excavate
community • theatre • events

THE WELLINGBOROUGH BLACK HISTORY AUDIO HERITAGE TRAIL

FIVE STORIES

by Andy Barrett

October 2024

ARRIVING

Joseph: What makes a person arrive? What brings someone to a place that is different to the place they were living in before? The place they called home; the place they thought was home. What is it that makes them do that? This is a question that I have been asking myself ever since I arrived here. In Wellingborough.

My name is Joseph. I was born in Kingston, Jamaica, my parents having moved there from Hopewell, where my father worked as a fisherman. I grew up, kept the family tradition of working with water and became a plumber. I met a good woman who gave me the honour of becoming my wife and things went on from day to day.

Then it started, the knocking on my door, friends and cousins telling me they were leaving. That there were jobs in England. Working on the trains and on the buses in the greatest city in the world. ‘Why don’t you come with us?’ they’d say. ‘There’s nothing here. We can make some good money in England. Five years that’s all we need’.

Five years.

In the end I was the only one who had not left. And then, one morning, the Rediffusion told us that a hurricane was on its way. Janet they called her. Like my wife's mother; so, I knew it was going to be trouble. Ever since Hurricane Charlie four years previously, in 1951, when a lot of people were killed and a whole lot of damage was done, people had been wondering when the next big one would come. But we were lucky this time, it was Barbados that got it bad. But the next morning my wife said it was time for me to go. That she will come when I am settled and have everything ready for her.

So, I borrowed the money for my passage, got the boat to Southampton, went to Waterloo, and found myself in a Labour Exchange being told there was no need for any plumbers but there was a job in a flour mill in a place called Wellingborough, near Northampton. And I thought this must be a sign. Because my father always used to tell me that it's the shoes that make the man and the finest pair he ever wore had been made in a place called Northampton.

So that is what brought me here. The British Empire, my wife worrying about the hurricanes, my fathers' shoes, and a job that would have gone to another man if I'd arrived at that Labour Exchange five minutes later. And the moment I got off the train that is exactly what I wished had happened.

It was raining. Cold, cold rain and I had nothing to stop it soaking me to the bones. What is this two horse town? I said to myself. With all this smoke coming out of all those chimneys making me think that every house was some little factory. And when I took the piece of paper out of my pocket, telling me where to go, it had run so bad you could not read a thing. I thought it was the weather that was making people so unfriendly, so difficult to talk to as I walked up Midland Road and tried to ask them where I was meant to go. But I soon learnt different.

Whitworths it was called. On London Road. The Manager told me the job came with a room in a house on Westfield Road. That he would take the rent from my pay. There were six of us there. All from Barbados or Jamaica. All in our late twenties. All married and all waiting for our women to come. And all wondering what we had done.

Lifting hundred weight sacks with your muscles straining ‘til you think they’re going to leap out of your body. Working on machines to fill them with flour. Being shouted at. Pointed at. Told to clean up the mess that someone else had made. Wanting to blow up but remembering what your mother told you as she was crying her eyes out at the dock. To always show your manners. Because this is what the English respect.

But the room kept me there because finding another place to live was not an easy thing to do, even with all the signs in the windows tempting lodgers to the door. And it is never the landlord or landlady that has any colour prejudice. No, it is always the neighbour that is the problem! That means the door is shut and you have to walk on.

It was bleak and grey for weeks on end and I wondered if the sun had ever been to Wellingborough. And every day people look at you like you fell from the sky. And it makes no sense because back home there is black and there is white and nobody asks where are you from. And the food was no good and your stomach is killing you from all the bread you have to eat from all this bloody flour.

Every week I got a letter from my wife asking how much money I am putting aside for her to join me. And every week I tell her a little white lie and count the money that isn’t in my pocket. And I wonder what she would think if she could see me now. Because this place is not the place we were told it was. That if I could I would head back. But without any money there was no chance of that. I just had to tell myself, like all the others who made their passage, that this is Their country. But if you obey the rules, however harsh they make them, you will get by.

And then something happened.

I was in the Co-op on Midland Road, buying myself a handkerchief. And the woman behind the counter ignored me and served this white man who was standing behind me. And I hear this voice. ‘The coloured gentleman was before him madam’. I look round and see her, this white woman who is holding the hand of a little boy who looks like me. And I realised that I have not seen children like this since I have arrived. That it has been too long since I played with a child. That I pulled a stupid face or stuck out my tongue.

