

LEADER IN THE COMMUNITY



University of
Nottingham

UK | CHINA | MALAYSIA

Education Pack- Nottingham Schools
& Transatlantic Slavery Project



Eric Irons' first picture in his RAF uniform in 1944.
Photo courtesy of the Irons family



Eric Irons
National Portrait Gallery

ERIC IRONS

TRAILBLAZER, ACTIVIST,
MAGISTRATE, EDUCATOR

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EDUCATION PACK

**BIO, EXCERPTS & DISCUSSION
QUESTIONS**



ERIC IRONS

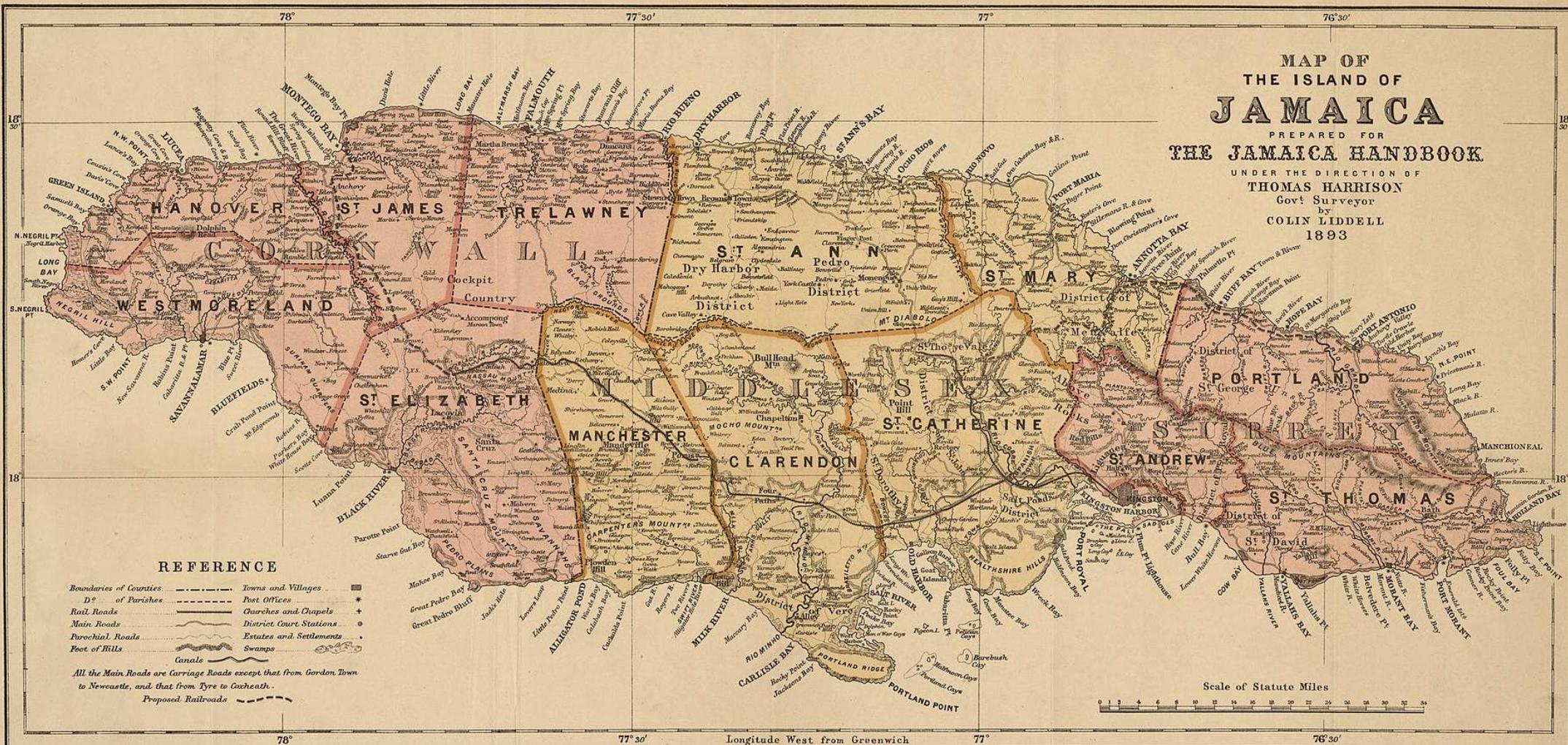
EDUCATION RESOURCE PACK

About this Resource

An integral part of the Nottingham Schools and Transatlantic Slavery Project focuses on highlighting the contributions of Black people to the development of Nottingham. This not only promotes a more holistic narrative of who are the heroes of Nottingham but also allows ethnic minority students to see themselves represented in the curriculum.

