

## Patrick Vernon OBE: Reflections on Caribbean Through A Lens

### Introduction

Tens of thousands of individuals, often in their teens or young adults, migrated to Britain after the Second World War and up to the late 1960s. Many have never had the opportunity to look back on their past life through exploring historical images of the Caribbean - either to reminisce or even share the lessons and challenges of their personal journey of family history and migration.

However, The National Archives has digitised over 7,000 images, which are **now available on Flickr.**

The timing of the release of these images is also important, following the 50th anniversary of the independence of Jamaica and Trinidad, and the London 2012 Olympics with the Caribbean dominating the track and field events.

Also, 2012 marked the 25th anniversary of the creation of Black History Month in the UK. A key objective was the



▲ CO 1069/813 (Kingston, Jamaica 1937) W. A. Bustamante Leader of Jamaica Workers Union at a rally. He became Jamaica's first Prime Minister after independence in 1962.

▶ INF 10/361/3 (September 1962) Independence celebrations in Trinidad. The scene outside the Red House, Trinidad, shortly after the midnight ceremony.

promotion of African and Caribbean heritage in schools and wider society.

The outreach team from The National Archives is seeking your support in helping to interpret and add new content

so we all have a better understanding of the Caribbean during this period. Who knows? You may even spot an important landmark or individual that has a strong connection to your personal family history.



Sandra Shakespeare, as the Community Projects Officer, has been supporting and developing exhibitions, reminiscence sessions and workshops by working in partnership locally and regionally with museums, libraries and community organisations.

There are a number of examples where local and Caribbean organisations have used these images for reminiscence and research projects. For example, [see this reminiscence session facilitated by Abela Culture in Haringey.](#)

At an international level, a number of Caribbean newspapers are encouraging their readers to research and find more about the individuals featured in the archive collection.

[www.antiguaobserver.com/help-identify-historic-antiguan-](http://www.antiguaobserver.com/help-identify-historic-antiguan-)

[www.guardian.co.tt/lifestyle/2012-09-10/archive-looks-through-lens-our-colonial-past](http://www.guardian.co.tt/lifestyle/2012-09-10/archive-looks-through-lens-our-colonial-past)

The images are a potential resource for young, old, and inter-generational learning for all.

## New Caribbean families and Identities

Often, in our Caribbean family histories the rich and poor are intermingled within post-emancipation societies. I am sure that you have your own personal stories and folk tales of a rich or successful great-grandparent, aunt or uncle who left lots of acres of 'family land' or had an important role in administration on a plantation or government body, or maybe was a preacher, headteacher, entertainer or ran a successful business or farm.

The mythology of Caribbean family history is very powerful, especially if you are the second, third or even fourth generation in the UK. However, the images below also paint another side of the harsh inequalities of economic and social life and the creation of new multi-ethnic family and societies in post-slavery and -emancipation Caribbean. That is why images need to be corroborated with documentary records, oral history, folk music, proverbs and general historical accounts so we can have a better understanding and appreciation of the lives of our ancestors.

These images explore the true story of the Caribbean, where my parents and others from the Windrush Generation can fully articulate their childhood

experiences and the motivational factors in leaving their friends and families behind. The Windrush Generation had to create a new persona and lifestyle as part of their survival and resilience strategies in the 1950s and 60s in the UK.

It is these resilience strategies that we can see in these images! What was the story of the higgler or small farmers travelling 10 to 20 miles on market day or not having the money to pay for their children to be educated?

What was the relationship between small farmers and the remnants of plantocracy families and the new money from manufacturers and entrepreneurs from North America and Europe?

What were the dynamics and relationships between African, Indian, and Chinese and those from the Middle East in the creation of new multicultural ethnic



societies building on the foundations of the class and racial structures from the days of slavery?

These and other questions form part of the process of family history. These images give a taste of how our ancestors lived and the stories that are passed from our parents and grandparents.

