

THE 'STRANGERS' HOME



Exhibition

Between the late 19th and mid-20th centuries, the area around the Royal Docks became one of the most culturally diverse places anywhere in Britain. This came about because of the ships that landed in the docks carrying sailors from across the British Empire and beyond. Some of these sailors would stay temporarily in lodging houses and missions, frequenting spaces such as clubs, shops, or markets around the Royal Docks. Others would settle in the area and build families.

Seven young scholars with ambitions to enter the heritage sector researched this subject matter in museums and archives and then interpreted it for this exhibition.

Two films were also created: a short film recording the scholars' experiences as they undertook their research, and a longer-format documentary film which explores the heritage subject in greater depth. Both can be viewed on Thames Festival Trust's Places of Change webpage.



THE 'STRANGERS' HOME

Introduction

Around the Royal Docks you may notice streets such as 'Kamal Chunchie Way' and 'Lascars Avenue' or walk past the remains of the Albert Dock Seamen's Hospital. These are just some traces of the enduring legacy of a diverse community of sailors who came from across the British Empire to the Royal Docks area between 1855 and 1945.

The docks provided security for resources violently extracted by the British Empire from its colonies. These included sugar, grain, tobacco, meat, fruit, and vegetables.

It was not just cargo that came in on ships. Sailors, of which 'over a thousand [were] to be found daily in the Docks', would disembark and settle. These sailors were racialised by authorities and the wider public, defined and othered by the colour of their skin.

The traces of these communities inspired us to research this further and curate an exhibition investigating the lived experience of this community. The name 'The 'Strangers' Home', was inspired by one of the local lodging houses that catered for these sailors.

Sources at archives and museums often come from government and colonial authorities. Whilst they are a useful record of people and their presence, they do not provide the sailors' experience in their own words.

We only have glimpses into the journeys these sailors took, the places they visited and stayed, the racism and violence they faced, and their working conditions. From this, we can gain some insight into their agency and the community they built, but we cannot speculate on their everyday experience or speak on their behalf.

We hope you will be able to take away some understanding of the lives of sailors. Going forward, we invite you to question existing research and the ethics of uncovering 'lost' stories.

Read between the lines of these recorded histories.

Scan to learn more:



Left: Barking Road, early 1900s.
(Newham Archives)

Middle: The Waith sisters on Crown Street,
Canning Town, 1920s. (Newham Archives)

Right: The Royal Docks from above, c.1935.
(Newham Archives)





Portrayal of Sailors

Sailors from different parts of the world increasingly appeared in East London's docks during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, working on board British ships. Coming from parts of the expanding British Empire in Africa, the Caribbean and Asia, these sailors were marginalised and othered because of the colour of their skin, a process of racialisation which began on board ships.

Pejorative terms were used to describe them. Sailors from south and south-east Asia and the Arabian Peninsula were often referred to as 'lascars'. The origin of the term comes from a 17th century English diplomat who misused the Urdu word '*lashkar*', which means army or camp. They were employed on contracts called 'Lascar agreements'.

We found that newspaper portrayals of these sailors changed to fit particular narratives. Sometimes they were described as 'hard working' or 'resilient' to justify their exploitation in dangerous roles, and sometimes as 'lazy' or 'stupid' to reinforce their position as inferior to white sailors.

As can be seen below in 'Why There are no British Seamen', these men were blamed for supposed job shortages for British sailors. The photograph is symbolic of the men who migrated from these areas. Ranging in age and ethnicity, they would undergo a journey of alienation as they transitioned to 'Strangers' at home.

Photography of these sailors focused on dress to enforce these ideas of difference. The uniform for South Asian sailors typically consisted of a variation of *topis* (headgear) to identify a seafarer's rank, a belted shirt dress, and white trousers.