The information contained in this resource was derived mainly from the unpublished memoir of Eric Irons (Eric Irons, Unpublished Memoir, 2009) and should be used alongside other materials in our education pack. The team would like to especially thank the Irons family for sharing this precious resource along with numerous pictures. It has proven to be a valuable primary source for our project.

This pack contains information and excerpts on the life and tireless work of Eric Irons in his campaign for racial equality and social justice in Britain. **Due to the sensitive nature of this topic and racially-sensitive terminologies contained in some of the quotations, teachers should exercise caution when relaying this information to students.** Please see our Racial Terminology Glossary for information on the history and usage of the terms "coloured" and "people of colour".



<https://mapsontheweb.zoom-maps.com/post/108163075344/old-map-of-jamaica-in-1893-source-static-phil>

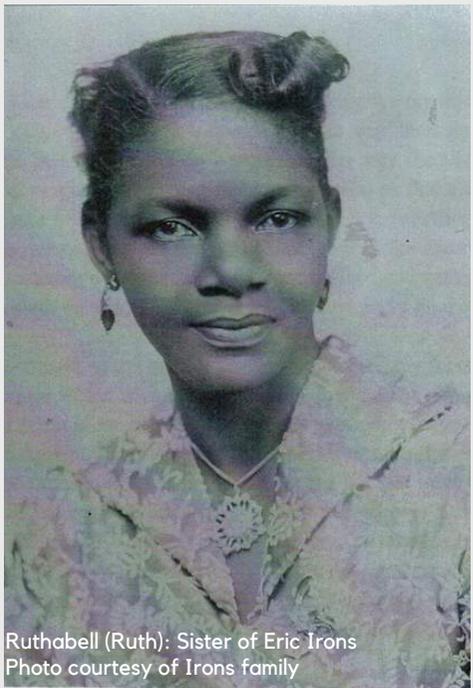
Early Life: Portland, Jamaica

- Irons was born at Wellington Street in Spanish Town, the ancient capital of Jamaica, on 21st July 1921.
- He was the son of Benjamin Irons and Madeline Burke and had two older siblings, Luther and Ruth.
- He spent his early childhood in the district of Portland, Jamaica, with his maternal grandmother, Grace Anne Warren.
- His grandmother was a strong woman who was known as the "district matriarch".

Early Life: Portland, Jamaica

Since childhood, Irons was affectionately nicknamed 'Papaman.'

After living with his grandmother for many years, Irons moved to Spanish Town, Jamaica, to live with his father.



Ruthabell (Ruth): Sister of Eric Irons
Photo courtesy of Irons family



Luther Irons: Older brother of Eric Irons
Photo courtesy of Irons family

"She [Maama Grace] always addressed people according to their social status in the community; curtsying whenever she met people of importance and addressed white men as Backra Maasa and white women as Backra Miss".



Backra-massa refers to a white plantation owner. It is still used colloquially in contemporary Jamaican society. Backra by itself means a 'white person'.

Excerpts from Eric Irons' Unpublished Memoir

Portland

"In those days the district of Portland, where I spent my early childhood, was known parochially as 'FreeTown' because the early settlers were slaves who had acquired their freedom before slavery was abolished".

The Maroons of Jamaica were communities of formerly enslaved African people who obtained their freedom by running away. Nanny or 'Granny Nanny', led a community of Windward Maroons in the 18th Century. She guided them in a guerrilla war against the British, known as the First Maroon War. She is a national heroine in Jamaica and appears on its \$500 note.

Maroon Stories

"She [Maama Grace] tells the most fabulous Anancy and **Maroon** stories. My favourite Maroon story was how Nanny of the fighting maroons used her petticoat as a shield and caught the bullets of the British soldiers to protect her fighting warriors".

Move to Spanish Town

From the age of nine years, Eric Irons lived on a banana plantation called Phoenix Park farm with his father, Benjamin Irons and two siblings.

Emancipation Square in Spanish Town,
<http://www.jamaicanfamilysearch.com/images/phspansq.htm>

