

## 'This House is Africa': Accounting for the Hostel for 'Coloured Colonial Seamen' in London's East End

More than twenty years ago, Raphael Samuel's nuanced observations of how the built environment tends to reinforce social inequality, privileging the powerful, prompted architectural historians to redouble their efforts to account for humble 'everyday' sites of architectural production.<sup>2</sup> This endeavour is critical if an area such as Whitechapel, inner fulcrum of London's East End, is to be rightly understood. Located in the former Borough of Stepney (abolished in 1965), the parish has historically been a place of arrival for waves of immigrants, embracing over centuries German, Irish, East European Jewish and Bengali settlements to name but a few. In the context of this cyclical demographic change, the East End has experienced the near-continuous formation and re-formation of its built environment, shaped by the occupation and adaptation of existing buildings by migrant communities. Yet, the small-scale, short-lived and the ephemeral still easily falls between the gaps of historical enquiry, evidence obscured by archival practices which are apt to prioritize architectural accounts of high-profile new-builds commissioned by the powerful institutions and individuals. This paper assumes that when it comes to understanding change in the built environment, documenting the progressive accretion of 'tweaks' to the form and use of all sorts of lesser-known buildings, perhaps long gone, is as important to the historical record of urban change as widely reported grand designs for well-recognised monuments. The focus of the investigation is an examination of one 'moment' in the long narrative of urban flux around the Port of London. It centres on a short-lived hostel in order to explore spatial experiences of disconnection in relation to demographic upheaval and post-war reconstruction in the city. Set up in an existing building on Lemn Street in Whitechapel, the hostel was initiated by the British Government's Colonial Office during the Second World War and was intended to temporarily house 'colonial' seamen of African and Afro-Caribbean origin. Evidence suggests that such spaces of imperialism in post-war London were defined by instability, ambiguity and confusion.<sup>3</sup> More specifically, seamen's hostels acted as flashpoints for discontent as the national identity and rights of black migrants from British colonies were contested by employers, activists, local and government authorities and the men themselves, against the backdrop of the emerging field of race relations in the United Kingdom.<sup>4</sup>

In *The Lonely Londoners*, Trinidadian writer Sam Selvon drew on his personal observations of the London hostel where he lodged to memorably sketch out the transient and unsettled experience of many West Indians seeking to make a home in the 'heart of Empire' in the

---

<sup>2</sup> Samuel, R. (1998). *Island Stories: Unravelling Britain*. London: Verso. 367–8

<sup>3</sup> Baucom, I. (1999). *Out of Place: Englishness, Empire, and the Locations of Identity*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

<sup>4</sup> See for example: Little, K. (1948). *Negroes in Britain: A Study of Racial Relations in English Society*. London: Kegan Paul.

1950s. The condition of spatial precariousness of migrants in the urban environment is not, or has it ever been, exclusive to the East End of London, but stories of settlement and unsettlement are especially prevalent there. An established entry point and reception area for migrants arriving by sea, East London has been shaped by the churn of its 'floating population' - sailors who stayed temporarily onshore awaiting their next job, or who took short-term leave to spend their earnings in the area, or harboured intentions to settle by finding work on land. Because of its proximity to the docks, throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Stepney's streets were punctuated by numerous boarding houses, social clubs and pubs which served a community of seamen of diverse nationalities and ethnicities.<sup>5</sup> On land, sailors from around the globe tended to cluster with those of their own culture or nationality, among others, giving rise to Greek, Indian, and Maltese establishments along Cable Street. Through the colonial trade, the presence of black sailors from Africa and the West Indies, alongside lascars from Bengal, was well-established in East London by the twentieth century. The British Empire was dependent on continuous traffic between its colonies and the mother country, and the East End held strategic importance in these exchanges, yet one scholar concluded that although 'the produce of the empire channelled through the East End', the 'wealth it generated came to rest elsewhere.'<sup>6</sup>

The First and Second World Wars accelerated the number of black sailors from the colonies landing in the UK as more men from the West Indies and West Africa joined the merchant navy and commercial operations to support the war effort, often taking up the most dangerous and physically demanding positions on ships. The interwar and post-war years saw a severe contraction in the shipping industry, during which time many seamen from the British colonies took up longer-term residence in Stepney despite encountering difficulty there. For twenty years after 1919, racial unrest triggered by high unemployment rates, housing shortages, structural inequality, and the UK's altered global position frequently spilled over into collective violence in dockside areas.<sup>7</sup> One Ijo seaman summarized his experience of prejudice as a black sailor thus, 'When white man finish you get job. White man never finish.'<sup>8</sup> The Second World War brought with it a renewed call from the British government for assistance from sailors from the colonies and promises of welfare support to right the wrongs of the interwar period. With some reservations, the Colonial Office was tasked with formulating a plan to provide onshore hostel accommodation for the newly increased 'coloured floating population'. The Colonial House hostel in Whitechapel was set up in this climate and proved to be indicative of a conflicted and partial institutional

---

<sup>5</sup> Morris, D., Cozens, K. (2017). Mariners Ashore in the Eighteenth Century: The role of boarding-house keepers and victuallers, *The Mariner's Mirror*, 103:4, 431-449.

<sup>6</sup> Jacobs, J. M. (2002). *Edge of Empire: Postcolonialism and the City*. London: Routledge. 73

<sup>7</sup> Tabili, L. (1994). The Construction of Racial Difference in Twentieth-Century Britain: The Special Restriction (Coloured Alien Seamen) Order, 1925. *Journal of British Studies*, 33, No. 1, 54-98; Featherstone, D. (2015). Maritime labour and subaltern geographies of internationalism: Black internationalist seafarers' organising in the interwar period. *Political Geography*, 49, 7-16.

<sup>8</sup> Banton, M. (1955). *The Coloured Quarter: Negro Immigrants in an English City*. London: Jonathan Cape. 18-38;

response to a broader challenge. Operating from 1942 to 1950, the thirteen-bed hostel for West Indian and West African sailors was a failure from a number of perspectives, but the hostel is useful for our purposes, for discussions around its inadequacies serve to illuminate the wider spatial circumstances of the East End's black British community and the tensions surrounding the permanent settlement of West Indian and African sailors in the UK.

Built originally in the mid-nineteenth century as a German Mission School, the two-storey hostel was situated at the north end of Lemn Street, near Whitechapel High Street. It was demolished in 2008/9 to make way for a twenty-four storey tower of short-stay serviced apartments (15-17 Lemn Street). Despite functioning for less than a decade, as a government-funded hostel which was the subject of some local controversy, Colonial House was relatively well documented as a result of its connection to the Colonial Office and a group of tireless East London campaigners. Set up to advise the Colonial Office on the precarious situation of the seamen, the East End Welfare Advisory Committee (EEWAC) was formed of local religious and political leaders. A key figure of this group was Edith Ramsay, a social campaigner primarily based at Toynbee Hall, who deposited her papers, many relating to the ill-fated seamen's hostel, at the Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archive. Ramsay acted in the guise of an unofficial welfare officer but always sought the appointment of an official one posted in Stepney by the Colonial Office. Her documents reveal the extent of her personal investment in the lives of Whitechapel's migrant seamen and provide mediated access to their stories. In 1946 the newly established Colonial Office Welfare Department did in fact appoint a Welfare Officer to work in London, but located his base in Covent Garden, perpetuating Ramsay's entanglement with the cases of distressed individuals in the East.<sup>9</sup> Ramsay was matched in her strength of character and care for Stepney's seamen by Ethiopian-born Kathleen Wrsama, owner of an independent local lodging house which sought to provide alternative accommodation for men of West Indian and African origin. Transcriptions of interviews with Wrsama describe her critical involvement in the formation of a grass-roots organisation, the Stepney Coloured People's Association, set up to unite and represent black residents and workers of the East End. Three principal sources, the Colonial Office records, the personal correspondence of Edith Ramsay, and the oral testimony of Kathleen Wrsama, allow for the story of Colonial House to be documented and assessed. The investigation that follows moved outwards in scale, beginning with a brief history of the Lemn Street building and use as a hostel, before moving to compare the social observations of three different studies of the black community in the East End commissioned in 1944, 1949 and 1950. Finally Colonial House is set in a national context, considering the spatial implications of the Colonial Office's unarticulated strategy of 'benign paternalism' and their compromised anti-segregationist tendencies.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archive (THLHLA), P/HAL/1/4

<sup>10</sup> Rich, P. (2nd ed. 1990). *Race and Empire in British Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 164.