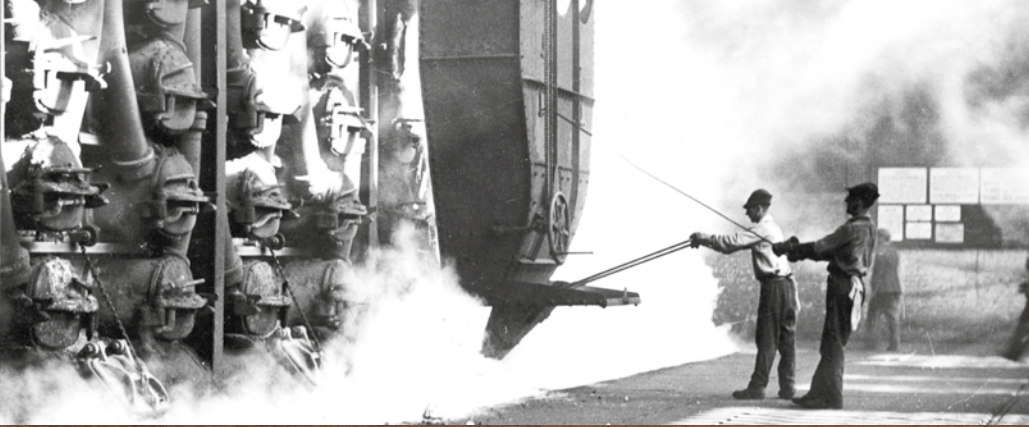
This image speaks to how at times, photos are **constructed** to convey a skewed narrative. On board, the camera functioned as a tool of empire to project an image of racialised sailors as a spectacle to behold, other, and **infantilise**.



Top: Map showing the commercial trade routes connected to the British Empire, 1890. (Alamy)

Bottom Left: Three sailors of the 'Viceroy of India' (1929), standing behind the wheel of one of the ship's tenders. (Royal Museums Greenwich)

Bottom Right: A Daily Mirror article depicting seamen connected with different parts of the British Empire, 1905. (British Newspaper Archive)



Working Conditions

From different newspapers we understand how the labour of some workers in Britain was valued less, on board ships and on land. They came from the colonies of the British Empire as well as from other European countries, particularly Germany, Ireland, Russia, and Italy.

In 1898 there were reported to be 36,023 sailors working on board British ships employed on 'lascar agreements', who earned between 60%–80% less than those on 'European agreements'.

The commodification of 'foreign' labour as cheap labour led to higher risk of injury and deaths for sailors and workers. A newspaper extract from 1890 reported that 'two Lascars' were killed in Canning Town under the weight of a ship.

A Daily Mirror article from 1905 claimed that 'foreign' sailors 'work for low wages, and are content with food and quarters for which an Englishman would revolt'. This is an example of the use of racial stereotypes to justify the exploitation of racialised labour.

This directly fueled racial anxiety among the white British working class. See below this example of an advert from a local newspaper boasting that 'No Foreign Labour [is] Employed' in their production. Strikes also took place against 'foreign' labour, including at the Beckton Gasworks in 1898.

In 1912 the Daily Herald reported that British seamen were striking against the employment of 'foreign' labour – reinforcing the construction of a unified white, British working class and the idea of a white 'Great' Britain, untouched by Imperial encounters.

The exclusion of non-British workers from the working class was coded in law in the 1919 Aliens Restriction Act, which banned them from striking.

Britain's wealth was accumulated from this exploitation, with the wealth of Britain today built by these labourers.

EDMOND BAKERY & DAIRY COMPANY.
ESTABLISHED 1850.

SUPPORT BRITISH PLUCK
AND WORKERS!

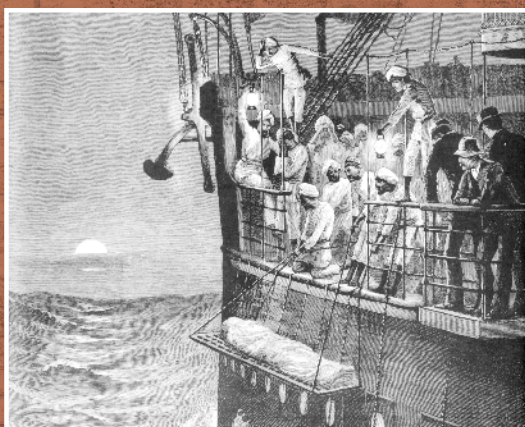
The World Challenged!
We accepted the Challenge! and
The Result came out Trumps!