- ▲ CO/1069/399 (Port of Spain 1950s) 2 storey 1,2 & 3 bedroom flats
- ▲ CO/1069/399 (Port of Spain 1950s) new development of 2 and 3 bedroom flats.

## Country life



- ▲ (left) CO1069/ 312 (Roseau in Dominica 1961) Opening up Cocoa Pods.
- ▲ (right) CO 1069 325 (Belmont Village, Carriacou island Grenada 1950) the wedding Mr Leo Alexander and his bride from Belmont Village.
- ▶ CO/1069/376 (Manderville, Jamaica 1950s) Image of May Day Mountains and basket sellers near Mandeville.



## Markets



- ◀ (far left) CO/1069/251 (Barbados 1900).
- ◀ (top left) CO/1069 349 (St George's Square in Grenada 1890).
- ◀ (bottom left) CO/1069/39 (Scarborough, Trinidad 1877) Market day.



## Poverty and hardship



- ◀ CO/1069/397 (Plymouth, Trinidad 1939) poverty and hardship.
- ▲ (top) CO/1069/399 (Port of Spain 1950s) slum areas prior to demolition by the Trinidad & Tobago Planning and Housing Commission.
- ▲ (bottom) CO/1069/401 (possible location Jumbie Village 1949) barracks style housing.

## Role of photographers, sitters and subject matters

Many of the images that you will come across on **the Flickr site** were commissioned by colonial administrators, entrepreneurial photographers and business people who played key roles in the development of studios and the photography industry in the Caribbean.

The history of the postcard industry in the Caribbean and the rise of the modern development of photography techniques and processes are clearly linked to the development of the tourism industry from the mid to late 19th century.

The questions we need to ask ourselves when looking at these images are: Was this a mutual enterprise between the photographer and the sitter? Do these images give an accurate or fair

representation of Caribbean society back in the day?

What is very clear is that the history and development of black and other ethnic representations in photographs and postcards are built on racist assumptions and stereotypes (you come across defamatory expressions such as 'Negro', 'Native' and 'Coolie' in these and other images from this period). This has influenced the development of Black Ephemera over the last 100 years and the

legacy is still current today in the media and advertising – read the following articles on this issue.

<http://everygeneration.co.uk/index.php/black-british-history/ephemera>

"What is interesting when comparing images of African, Caribbean and North American postcards are the various stereotypes and perceptions of people of African descent.

Often the images from Africa were taken to reflect a clear, powerful relationship between the civilised and uncivilised, while the North American images, with the exceptions of the photographers during the Harlem Renaissance, generally created stereotypes of African-Americans as lazy, stupid and docile."

Please look at the National Archives' **Africa Through A Lens images** and the **Jim Crow Museum** so you can explore the differences around representation and stereotypes.

However, when examining the Caribbean images we can see there was clear process of manufacturing a picturesque image aimed at potential European settlers wanting to start a new life and or take advantage of business opportunities. Often, the sitters on location shots seem

◀ CO 1069/349 landscape view of St George in Grenada, 1890



too compliant and subservient to reassure potential tourist and entrepreneurs that the Caribbean was no a longer a place of slave rebellions and insurrections but a calm paradise, with passive Caribbean people willing to serve and accommodate the rich and powerful. These perceptions still influence current tourism marketing and branding strategies of the Caribbean.

These images, like slave plantation documents, are part of our cultural history and memory that is now available for family history research. However, this can supplemented by the growing local media companies in the Caribbean who have developed their own photographic collections of images.

You can also access the Gleaner [archives online](#).

However, despite these challenges, the photographic images provide an insight into the transition and development of the West Indies to the modern day Caribbean.

The following categories below give an overview that you can further explore and research as part of learning about this period:

## The rise and fall of the Caribbean sugar and plantation industry and the creation of small to medium farm holdings and new industries and products.



◀ *Clockwise starting far left*

CO/1069 243,  
Barbados 1900.

CO/1069 385  
(Castries in St Lucia  
1953) harvesting the  
sugar cane.