She was called Grace, her son was Michael, and his father was an American GI, General Issue. We became friends and I learnt about all of the Black soldiers who had been here not too long ago. From the 8th Air Force Support Command, the RAF having made over two hundred airfields available to the United States Army Air Force. And in Kettering and Wellingborough there were Quartermaster stores for these bases so the GIs would be loading munitions onto the trains and driving trucks around.

There was strict segregation and the Black GIs had separate training facilities, separate accommodation, separate units. They were told which pubs and clubs they could go to. And of course they were given the worst jobs.

Michael's father had been stationed in a building next to the Congregational church and school on Palk Road; the church having a Day Club where the men would go to eat and socialise. And they were very welcome, Grace told me. Some were put up in people's houses, some were invited in for teas, some had drinks bought for them at The Exchange on Market Square. They played games of American football and sang spiritual songs at church events. And when the town was bombed in August 1942 and two GIs had shielded eight girls from the blasts the papers called them 'Coloured Heroes'.

And I thought how can it be; that only ten or so years ago, there were proud Black men walking through this town, being welcomed. And now, here we are, men with trades and skills that are being wasted. Being paid less than the white workers. Crowded into houses stinking of paraffin, sometimes sharing beds and having to go to the Wilby lido to feel proper water on your body. Don't you know that we are British citizens! That the Nationality Act of 1948 has given me and everyone in the colonies, equal rights with native Britons.

My wife Alice came a year later. As smart as can be, like all the wives that arrived in their brand-new cardigans having been warned what to expect. But still not believing it would be as cold as we told them, until they tried to put the key in the front door and found their hands shaking.

Grace and Michael moved away in the end. Unlike me and Alice, as more people arrived from the Caribbean over the rest of the fifties; in dribs and in drabs. Steaming up the bus windows as they travelled to the jobs that no-one else wanted. I worked at the tannery on Rock Street; the furnace at Morris Motors; and even made shoes at Sharman’s on Sheep Street, wondering if my father was looking down from above and shaking his head in disbelief. Maybe if he had never moved from Hopewell I would have been a fisherman setting out every morning upon the bright blue sea rather than climbing into my dull blue overalls.

It's a funny thing, isn’t it? What makes a person arrive. But at least I knew, after all this time, that arrived is what I had finally done.

LIVING

Alan: The summer of sixty-six. And as everyone crammed into each other's houses on the Queensway to watch the World Cup final, I knew that whatever happened it could not be as good as the thing that had taken place the weekend before. When the greatest players in the greatest sport weren't on a little Hire Purchase screen but were standing tall and proud in the flesh, right here in Wellingborough.

I'd moved to the town with my family in 1965. I was seventeen, had spent all my life in Brixton, and had found myself leaving a city to come live in a village and I was not happy about it. It was the time of the estates then; of people moving out of London, to Queensway, Kingsway, and a little later Hemmingwell; where everyone would pray the wind didn't bring the Chettles pet food stink creeping through the air.

And of the Denington Industrial Estate which housed a lot of the factories that employed the people who moved here. And where I had an apprenticeship at LaBour making pumps that dealt with everything from butter to acid. Ten thousand people coming to a town of thirty thousand. ‘Throw outs’ some called us. But there were all kinds of people there, from other cities too.

Back then being Black wasn’t the main thing that made you different in this town, it was being from the estates. That’s where the real divide was. And although we had our disagreements on the Queensway, with a little bit of North versus South London competition amongst the older kids, it was alright. Apart from all the bloody walking we had to do; because for some reason the buses kept their distance from us.

My uncle and aunty had been in Wellingborough for a few years and had managed to save enough money through the ‘partner’ scheme to get their own house. Like a good few people who had come in the fifties and managed to settle down, here and there, across the town. And my parents had first come up here to go dancing with them in the late 50s and early 60s at functions that had been put on at the Co-op Halls on Cannon and Winstanley Street.

I think there were others too, at The Gloucester on Church Street or if it was going to be a really big event at the Tithe Barn Hall, although some of these may have been a little later. But most parties had taken place inside people’s homes, where you could play the music you wanted to and not have to put up with any nonsense. Where it was always the daughters that would have the job of clearing up the next morning.