SPANISH TOWN

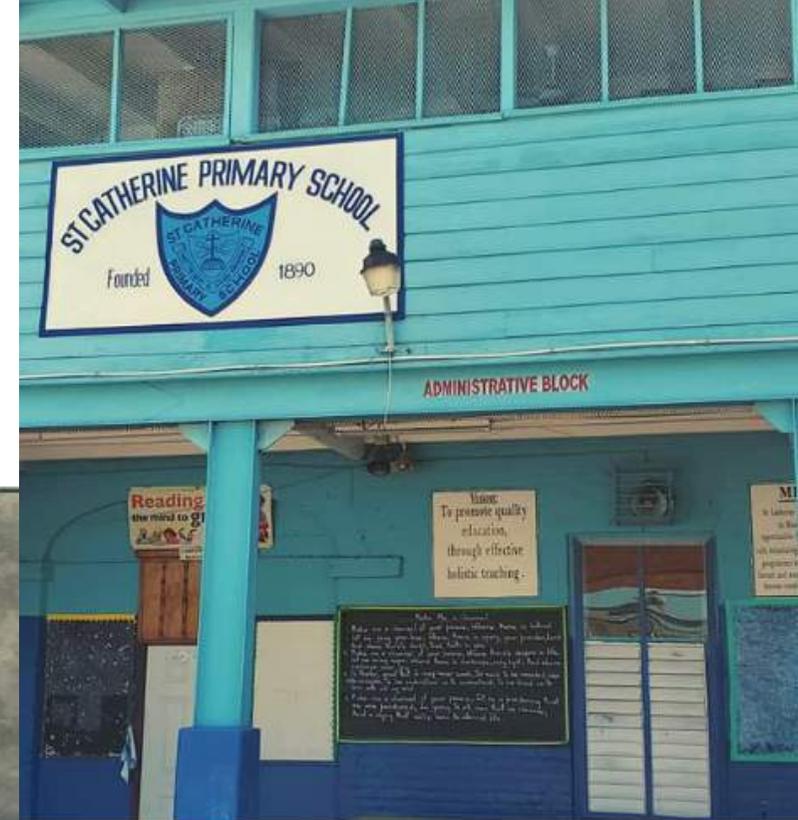
Spanish Town was the capital of Jamaica when it was ruled by the Spanish from 1534 to 1655. It remained the capital while under British rule until 1872, when the title was conferred upon Kingston.

Spanish Town was once the focal point of the island's social, economic and political life.



BENJAMIN IRONS (FATHER OF ERIC IRONS) AT HIS WEDDING TO MISS HELEN

Photo courtesy of the Irons family



- Irons and his siblings attended the St. Catherine, Roman Catholic School in Spanish Town.
- His older brother, Luther, was a detective with the Jamaica Constabulary Force.
- His sister, Ruth, worked as a seamstress in Jamaica and eventually migrated to Canada.



Madeline Burke: Mother of Eric Irons
Photo courtesy of Irons family

"As I recall, it was on the Sunday that Pearl Harbour was bombed that I played my last game - a football match on the March Penn Sports Ground".

Eric Irons, Unpublished Memoir

Life on the Farm

- Eric Irons parents separated when he was a child and he lived with his father on Phoenix Park farm, Spanish Town for many years.
- His mother, Madeline Burke, was a cook and ran a haberdashery stall at the local market.
- His father, Benjamin Irons, was headman for the farm and a district constable.
- Irons worked in the machine-engineering workshop at Bernard Lodge Sugar Factory, Spanish Town, before enlisting in the Royal Air Force (R.A.F) in 1944, at the age of twenty-three.

"Maama Katherine Irons [paternal grandmother of Eric Irons] was born a couple of decades or so after the abolition of slavery. She took great pride in telling us about the history and origins of the Irons family. She claimed that it was either her grandmother or her great-grandmother who was abducted in Africa and sold into slavery".



Prejudice in the RAF

"I have been asked on several occasions to reflect on my time in the RAF and on whether colour and racial prejudice existed. The answer is simply yes even though as an institution in theory prejudice was not tolerated. I met some wonderful people in the RAF but the Force also reflected society and the people were no different from those we met in everyday life".

Eric Irons, Unpublished Memoir



Eric Irons in camp Egypt in 1949
Photo courtesy of the Irons family



Irons with other new West Indian recruits at their training camp in Filey.
Photo courtesy of the Irons family



Irons representing the Combined Forces in the long jump in Malta, 1949. He came in 2nd place. Photo courtesy of the Irons family

The Royal Air Force

Posts in the RAF

Eric Irons served in the RAF for seven years, from 1944 to 1952. His first post was as a "works-hand" posted to No. 17 Detached Flight of 5015 Airfield Construction Squadron based at RAF Station, Little Staughton in Bedfordshire.

Irons eventually became "billet orderly" and an "orderly room clerk". By the end of his first enlistment period, he was a Corporal.

Re-enlistment

"I had just been promoted to the rank of Corporal and I felt that if I returned to my job at Bernard's Lodge in Jamaica I would not be able to provide the quality of life that I would want for my wife and our children".

Irons, therefore, re-enlisted in the RAF for a four-year period and in 1949 was posted to Egypt and later, Malta.

Athletics

Irons was passionate about sports and immersed himself in athletics such as cricket, football, high jump and long jump while in the service.



An Interracial Love Story

First Date

"I then turned to the shy dark haired woman and told her that it was my first visit to Nottingham, and I wondered if she would like to go to the pictures with me later that evening".