CO /1069 385  
(Castries in St Lucia  
1959) loading  
bananas for the  
United Kingdom.

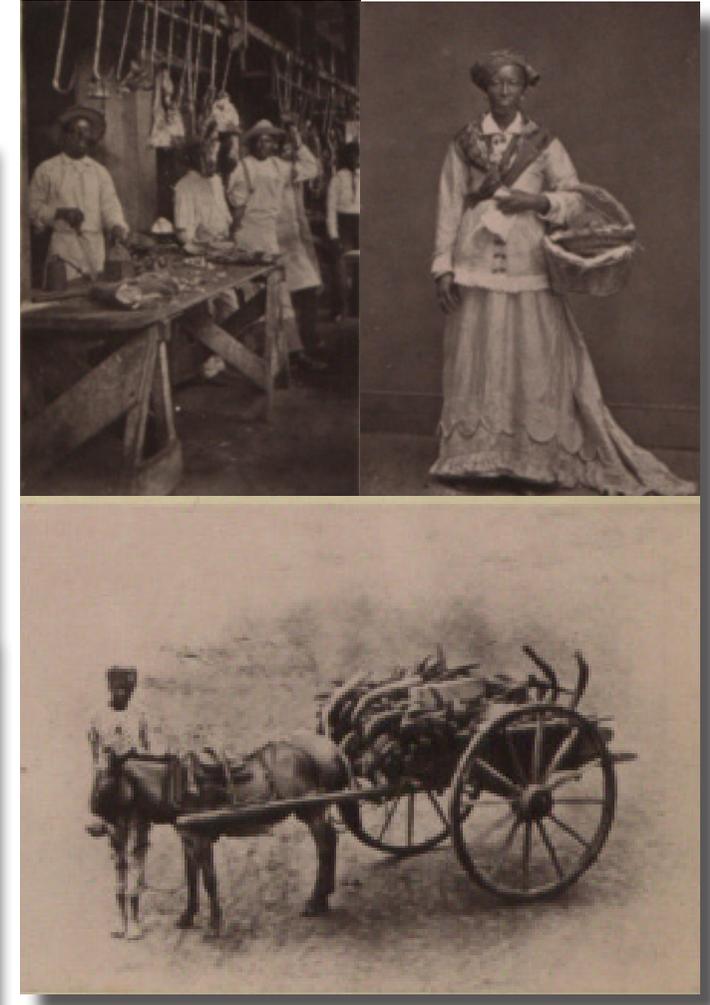
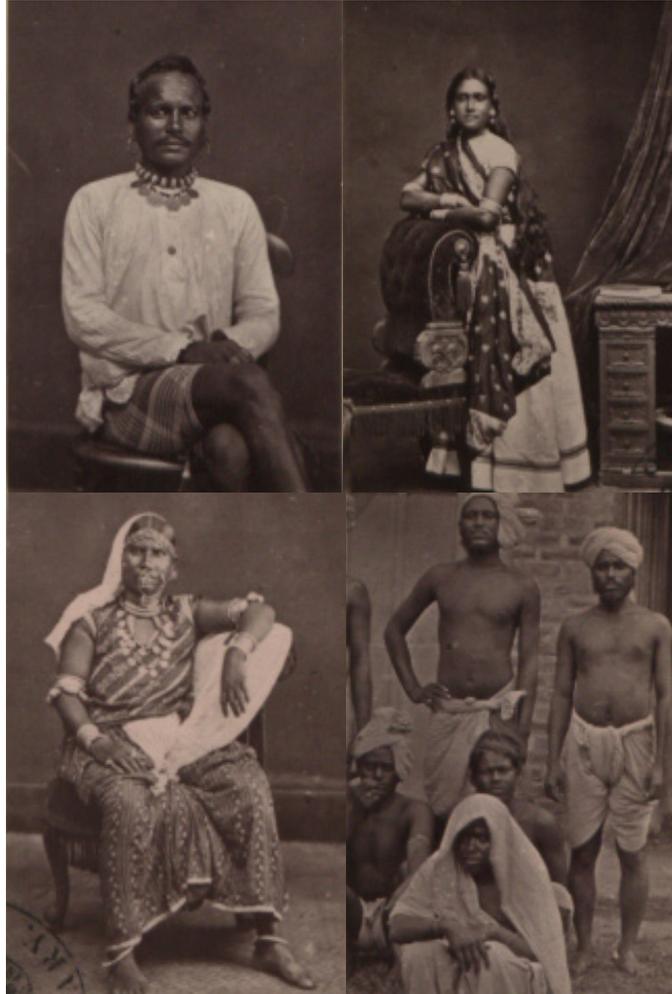
CO 1069/396  
(Pointe-a-Pierre,  
Trinidad 1939) Oil  
refinery. This was  
originally owned by  
Trinidad Leaseholds  
Limited then Texaco.  
This now belongs  
to TRINTOC which  
is a state owned  
company.