## The Space In-Between

The pattern of paternalistic welfare provision for migrant communities was well-established in the Lemman Street building long before the Colonial House hostel was initiated in 1942. Representing a space 'in-between' cultures, conceptually neither wholly 'here' nor 'there', 17 Lemman Street was constructed and then adapted to host education, recreation and acculturation activities for diasporic groups, firstly German Christians and then East European Jews.<sup>11</sup> The building specifically provided supervised spaces where the local working class youth negotiated their religious and national identities under the watchful eye of community elders.

Opening in 1861, the German Mission Day School replaced an eighteenth-century tenement and bakery on the site. The purpose-built school was one of a handful of educational buildings clustered on Buckle Street and the eastern extension of Alie Street. This group of buildings was fashioned primarily to serve a large local German population closely associated to the East London sugar-refining business during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>12</sup> Based on his involvement in other building projects of London's German community (for example, at the King's Cross German Gymnasium) and his work on contemporary school projects, it is possible that E. A. Gruning was implicated in the design of the Mission School. With a long elevation to Buckle Street and a steeply pitched gable roof, the two-and-a-half storey building assumed an institutional Gothic Revival style, typical of the mid-nineteenth century. It was formed of London stock brick with black and red headers above its arched openings.<sup>13</sup> A large ground-floor corner schoolroom was accessed through decorated double-doors located in a narrow wing extension facing onto Lemman Street. An office and further large schoolroom were situated on the first floor. The top floor provided separate living accommodation for the school's two teachers. The design of the building itself was not expressly Germanic, the national association perhaps only faintly implicit in its Gothic stylings. In its unassumingly reserved exterior, 17 Lemman Street was matched by other buildings constructed for the local German community, none of which architecturally sought to broadcast their minority 'alien' status (see fig. 1).

Figure 1: The former German Mission Day School in 1967. (THLHLA.)

Unusually for a faith school, the German Mission Day School was managed by an inter-denominational body known as the 'Mission Among the German Poor and Sailors in London', formed in 1849. Intended to serve poor children of seamen and preceding the

---

<sup>11</sup> Bhabha, H. (1994). *The Location of Culture*. Abingdon: Routledge. 2.

<sup>12</sup> Post Office Directories for 1859-1862; Mawer, B. (rev. ed. 2011). *Sugarbakers: From Sweat to Sweetness*. Anglo-German Family History Society.

<sup>13</sup> Cherry, B., O'Brien, C., Pevsner, N., (2005). *The Buildings of England: London East*. London and New Haven: Yale University Press. 435.

Public Schools Act of 1868, this charity school was reliant on subscriptions from wealthy members of the City's German community.<sup>14</sup> A few years after opening, the school roll numbered 150 children, who were instructed in both German and English. But by the end of the century many German families had moved out of Whitechapel to more salubrious suburbs and leaders of the school concluded that, in the light of this and the great many free English schools then in operation, the 'German Poor School' should be given up. The school closed in 1897 and the schoolhouse was let out for commercial purposes, the rent channelled into funding adult and child German education in other parts of the capital.<sup>15</sup>

By 1903 the former Mission School was in use by the Jewish Working Girls' Club (JWGC).<sup>16</sup> The purchase of the leasehold of the building was made possible entirely through the support of one individual, Mrs Charles Henry, daughter of the prominent Jewish-American philanthropist, Leonard Lewisohn.<sup>17</sup> Mrs Henry's support was prompted by an anxiety to show American goodwill towards English Jews in the light of tightening immigration policies in the US, which restricted Jewish movement into the country as religious refugees. The former Mission School was adapted without significant architectural alteration to suit its new purpose by the architect M. E. Collins, who, on completion, reported that the Club contained 'every accommodation, including the usual recreation rooms, a kitchen, scullery, library and other rooms'.<sup>18</sup> The day-to-day running of the Club was reliant on voluntary contributions and teachers were mostly volunteers from the well-meaning and already settled middle classes, concerned that assimilation of poor Jewish children from Eastern Europe was not occurring rapidly nor effectively enough.<sup>19</sup> With 160 girls regularly attending evening and Sunday classes in such subjects as needlework, cooking, Hebrew and religion, singing and drilling in the early 1900s, the Club 'exceedingly flourish[ed]' well into the 1920s.<sup>20</sup> The JWGC appears to have continued on until at least the late 1930s before closure around the beginning of the Second World War, the Jewish exodus from East London 'well-nigh complete' by the late 1950s.<sup>21</sup>

## Colonial House

Requisitioned for use by the War Office soon after the outbreak of war, the former Mission School became a hostel for black seamen from the British colonies in 1942. In spite of a proliferation of local seamen's hostels, 'coloured colonials' were frequently turned away or

---

<sup>14</sup> THLHLA, W/SGG/A

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*; Low, S. (1862). *The Charities of London in 1861*. London: S. Low and Sons. 75, 279; Panayi, P. (ed), (1996), *Germans in Britain Since 1500*. London: Bloomsbury. 76-80

<sup>16</sup> *Jewish Chronicle* (JC), 27 November 1936, 51

<sup>17</sup> *JC*, 12 December 1903, 18

<sup>18</sup> *JC*, 1 May 1903

<sup>19</sup> *JC*, 5 March 1909, 29; *JC*, 4 November 1938, 22

<sup>20</sup> *JC*, 6 February 1903; *JC*, 16 March 1923

<sup>21</sup> *JC*, 4 November 1938, 22; Kershen, A. (2005). *Strangers, Aliens and Asians: Huguenots, Jews and Bangladeshis in Spitalfields, 1660-2000*. Abingdon: Routledge. 15

were reticent to take up beds reserved for them in larger hostels, aware that their very presence might stir up trouble, as it had in the recent past.<sup>22</sup> Minister of nearby St George's in the East and member of EEWAC, Father Groser, regarded in 1946 that, 'there is excellent provision both by official and voluntary funds for seamen on shore, but though hostels with fine premises exist in theory for "British seamen", the colour bar is operative, and in these hostels there is no place for coloured colonials.'<sup>23</sup>

Figure 2: A group of West Indian men enjoying a game of billiards in the ground floor recreation room of Colonial House, Lemn Street, July 1949. (Photo by Bert Hardy/Picture Post/Getty Images.)

