the health service, I was there 8 years. I had done dressmaking before at home. And people were very nice. I can't regret a single day. Everybody was nice to me.



Edith: I came to Britain with a British passport. When I came my first job was not what I wanted which I stayed at for three months, which was laundry work. After three months I found myself a job, which I stayed with until I retired. So my job was machining and all the years I was here I only did three month in a different place apart from machining. I make different garments, different factories, the whole of my life was done in machining. I did suits, I worked for eleven and a half years with the Marks & Spencers firm. There were other places I worked for short periods, I didn't stay and the last placed that I worked I retired there, they did exclusive work, I can't remember the name now, they only do exclusive work for places like Horrocks. I was working in a factory before I came to England (machining). I did private work from home so all my life that is what I did, machining. I started when I was seventeen and end up doing it till I retired. At home in Jamaica, I was working for a company and I was also working from home in my

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spare time. Very much the same as I do here in England. I used to work and used to do some dresses for some friends until I stopped doing that because I found it was too hard to do two way work, it was too much.

Angelina: I came to Britain in 1957 from the West Indies where I met my husband. My husband came to Britain also in 1957 and sent for me. I worked in a restaurant in Kilburn. We moved from West Hampstead to Cricklewood after a short period and there I had our first child in Britain in 1960. Then we moved from there to Hendon where we are now. My husband worked in the building trade and I have always supported him with the office work. After I had the children, I went out to work. I worked at Edgware Hospital for a couple of years and then moved on to work for the Metropolitan Police in the catering department at the Peel Centre, Hendon and I was at the Peel Centre for 20 years. I retired from there.



Veronica: I came from Guyana in 1953. I was already teaching in Guyana, but it wasn't possible for me to get a teaching job on arrival here. So I worked in a factory where they made clothing. I remember clearly when the machines were switched on I thought I was going to die, because the sound of the machines going off at the same time was quite overwhelming. Rooooh (sound of machines), but they were lovely people, and my son, who was very young at the time, he benefited from lots of gifts from these people, they just loved him. I have very pleasant memories. And I am pleased to say I eventually got over that noise and I got quite friendly with the owners. I then went to Trent Park to

do my teacher training and went on to teaching and retired as a schoolteacher. I fully enjoyed my teaching career and I am still friends with the teachers I taught with. They ring me regularly and they say, we are coming to see you and we don't want you to prepare anything because we are bringing everything. That's the sort of relationship we have. They were teachers from Haringey. I stayed at one school (in Haringey) throughout my life and when I was in Guyana, I taught at Christ Church School.

Leonard: I came to England in 1967. I was recruited by the British Government to work for London transport until retiring. I fitted in quite quickly. I have a love for England, because over in my native country, which is Barbados, after returning from America, I seemed to have a heat problem. So the doctor said if I could go to a place with a milder, cooler weather, I would be much better off and so since moving to England, I have no intension of moving anywhere else. Because when I was working on the buses, people ask me especially when the rain falls, why am I so happy. I say because it's mild and lively and I welcome the English weather here. I wouldn't say that my body likes it, when it's very very cold, but when its more cold I am happy than when its hot. And I am very grateful to be here and I find the people to be very happy and go together.

So one day at Hendon Central someone said to me, how long have you been here. I said under one year. They used this term, "blimey, you get on like you have been here for years". Because I felt happy. I worked with London Transport until my retirement.

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Iris: I came to this country in 1956. I was about 23 when I came over. My husband was already here. When I came over here I used to work for the NAFFI (Navy, Army and Air Force Institutes) down Totteridge Lane, where they train soldiers, they used to have a lot of American soldiers there. I use to work in the kitchen where they do the cooking. I had twins afterwards so I couldn't go out to work, I had to look after the children. I love living in Barnet. From 1956 I lived in Barnet and always love Barnet. Well my husband came before me, sent for me, he came in March and I came in November 1st 1956 he used to work at NAFFI and I used to work at NAFFI, he used to work two evenings, so both of us used to work for the same place. I had no problem getting work and when the children grew up, I used to work in the laundry, the Advance Laundry, Finchley, they put me in the canteen there and in the evening I used to work at St. Elizabeth's, Mayfield Avenue, Finchley Older Peoples home, I did the meals for them, set the table for meals etc.



Kenneth: I came from Barbados, by British Airways, Britannia in 1961. I always lived in the Barnet area, Barnet and North Finchley for a long time. I worked for British Gas as a technician for a long time. I did engineering, I did a City and Guilds course in gas realisation. My first job was on London Transport I used to drive buses and then became an inspector and so on.

Later I did a coastal engineering course and a degree at Cambridge. We were young, I came when I was 20/21 and I have no regrets, I have no regrets at all. As far as I was concerned Barnet was always good to me. So I thought to myself, its only good for me to give back.