"She told me that she didn't like going to the cinema, but wouldn't mind going for a walk".

Meeting Nell

"Strangely enough, I met my wife on the very day I arrived in the city".

Eric Irons met his wife Nellie Kelham in 1945 while on sick leave in the RAF. On a visit to meet his cousin in Nottingham, he asked two girls for directions, one of whom would become his future wife.

After returning from leave, Irons was luckily stationed a few miles from Nottingham at RAF Winthorpe. This allowed him to spend most of his weekends in Nottingham with Nell.



Love & Marriage

"As a couple we were aware of the social antagonism towards mixed-race marriages and we knew that would affect our children".

The pair eventually got engaged and had a quiet wedding ceremony at the registry office in Nottingham. They went on to have six children and sixteen grandchildren.

Nell was regarded as a "tower of strength" by her family. Irons wrote in his memoir that "unbeknown to her, over the years I relied a great deal on her observations on certain people with whom I had to deal".



Left: Eric Irons walking through Nottingham with his wife Nell
Centre: Nell's parents, Marie and Harry, arriving at their wedding
Right: Irons and Nell's marriage at the Register Office, Nottingham.
Photos courtesy of the Irons family.



Central Ordnance Depot Chilwell 1939
<http://philwilliamswriter.co.uk>

Discrimination in Civilian Life

According to Irons, he found civilian life to be very different from his time in the service. His administrative and military experience, sporting background and welfare officer's training course, which he took at the University of Nottingham, did not culminate in any job offers:

"I applied for many office jobs and I received plenty of patronising words of encouragement but no one asked to see my service discharge papers or references, and there were no job offers".

Gunn and Moore

Irons first worked at Cricket Bat Manufacturers, Gunn and Moore, for a few weeks, "stockpiling and splitting willows, in the yard". He left this job as he could not in good conscience replace a "family man with two children".

"My conscience got the better of me for how could I show friendliness to a work-mate, who I would be replacing".

Central Ordnance Depot at Chilwell

He returned to the employment service and was referred to the Central Ordnance Depot at Chilwell. Based on his previous experiences, Irons requested the office to first phone the Depot:

"I overheard the speaker at the other end of the telephone telling him that they didn't want any n***** in the office".

After Irons made a point to question the clerk on his response to the racial discrimination directed towards him (see quote, above right), Irons eventually received a card of introduction for a clerical vacancy at the Chilwell Ordnance Depot.

"To be honest I had no idea what to do but the sheer prejudice made my blood boil. In my anger I asked the clerk what he was going to do about it. He made a call to what I assumed was a senior person and told him what had happened".

He interviewed for the position and got the job as a clerk responsible for railway warrants and leave.

Irons' suspicions that 'special arrangements' were made to accommodate him at the Depot were confirmed by a colleague.

He eventually became a "stores accountant" for the Battalion Quartermaster, Major O'Malley. He left the Central Ordnance Depot in March 1959.

Irons also joined the Auxiliary Air Force based at RAF Hucknall, as a means of supplementing his income.



Eric Irons in his office at the Council House on his first day as "Organiser/Adviser for Education for Coloured People"
Photo courtesy of the Irons family

Educational & Vocational Courses

Eric Irons established courses to assist ethnic minorities in Nottingham such as:

- English for Asian men and women at the Lenton Evening Institute;
- Reading and writing for illiterate and semi-literate West Indian men and women at the Meadows Evening Institute;
- Preparatory courses for young Asian and West Indians;
- Social studies and special craft courses;
- Textile machine operating courses at the Technical College and machine embroidery at the College of Art and Crafts.

Promotion of Education

In March 1959, Eric Irons was appointed by the Further Education Sub-Committee as "Organiser/Adviser for Education for Coloured People".

"My main responsibility in my new job was to provide educational and vocational courses for the adult coloured communities as one approach to assist our communities to settle, integrate and contribute to the City".



Irons at the Council House with the Further Education Sub-Committee that appointed him.
Photo courtesy of the Irons family



Nell as a guest at Eid Celebrations organised by the Pakistani Friends League (ladies circle) in October 1974. Photo courtesy of the Irons family

Engagement with Asian Women

Initially, the language classes geared towards Asian women were "sparsely supported". After meeting with Indian and Pakistani community leaders, Irons along with the Deputy Director of Education held a meeting with the Asian community at the YMCA Shakespeare in Nottingham.

"The outcome of that meeting was the establishment of the most successful English language and current affairs classes, for Hindu, Muslim and Sikh women. The success in establishing those classes attracted the attention of people in other parts of the country who had struggled to engage with Asian women".

