



AFRICAN & CARIBBEAN MEMORIAL



Speech by Ruth O'Keeffe, MBE, Independent Town and District Councillor and Mayor, Lewes Priory Ward, and Independent County Councillor, Lewes Division, given on 10 November 2015, at the Unveiling of the Blue Plaque placed at the entrance to the chapel in Alfriston Road Cemetery in Seaford, East Sussex, to commemorate soldiers of the British West Indies Regiment buried there.

“Early in the war, men from the Caribbean travelled to London to enlist in the army; some were so keen to enlist that they stowed away on board ships bound for England. In May 1915, nine men from Barbados appeared in court in East London after they had been found on board a steam packet which had arrived at the nearby docks. The men were taken to the nearest army recruiting office but were turned away on account of their colour. Their treatment caused friction between the Colonial Office and the War Office and after an intervention from King George V permission was granted on 19 May 1915 for a West Indian contingent to be recognised. The War Office was obviously not prepared for the support and enthusiasm by the men of the West Indies. **Private Griffiths**, who trained at Seaford Camp, was from Trinidad. He said

‘Everything I know has been taught to me by the English and when I heard Lord Kitchener’s appeal for men I could not help but come.’

A West India Contingent Committee was established in London and their office became a place where West Indians arriving in London to join-up could get advice. It was decided that Black volunteers should be sent to Seaford to await a decision on their recruitment and deployment. The first contingent of West Indians, mainly from Barbados and British Guiana, arrived in Seaford on 5 September 1915. A month later a ‘western port’ saw the arrival of 750 more men from the West Indies. Later, on their day of arrival, a frosty 4 October, they marched from Seaford railway station along Blatchington Road and up Blatchington Hill to the North Camp. The western entrances to the North Camp were 200 metres along Homefield Road and Upper Belgrave Road: North Camp Lane was one of the entrances.

The British West Indies Regiment was established on 26 October and Army Order 4 of 1916 (passed 3 November 1915) conceded that the regiment should be recognised as a corps for the purposes of the Army Act.



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On 25 November 1915 trains containing another 725 Black recruits arrived at Seaford station and, marching up to the North Camp, they joined the four companies that had been established there:

A Company - British Guiana

B Company - Trinidad

C Company - Trinidad and St Vincent

D Company - Grenada and Barbados

Later drafts were formed into E Company. The different companies had identification marks: one was a swastika, an ancient Hindu symbol of auspiciousness.

One of the first duties the men would have carried out was attending the funeral of Corporal James Lawrence Brown of St Vincent. He was accidentally killed on 21 November when he came off his bicycle after it careered down Exceat Hill. He lost control and his head struck a tree.

In November 1915 a Ladies Committee was established in London chaired by the Countess of Stamford. The committee set about improving the life of men at the Seaford Camp and supplying much needed warm clothing as well as cigars and cigarettes. The committee also arranged a flag day across the Caribbean islands. The money was used to provide the men with parcels which contained handkerchiefs, soap, boots, badges, clothing, writing materials, shaving equipment, games, fruit, wallets, books and magazines.

In November 1915 a group of Black soldiers marched in the Lord Mayor's Parade in London. The Daily News called them 'huge and mighty men of valour'

(As well as troops from the colonies, German prisoners-of-war and captured guns were paraded at the 1915 Lord Mayors Show. The parade, to introduce the new Lord Mayor of London, has taken place annually, in peacetime and war alike, since 1852. The 1915 parade was timed to coincide with ten recruitment meetings and as the parade passed the recruiting offices more and more men joined the parade.)