And the thing was, that even now, in the mid-sixties, things felt a little hidden away, you know. In Brixton the barbers and restaurants and grocers and record shops had been visible to everyone. But not in Wellingborough. Not yet.

Getting food for instance. The only place in town before the Caribbean shops started to appear on Cambridge Street and Mill Lane, was George Lamont’s van. There was plenty of oxtail and pigs’ trotters to be had, which the Wellingborough butchers thought little of and sold for next to nothing; until they cottoned on and suddenly put the prices up. Or they’d come out to the estates with trays of beef and chicken that they’d sell on your doorstep.

My mother had got a job as a nurse at the Park Hospital; there were a lot of Black nurses there, especially on the night shifts. And there was a woman called Cherry who was the hairdresser, for all these nurses; not in a shop but in her home.

See that's how things worked. In homes. Hidden away, like a shadow system, that only Black people knew about. If I wanted my hair cut there was no way I was going to a white barbershop, and they were all white barbershops. So, I had to wait 'til a barber would come, usually from London, to set up in someone's house.

You could see why people wanted so desperately to buy their own place. With the plastic upholstery on the dining room table and the bottles of alcohol proudly displayed in the glass cabinets. Velvet scrolls and maps and flags of the island you came from in the front room where children could only go if there were visitors. Where there were always visitors.

The house was its own social club, because there was no West Indian Social Club. Not in Wellingborough. Not then. I swear that every Dominican family that came to Wellingborough went through one house in Senwick Road, renting rooms, having parties. It was almost like every island had its own informal embassy hidden behind a normal front door on a normal street.

There was also church of course, and again the home had been a big part of all of that. When my aunty went to the Anglican church, as she had done all her life in the Caribbean, she had been asked to sit in the back; like many others. Even those who came to England carrying letters from their vicar, who had been active members of the Mothers Union. So, you can see why so many people started to go to prayer meetings in each other's houses.

And now there were all kinds of churches, old and new. Mill Road Baptist; the West Street Methodist; The Baptist Tabernacle on Park Street; the High Street Congregational Church; and the fiery sermons of Pastor Harris at the Full Gospel Church on St John Street. Every Sunday morning, with Sunday School in the afternoon, gospel meeting at 6, and after-church fellowship at 7.30. There was a lot of God calling for you in Wellingborough; and that's where the sixties were swinging for a lot of folks.

But my religion was cricket. Which was the one thing that we did out in the open, where everyone could see us. Many of the different companies and factories had teams and a lot of Black people would join them, because cricket was always a popular sport in the Caribbean.

And then when United Social, an all-Black cricket team, was founded in Northampton in 1961 a coach full of people from Wellingborough would go to see them play at the Racecourse, against teams from Sheffield and London and Birmingham. Always with a party after the match at their social club in Regents Square. And on the coach home all the talk was about how Wellingborough must form their own Caribbean cricket team; have their own social club.

And it was all of us who came from London who made that happen. We were different to those who had their heads down, working hard to send money back to families at home, with little time for anything else. Now we had more people who wanted to live properly. And so it happened; the Wellingborough West Indian Cricket Club. Playing Sunday matches on Eastfield Park or travelling to other towns and cities to win more often than they lost. And I was part of the team. The youngest, the tallest, and the always with the sharpest crease on my bright white trousers.

And the thing is that although the games were always tough and no-one ever gave an inch what I remember most is not the matches but the atmosphere there on those Sundays. Always records being put on the turntable in the Club House; Calypso music and reggae that was beginning to be popular. Always good food. And, of course, everywhere we go we must have liquor. The kids would come; the elders would come; the families would mix and get together, and the island loyalties began to fade a little.

It was one big family fun day and people got connected through this. Grew their confidence through this. Became more of a community through this. And there were plenty of others who came to watch from the town. There was always a big crowd; one hundred, two hundred, because we were a good team. Like United Social, like the West Indies.

And then that day, the Saturday 23rd of July 1966. The weekend before the football World Cup Final. The West Indies cricket team playing in England, Gary Sobers, Wes Hall, Lance Gibbs. Beating England and beating them well. Playing a friendly against Northamptonshire between a long gap in test matches because of the football World Cup. Arriving here in Wellingborough at the Drill Hall on High Street, organised by the Round Table for a Calypso Evening.