The Colonial Office hostel at Lemn Street was intended for thirteen seamen, whose stay was limited to a maximum of three weeks on the basis that they were only temporary residents awaiting their next contract at sea. Accommodation included a basement dining room and kitchen, a ground-floor common room and office, a large open dormitory, and a small adjoining bedroom (see fig. 2 and 3). The self-contained second-floor flat once home to the German teachers was assigned to the hostel's Warden.<sup>24</sup> Equipped with a billiard table and piano, the common room was intended to serve an important social function, where, it was envisioned, 'men can sit and talk'.<sup>25</sup> But in the extent of its provision and the effectiveness of its organisation, the small hostel fell woefully short, dogged by problems from the beginning and especially after the end of the war. Three successive Wardens failed to maintain order in the house as men arriving at the hostel often struggled to find places on ships leaving the port, overstayed and grew restless. Although intended only as a place of short-stays for 'the floating population', the hostel frequently housed teenage stowaways and those with longer-term ambitions to settle permanently in the country. Kathleen Wrsama despaired at the lack of support given to these men, who arrived with little or no knowledge of the culture and institutional systems in England. She recalled, 'The Colonial Office opened a house and you know what it was known as? It was known as the government gambling den. I used to laugh at that. They did nothing for the poor boys.'<sup>26</sup> Lightbulbs were removed from common spaces in order to dissuade the gambling that was apparently even undertaken in corridors and toilets. A police raid on the recreation room in January 1949 resulted in the arrest of forty-nine men. Two were charged with keeping a common gambling house, and forty-seven others as frequenters of the house.<sup>27</sup>

Figure 3: A serviceman in RAF uniform and two other men outside the main entrance at Colonial House, Lemn Street, June 1949. (Photo by Bert Hardy/Picture Post/Hulton Archive/Getty Images.)

---

<sup>22</sup> THLHLA, P/RAM/3; Black Cultural Archives (BCA), BANTON/1

<sup>23</sup> THLHLA, P/HAL/1; P/RAM/3/2/4

<sup>24</sup> THLHLA, L/SMB/A/8/49

<sup>25</sup> THLHLA, P/HAL/1

<sup>26</sup> BCA, BCA/5/1/24

<sup>27</sup> Banton, *The Coloured Quarter*, 86; THLHLA, P/RAM/3/2/4

Much to the dismay of local activists such as Edith Ramsey and Father Groser, who branded Colonial House 'a token recognition of responsibility', by 1946 inefficient management of the hostel had caused the Colonial Office to quietly close it only for it to be hastily re-opened soon after.<sup>28</sup> For Ramsay, this episode was evidence of a dereliction of public duty and the abandonment of principles set out in legislation such as the Colonial Development and Welfare Act 1940 which shifted government policy away from a laissez-faire attitude to the colonies and its peoples towards a pro-active investment in their social, physical and economic needs.<sup>29</sup> The London County Council (LCC) too recognised the housing shortage which was affecting growing numbers of Afro-Caribbean men, and particularly seamen, who continued to arrive in the East End due to its industrial and riverside character. But it held that responsibility to provide suitable hostels for this group lay firmly with the Colonial Office. On the basis that the EEWAC would provide essential advice on the running of the hostel, the LCC persuaded the Colonial Office to defer permanent closure of the Lemn Street hostel.<sup>30</sup> With the inadequacy of the hostel provision more widely accepted than before, after re-opening, discussions turned to consider the construction of a large purpose-built hostel to accommodate approximately 100 men. The bomb-damaged site of St Augustine's on Settles Street was surveyed as was a property on Wellclose Square and another on Dock Street, but at the last minute the Colonial Office unexpectedly withdrew its support for the scheme in an unwelcome change of policy.<sup>31</sup> The existing thirteen-bed hostel muddled on.

The decisive closure of Colonial House was announced in October 1949. Hopes of a new centre long since dissipated, blindsided local campaigners felt their considerable efforts to improve conditions had been shamefully undermined. Ramsay accused the government of foul play reflecting that, 'It certainly seems that the Colonial Office considers the welfare of coloured men in East London so unimportant that they have played an elaborate game for the last four years in order to keep a few tiresome people like myself, quiet.'<sup>32</sup> Critics of the Colonial Office viewed that the failure to provide housing in Stepney had repercussions around the Commonwealth, with the fear of a rise in 'anti-British' communism underpinning many discussions. But the Colonial Office argued that it had 'no authority to provide accommodation for colonials permanently resident in the UK and this was primarily a matter for local authorities.' Further, it noted that similar government-sponsored hostels in Manchester and Liverpool had closed with no trouble and that sufficient private and institutional accommodation was available for black seamen. The London closure proved to be particularly contentious and lamented, for housing conditions of many Afro-Caribbean residents around Cable Street were increasingly cramped and difficult. In contrast, on its

---

<sup>28</sup> THLHLA, P/HAL/1; P/RAM/3/2/4

<sup>29</sup> Ellis, N. (2015). Black Migrants, White Queers and the Archive of Inclusion in Postwar London, *Interventions*, 17:6, 893-915, 900.

<sup>30</sup> THLHLA, L/SMB/A/8/49

<sup>31</sup> BCA, BANTON/1/4/10; BANTON/1/3/1

<sup>32</sup> THLHLA, P/RAM/3/2/3

release in 1949, Colonial House was regarded as 'large, old and structurally in good condition' by local inspectors.<sup>34</sup> After the Colonial Office's retreat, the hostel operated briefly under the private management of a West Indian, Donald Watson (or Watkins) of Ladbroke Grove, before transferring to the LCC as use as a 'reception centre for stowaways', a scheme was partially administered through the London Council of Social Service.<sup>35</sup> By 1959, the centre had closed and the building was used for commercial purposes.<sup>36</sup>

### The 'Coloured Question' in Stepney

In the nineteenth century, East London was referred to as the 'Deutsche Kolonie' by the German community and 'our London ghetto' by the Jewish community.<sup>37</sup> For British sociologist, Michael Banton, by 1955, Stepney could comfortably be regarded as 'The Coloured Quarter'. In particular, an area of low-quality housing around Cable Street, Leman Street and Christian Street came to be inhabited by many black residents during and after the war, attracting journalists to report provocatively on living conditions and the moral standard of residents on slow news days.<sup>38</sup> Reminiscent of the thinly veiled prejudice pedalled by crime-hungry tabloid newspaper articles, one local police constable endorsed a plan of inaction, 'You can't stamp out these things in a dock area. You can only localise them and advise people to keep away.'<sup>39</sup> For authorities, specifically the Colonial Office, the 'coloured question' in London's East End was a matter of more strategic importance as Stepney's increased stature as a centre for Afro-Caribbean culture came under wider public scrutiny. Concerned about issues of segregation in the built environment and acutely aware of the dangers of 'ghettoization', a number of groups commissioned surveys which aimed to assess the welfare and housing situation of the East End's black community. The shape and impact of the unofficial 'colour bar' on the experience of black seamen was of especial interest in these studies. In contrast to the American policy of official racial segregation, enacted even in the case of American GIs resident in the UK during the Second World War, Britain did not politically support segregation. Yet discrimination was by no means absent in British space, leading to a de facto segregation which cut across both private and public urban spaces. Reports suggested that the bar was most evident in port cities like London, but the extent to which it was felt and enacted nationally was never adequately mapped. An article in *The Picture Post* entitled 'Is there a British colour bar?' indicated that the bar was not evenly enacted across the country, and was even absent outside of urban areas. However, the author, Robert Kee, cautioned readers that, 'the British colour bar, one might

---

<sup>34</sup> THLHLA, L/SMB/A/8/49

<sup>35</sup> BCA, BANTON/1/4/10; BANTON/1/3/1; Banton, *The Coloured Quarter*, 86; THLHLA, L/SMB/A/8/50; L/SMB/A/8/49

<sup>36</sup> Post Office Directory 1959

<sup>37</sup> Dorgeel, H. (1881). *Die Deutsche Kolonie in London*, London; Zangwil, I. (1892). *Children of the Ghetto*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America.