## The rise and development of the changing multicultural nature of Caribbean societies



▲ CO/1069 355 (Georgetown in Guyana circa 1870-1931) description of Chinese, African and Mulatto.

▼ CO/1069 355 (Georgetown in Guyana circa 1870 -1931) East Indian immigrants reflecting the diversity within the Hindu community.



▲ CO 1069 355 (Georgetown in Guyana circa 1870 -1931) portraits of African and Portuguese.

The rise and development of tourism which is now the dominate industry for a number of Caribbean countries.



◀ CO 1069 383 (Soufriere in St Lucia 1950) local guide stands in front of volcanic sulphur springs.

▼ CO 1069/349 landscape view of St George in Grenada, 1890



Reflection of the race and class stratifications in social structures and lifestyles.



▲ CO 1069-240 (Eleuthera Island, Bahamas, 1958) Lennox-Boyd MP Secretary of State for the Colonies meeting plantation owners

## Military conflict and World Wars

Since the creation of the West India Regiment in 1795 and The British West Indies Regiment during the First World War people from the Caribbean have contributed to the British armed forces to military and international conflicts. In addition, the Caribbean have raised funds for the First and Second World Wars along with being a place of safety for war evacuees.



◀ (left) CO/1069/234 (Nassau in Bahamas 1890) Caribbean Army officers possibly from the West Indies Regiment.

◀ (right) CO/1069/371 (Mona, Jamaica 1940) The Gibraltar Camp was established between 1940 and 1941 for 1,500 Gibraltarian evacuees from the Second World War.

▼ (right) CO/1069/369 (Kingston in Jamaica 1916) 1st Battalion, British West Indian Regiment in Egypt May 1916.

▼ (right) CO/1069/371 Food preparation for the camp community.