I had a girlfriend then called Cynthia. She worked at the Rosebud factory, putting eyes into dolls and that. I always remember her telling me when they started to make a Black doll and how worried they were about getting the hair right.

Her father worked at Shackletons, like mine, with a lot of Jamaicans and Bajans and Grenadians. And her mother always brought a big tray of patties to the Eastfield cricket matches. Which is why she was helping with the buffet for the Calypso Evening. And why, through divine intervention, me and Cynthia were there to help serve the food.

And as people danced and laughed, and I got to see some of my heroes' face to face I thought this is going to be alright, here in Wellingborough. Things will come; things will change for the better and it is going to be a place where I can live. And that is what I have been doing ever since.

FIGHTING

Jenny: ‘Why do you keep playing that song over and over girl?’ my father would ask me, as a ten-year-old. Because I did. Young, Gifted, and Black. But I was young. And I was Black. And I was hoping that maybe I might be gifted. Though of course everyone at school who had dark skin was told that this was not the case and would never be so. That even if we did well at the end of term, we would still find ourselves coming back to join the classes for those who were struggling.

‘Educationally subnormal’ that was what we were called, I found out later. Even though back in the Caribbean lots of people were getting very good exam results. It was like they didn’t want us to succeed. That they believed there was something in our makeup that prevented us from doing so, rather than something in theirs.

There was a boy in my class at Victoria School, this is in the 70s, called Clive Mutesemango. And some of the teachers had him down as Smith on the register. Because they said they couldn’t pronounce Mutesemango. They couldn’t say his actual name. Much too difficult you see. So, they changed it into something that fit.

Which is why, ten years later, I was fighting. Because things were serious, and we couldn’t just sit around and do nothing. And it was tense, especially with parents who always thought you should toe the line. Who didn’t like this new found belief and pride in our African roots and identity.

We could see how much effort and struggle it had been for our parents. How they had wanted to build a good life for their children. But how can you make them proud if when your careers teacher asks you what your ambition is and you say ‘to teach’ she tells you ‘Why don't you be realistic? Why don't you think about working in a factory?’

‘Anybody can work in a factory! It's not an ambition!’, I roared back at her. And she knew then that I was not going to take their nonsense. Which just kept coming, year after year.

Let me tell you about Morcea. This was in the eighties. She had just become an advisory teacher with the Multicultural Service, looking at the school curriculum. Because there had been a lot of exclusions of pupils from the Black community here in the town, which was becoming a very multicultural place. And Morcea was going to a school for a training day, to talk about equalities and how to make the curriculum potent for different communities. And her mother, who was so proud of her daughter and her new job, had bought her a navy-blue suit from Harrods. Telling her that ‘when you go in there girl you have to look better than everybody else’.

And her father, who was so proud of his daughter and her new job, had bought her a briefcase so she would absolutely look the part. And Morcea goes to the school, who know that a trainer is coming. And as she approaches the Front Desk a woman says ‘have you come for the cleaning job?’

See this is why we became so interested in our history. In digging into our past to find an identity that wasn’t like the one our parents had been given. Of British people who were never allowed to be British. Who weren’t welcome to be British. Even though they knew more British history, more British literature than most. Because of what they had learnt at school back in the Caribbean.

My father, in many ways, was the most British man you could meet. I was born when he was in his fifties, ‘the best mistake of my life’ he used to say. Always listening to The Archers. Always cooking a roast on Sunday. Always telling me stories from ‘The Jungle Book’ when we went to the Wellingborough Zoopark before they closed it and sold off all the animals. When he told me he would buy the lion, who was going to live out in the shed by the dartboard.

But now it was time for different books. No more Mowgli. Because we had to think through, work out, who we were, who we are. You see you have to navigate that before you can take on those who want to tell you who you can be.

There had been good work going on in the town of course. Not everyone was like my father, keeping his head in the sand. I think it was the mid-seventies when the first language supplementary school was set up for African Caribbean children, meeting in people’s houses. Then the West Indian Parents Association was set up for Northampton and Wellingborough. Because, as I said, the schools here were not doing right by us.

And of course, there was the Victoria Centre which had been opened in 1979, when the United Reformed Church realised their congregation was dwindling. And the Community Relations Council who used a room there, helped to turn it into Wellingborough’s first multi-faith, multi-cultural, multi-racial centre.