<sup>38</sup> Banton, *The Coloured Quarter*, 82-83. For example: 'Vice in Stepney: Where wives go in fear of the dark', *The Star*, 12 June 1957

<sup>39</sup> Banton, *The Coloured Quarter*, 84



say, is invisible, but like Wells' invisible man it is hard and real to touch.<sup>40</sup> For black seamen in wartime and post-war East London, it seems the existence of a colour bar was indisputable. Even in times of urgent crisis, racism lived on and was worked out in spatial terms. In 1941 for example, a group of Stepney seamen complained of discrimination with regards to their access to air raid shelters, claiming that Wardens barred their entry to the best shelters, reserving them for white residents only.<sup>41</sup>

Written between 1944 and 1950, three separately authored reports considered the effect of the colour bar on local hostel accommodation and explored the alternative lodging places for black seamen, mostly accessed via a lively and mostly unregulated café culture. All three researchers responsible for producing the reports independently judged that welfare provision was unsatisfactory and socially damaging. Each recommended that the divers groups and governmental departments associated with the welfare of the seamen integrate their approaches in order to decisively improve conditions. Together, the reports supported the establishment of one large centralised community hub which combined housing and information services with recreation facilities, as well as the employment of a dedicated Welfare Officer. The impact of these reports was limited, but they provide important detailed assessments of the situation of many black East Londoners in the post-war period. The first, entitled 'A Report on an Investigation into the Conditions of the Coloured Population in a Stepney Area', was produced in 1944 by Phyllis Young, a researcher recruited from the Ministry of Labour. It was initiated by a group of individuals who formed themselves into the EEWAC after the report's publication, seeking to advise the Colonial Office in matters raised in Young's study.<sup>42</sup> Toynbee Hall too supported the endeavour and the Colonial Office itself gave access to their own confidential information, taking a keen interest in its conclusions. Five years later, on the eve of Colonial House's closure, 'the conditions of coloured people in Stepney' were once more surveyed in a briefer report commissioned by a local Jewish charity and social centre, the Bernhard Baron Settlement. The researcher, Derek Bamuta, was an East African student of Social Science on placement at the Bethnal Green Family Welfare Association.<sup>43</sup> Finally, considering their response to the closure of Colonial House, the London County Council commissioned a new report in January 1950 following the pattern already established, but researched and written by an unknown individual or individuals.<sup>44</sup>

The studies deployed personal observations as well as statistics drawn from official sources to outline the numbers and constitution of British 'colonials' in Stepney. Their findings

---

<sup>40</sup> *Picture Post*, 2 July 1949

<sup>41</sup> The National Archives (TNA), CO 859/76/6

<sup>42</sup> Young, K. P. M. (1944). *Report on an Investigation into the Conditions of the Coloured Population in a Stepney Area*. Privately published.

<sup>43</sup> BCA, Banton/1/3/1; Bamuta, D. (1949). Report on an Investigation into conditions of the coloured people in Stepney. Prepared for the Warden of the Bernhard Baron Settlement. Published anonymously in *Social Work*. (January 1950). 387-395; Banton, *The Coloured Quarter*, 84-85

<sup>44</sup> BCA, Banton/1/3/1

revealed a strong correlation between precarious spatial conditions and short-term transitory employment. In 1944, 400 'coloured' men were staying on Cable Street and Christian Street, 80% of whom were either seamen or café-workers.<sup>45</sup> Young regarded that, in contrast to the pre-war years, work was easy to come-by, but attainable jobs on land and sea tended to involve the harder sort of manual labour.<sup>46</sup> By 1950, the unemployment rate had returned to an extreme high, with 325 'colonial' men out of work, nearly 200 of whom were of British West Indian or African origin.<sup>47</sup> In a letter in the *New Statesman* in 1949, Ramsay herself acknowledged that by this time, 'the majority of men involved are not now seamen...they are resident in England', simplistically identifying the exclusionary tactics of the Seaman's Unions and the Pool as primary reasons for the giving up of seafaring amongst these men.<sup>48</sup> The LCC report of 1950 identified ninety 'coloured' seamen on shore using Stepney's hostel accommodation, while the rest sought shelter in independent lodgings.<sup>50</sup>

While the existence of a colour bar was unchallenged by the reports, the exact outline of it varied according to the author. Young judged starkly that 'the colour bar deprived men of the use of all the main seamen's hostels and recreational facilities in the area'.<sup>51</sup> Considering social places such as Toynbee Hall and the Seamen's Christian Mission, she regarded that even if leaders of the organisations accepted black men in principle, prejudice from other seamen was felt to the extent that both buildings were largely unused by the black community.<sup>52</sup> For Bamuta, the 'colour bar' undoubtedly operated but was complicated by the diversity within the black community itself. The bar was 'by no means one-sided as some people believe, but is mutual on both sides', aggravated as he saw it by some difficult inter-racial relationships and interactions.<sup>53</sup>

The studies surveyed the provision for 'coloured colonials' in local hostels, uncovering the extent to which recent histories of racial tension curtailed uptake within them. In 1944 there were five licensed and two unlicensed seamen's hostels within the Stepney area, most located close to the Merchant Navy Pool in Dock Street. Only three were used by 'coloured' men to any extent. Indian seamen dominated one hostel, while the two other small hostels contained only eighteen beds between them. Two of the largest seamen's hostels in the area, the Empire Memorial Hostel on Commercial Road, and the Sailors' Home and Red Ensign Club on Dock Street, represented accommodation for 550 men, but inter-war hostilities between white and black seamen at Dock Street had caused the hostel to become almost entirely occupied by seamen whose origins were not Afro-Caribbean or African. Young noted in 1944 that the Red Ensign only occasionally offered a bed to a black 'colonial'

---

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*; Young, *Report*, 1944, 6

<sup>46</sup> Young, *Report*, 1944, 8

<sup>47</sup> BCA, Banton/1/3/1

<sup>48</sup> THLHLA, P/RAM/3/1/6

<sup>50</sup> BCA, Banton/1/3/1

<sup>51</sup> Young, *Report*, 1944, 9

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> Bamuta, *Report*, 1949, unpaginated.

seaman because 'experience has shown that the colour bar exists so strongly among the white men, especially some of the officers, that it is thought better not to mix them [with black seamen]'.<sup>54</sup> Moreover the researcher recognised that the black seamen themselves preferred separate accommodation, unable to 'feel at home in any place where white people predominate'.<sup>55</sup> Meanwhile, the 1950 report was accompanied by a map produced by the LCC Architect's Department, highlighting the 'main coloured residential areas' but also the hostels which accommodated a quota of coloured men (see fig. 4). Little had changed since 1944. Stepney's seamen's hostels still accepted only a very small number of black seamen each (approximately ten) citing that 'white men residents often object to coloured men and sometimes there is trouble in the nature of fights or brawls'.<sup>56</sup> Other local hostels with similar policies included the Salvation Army Hostel on Middlesex Street and Rowton House on Fieldgate Street which together conceded sixteen beds out of 1214 for black men. Banton acknowledged that these hostels served destitute and homeless men, observing that, even if more beds were available, 'most immigrants [being] sensitive to the criteria of "respectability"', the hostels would have been avoided by working seamen, aware that use of hostels could contribute to their further cultural exclusion.<sup>57</sup>

Figure 4: The LCC's 1950 'Distribution of Coloured Population' plotted main residential areas and hostels. BCA, Banton/1/3/1