Eleanor: I first came to England in 1959 February. I was 18 yrs old and I came with my sister who was two years younger than me. I came by ship called The Venezuela, I spent 16 days on sea. Mother was here, I had finished school, we didn't get jobs those days in Jamaica. My mum sent for the two of us together. So we had to just get on best we could till we got jobs. My sister got a job first, she was younger, because they had this Youth Exchange scheme at the time so she got a job. It was three months before I got a job. I went to work in a laundry, I was doing racking in a laundry. I stayed for about two years, I went on to other jobs anyway and then I got married. I got a job when my daughter was 8 months old and I just carried on working and working. I went into a factory and worked my way up. I ended up at the Police College in the kitchen, in Hendon. I worked there for 13 years and then put off four years before my retirement. People, well some were unkind, and some were all right I think. Well, at the time I was a very quiet person, I didn't use to respond until one day, it was an African person, when she heard the way they were behaving towards me, she said to me, "when they speak to you, speak back". So I thought, "Oh! is that it". When things cropped up at work and I had to speak up, I never forgot those words (laughter).

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Archibong: (Nigeria) I came to Britain through the English Electric Company, they provided me with a job as an electrician. I qualified in Nigeria as an electrical engineer, installations of all kinds. Previously I was trained by R.E.M.E. (Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers UK Army) enlisted in World War 2 and sent to Burma. I was in conflict all the time. I spent all my service there, but lets not start talking about that, I was young then and thought I was invincible. After the war, I was working on a power station in Nigeria and English Electric wanted me to come to Britain and work for them. After my duration of work, I got my pension here. That's how I remained here. I retired with them.

Leisure

At the time of recording this project, the Notting Hill Carnival had just been held. The Carnival, a talking point around leisure time.



Enid: No, not me. I am not a Carnival person, I wasn't into it at home either. I'd see it passing and I would look at it. That's about all. It's not everyone who is carnival conscious. Yes, it was part of our tradition.

Veronica: There were lots of masquerades in Guyana.

Enid: Yes, in Trinidad too.

Veronica: Well it's without having the carnival attached to it. Masquerade, where dressing up they all knocked at your door and you couldn't find out, they had themselves sort of changed, then they would take off their masks. That was part of the Christmas tradition and masquerade bands that went along the street playing music.

Eleanor: We had something at Christmas called Jonkanoo where men dress up and all sorts of faces and all sorts of clothes, a masquerade. They used to jump around and as children, we were scared of them. My aunt had a grocery shop, and they would come in and do things, you were scared as children.

Enid: Calypso is our music culture.

Leonard: I was always a sportsman.

I played table tennis, football, cricket, I played cricket for London Transport, for their clubs. Entertainment, we went to friends and social events and so forth and dances, mostly in the homes because at the time they didn't have so many open clubs so most of the entertainment used to be at various friends home and we had an enjoyable life. Pretty good social life.

Yes I would say my sports plus my friendships, meeting at weekends having home parties.

My friends were from various sections from the people we knew, like my Barbadian friends.

Veronica: No, clubs were not my scene. Walks would have been, you often would go along the sea wall for walks in the evening.

Question: Was this London?

Veronica: Oh no this was in Guyana, I am in Guyana now (general laughter). I don't know, I'll have to stop to get this together, things just evolved. Teaching for a start, my friends were teachers and still are my friends, it came together, your friends were your colleagues. For evenings or holiday periods or whatever it was. Entertaining was part of the West Indian culture. Having people come into your homes and share. I can't remember suffering any sort of attack on me personally, you know people saying, she's a black girl or that sort of thing, never came up, since I have been here first or later.

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Archibong: There was a Christian Association (Nigeria) and I used to sing in the choir there, for pleasure, I gave my time to the church, I enjoyed it. I was Christian and my Grandma was Christian. My father died when I was young, so my grandma educated me. I belonged to the Church Missionary Society and we live as Christians. Well doing the job was not easy, opening a power station, you had shifts, duties. I didn't have time till I retired.

Iris: Mostly you would go to church and my uncles and aunties used to be over here, I would go to visit them on Sundays. Took the children to the park and different places. Entertainment, like when they have entertainment in the park, it was very good.

Edith: I didn't have time for a social life, I had many responsibilities. I left my two children with my mother in the West Indies. So leaving my two children with my mother and paying rent for her and myself in London, so it was really hard going. I sent for the children, but my mother was on her own, so I adopted another child to be with her, so the responsibility was still there. When my daughter started school and then started work, it eased things up, but easing that you take up another responsibility, to get a roof over my head.

I didn't bring my mother here, I would like to, but she refused to come. That's where she stayed. So you find a little bit of responsibility fall off one way and then you take up another.