Although seeing non-white faces in Seaford was unusual it was not unknown. The town was a port in medieval times and close to the later port of Newhaven, so Seafordians would have seen many visitors from overseas. In 1683 two black people were married at St Leonard's Church and in 1822 the local freemasons had a Black member. There would, inevitably, have been elements of racism and discrimination, but the Black regiments' stay in Seaford was accepted by local residents; the soldiers were known affectionately as "Westies". The men were smarter than the average white soldier, wearing white shirts and black ties when off-duty, and some Seaford



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residents at first imagined they must all be padres. Quite a number were well educated and accustomed to English ways, so they soon got to know some of the local people and many made friends. The **vicar of St Leonard's** at the time later wrote, with some condescension, that the men of the British West Indies Regiment were

'at least equal with most of the white regiments of which we have had experience'

In December 1915 the **Eastbourne Chronicle** reported

'At the outset, local people were inclined, not unnaturally, to be sceptical at the arrival of these strange soldiers of the King, and therefore the tribute of praise is all the more sincere when, after a couple of months' experience, the residents generally speak in high terms of the behaviour of these men. Their presence is a striking tribute to the strength of the British Empire.'

That month 53 West Indian soldiers joined local people to be confirmed by the Bishop of Lewes. The Chronicle reported that it was

'inspiring to see the reverent attitude of the soldiers, who, being 4,000 miles from home, discharge their duty to the Empire and found a warm welcome in their mother church'

The Seaford branch of the Ancient Order of Foresters, which had many members serving in the armed forces, discovered that several of the West Indian soldiers at the North Camp were members of their own organisation. They were duly invited to attend local meetings. During one of these, **Private Clement of the Pride of Hope Court of the Foresters of Trinidad** said

'We have left our homes and comforts because the call-to-arms is as much to us as it is to an Englishman. We are all British and are proud to be members of the Empire and we will shed our last drop of blood to uphold its integrity'

Not everyone in Seaford was so accommodating. In October 1915 Lawrence Graham appeared at Lewes Magistrates charged with disaffection for making remarks likely to jeopardise recruiting to His Majesty's Forces. Graham had accosted Black soldiers, telling them that white men should be left to fight their own battles

'West Indians are fools for fighting for the Empire. Why don't you lay down your arms and do no fighting?'



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In the bar of a Seaford hotel he asked two Black soldiers why they had enlisted on such little pay when Churchill, Asquith and Lloyd-George were being paid £15,000 a year. For his subversion Graham was sentenced to six years' imprisonment with hard labour.

Further evidence of the acceptance of the men locally is shown by the visit, in December 1915, of two headmasters from schools in Trinidad and British Guiana to Church Street School Seaford.

There is also a remarkable letter that has survived from Private Hughes. Private 875 Eric Hughes of the British West Indies Regiment wrote to two Seaford girls, Dorothy and Doris. He had evidently met the girls before as he sent his regards to their mother; then he asked the girls if they would accompany him to the cinema on Thursday night. We have no way of knowing whether Eric got his double date but it says much for race relations at the time that he had the confidence to ask.

Coming from a Caribbean climate to wintry Seaford was a massive shock to most of the men. Many of the West Indians succumbed to mumps and pneumonia and, between October 1915 and January 1916, nineteen of them died. Their Commonwealth War Graves can still be seen at Alfriston Road Cemetery, Seaford. By the end of the war the British West Indies Regiment would have lost 178 men to enemy action - but over a thousand to infection and illness. In April 1916, the British West Indies Regiment went to Egypt. On their departure the future Prime Minister, Andrew Bonar-Law (who was Canadian by birth) wrote to Colonel Blanchard:

'On the eve of the departure of the British West Indies Regiment to serve abroad, I desire, as Secretary of State for the Colonies, to express to you and through you to your Officers, Non-Commissioned Officers, and Men of the Regiment my warmest good wishes for you and their welfare and success in the tasks that lay before them. I only regret that circumstances prevent me personally delivering the message to them.'

The Ladies Committee petitioned for equality of pay for the British West Indies Regiment. The Army had designated the regiment as a Native unit and until Army Order 1918 they were paid less than 'regular' (in other words, white) troops. The difference in pay was not based on the fact that Black soldiers came from the colonies; white soldiers recruited in South Africa were not subject to this discrimination".