Despite damning assessments of the management of Colonial House, the hostel was consistently oversubscribed, with Ramsay reporting in the mid-1940s that up to forty men could be packed into the building using mattresses on the floor, 'but even then applicants have been turned away'.<sup>58</sup> Young regarded that the Colonial Office's 'official club for Colonial men' was a small and unattractive building, the canteen unlicensed and the atmosphere 'cold'. In her assessment the project was 'doomed...to failure in its endeavour to become the recreational centre for Colonial men in the area'.<sup>59</sup> The report emphasized that it only catered for a 'very small percentage' of non-resident seamen, leaving the needs of the wider resident 'coloured' community entirely unattended to.<sup>60</sup> Bamuta recognised that existing facilities for the floating population were 'very poor indeed'. The Colonial Club was 'very limited', the Franciscan Brothers' Club for Coloured Men, set up as a result of Young's 1944 report, was 'a very fine effort' but was poorly situated close to a house of prostitution, and the Jamaican Club was unsatisfactory as it primarily functioned as 'a dancing place with drinks'.<sup>61</sup> The Franciscan Brothers' Club in North East Passage, located almost opposite Kathleen Wrsama's hostel, was used by 80-100 men at any one time, with

---

<sup>54</sup> Young, *Report*, 1944, 16

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.* 17

<sup>56</sup> BCA, Banton/1/3/1

<sup>57</sup> Banton, *The Coloured Quarter*, 110

<sup>58</sup> THLHLA, P/RAM/3/2/3

<sup>59</sup> Young, *Report*, 1944, 14

<sup>60</sup> Young, *Report*, 1944, 18

<sup>61</sup> BCA, Banton/1/3/1

about twenty to thirty sleeping in two rooms.<sup>62</sup> In 1950, a reporter from *The Times* evocatively described the make-do conditions he found there: 'In one of the most squalid areas in the East End is a bare chapel in a basement. Looking upwards through the window one can see a grating on which traders stand and count their money. Occasionally coins drop through and men bang on the front door and ask for them back...Now a modest club of two or three rooms, the upper one of which has balloon fabric under the roof to keep it weather tight, is doing useful welfare work.'<sup>63</sup>

Cafes that lined the Cable Street area, often run by former seamen, formed a valuable network of informal social spaces through which private lodging places could be found. A pattern of friendly association brought men into this alternative economy, as former colleagues set up unregistered lodging houses housing a circuit of friends and friends of friends who arrived after a period of time at sea. Along Cable Street, three-storey bomb-damaged terraced houses in a state of considerable disrepair accommodated cafes on the ground floor, dancing clubs in the basement, and bedrooms on the upper floors (see fig. 5). News from the colonies was circulated through loose social networks embedded in these places and, much to the concern of authorities, relationships were struck up between what were regarded as 'uneducated' black men and 'promiscuous' white women.<sup>64</sup> Young noted thirty-four such cafes located in 'small, insignificant looking...[in] isolated houses'.<sup>65</sup> For Bamuta, Africans were the most affected by deficient housing conditions. He found that this group of men 'live in some of the worst conditions, and I have reason to suspect that a lot of them actually sleep in bombed out houses' after having wandered the streets until the early hours of the morning.<sup>66</sup> By 1950, those living in unofficial lodgings in the Cable Street area were deemed to be enduring 'the worst possible conditions', with the exception of Kathleen Wsrama's lodging house which was praised for its order amidst perceived chaos and degeneration.<sup>67</sup> Once settled in temporary accommodation, there were few opportunities for black tenants to move out of the area; many white landlords that would not accept them. Wsrama recalled that, 'there was no way for them to get their own accommodation, because [landlords] used to have boards [outside houses] saying 'No blacks need apply'.<sup>68</sup>

Figure 5: Cable Street c.1962, THLHLA.

Anticipating the end of military hostilities, Young impressed upon her readers that the welfare of the black population was not a wartime issue and correctly predicted that the number of 'coloured seamen' staying in Stepney would grow in the post-war period.<sup>69</sup> Bamuta warned that the disillusionment felt by many of these men as they encountered

---

<sup>62</sup> BCA, Banton/1/3/1

<sup>63</sup> *The Times*, 31 January 1950

<sup>64</sup> Bamuta, *Report*, 1949, unpaginated.

<sup>65</sup> Young, *Report*, 1944, 25

<sup>66</sup> Bamuta, *Report*, 1949, unpaginated.

<sup>67</sup> BCA, Banton/1/3/1

<sup>68</sup> BCA, BCA/5/1/24

<sup>69</sup> Young, *Report*, 1944, 9

prejudice had the potential to increase 'anti-British' communist sympathies, spreading what he viewed to be dangerous ideologies far beyond East London. He noted that, 'whatever [the seamen] carry back with them as the English way of life is going to be passed on to their friends, and this kind of thing very often influences a people'. However, Bamuta regarded that the 'problem' was in its infancy and preventative measures could still be taken, even in 1949. Identifying an imbalance in the extent of welfare provision made for black university students in comparison to black seamen, he declared 'the most important people of the Colonies...are these sailors'.<sup>70</sup>

Though the problem and solution were clear, the new building to support welfare in East London failed to materialise. With such a building first conceived in 1944, six years later the LCC report diverged little from Young's recommendation that, 'until the integration is achieved it will be essential to provide the coloured population with as good recreational and social facilities as exist for their white neighbours.' In addition to this centre, which was to be situated outside of Cable Street, the 1950 report suggested a residential training centre was also needed, designed to build up skills in the workplace thereby ensuring the 'dispersal' of men all over the country and their subsequent absorption into a range of local communities so not as to 'build up a colony in Stepney'. At the end of the 1940s, while the 'coloured question' at last received substantial media attention, the 'coloured' population of Stepney had already begun to decline, slowly migrating out of bomb-stricken environments as the demolition of properties earmarked for redevelopment began.<sup>71</sup> By 1952 the reported number of seamen seeking hostel accommodation had dropped to twenty-five, and the 'Old Colonial House' hostel for seamen had officially closed.<sup>72</sup> The focus for East End campaigners during the next ten years was the nature of the large-scale redevelopment and reconstruction of Stepney. These discussions acknowledged the resilience of the black community around Cable Street, which had stabilised in spite of a widespread lack of access to permanent employment, decent housing and recreation spaces. Foreshadowing the observations that would be made by Wilmot and Young in their seminal *Family and Kinship in East London* (1957), Father Groser argued at the London Development Inquiry in 1952 that the social networks of those in his parish (which included Cable Street) were reliant on a fluidity between houses, with everyday social interactions centred around front doors and the street. By this time, the pre-war population of Stepney had however halved in number.<sup>73</sup>

### **The National Picture**

Closure of the tiny Colonial House became representative of what was perceived to be central government's confused policy and piece-meal approach the issue of housing British

---

<sup>70</sup> Bamuta, *Report*, 1949, unpaginated.

<sup>71</sup> Banton, *The Coloured Quarter*, 86

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.* 110

<sup>73</sup> Pepper, S. (2017). High-rise housing in London, c.1940 to c.1970. In P. Guillery, D. Kroll (Eds), *Mobilising Housing Histories*, 123-143. London: RIBA.

'colonials' in the UK. After a visit to the Leman Street hostel in 1944, a shocked British civil servant, Frank de Halpert, exclaimed, 'Here we are in the greatest city in the world, with the largest colonial empire, and that is the hostel we offer!'<sup>74</sup> Linking it to a broader political disregard for British territories overseas, he assessed 'it is on a par with our [political] treatment of the colonies to which in Parliament we devote one or at most two days per annum.'<sup>75</sup> Critical letters from members of the EEWAC were published in national newspapers seeking to convince readers of the importance of the Stepney situation. 'Here in the East End of London is a great opening which the Colonial Office, blind both to personal and wider issues, has tackled by methods and an enthusiasm suited to a 'phoney war', they wrote in *The Times* in 1949.<sup>76</sup> In fact, the Colonial Office was involved in the establishment of a national network of 'Colonial Houses', though the Stepney hostel in the heart of the capital proved to be an unresolved thorn in their side throughout its short existence. Here, the complexity of migration patterns and London itself rendered control impossible and success elusive.