"Growing up and living amongst people originating from the Indian sub-continent had imbued in me a healthy respect for other peoples way of life and their beliefs and traditions".

The Chinese Community

Irons indicated that he "had the most difficult time in making meaningful contact with the Chinese community" until he was introduced to Yee Lam, a Chinese restaurateur in Nottingham. Yee then introduced him to Alan Kong, Secretary of the East Midland's Chinese Association.

"The Chinese community in the city had grown to a size where they sought advice about starting a mother tongue class for their children".



A popular Saturday Punjabi language class in the mid 1960s
Photo courtesy of the Irons family

The programme included language classes as well as other culturally relevant classes focused on Ramadan, Divali and excursions to British places of interest.

In November 1979, Irons helped Alan Kong draft a successful appeal to the Department of Education for grant aid to establish a Chinese Community Centre. It was established at the junction of Huntingdon Street, Elm Avenue and St. Ann's Well Road.

"One of my early observations was that there were no Asian or West Indian women involved in the administration of any of the existing organizations at the time and so one of my first acts was to establish three women's groups in different parts of the city".



Women's Groups

Forest Fields West Indian Women's Club in 1961.
Photo courtesy of the Irons family

Eric Irons established three women's groups in different parts of Nottingham. At meetings involving these three groups and other Asian and West Indian organisations, the need for an umbrella organisation that would ensure the inclusion of women in community organisations and activities was highlighted.

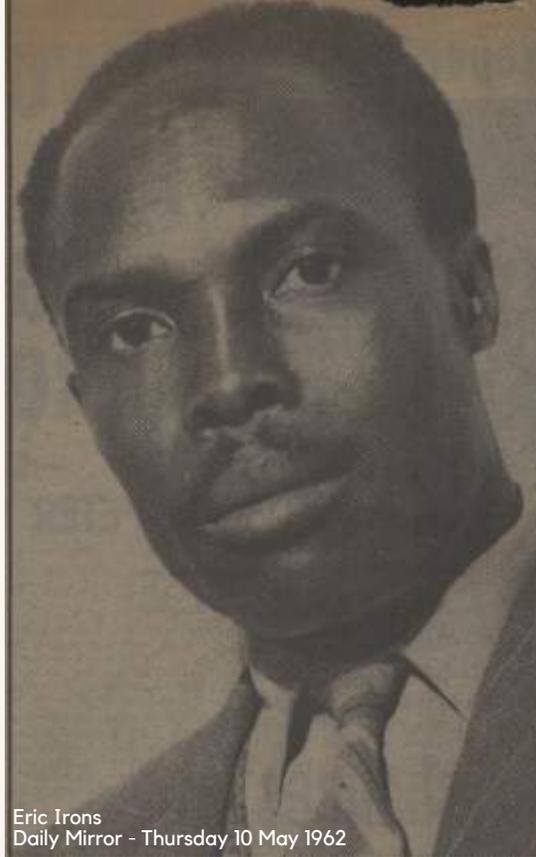
This led to the establishment of the Nottingham Standing Conference of Commonwealth Citizens in September 1960, of which Irons was the secretary.

The Standing Conference organised important community events such as "a joint training session with the Nottingham Federation of Community Associations on Leadership in the Neighbourhood" and "Commonwealth Unity Week".

Campaigner for Equality

Due to his own experience and what he considered a "restrictive practice at the Chilwell Ordnance Depot", Irons sought to make a change to the system. He asked three acquaintances to apply for work at the Depot through the Labour Exchange office in Nottingham. However, none of them were successful in receiving an interview.

He forwarded the information, including his personal experience, to Ivo de Souza, the Welfare Liaison Officer for West Indians at the Colonial Office.



Eric Irons
Daily Mirror - Thursday 10 May 1962

Being Heard

The Senior Executive and Personnel Officer at Chilwell Depot eventually paid Irons a surprise visit and enquired about his job.

Following that visit in 1954, the restrictions at the Depot were lifted.

Positive Change

“When I was leaving the Depot in March 1959, the welfare department informed me that a total of 1,137 Asian and West Indians were employed.”



Eric Irons
National Portrait Gallery, London

"I was a co-opted observer to the Trades Council meetings as the motion for the employment of coloured workers by the City Transport Department was piloted through its many stages by the husband and wife team of Bob and Peggy Shaw".

Irons targeted the Nottingham City Transport Department to employ Black bus conductors. Irons again asked three acquaintances to apply for jobs as bus conductors. All three were rejected. Acting on Ivo de Souza and his trusted trade unionist friends' advice, Irons gave the information along with a cover letter to Jack Charlesworth, the secretary of the Nottingham and District Trades Council.

Irons served on the sub-committee established by the Trades Council, to enquire into racial discrimination in employment within the City of Nottingham.

