

10 Things You Didn't Know About London's Black Community on the Home Front

by Stephen Bourne

1. During the German Blitz on British cities, many black people volunteered as fire guards and these included Stephen Bourne's adopted aunt, Esther Bruce. During air raids Esther would make sure that any fires started by incendiaries (fire bombs) on the roof of her place of work (Brompton Hospital) were extinguished before any major damage was done. Stephen's short film *Aunt Esther's Story* can now be seen on You Tube.
2. Before the National Health Service was founded in 1948, many West African and West Indian women trained as nurses in British hospitals during the Second World War. These included Princess Ademola, daughter of the paramount chief in northern Nigeria. She was based at Guy's Hospital and her story was filmed by the Colonial Film Unit in 1943.
3. In 1943 E. I. Ekpenyon published a pamphlet in which he described his experiences as an African air raid warden based in the St Marylebone area of London.
4. In 1939 the internationally acclaimed jazz singer Adelaide Hall could have returned home to the safety of New York but she decided to stay in London with her Trinidadian husband and entertain the British public and the troops. She had a special uniform made by Madame Adele of Grosvenor Street.
5. As soon as the war broke out in 1939, the Jamaican-born Fernando Henriques joined the National Fire Service and he remained a fireman for three years, facing great danger during the London Blitz of 1940-41.



Casualty: the band leader Ken "Snakehips" Johnson.



The jazz singer, Adelaide Hall.

6. In 1941 the Guyanese bandleader Ken 'Snakehips' Johnson was killed in an air raid during a performance at the Cafe de Paris in spite of the fact that it was advertised as the safest nightclub in London's West End. Over thirty people lost their lives, and sixty others were seriously injured after a bomb smashed through the glass ceiling of the club.
7. In 1941 the Jamaican poet and feminist Una Marson became the BBC's first black radio producer. During the war her series *Calling the West Indies* was broadcast every week from BBC Broadcasting House in London to the Caribbean.
8. Ivor Cummings was a black Briton whose wartime role as the Assistant Welfare Officer for the Colonial Office earned him a reputation as someone who would assist any black person in trouble.
9. In 1941 Winston Churchill received a letter from a black housewife who was living in poor accommodation in Camden Town in London. She pleaded with the Prime Minister to address the discrimination faced by some black British citizens in wartime.
10. The flamboyant racing tipster Prince Monolulu, with his headdress of ostrich feathers, was one of the most famous black men in Britain. He was featured in several wartime film newsreels, including *London Carries On* (1939) in which he encouraged the British public to use of gas masks.

Black Londoners on the Home Front 1939 - 45.

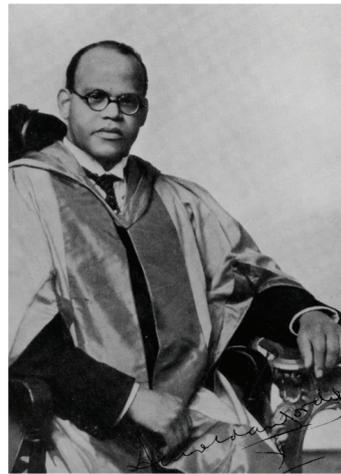
In his new book *Mother Country* Stephen Bourne unearths a hidden history of Britain's black community. Stephen tells the stories of many black Britons who lived and worked on the 'front line' during the Second World War. He explains: "My interest in documenting the experiences of black Britons in wartime began with the stories my adopted aunt, Esther Bruce, told me. She was born in Fulham in 1912, and during the Second World War she volunteered as a fire watcher. This dangerous work involved looking out for incendiary bombs on the roof of her workplace, Brompton Hospital."



After recording his aunt's memories, Stephen began searching for other stories of black Britons in wartime. He discovered many who have been overlooked by historians and the results are now published in *Mother Country – Britain's Black Community on the Home Front 1939-45* (The History Press). This has been described by Austin Ruddy in the Leicester Mercury as: "The most original British wartime social history I have read in some years. Well researched, Bourne's book tells a genuinely overlooked, interesting and important aspect of our wartime history. An uplifting read."

Mother Country includes many stories about black Londoners in wartime, the most prominent being the community leader Dr. Harold Moody. He travelled from his home in Jamaica to London in the Edwardian era, and settled in Peckham. In addition to being a highly respected family doctor in his community, Moody campaigned on behalf of black people in Britain. He was also one of the first doctors to arrive on the scene of the terrible V2 rocket incident in New Cross in 1944. Nearly 200 were killed and hundreds injured. Says Stephen "there is an English Heritage Blue Plaque on his former home in Peckham, but Dr. Moody has never been given proper acknowledgement as Britain's most important black community leader in the 1930s and 1940s."

Other black Londoners who feature in *Mother Country* include the BBC broadcaster and Hampstead resident Una Marson; the Nigerian air raid warden E. I. Ekpenyon who was based in Marylebone; the popular West End bandleader Ken 'Snakehips' Johnson who was killed during the London Blitz when the Cafe de Paris suffered a direct hit; and black elders from the Southwark Pensioner's Centre in Camberwell who have been interviewed by Stephen about their experiences of the home front in West Africa and the Caribbean. Stephen also devotes a chapter to the American singer Adelaide Hall who settled in London in 1939 with her Trinidadian husband Bert Hicks. Adelaide supported the war effort by entertaining the troops and touring variety theatres. He has also interviewed several black evacuees from London's East End.



Community leader
Dr Harold Moody.



An evacuee.



Esther Bruce.

Praise for Mother Country

Family History Monthly: "This well-researched book blends personal experience with historical fact. Readers will relish this new perspective on World War Two."

BBC History Magazine: "Bourne has done an invaluable service with this wide-ranging book, which is illuminated with biographies, many of them original interviews. A wonderful introduction to many facets of this history."

Mother Country - Britain's Black Community on the Home Front 1939-45 by Stephen Bourne (The History Press, £12.99)

For further information about Stephen Bourne go to www.stephenbourne.co.uk



Stephen Bourne.