The provision of seamen's hostels had become a government issue during the Second World War, with responsibility for the 'special wartime measure' for seamen from the colonies given over to the Colonial Office, action taken after the Colonial Development and Welfare Act of 1940 was passed.<sup>77</sup> Colonial labour to support the war effort had been actively sought, with recruitment calls made in British colonies in the West Indies and West Africa, yet government provision for onshore accommodation for sailors prioritised white British seamen. The Ministry of Labour & National Service, which led the first hostel planning initiative, set generous minimum spaces standards for their hostels, with 'the character of...accommodation...adapted accordingly' for Indian, Chinese, West African, Arab, Scandinavian, Dutch, Belgian and French seamen. It was regarded that, 'the 'Poor Jack' and 'Drunken Sailor' complex must disappear and the seaman treated as a very gallant gentleman that he is, and as one of the most essential workers, not only in War, but in Peace.'<sup>78</sup> These statements appear to have the white British seamen in view, for space standards set for other sailors in on shore accommodation were less generous. Meanwhile, sailors from West Africa and the West Indies were paid less than their white British counterparts. Black crews were discriminated against by the National Maritime Board and National Union of Seamen, and mixed crews were not supported by the Shipping Federation and companies.<sup>79</sup> In 1942, Elder Dempster, one of the largest shipping companies, was criticised by the Colonial Office for recruiting 'cheap labour' in Nigeria and Sierra Leone,

---

<sup>74</sup> THLHLA, P/RAM/3/1/6; Halpert's words are reminiscent of Jack London's reaction to his observation of East End poverty, in particular disbelief that a Carter and Carpenter would pick up crumbs to eat from the pavement "in the heart of the greatest, wealthiest, and most powerful empire the world has ever seen". London, J. (1903). *The People of the Abyss*, London: MacMillan and Co. 78.

<sup>75</sup> THLHLA, P/RAM/3/1/6

<sup>76</sup> THLHLA, P/RAM/3/2/3

<sup>77</sup> TNA, CO 876/236; MT 9/4499

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> TNA, CO 859/76/6; CO 876/191; CO 859/76/13

giving rise to 'some idea that the West African seaman is inferior in standing to other coloured seamen'.<sup>80</sup> Nationwide powers of requisition were granted so that existing buildings, usually terraced houses, could be commandeered for use by seamen during the war, managed by voluntary organisations such as the British Sailors' Society where possible.<sup>81</sup> The 'light-touch' approach of the Colonial Office, which tended to avoid direct interference in the running of hostels, did not last and by July 1942, the Colonial Office had set up a handful of hostels across the country, with more in the pipeline (see Appendix 1).<sup>82</sup>

Figure 6: Poster for the British Sailors' Society hostel and recreational hostel for West Indian and West African seamen, notably advertised 'under the efficient management of West African and West Indian staff'. Dated November 1941. One hundred of these were distributed to ports in England, West Indies and West Africa, the Colonial Office sending copies to the poster to the Gambia, the Gold Coast, Sierra Leone and Nigeria. (TNA, CO 859/76/5.)

The first hostel intended specifically for 'coloured' seamen was in fact opened in 1941 at Louvaine Place in Newcastle, managed by Koi Larbi and funded by the British Sailors' Society with space for sixty men.<sup>83</sup> The Colonial Office supported its establishment, spreading word about it across Commonwealth ports, but the Office was not directly implicated in its running (see fig. 6). The manager, Larbi, was a recent graduate of Durham University who had become interested in the welfare of West Africans and West Indians in the North East. On account of the smallness of the present black population in the local area and the city's geographical dislocation from Liverpool, Cardiff and London, the intention was that Newcastle would form the 'home port' for West Indian seamen drafted into the war effort, but the plan for a Newcastle cluster was not entirely successful.<sup>84</sup> Stepney was the preferred location for more seamen than the Colonial Office liked to admit, the area having gained a reputation, also amongst American servicemen, for being a place where black men could enjoy periods of leave with those of the same race or culture.<sup>85</sup> The set-up of the Newcastle hostel exemplified the Office's early *laissez-faire* strategy with regards to the provision of accommodation for seamen. The department relied on the work of voluntary bodies and avoided direct control of sites so that overall government expenditure and staff involvement was minimised. Such an approach bore a faint resemblance to the 'indirect rule' system of government that was enacted in the colonies. The application of this hands-off policy to the welfare of 'colonial' seamen on home soil during wartime quickly proved unsatisfactory, leading to the proactive initiation of a clutch of Colonial Office run hostels, several opening in 1942. Still, in the capital where the complexity and significance of the difficulties facing West Indian and West African seamen were wholly underestimated, the Colonial Office remained reluctant to act. Even in the late 1940s, the Office seemed to cling

---

<sup>80</sup> TNA, CO 876/191

<sup>81</sup> TNA, CO 859/76/5

<sup>82</sup> TNA, CO 876/33

<sup>83</sup> TNA, CO 859/76/4

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> THLHLA, P/RAM/3/2/3

to laissez-faire attitudes regarding that, in East London, 'a great deal could be done by individuals and voluntary organisations to bring about improvement.'

The Colonial Office's responsibilities in the UK did not solely rest with visiting seamen. By 1947 there were about thirty clubs and hostels across the country for students and specialist workers (often employed in munition factories) from the colonies as well as seamen.<sup>86</sup> 'Colonial' students were an increasingly large category deemed to have especial strategic importance for their potential to become leaders in the countries from which they came. Working with groups like the League of Coloured Peoples, the Colonial Office had already established or supported student hostels in London before the war. This provision was extended in the 1940s.<sup>87</sup> For Ramsay, the Colonial Office's pursuit of well-funded student hostels smacked of class prejudice. Writing in 1949, she admitted that, 'it is a bitter thought that on the very day that the Secretary of State for the Colonies in a Labour Government was opening a luxurious Hostel and Club for West African Students in Chelsea, the Hostel in Leman Street – the only official provision for men other than those in the student category, was in the process of dismantling'(see fig. 7).<sup>88</sup> After the war, on the advice of the newly established Merchant Navy Welfare Board, government-sponsored seamen's hostels like Colonial House were either closed or transferred into private management. By June 1950, the Colonial Office had dispensed with its responsibility for all such sites.<sup>89</sup> Although consistently well-funded before and during wartime, their student hostels were also transferred to a non-governmental body, the British Council.<sup>90</sup>

Figure 7: The WASU student hostel opened in 1949 at 13 Chelsea Embankment overlooking the Thames. Pictured 1974. (LMA, Collage no. 59355).