The "Colour Bar"



A Caribbean Evening at the Assembly of Gods, Mansfield Road, 1956
Photo courtesy of the Irons family



ADVOCACY

"My other major concern was with the Labour Exchange. They were known for the discourteous way coloured people, in particular those who have recently arrived, were treated by their staff".

Eric Irons meeting a party of journalists at the request of the Foreign Commonwealth Office. From left to right: Mr Roa from India, Mr Ramiallah (Mauritius) and Mr Nyirenda (Zambia). Photo courtesy of the Irons family

Labour Exchange

Irons' referrals of various cases and reported incidents involving the treatment of immigrants at the Labour Exchange office, resulted in discussions and correspondence with the manager. This eventually led to a meeting between the manager and a representative body to discuss the grievances in the immigrant community. According to Irons, "the outcome was an improvement in the treatment of immigrants by the staff at the Labour Exchange".

Racism in the Pubs

There were numerous incidents of discrimination in pubs where service was refused to Black customers. Irons drew attention to this issue in the 50s and was invited to discuss the situation with an Assistant Chief Constable. "The outcome was that the Licensing Magistrates issued a stern warning to all publicans". According to Irons although this somewhat eased discrimination in the pubs, many publicans continued to refuse service to Black customers.

A Caribbean Evening at the Assembly of Gods, Mansfield Road, 1956. Photo courtesy of the Irons family



https://twitter.com/Forza_Garibaldi/status/110032688801742848/photo/1

The Importance of a Social Club

By the time Irons returned from his RAF post in Malta, many West Indians had settled in Nottingham. This included migrants who came on the MV Empire Windrush.

On seeing the living conditions of some West Indians, Irons along with twenty-two other Nottingham residents, many of whom were ex-servicemen, saw the need for a social club to provide support along with social and recreational activities.

The Nottingham Cosmopolitan Social Club, now the West Indian Nationals Association, was thus formed on 17th February 1952. Irons was the chairman and acting treasurer.



"Cricket my passion. The Caribs Cricket club against an unknown team. I can just be seen behind and to the right of our captain (mid to late 1950s)" (Irons, p. 75). Photo courtesy of the Irons family.

In pursuit of a venue for the club and cricket ground, Irons explained to Dorothy Wood, the then secretary of the Nottingham Council of Social Service, that:

This meeting with Dorothy made Irons realise that the issues confronting the West Indian community in Nottingham "went far beyond the need to provide social and recreation facilities".

"...as a coloured person and an ex-serviceman it was clear to me that we were not wanted or welcomed in most of the places of entertainment and recreation in the City...having a place of our own would give us some measure of stability and choice, and would enable us to accept and return hospitality. In doing so we would then be able to make some positive contributions to the gradual breaking down of the barriers of prejudice that we were faced with in our daily lives".

Bridge for the Community

Irons' voluntary work in the community had garnered him a prominent reputation within the West Indian community. His home became "the meeting place and the first port of call for many West Indian migrants to the city and for others requiring help of some kind or other".



Dance organised by the Colonial Social and Cricket Club at Alfred Street, St Anns, 1957. Photo courtesy of the Irons family



Entertainment provided by Mrs Carter, Hartley Brooks and Ken Gray at Alfred Street premises in 1958. Photo courtesy of the Irons family

Colonial Social and Cricket Club

As a representative of the Colonial Social and Cricket Club, Irons offered advice to unemployed West Indians and Asians every Saturday morning. The 'Saturday night socials', religious services, Sunday schools and English classes were important activities that fostered solidarity within the immigrant community.

"Fireside Chats"

Irons also spoke to various church and social groups about the immigrant community in Nottingham. He also conducted "fireside chats" with small groups at their homes.

'The Consultative Committee for the Welfare of Coloured People'

It was agreed at a meeting with the Council of Churches, the Council of Social Service and the Colonial Social and Cricket Club in 1954, that "the Consultative Committee for the Welfare of Coloured People - the forerunner of the Nottingham and District Racial Equality Council" should be formed. The organisation came into being on 15 February 1955.

"This organisation provided us with the forum through which we could direct concerns from the immigrant community to relevant organisations".



Steel band that performed at Wollaton Park Nottingham in 1959
Photo courtesy of the Irons family

Racial Clash: Probe Goes On

POLICE VIGIL ON REST OF CITY'S COLOURED COLONIES



Mrs. Ellen Ryan, of Little John-street, who took Mr. Charles Cayton into her home after he was stabbed in the back and his wife was kicked in the stomach.

Car Driver Who Kept Going— "Thought He Might Be Lynched"

Nottingham CID men continued their intensive inquiries to-day into the racial battle in the St. Ann's Well-road district late on Saturday. No arrests have been made yet.