OUR DAIRY BREAD
IS MADE FROM THE
Finest British Milled Flours
*(Which are known to be the World's Richest of Foreign
Flours for Sweetness and Delicacy).*

PURE SKIM MILK AND FRESHEST YEAST.

NO FOREIGN LABOUR EMPLOYED.
Try our BREAD and compare with that produced from
Imported Foreign Flours, and made by Foreign Men.

ELLIOTT & SONS.
Dairy Farmers and Dairy Bread Bakers,
COWKEEPERS AND BUTTERMAKERS,
WATER LANE AND MANBEY GROVE, STRATFORD.



Top: Beckton Gasworks, late 19th century. (Newham Archives)

Bottom Left: A local 1898 advert against 'foreign labour'. (Newham Archives)

Bottom Right: Depiction of a 'lascar' funeral at sea, 1887. (Look and Learn)



Places

Lodging houses, missions and hospitals formed key places where sailors temporarily stayed around the Royal Docks. Here are some examples:

St Luke's Lascar Mission: Under St Luke's Parish on Victoria Dock Road in Canning Town, the Mission sought to provide 'Christian Instruction, Reading, and Recreation for [Lascars]'

Royal Albert Dock Hospital (see image).

Queen Victoria Seamen's Rest: Located on East India Dock Road, the Rest was established as a meeting and resting place, continuing to provide accommodation for sailors, both active and retired, ex-servicemen and other homeless men today.

Strangers' Home for Asiatics, Africans and South Sea Islanders: According to the Illustrated London News, the Strangers' Home aimed to provide temporary accommodation at a moderate price for the 'miserably unprotected [...] Lascars and other non-European seamen', seen as 'unfit companions for English sailors living in London'.

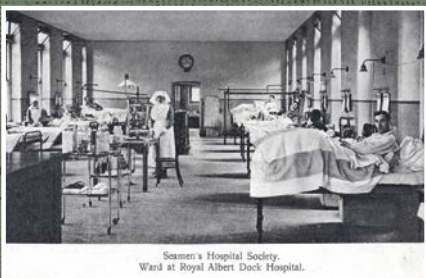
Although the Directors of the Strangers' Home were said to 'carefully [refrain]' from interfering with the inhabitants' religion, Christian instruction was offered alongside aid.

Similarly, Muslim and Hindu visitors of St Luke's Lascar Mission were allowed to conduct their own prayers onsite.

Christian converts from south Asia played an important role in missionary work, such as Reverend E.B. Bhoose (St Luke's Lascar Mission) and Kamal Churchie (the Coloured Men's Institute).

Sailors interacted with existing communities and formed new ones. Reflecting the diversity of the families who lived there, an area of Canning Town was nicknamed 'Draughtboard Alley'.

South Hallsville School, located near 'Draughtboard Alley', was bombed while serving as a shelter for the locals of Canning Town during the Second World War. The true number of casualties, possibly 600, was covered up – with government officials only reporting 77. This would make South Hallsville School the highest single civilian death toll in Britain during the war.



Seamen's Hospital Society.
Ward at Royal Albert Dock Hospital.



Top: A party at the Coloured Men's Institute, c.1930. (*Eastside Community Heritage*)

Bottom Left: Patients at Royal Albert Dock Hospital, c.1938. (*Alamy*)

Bottom Right: South Hallsville School. Bomb damage. 10 Sept 1940. (*Newham Archives*)



Racism and Violence

Migrant workers in the Royal Docks faced discrimination and racism from authorities and newspapers, which stirred prejudice from the wider public, particularly following the First World War.