For those seeking to discern the Colonial Office's policy to hostel provision within the UK, the goal posts seemed ever-moving throughout the 1940s, only to be removed entirely by 1950. In 1951, reflecting on the assistance that colonial subjects in the UK had been afforded in previous years, *The Times* reported, 'the loss of the favoured position is naturally felt, especially as this change of policy is not understood and has never at any time been clearly explained to those whom it affected.'<sup>91</sup> This perceived fog of confusion was evidence of internal departmental tensions. The Colonial Office had long feared the interpretation of any of their actions as supporting racial segregation and their quick dispensation of the hostels in the post-war period revealed the extent to which such a policy was seen to be political damaging, especially in peacetime. Based on the view that sea-going employment was in generally in decline and there were already far fewer 'bona fide seamen', the

---

<sup>86</sup> TNA, WORK 22/185

<sup>87</sup> For an account of Aggrey House see: Whittall, D. (2011). Creating Black Places in Imperial London: The League of Coloured Peoples and Aggrey House, 1931–1943. *The London Journal*, 36:3, 225-246

<sup>88</sup> THLHLA, P/RAM/3/2/3

<sup>89</sup> TNA, CO 876/236

<sup>90</sup> Perraton, H. (2014). *A History of Foreign Students in Britain*. London: Palgrave MacMillan. 166

<sup>91</sup> *The Times*, 11 November 1951



Merchant Navy Welfare Board's recommendation for the hostels' closure suited the Colonial Office.<sup>92</sup>

### **Stepney Stowaways**

'What is a seaman?' asked Edith Ramsay in an exasperated letter of 1949.<sup>93</sup> How long could a seaman be on land before he was no longer to be afforded the status and privileges of a seaman temporarily lodged onshore? The distinction was significant at an institutional level. The Colonial Office sought to support men on UK shores who were both British 'colonials' and working seamen. How this criteria was defined and practically assessed however proved to be contentious, prompting criticism on account of the potential for any definition to be manipulated for political gain. For example, since 1925, all 'coloured' seamen who could not produce documents that proved their British citizenship were required to register with the police as aliens, curtailing their rights. At the time this policy was adopted very few sailors, British, British 'colonial' or otherwise, carried passports or other acceptable identification. For scholar, Laura Tabili, in the 1920s and 30s, 'the ambiguity of many Black seamen's nationality, of which the authorities took ample advantage during the [First World] War, now became a weapon used against them.'<sup>94</sup> The Second World War ushered in another period of uncertainty. The legal rights of a generation of West Indian and Caribbean people invited over to rebuild post-war Britain under the Nationality Act of 1948 continue to be scandalously challenged.<sup>95</sup>

A stream of young male stowaways arriving by sea further complicated and, in some ways, undermined the efforts of the Colonial Office to support those seen to be 'bona fide' seamen. These individuals were often already involved in the sea trade, with access to ships, and many were in their youth, aged fourteen or fifteen. In 1948 the Home Office reported that 101 of 163 stowaways arriving in the UK were from British colonies in Africa and, as such, they fell under the jurisdiction of the Colonial Office.<sup>96</sup> After serving a brief prison sentence for the misdemeanour of illegally boarding a ship, if their papers proved British citizenship, stowaways were free to go with little direction. With no special welfare provision or housing, many boys found their way to Stepney and Colonial House, often falling under the wing of Edith Ramsay. The Wardens of Colonial House were deemed woefully ill-suited for the task at hand.<sup>97</sup> Whilst acknowledging their low salary, Ramsay accused the Wardens of organising gambling and consistent absence, regarding that, 'if the Colonial Office had set out to find the most unsuitable men in Britain for the posts that have

---

<sup>92</sup> TNA, CO 876/236; MT 9/4509

<sup>93</sup> TNA, P/RAM/3/1/6

<sup>94</sup> Tabili, *The Construction of Racial Difference*, 84

<sup>95</sup> *The Guardian*, 'Home Office Destroyed Windrush Landing Cards Says Ex-Staffer', 17 April 2018

<sup>96</sup> THLHLA, P/RAM/3/1/6

<sup>97</sup> For examples see: THLHLA, P/RAM/3/1/13; P/RAM/3/1/4

existed up to date in connection with their work here, they certainly could not have succeeded better than they did in the appointments they made.’<sup>98</sup>

In May 1947, three young stowaways were resident in Leman Street. Nigerian Richard McKay had worked as a tally clerk on ships in Sierra Leone before stowing away. In only two weeks of landing on shore he had found employment at the Ritz. Augustus McCarthy was a friend of McKay’s from Sierra Leone, then unemployed but with experience as a seaman. Jacob Thoronka had been at Leman Street for almost two months having served his time in Brixton prison for stowing away. He worked at the Trocadero. All three were being helped into evening classes at the Bethnal Green Evening Institute, probably arranged by the LCC, and the work that had been found was likely due to the work of the local Employment Exchange, which was reportedly very engaged in finding positions for the incoming black men.<sup>99</sup> Although these three young men appeared to be adequately settling into London life, the story of Jimmy Shamuna, a fifteen-year-old stowaway who arrived in London from Freetown, Sierra Leone, in May 1945, demonstrated the troubled experience of some. He stayed at the Colonial House hostel for a couple of months after a short stay in prison. But his unruly behaviour, influenced, it was suggested, by the other older men around him and by the loss of the previous Warden, who was West African and ‘understood the boy’, led to the stowaway’s dismissal. After brief periods in police cells, on the streets and in various other local hostels, his case was heard at Juvenile Court held at Toynbee Hall. The Colonial Office elected to send Shamuna back to Freetown as a ‘distressed seaman’ but, as a British citizen, Jimmy had no compulsion to go and indeed a suitable ship was to take two or three months to arrive in any case, time enough for him to disappear again. Yet the decision was passed on the basis that if Jimmy was sent back home to his mother, he had ‘a chance of growing up a good African’, as a British citizen it was feared he was already consigned to a life of delinquency and disrepute. He was back in Freetown by November 1945.<sup>100</sup>

While Home Office statistics suggested the only a few hundred stowaways arrived every year, the scale of the problem was assessed entirely differently by Kathleen Wsrma whose hostel was recommended by the Colonial Office to stowaways on departure from prison. She reported that the number of boys arriving was unmanageable, estimating she encountered forty to fifty youths per week. As a result of her experiences, Wsrma was a vocal critic of the Colonial Office, whose approach was either to send non-British stowaways immediately back home by ship, or, for those with the right papers, to ‘wash their hands [of them] because they’re British now...’<sup>101</sup> Her small hostel accommodated men for longer periods of time than Colonial House was apt to do, giving Wsrma ample time to observe the tragic disappointment of her guests at first-hand. She recalled, ‘when they came, they were all for England, I mean even when they went to prison. It was England, England, oh

---

<sup>98</sup> THLHLA, P/RAM/3/2/3

<sup>99</sup> THLHLA, P/RAM/3/1/14

<sup>100</sup> THLHLA, P/RAM/3/1/4; P/RAM/3/1/6. All names have been changed.

<sup>101</sup> BCA, BCA/5/1/24

they were glad to be in England, you know, their mother country...They'd come with the sun shining in their eyes at the thought of England; but when they'd been here for a while you could see their attitudes changing'. Wrsama, like Ramsay, assumed the role of de facto welfare officer for the men, seeing to it that they were introduced to essential institutional systems including how to register for food and housing coupons. But more than this, understanding their culture and sympathetic to their sense of alienation, she wanted to create a home for her temporary residents. Wrsama proudly reported that 'when [the men] talked about the seaman's mission [Wrsama's hostel], they'd say 'this house is Africa.'"<sup>102</sup> Unlike Colonial House, the hostel at 5 North East Passage was owned and run outside of a paternalistic and institutional framework. Its success, attested to by a number of authorities, is striking in comparison to the inhospitable nature and absent management of Colonial House.

As advocate for the Stepney seamen, Wrsama felt deserted not only by the Colonial Office but also by the educated 'colonial' classes, who arrived in the UK to study. After visiting one well-known central London student hostel, Aggrey House, to invite its inhabitants to visit East London and speak with the seamen, she bitterly reported, 'the educated ones would cut themselves off. They wouldn't have anything to do with them.'<sup>103</sup> The EEWAC also saw the potential in connecting both groups of 'colonial' people. West Indian and West African students at International House were approached in an attempt to interest them in their compatriots in the East End and the possibility of involvement in Toynbee Hall or with the Franciscan Brothers raised.<sup>104</sup> These suggestions do not appear to have mobilised many into action, although Derek Bamuta's efforts to document the community in 1949 suggest there were at least isolated cases of engagement.