## Natural disasters

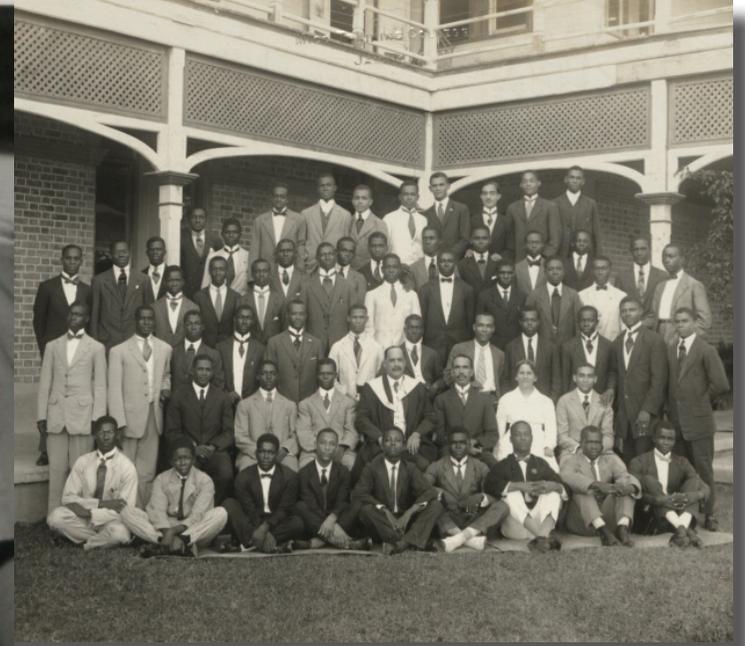
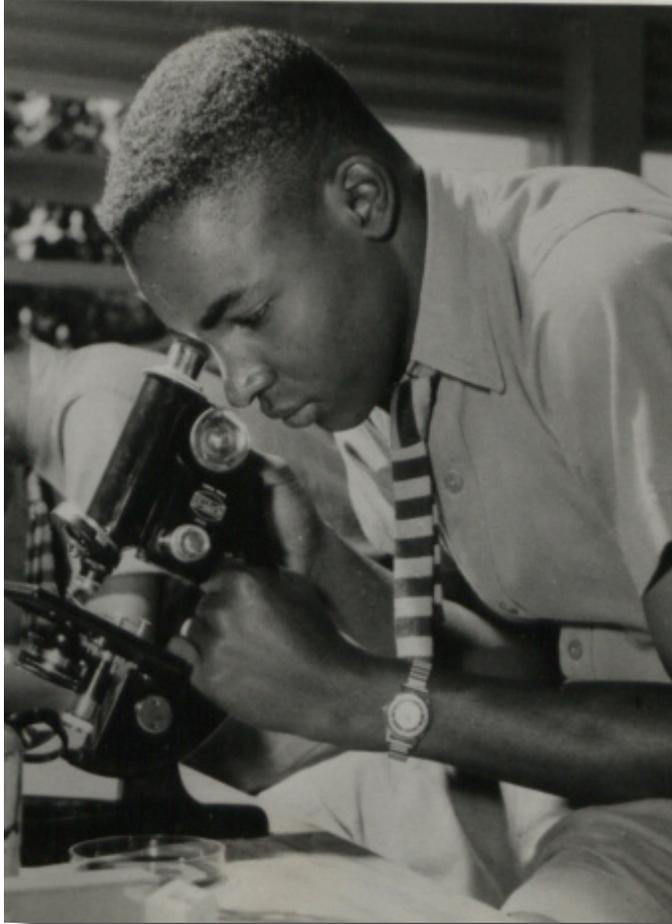
Climate change may be a potential reality for the future of the Caribbean but, historically, various Islands have been plagued by natural disasters, from hurricanes, earthquakes and volcanic eruptions to bush fires.



▲ CO/1069/369 (14th January 1907 Kingston, Jamaica) King Street from Harbour showing wreckage from earthquake.

## Education and social mobility

Caribbean people see the importance of education as part of social mobility and improving their life chances. For those talented students there were growing opportunities in teaching and going to higher education and studying at British Universities and colleges.



- ◀ CO/ 1069 312 (Roseau in Dominica 1954).Picture of Clayton Shillingford a student of Dominica Grammar School in a science laboratory.
- ▲ CO/1069/369 (Kingston in Jamaica 1921/22) staff and students from Micro Training College.