Special police squads are to remain on duty throughout the area, which was the scene of one of Britain's most bitter and ugly black-versus-white battles—and other policemen have been ordered to keep special watch on the rest of the city's coloured colonies.

CID officers were making inquiries to-day in the area where dozens of men and women had been injured by bottles, knives, razors and stakes.

Eight people, including a police constable who was run down by a coloured driver's car, were taken to the General Hospital.

Fire Brigade Union Protest

The Fire Brigades Union stated to-day that they have asked the Home Secretary, Mr. R. A. Butler, to see a deputation and hear a protest



"Refused To Split" Statement

Then Nottm. Bench Dismiss Charge

One of two men found in a yard occupied by Misses Radamers, Canal-street, Nottingham, refused to tell police the name of the man who got away. "It's more than my life's worth to split on the other bloke. He'd get PD (Preventive Detention) if he got caught again," he told them.

This was heard by the prosecution when the accused man, William Walker, 24, of no fixed abode, appeared at Nottingham Crown-court. He was charged with being in an enclosed yard with intent to steal. Mr. G. Green, prosecuting, said that Walker was seen on the wall of the premises. The other man was in a crowded position on a sloping roof and got away when a police officer approached. Two of three had been placed against the wall.

"TRYING TO GET HIM." P. J. Fleming said he spoke to Walker, who replied: "I am not doing anything. There is a man in there and I am going to get him."

EDITOR'S LETTER BAG

Briton overseas is ashamed of Nottingham

I WAS ashamed to read a report to-day in the most influential newspaper in this area, of race riots in Nottingham. A British citizen in the United States, I am constantly amazed at and disgusted with race prejudice in this country. I felt proud to be from a country where little or no racial feeling existed. Now I feel ashamed of what people in my own country are doing. I wonder if it is just thoughtless articles by a few hoodlums, or whether the people of Nottingham really feel such antagonism to fellow human beings just because the colour of their skin is different. I sincerely hope it is the former reason, because such hoodlums can be punished. We should never forget that most civilised peoples are British too, and entitled to the very same privileges that we enjoy. They are British because we made them so, and so we should bear the responsibility of treating them as neighbouring citizens. I have often visited Nottingham, and it always seemed a friendly, civilised city. I hope it remains so. MEGAN EDWARDS
YWCA Residence,
9th and Walnut-streets,
Cincinnati,
Ohio, U.S.A.

Aborigines. Unfortunately, if we applied this rule fully, this island might become a little crowded. Nottingham. LOGICAL.

THE GOOD NEIGHBOURS

I was reading in the Post the letter with the heading of "The Bad Neighbour." I must certainly not agree with what "Fed-Up" has to say. I am a white person living between two lots of coloured people. These people are more kind, kind their own business and, if left alone, the same as any white person, are good neighbours. BE-HAPPY.
Nottingham.

GENUINE ART

While agreeing with correspondent Jack Cook on the poor standard of this year's Local Artists' Exhibition, I must say that from his choice of words he appears to be anxious to plug one brand of art. "Modern slush" implies a prejudice. The term "Local Artists" embraces not merely local cliques, but all individual artists living within a radius of thirty miles. I am not an admirer of thirty miles. "Orthodox" surely means the conventional or academic—no work of this nature.

THE NOTTINGHAM STORY

Extracts from a topographical and historical description of the county of Nottingham, 1820, by F. C. Leford.

GENERAL HOSPITAL

But one of the greatest glories of Nottingham is its General Infirmary, a most spacious and indeed elegant building; and noble institution, which, as Throsby observes, takes under its healing wings the sick, poor and lame from any county or district shedding a most comfortable influence around and forming a splendid ornament to the town. The first stone was laid on the 12th of February, 1781, at the south-east butment, accompanied by a series of silver coins of the present reign, and with a brass plate whose inscription at some distant day may prove, to future antiquaries, the benevolence of Englishmen in the 18th and 19th centuries.

"General Hospital near Nottingham; open to the Sick and Poor of any county." The Corporation gave the ground for the said Hospital.

On digging for the foundation, some human bones were found with a sword and target, broken spears, &c. The building consists of a centre, two

NOTTINGHAM LOCAL STUDIES LIBRARY

Nottingham Race Riots in 1958

On 23 August 1958, racially motivated riots occurred in the streets of St Ann's, Nottingham. These clashes garnered both domestic and international attention.

Irons assisted the City Council in addressing issues related to the Black community following the race riots in 1958. He also represented a joint committee consisting of the Council of Social Services and the Consultative Committee for Coloured People, in briefing a delegation from the West Indian High Commission, that was sent to investigate the incident.

"What shook the police and everyone was the ferocity and speed of the West Indian response as hundreds of them rushed to the scene".