Although Ramsay's papers fastidiously documented the activities of the EEWAC in relation to the seamen, fragmentary evidence indicates that the men themselves did not stay silent in their discontent, despite some illiteracy. In 1941 the Welfare Officer of the Colonial Office, Ivor Cummings, visited the East End on the invitation of the Warden of Colonial House, A. K. Lewis, a man from Sierra Leone. In a bombed-out house near Cable Street about forty-five African and West Indian men gathered to share their concerns with Cummings, a former Warden of Aggrey House and an Englishman with a Sierra Leonean father. The discussion centred on the lack of a suitable clubhouse and the impact of the colour bar on their ability to find housing. Notably, the seamen sought assurance for their treatment after the war, all too aware of the acute racial prejudice suffered in the difficult interwar years. On this point Cummings replied that, 'their post-war welfare would be properly organised this time and that they must have confidence in the Government'.<sup>105</sup> A further meeting in November 1949 was attended by about fifty Somali seamen, led by

---

<sup>102</sup> BCA, BCA/5/1/24

<sup>103</sup> BCA, BCA/5/1/24

<sup>104</sup> BCA, Banton/1/3/1

<sup>105</sup> TNA, CO 859/76/6

Suleiman Wrsama, Kathleen's husband, himself a former seaman. During this meeting the men addressed their grievances as one large group, rejecting the offer to speak one by one to the Colonial Office representative, instead they declared they 'all spoke with one voice in the matter' of their predicament and made it clear that 'what they want is work'.<sup>106</sup> Despite these meetings and complaints, it is clear that the League of Coloured Peoples' advice to the Colonial Office that the seamen's 'cooperation must be secured' was routinely ignored.<sup>107</sup> Attempting to escalate the situation, in July 1949, Ramsay orchestrated a letter, dictated by a group of Colonial House men, to be sent to the King. The letter explained, 'We come to this country because we hear you need labour, because we are British citizens, and because we help you to win this war and want to see London.'<sup>108</sup> Requesting an audience with George VI, the seamen hoped he would hold the Colonial Office accountable for its failures. No such public gesture was forthcoming.

Initiated by Kathleen Wrsama, the Stepney Coloured People's Association (SCPA) was formed in 1951 and continued for eight years.<sup>109</sup> Although its formation was significant, this local group was not the first to support black rights in the East End; the United African Brotherhood Society was formed in Stepney in 1919 and the 1930s saw the formation of The Coloured Seamen's Association which sought to protest against the employment crisis afflicting black seamen at the time. These were relatively short-lived organisations, but Banton suggests they effectively served their purpose and then dissolved.<sup>110</sup> The SCPA sought to campaign for better rights for all 'coloured' people in Stepney and this broad coalition built on the situation observed by Bamuta that, despite distinct ethnic, tribal and national identities, 'There is a very strong feeling of colour unity in the East End, and as long as you are coloured and speak 'the language' you are one of them.'<sup>111</sup> The formation of Association linked the black community in East London with other grass-roots organisations working to represent people from the colonies in all sorts of capacities. For Laura Tabili, these groups were central to the emergence of a 'multicultural Black political identity' which 'coexisted with but transcended religious, cultural and linguistic diversity'.<sup>112</sup>

The Association sought to establish its own housing bureau, capable of recommending responsible 'coloured' people as prospective tenants to those landlords that did not hold a colour prejudice. It petitioned Stepney Borough Council and the LCC to extend their hostel and social provision, and looked to the Clifton Institute for Coloured Peoples in Birmingham as a model for the LCC to follow in Stepney, suggesting a new building was not entirely necessary but greater support was. The Clifton was one of a number of newly established

---

<sup>106</sup> BCA, Banton/1/3/1

<sup>107</sup> THLHLA, P/RAM/3/2/1

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>109</sup> BCA, BCA/5/1/24

<sup>110</sup> Banton, *The Coloured Quarter*, 34, 38

<sup>111</sup> Bamuta, *Report*, 1949, unpaginated.

<sup>112</sup> Tabili, *The Construction of Racial Difference*, 159

social and educational centres funded by municipal authorities.<sup>113</sup> The model was clear, but no action was taken and the SCPA was itself wound up in 1959 on account of a substantial decline in the size of the area's black community.

## Conclusion

In his book *Englishness, Empire, and the Locations of Identity*, Baucom asked, 'What did the English nation see when it regarded a global beyond that was also an imperial within?'<sup>114</sup> Regarding the British government, the unashamedly inadequate welfare provisions made for black seamen from British colonies, resident in London during the Second World War and its immediate aftermath, are revealing. The case of Stepney's Colonial House suggests that, for Baucom's question to be interrogated fully, short-lived occupations and unassuming adaptations of existing small-scale buildings must be given careful attention. The pursuit of more representative architectural histories cannot be led by survival, or longevity of building use alone. What those in power left unbuilt, and why, is perhaps too often passed over.

The intense but ultimately failed negotiations surrounding a new welfare centre and hostel intended to supersede Colonial House exemplify the wider struggle of the Colonial Office to effectively position itself in relation to which was quickly becoming the post-imperial built environment. The unavoidable realities of the colour bar forced the Office to steer a course of compromise during wartime. Rather than continuing to act on the basis of its liberal anti-segregationist ideals, by 1942 the Office had conceded that special hostels for people from the colonies were necessary, but by 1951 the Office were relieved to have distanced themselves from hostel provision. During these years, on the one hand, leaders of the Colonial Office were anxious to communicate that 'the Colonial people are in no sense aliens and are entitled to regard this country as their home and to be regarded and treated as fellow citizens.'<sup>115</sup> At the same time, the provision of segregated hostel accommodation for seamen allowed for a level of control or at least surveillance over their absorption into the local population, working to avoid the seamen taking rooms outside this institutional and geographical setting.<sup>116</sup> For many, while sympathetic to the department's desire not to interfere with settlement processes or to seem to promote segregation, the Colonial Office's apprehension in housing, and failure to effectively welcome, seamen from the colonies in London was inexcusable on a human level. In the context of the UK's wartime hostels for 'coloured colonial' seamen, nationhood was shown to be contingent. The ways in which Britishness was assessed and then accommodated in the post-war city were shifting and bewildering for almost all involved. If the Wrsama's hostel symbolically 'was Africa' to the seamen, where did that leave Colonial House? Nobody seemed to know.

---

<sup>113</sup> *The Times*, 1 June 1954

<sup>114</sup> Baucom, *Out of Place*, 5

<sup>115</sup> TNA, LAB 20/218

<sup>116</sup> THLHLA, P/RAM/3/1/6

Appendix 1: Table of Colonial Office hostels for seamen, c.1942-1950

Town/City	Street	Type	Date established	No. of beds (where known)	Closure date (where known)
Barry	13 Thompson Street	Non-residential Club for Colonials	1942/3		
Cardiff	132 then 213-216 Bute Street	Club for Maltese Seamen	March 1943		1950
Cardiff	135/5 Bute Street	Hostel and Recreational Centre	March 1942	41 beds	Reduced to 9 beds 1950
London	17 Leman Street	Social Centre and Hostel for Colonial Merchant Seamen	1942	13 beds	1950
Liverpool	2 Upper Stanhope Street	Hostel for Seamen	1942/3	60 beds	1950
Liverpool	11 Parkfield Road	Hostel for West Indians	Before 1945		
Manchester	28 Chorlton Road	Recreational Centre for African Seamen	By 1945		
North Shields	Esk House	Recreational Centre	May 1942	19 beds	
South Shields	4/6 Green Street	Recreational Centre for Colonial Seamen	January 1946	24 beds	

Refs: TNA, WORK 22/185 and CO 876/236