There was all sorts going on. Indian dancing, African drumming, and of course all the different Caribbean groups representing their island loyalties, until Mike Prescod said ‘enough is enough! We don’t want to break down island identities but we need the Grenadians of the Caribbean Spicy Club, to come together with the Bajans and Jamaicans and Trinidadians of the Afro-Caribbean Ladies Association, the West Indian Sports and Social Centre and all the others if we’re really going to make a difference to this town. If we’re going to have our voice heard loud and clear.

And it was a time when unity was needed. Although the riots of 1981 that had erupted in many places didn’t find their way here, that didn’t mean you couldn’t feel the tension that had been growing. You would see graffiti and not just on the estates.

There was a house on Torrington Road, a relatively middle-class kind of area, and there was something disgusting written on their wall; really big. But the people that lived there said ‘No, we don’t want this removing. We want all our neighbours to see what racism looks like’. Which was a brave thing to do.

Organisations were being built: United against Racism, the Community Relations Council, the Outlook Centre; all dealing with issues of race and colour and discrimination. Because writing on a wall can be seen by everyone, but refusing to give someone a job for some nonsense reason, which was happening here all the time, is so much easier to hide. And when the BNP had tried to march it was people of all colours who had turned them back on Midland Road.

But these organisations back then were things I knew little of. I was in a different place; swept up in the excitement of counter-culture and embracing the idea of Rastafarianism. Breaking with the older generation’s loyalty to Britishness by reclaiming our African roots through music, hairstyles, religion, and Black History. We would go to Northampton, where a group of young Black people had occupied the old and empty Salvation Army building, and turned it into a place of education and self-reliance; with its printing press and sound systems. Matta Fancanta they called themselves. ‘Come Guard Yourself Against Self-Destruction’.

Here in Wellingborough our own place was the Shack. The little building behind WACA on Rock Street, which at that time was owned by the County Youth Service. That was a space for us to play our music, read The Voice newspaper, and talk about Stop and Search and all the other ways the State was trying to beat us down.

Sometimes we would go to The Globe opposite the Palace Cinema, an Irish bar where we were always welcomed; the Irish and African-Caribbean communities often seeming to get on well together. And at the Victoria Centre there were plays from radical Black and Feminist theatre companies; or readings from a young Benjamin Zephaniah which I lapped up, in my donkey jacket and Doc Martens.

But back at home it was getting more and more difficult as my parent's generation kept ploughing on and opening their shops. Sid Hutchen's at the bottom of Mill Road, who also had a stall in the market and whose son played in a steel band called The Gay Desperados. Ivy's Hairdressers also on Mill Road. And in 1987, after all these years, Wellingborough finally got a proper West Indian restaurant and takeaway. The Tropical on Midland Road, with a whole lot of people gathering to celebrate its opening and get their hands on the free samples. 'Hard working people providing a real service to the community', my father would say. And I tried to ignore him.

But whenever we turned on the news and heard of more tension between the police and Black youth then I would start up with my speeches. How 'they' are passing law after law to push us into a corner. Labelling us all as immigrants, as lesser than them. That the police have become in effect an army of occupation charged with the task of keeping Black people in their place. And my father would shake his fists and say that all Rastafarians are drug addicts. And that he wished he did have the Zoopark lion in the shed so that he could feed me to him.

Let me tell you some history; about the United Reform Church on Salem Lane. It was once a Congregational Church and School. And in Eighteen Hundred and Ninety-Five over five hundred people were gathered there to listen to King Khama of Bechuanaland, which is now Botswana, and his fellow chiefs Sebele and Bathoen. They had come to Britain to make a direct appeal to the British government and people, against the Chartered Company of South Africa and Cecil Rhodes' plan to take control of their country.

The Wellingborough Post reported that 'they looked like shrewd men, attired in English costume, big and well built'. And, through an interpreter, they made their case. 'We have heard that we are to be handed over to a chartered Company. Why should the great Queen do this?' Their opposition to being absorbed into the land taken by the British South Africa company - and that is a story you need to look into - was loudly applauded by all.