Kenneth: I used to read a lot. I used to read till 2.30 in the morning. All kinds of books and biographies etc. I can't read a lot any more. I find it puts a strain on me, a strain on my eyes. There is a school there, Queen Elizabeth's, Barnet, I used to go there for indoor sports practice. I belonged to Middlesex, when I was playing cricket, through sports I have met people from Canada, all over the world, lots of Australians.

Family Life

Angelina: Well, living down in Cricklewood for a short while, I didn't like the atmosphere and the way the school was running and meeting people and so on. I tell myself, well you're in a different country, you should be mixing more. So I decided to move out. I managed to buy a house here in Hendon and so I decided that the children must go to the school here. They all attended Woodcroft School and St. Mary's Hendon and they were quite happy and I was happy too. The school was quite good, the headmistress would come to find out how the children were getting on. The headmaster at St. Marys' said to me the boys were well behaved and he was pleased to have them here, so we were very fortunate, the children liked the school, they like the teachers and the teachers like them. The Minister for the Church of England in Rushgrove Avenue, he used to come and say to me they were very well behaved. I have six children, I had three back in the West Indies and three were born here.

Well we used to meet up as a family, I had a sister and brother here, some were living in Birmingham, Leicester, Manchester, so we use to meet up.

Achibong: Yes, my wife joined me here and my other children joined me here, the two boys became electrical engineers. One son has just gone to Nigeria to lecture on engineering, my father was also an engineer. I have two daughters, one in London, doing clerical work.

Eleanor: Well I started working when my daughter was 8 months old. I only had one. It was a bit difficult in the cold weather pushing the pram out trying to find a minder. And then I had to rush to get the train, because I started working in Boreham Wood, from Cricklewood to Boreham Wood. I had to take her to the minder first, then further down the road from Shoot Up



Hill to get to Cricklewood Lane Station, so it was a difficult journey. At school age I think we just went along to the school and enrolled her. The trouble is, when she was younger and I was working I had to sort of leave her with my mum. One of the stages when my mother and older sister had a house and my mum used to be there so, there was a school just outside the gates, so my daughter went to stay with her for awhile so she could go to school. But then she started giving trouble, she wouldn't go the right direction and coming home from school she wouldn't find the right gate. There was a bit of problem there. And then when my mum moved back, it was at Shoot Up Hill then, I had to ask a neighbour, when she was old enough to take her to school for me, while her niece was going, so I had to pack all her things and leave it next door so that she was always with somebody.

Veronica's reminiscence of family in Guyana:

Aunt Nellie, had a big house, yes she did. But in a nice area. There were the gardens nearby, the promenade gardens. Took their children, prams, that sort of thing. I remember, my aunt Nellie she had some posh relations, when I say posh relation... Aunt Nellie was the head, the oldest member of the family as it were and when my mother died, I went to live with Aunt Nellie. It was a five bedroom house my aunt Nellie lived in. My uncle was a gold miner on the Potara River and the family was very

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close. There was a lot of letter writing, loads of letter writing. And the letter writing there was so much for Vero. They use to call me Vero. Money, what ever that was from my uncle who lived in the town. And the sluice broke down. This is the thing that takes the gold and they were just about to send to England for somebody to repair the sluice when uncle said, well could you give me a chance, I think I can do it. He did it and hence I got this gold bracelet and gold watch and all that came because of uncle repairing the sluice that nobody else in Guyana could have done.

Aunt Dorothy was a nurse, she did a lot of private nursing. And Auntie was nurse Smith, and they would say "we must send for Smithie". These are people who had money to pay in Guyana for a private nurse to come into their home to look after them rather than take them to the public hospital. So I have a sort of very wide experience of family. Yes and people who directed me well because in their background they were well directed, they were well brought up.

Aunt Nellie took me to the Pilgrim Holiness Church. Why Aunt Nellie was brought up in this, I do not know why. She was a tiny little lady with a velvet bag with a cord, that sort of thing. And everybody in the church sings "Praise God Hallelujah" (Veronica clapping her hands as people do in spiritual churches). Aunt Nellie's hands never moved. (Laughter) That was a bit too, too, too (more laughter). Then she said, now you're 13 now my dear, we're going to take you to secondary school. I hear Charlestown Convent is a very good secondary school. So we will go. So Aunt Nellie with her velvet bag and me walked to the school. We had to wait till the mother superior came and when she came Aunt Nellie said this is my niece and I would like her to be part of this school. She said we don't take young ladies as big as this. Aunt Nellie said, she's just 13 she's a big built girl, she's just 13. So I went to Charles Town Convent, did my junior and senior

Cambridge examinations there. So you see all that I am now, I owe to my relations.



I would like to mention the following people who I had the pleasure of spending a little, if somewhat brief time in conversation.

Murial, Cistin, Lucy, Claudette, Pam, Mr de Brito and many others whose names I had not noted.

To everyone at the Barnet African Caribbean Association

Thank you for being so generous with your time and your reminiscences.

Produced by Y.Webb, Local Studies Collections Manager

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