## Donkey, steamships and railways

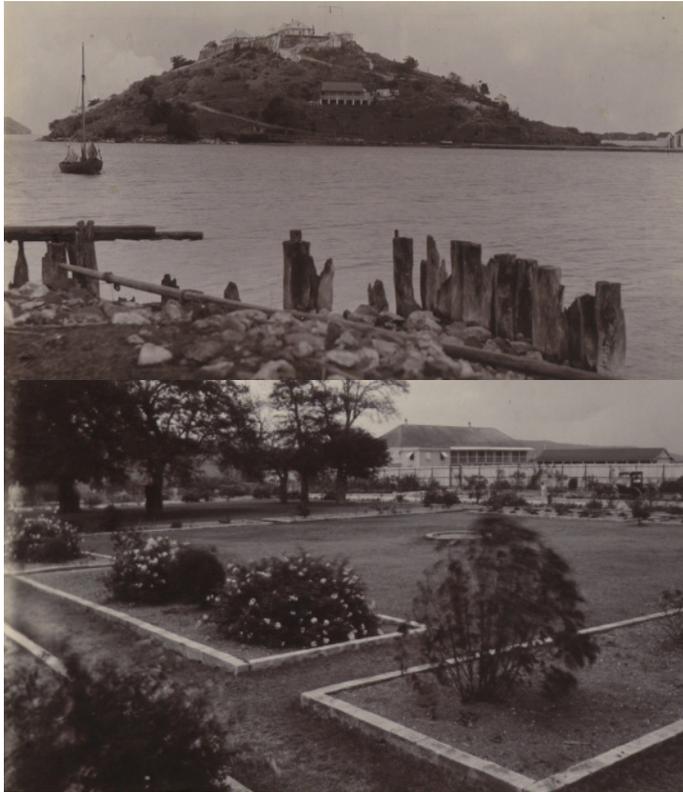
The donkey has been a key contributor in connecting villages and communities to markets, church and social life. With the growth of tourism and trade, steamships and the development of harbours was integral in linking the Caribbean to international markets. What is interesting, however, as part of the tropicalisation of the Caribbean a number of investors from North America and Europe invested heavily from the late 19th century in creating the first modern railway system linking to sugar plantation and tourism across the Caribbean.



- ▲ CO/1069 250 (Barbados 1900)
- ◆ (far left) CO/1069/231 (St John's in Antigua 1948) the donkey is one of the most transport modes for taking vegetables to the local market or social occasions in the Caribbean.
- ◆ (left) CO/1069 251 (Barbados 1900).

## Health care

The mass migration from the Caribbean as a result of the call from the 'Mother Country' to support post war reconstruction and the development of the NHS highlighted an antiquated and Victorian model of health care in the Caribbean.



▲ (top) CO/1069/411 (St John's Antigua 1908) Rat Island containing a Leper Asylum with quarters of signalman in foreground.

▲ (bottom) CO/1069/411 38 (St John's Antigua unknown date) Lunatic Asylum Grounds showing male wards in distance

## Conclusion

The Caribbean Through A Lens images provide a historical and social background to why so many women and men served in both world wars, which subsequently became the catalyst for the Windrush Generation in the UK, along with mass migration to the USA and Canada.

The images also add value to the process, not only of family history, but also an understanding of the Caribbean in post-emancipation society leading to the various islands' political independence and forging of a new relationship with Britain.

Furthermore, these images also provide the wider context of 'returnees', often Caribbean elders coming back to their respective home country to retire, as well as the diaspora and transnational families in the West, and the rebranding of the Caribbean as part of a global economy around the cultural, tourist and entertainment industries.

I have been lucky to spend the last few months going over 500 images to select a number of images which will give you a useful background not only to family history but also the hidden history of the Caribbean which is often overlooked.

I hope you will be inspired by these images but also question how they can support your understanding of the development of the Caribbean and its relationship with the UK through our shared family history and cultural dialogue.

## Further reading and web links

The Caribbean Through a Lens collection on Flickr

[flickr.com/photos/nationalarchives/collections/72157630635006206/](https://www.flickr.com/photos/nationalarchives/collections/72157630635006206/)

The National Archives podcast debate on family history chaired by Patrick Vernon with Colin Jackson, Kathy Chather and Paul Crooks in 2006

[media.nationalarchives.gov.uk/index.php/creating-a-legacy-from-your-family-history/](https://media.nationalarchives.gov.uk/index.php/creating-a-legacy-from-your-family-history/)

Black Cultural Archives resources on the history of the African and Caribbean community in Britain

[bcaheritage.org.uk](https://bcaheritage.org.uk)

Every Generation - the site was established as a resource for information around family genealogy and identity in 2002 and launched in November 2012.

[everygeneration.co.uk](https://everygeneration.co.uk)