Letters were sent to the government and they were successful. Bechuanaland would stay as it was. A British ‘protectorate’, with an evangelical Christian King, which is probably why he was here in this church, and probably why his case was won. But within a few years Southern Africa became at the forefront of everybody’s thinking in a different way. As Wellingborough, like the rest of England, stirred itself up into a patriotic fervour as men signed up to fight in the war against the Dutch Boers. And the civilised English carried out their scorched earth policy, and built their concentration camps.

And almost a century later, on the 11th of February 1990, I was at a gathering in that same church. With fewer people but with an unbelievable crackle of excitement in the air as we waited to watch, on a television screen, the release of Nelson Mandela from a South African jail. The anti-apartheid struggle had energised a lot of people here, as elsewhere, black and white. And there was this feeling, it was so strong, that what we were going to witness was a moment of victory for all the struggle we had been going through. And maybe a sign that things could change for the better.

And as I came up to the church, I saw my father waiting outside, dressed in his smartest suit. He carefully shook the hand of every friend I was with. And when we went inside, he put his arm around me and said ‘the reason we never needed to take care of the Zoopark lion was because I knew we already had a lion of our own’.

We stood there side by side as Mandela finally walked free. And it was then that I understood how difficult it is to stand up and be counted without the support of those that came before you. Who did their own hard work in their own hard way.

THRIVING

Jacque: Some years pass you by. You try and remember what you did and you can't get any sense out of it at all. And then, every now and again, a year will come along that lights up all over you and which you know you'll never forget. Like 1998.

I'd arrived here a few years before, in 1991, and I can tell you that I was lost. I had two young children, I was on my own, and my mother and father had both died much too early. I was struggling, you know. And then a friend, well not a friend then really, just a woman who could tell that I needed cheering up, brought me here, while her daughter looked after my children. To a Friday night social.

I didn't know what to expect. Wellingborough had seemed like a sleepy place but as soon as I came in here, to WACA, I could feel that maybe this town was going to be a lot livelier than I thought. There were a lot of women, many were older than me, all of them looking really good. I asked if it was just a Ladies Night and they showed me the room where all the men were sitting round tables smashing dominoes down with people crowding round offering their thoughts on what was happening.

We just talked and listened to music and did a bit of dancing and then the men started to spill out and join us. And it was fun. The first time I'd had fun for a long time. And that was when it started; when this place began to take me in. To get me on my feet again.

It hadn't been open for long, and I soon realised that I had arrived in Wellingborough at exactly the right moment. I started to bring my children here to the Saturday school, 10.30 to 12.30; and there were quite a few, like mine, with Black and White parents, along with the Bangladeshis that also came.

There were a lot of good people who worked with the children. Billy Walker, who made my son fall in love with mathematics; Jenny Sebastian with her passion for teaching children to know their history; Mr. Livingston the electrician and all the others. And a few weeks later there was an arts festival here, with steel bands and rappers and my daughter won the Caribbean costume contest; and her smile was so wide her face wasn't big enough to hold it all in.

And I knew then that we could belong in this community. That this building could be a place where we could find ourselves reflected. A place where my children would be looked after and understood; and that they would understand themselves.

The more I came the more I could see what was happening. How much energy and commitment and work was going on to make things better for as many people as possible. The club for the elderly that Joyce Prescod had set up; volunteers going out to visit those who couldn't come here; the parents and tots group, playschemes and trips to the seaside; netball and indoor bowls with the women; and the Paradise Youth Club where the kids had to hang around for hours afterwards waiting for their parents in a thick fog of cigarette smoke.

It was thriving. You could taste the excitement of the community establishing itself. And you could sense that everyone in the community understood what a precious thing this building was. That it had to be embraced and used to do as much good as possible. That it was an opportunity to keep moving forward each year as the community grew, getting older and younger at the same time.

My children had settled down well. Michael was in a steel band, The Thunderbirds, and whenever there was some kind of entertainment in the town or the villages nearby, they always wanted a steel band to come and make their racket. And Nina was in the youth drama group at the Castle Theatre, which opened in 95 and soon started to run Black music and Black comedy nights which I loved to go to.

But nothing, of course, was as good as the Domino Dances. When the big matches were played against teams from London and Birmingham and Sheffield and all the others. Arriving in their coach loads to play the game, whilst the women headed into town before coming back to have the meal, to get changed, and to dance. Past midnight, on and on ‘til two, three, four in the morning. Sometimes with sound systems, sometimes with DJs, with Mystery Lady just becoming the resident Queen of the decks.