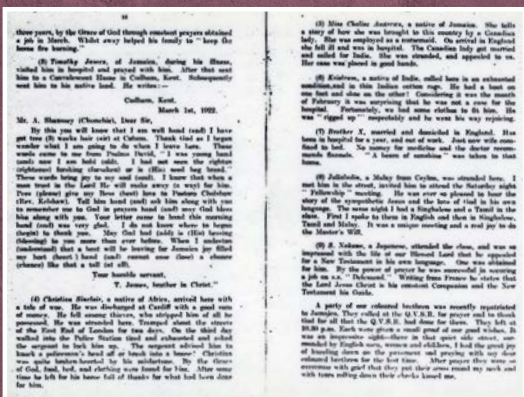
The 1919 Aliens Restriction Act restricted employment and housing opportunities, and criminalised strike action. An update the following year ordered 'aliens' to register with police under threat of deportation. The 1925 Special Restriction (Coloured Alien Seamen) Order specifically restricted the rights of 'coloured' men, who would be reported to police if they didn't have correct proof of identity, which was often difficult to obtain. This law tore families apart.

The multidimensional racial discrimination intensified tensions within the community. In 1919, a prolonged outbreak of violence occurred in the docklands, targeting black people in the vicinity, as well as white women who lived with black men or who were employed by black or Arab businesses.

Further riots in June 1919 were aimed at the local Chinese population. A demonstration by unemployed white British sailors against Chinese labour took place at the shipping offices on East India Dock Road.

Although the riots can be attributed to many sources, such as job competition, housing shortages and overcrowding, the local press sought a single sensational origin for the violence, latching onto the issue of white working-class resentment of sexual relationships between white women and black and Arab men as the explanation.

Even those who were seeking to 'do good' for racialised communities in the docklands portrayed them as 'helpless' and 'desperate' people, as seen in the below report written by Kamal Chunchie in the early 1920s. This image was used by authorities to justify imperial rule over 'aliens' who, while worthy of kind treatment, were to be viewed as second class to white Europeans.



ALIENS' RESTRICTION ACT
NOW IN FORCE.
Heavy Penalties for Non-compliance.

It is the duty of every keeper or manager of any Hotel, Inn, Lodging-house, Lodging-house, or Apartment, to keep a Register of all aliens over the age of 14 years staying in his house, and to obtain from

Top: Crew of a British merchant navy vessel, c.1910. (Alamy)

Bottom Left: Details from a report carried out by Kamal Chunchie in 1922. (Newham Archives)

Bottom Right: Newspaper article announcing the Aliens' Restriction Act. (British Newspaper Archive)



Agency

There might be a story here about communities who evaded authorities and their scrutiny, and created thriving spaces in spite of racism. This is not a story we are equipped to tell.

However, evidence of resistance to the working conditions through strikes allows a glimpse into the agency and resistance of these people.

‘Native Seamen Gaoled: Thirty-Eight Lascars Strike For Double Pay And Bonus | Thirty-eight Lascar seamen who had struck work on their ship demanding more money because of war risks, were each sent to prison for a month at East Ham police court on Thursday.’ (*East Ham Echo & Barking Chronicle*, 24/11/1939)

Today, mixed-race identity and multi-racial communities face harassment and discrimination, stemming from harmful views of mixed-race families and communities as tokens and symbols of progress.

Mixed-race people, and mixed-race communities, sheerly by existing, pose a problem to political views which advocate a separation of race. Throughout history and today, those in power have viewed mixed race people as disruptive to the fabric of society, and a wider threat to white superiority.

In this context, we offer a glimpse into a community that did resist, by staying, by being together, and by combatting the working conditions imposed upon them.

Below, a community gathers to listen to a saxophone at the Coloured Men’s Institute, where Christmas dinners, gifts, and excursions were offered to workers and their families.

A 1902 article in a local newspaper entitled **‘Lazy Lascars’** referred to seven ‘lascars’ charged in Stratford for disobeying orders. They had complained to their captain about poor quality food, which had made them ill, but had been ignored. They therefore rebelled and were prosecuted:

‘Defendants were under contract for twelve months, but they appeared to imagine that the moment they got to England they could do as they liked.’



Top: Children playing together on Crown Street, c.1930. (*Mary Evans Picture Library*)

Bottom Left: A party at the Coloured Men’s Institute, c.1928. (*Eastside Community Heritage*)

Bottom Right: Activities at the Strangers’ Home, c.1900. (*Look and Learn*)