That was when this building really hummed, when you could see the bricks shaking with the energy of everyone inside. I always got a thrill when the sound system competitions took place, and you’d see these big speaker boxes being taken down off of the lorries. Or when the dance-offs happened and somebody always went home with a big tear in their trousers. But it was the Domino Dances that were my favourite.

I did try to learn how to play the game. There was an older gentleman called Joseph who used to come to the Elders club when I volunteered here on my day off. He told me about the old days playing in The George, and the informal tournaments they had moving from house to house on a Sunday when the pubs had shut. He always let me win one game, always pretending to look surprised when I did; even though he knew exactly what was going to happen.

He was one of the reasons why 1998 is a year that I will never forget. Dressed as smart as can be for the fiftieth anniversary of the Windrush generation. But what made that event really special was that the mayor who was opening the anniversary celebrations was the same man who had worked so hard to get this building going.

Mr Mike Prescod, who had been born in Barbados and moved to Britain when he was 19. He was at the centre of so many organisations and projects, always whipping people into action. He was always sharp, always tough, always welcoming but always expecting you to do your best. Because there were still things happening every day that reminded you that once you walked outside of these doors not everyone had your back.

There were all sorts of people working or meeting in the building. Providing guidance and support for everybody that needed it, and always thinking of the social mobility of the whole community. There was never a day when there wasn't some kind of fight going on somewhere. Still dealing with racism at work, in the secondary schools, and in town amongst young men.

Or crazy things like trying to stop Lillian Mayers being deported by the Home Office which would have left the town bereft of its Barbadian Carnival Queen. A harbinger of the day that would come when those who had arrived as British citizens all those years ago might find a letter on their doormat telling them that they had no right to be in the UK; that they should arrange to leave the country immediately.

Joseph had died before those kinds of letters appeared, and I don't know if any of his friends received one; I hope not. But before then, and by the time the new century began and my children were starting college, I had 'found' myself, as they say, and had started to DJ a little. Playing here or in the pubs, The Chequers and The Leather Bottle. And then at the house parties that became more popular as the dance nights started to fade away. When we do manage to have a dance here now most of those who come are pensioners.

Anyway, that's me. My kids are grown up now and doing well and have children of their own. They never really engaged with this place as they got older; and their children have hardly set foot inside. A different time I suppose.

Maybe young people are choosing their identity in a different way. And maybe if people are feeling comfortable, they have less reason to question who they are. But there are always moments of crisis and transition coming around the corner. And those are the moments when you dig into that question. Who am I and where is my place in the world? And that is when we all need somewhere like WACA.

INSPIRING

Ines: They showed us the picture at college. Two black men standing shoeless on a podium. Wearing black socks and black scarfs with their heads down and one arm raised, their fists in a black glove. Tommie Smith and John Carlos, medal winners in the two hundred metres at the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico City. 'Everything can be political', the teacher told us. 'Even the simplest and smallest actions can ripple through history and help to make change happen'. The black socks were to protest Black poverty. The salute was one of Black power.

I found the picture on my laptop and showed it to my Gran when I got home. And she said, 'you do know there's a woman in Wellingborough that was at that Olympics; that watched that ceremony; that took a photograph of that moment'. 'She was there?' I said, in disbelief. 'Right there', my Gran said. 'She was in the 100-metre relay team that got to the final; she was the first Black female athlete ever to represent Great Britain at the Olympic Games; and best of all she sat next to me working her machine at Ideal Clothing'.

'Do you still know her?', I asked. 'Course I do!' she said; 'I think she may have babysat for you once or twice all those years ago'. 'Why didn't you say anything before Gran?' 'Because you never asked'.

Anita Neil's dad was an American; a Black soldier who was here during the Second World War. He met her mother, Florence, at The Exchange pub in The Market Square. She was only young but they fell in love, and after going back to America to be demobbed he returned to Wellingborough and they got married.

Although he set up a successful taxi service her father found it difficult to settle and would go back to America for large periods of time, leaving Anita's mother to bring up the children alone, with support from her parents. And it was on one of his visits to Wellingborough, when he challenged his young daughter to a race, that Anita first heard the words 'on your marks, get set, go'. She must have been fast, even then, because as he opened the front door her father called out to her mother 'Anita's going to be a runner'.

We were at Catherine's when Anita told us this; she's an artist and her house is full of her colourful work. When they both first went to school in Wellingborough, Catherine said, every other kid was white. But it was the teachers that were unkind rather than the children. The teachers that called them names and made them feel uncomfortable. There was one time when they were made to stand up in assembly. Their father had been visiting and cooking different kinds of food that they ate with a fork, a habit they had taken into the dining hall. The headmistress told them that they weren't civilised and then rammed a spoon down their throats until they gagged, to show everyone what being civilised meant.

But by now Anita was winning all of the races at all of the sports days, apart from when she came second at the district competition at Eastfield Park when she stopped to turn round to see where everyone was, and was overtaken. She never did that again. And when she was 14, watching the British long jumper Mary Rand compete in the 1964 Tokyo Olympic Games, with the rest of her class at John Lea school, Anita realised that was what she wanted to be. An Olympic athlete.

Before long she was representing Northamptonshire at the All-England Schools Championships, in the long jump and as a runner. But it wasn't easy. The teachers at John Lea school had to club together to buy her track suit. When her mother went to find her after the race, which she won, she found Anita under the stands looking for empty pop bottles to get the three pence deposit.

Roger Beadsworth, the school P.E. teacher, offered to become her coach. And so when Anita left school at the age of fifteen and started working in the factory, thirty-six hours a week along with my Gran and many other Wellingborough women, he would pick her up at the end of her shift and train with her on the rough grass of the rugby field, or drive her to the weekend athletics meetings, never asking for petrol money.

She joined the London Olympiads, the club her heroine Mary Rand belonged to and when Rand was injured before a major competition in Lille, it was Anita who was chosen to replace her; the only factory girl in the team. She was sick on the plane on the way over, having never flown before.

By the time she was sixteen it was Anita's speed as a runner that everyone was focussed on. In 1968 she equalled the British record in the one hundred yards, and was a member of the team that broke the world record for the four by one hundred- and ten-yards relay, being invited to Buckingham Palace to celebrate the achievement.

And then that moment. In 1968. The Mexico Olympics. Running in the heats of the one hundred metres. Running in the final of the one hundred metres relay. One of the Gold Ribbon events at one of the most famous Olympics ever.

And it kept going. Winning two bronze medals at the European Games in Athens in 1969. A silver medal at the 1970 Commonwealth Games in Edinburgh. And the Olympics again in 1972, in Munich. Another moment when politics intervened as the eyes of the world were watching; Anita having met an Israeli coach on the practice track, the day before the tragedy unfolded and he was one of those who was taken hostage and killed.

And throughout all of this she continued to practice on the school playing fields, and continued with her day job. A young woman who was truly a pioneer and yet somehow utterly ignored. And so, when her coach had to step back because of a family tragedy she found herself training alone, and unable to afford the travel to track meetings and trials. Her dreams of a third Olympic games, in Montreal, were over.

With nobody calling or coming to help her, to pick her up, to push her on. At the age of 23 her life as an elite athlete was over and she just went back to work. ‘It was difficult’ she told me, as we drank our mugs of tea and ate our biscuits. ‘It was devastating really’.

And no-one knew, as she worked in factories and offices and schools and went to the creche at WACA with her daughter. No-one knew, that this woman who had locked up all her medals and tracksuits, was the first woman of colour to represent her country at the Olympic Games. The first! And when the Olympics were held in London in 2012, and the Olympic torch came through Wellingborough, she wasn’t even approached to carry it. How could that be?

It was a journalist in the end who uncovered her story, in 2021, when she finally began to get some of the recognition she deserved. When she finally felt able to look at her medals again, as she attended events and sports days, and raised flags and opened shops, and became an honorary free woman of Wellingborough. Where her father met her mother. Where she worked at The Ideal, as everyone called the factory. Where her mother worked at Saxby’s making pork pies. Where her sister makes her artwork. Where she goes to Zumba class and is a member of the Waendel Walkers' Club.

‘People are always running faster’, she told me. But ‘somebody's got to be first and that record's never going to be broken’. You just don’t realise, do you, the amazing things that people may have done, as you pass them by in the street, every single day.