"There was racial tension and motivation at its core. There was suspicion and mistrust on both sides".

W. INDIAN MAGISTRATE.—Mr. Eric Irons, aged 41, who works for Nottingham Education Department as liaison officer among coloured people, has been appointed Nottingham's first West Indian magistrate.

"News in Brief," Times, 10 May 1962

"I WAS MOST SURPRISED WHEN I RECEIVED A LETTER FROM THE SECRETARY OF THE LORD CHANCELLOR'S ADVISORY COMMITTEE INVITING ME FOR AN INTERVIEW TO BECOME A JUSTICE OF THE PEACE".

Justice of the Peace

Eric Irons became a Justice of the Peace for the City of Nottingham on 3 May 1962.

His appointment received local and international publicity as well as support and criticism. Irons received both congratulatory and racist letters regarding his appointment, including one from the Klu Klux Klan.

Time on the Bench

Irons served on the Licensing and Betting Licensing Committees, the Juvenile and Domestic Court Panels, the Lord Chancellor's Advisory Committee, and served on the Home Secretary's Committee on Juvenile Delinquency as well as the Board of Visitors to the Nottingham Prison.

"I HADN'T THE SLIGHTEST IDEA THAT THE APPOINTMENT WOULD CAUSE SUCH MEDIA PUBLICITY".

WEST INDIAN SWORN IN AS MAGISTRATE

FROM OUR CORRESPONDENT
NOTTINGHAM, MAY 15

Mr. Eric Irons, a West Indian, was sworn in today as Britain's first coloured magistrate, one of six new magistrates for the city. Outside the court afterwards two West Indian women shook hands with him. Mr. Irons, a welfare worker, of Clifton, Nottingham, will take up his duties on July 2.

"News in Brief", Times, 16 May 1962



Eric Irons being congratulated on his appointment as a magistrate, by the Prime Minister of Jamaica, Alexander Bustamante, in his office in Kingston, 1962. Photo courtesy of the Irons family.

Does Prejudice Exist in our Courts?

According to Irons, the above-captioned question was "one of the most provocative and recurring questions" he received during his time as a magistrate. His answer was:

"...that from my life experience I cannot imagine any black person living in our western society who has not suffered the indignity of prejudice or racism because of the colour of their skin. It was however important that courts made black defendants and witnesses feel that they would be fairly treated. At times I was able to use my experience to inform judgements about black defendants".



Alhaji Abdul Maliki, High Commissioner for Nigeria at the first Commonwealth Unity Week celebrations in 1963. Photo courtesy of the Irons family.



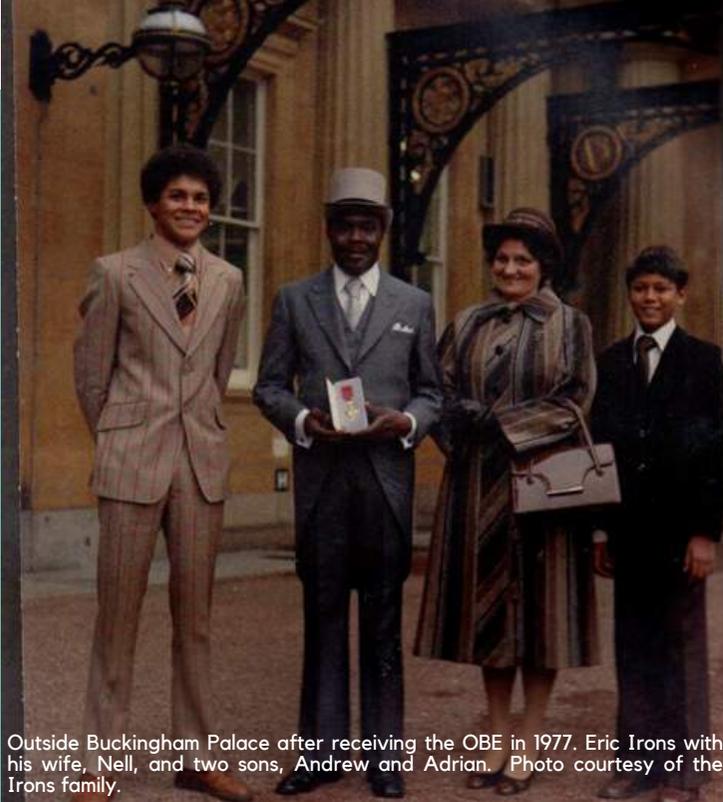
Eric Irons with (left to right): Lawrence Lindo, Jamaican High Commissioner to Britain; the Duke of Devonshire, Britain's Minister of State for Commonwealth Relations; Alderman Cameron, Lord Mayor of Nottingham; the Lady Mayoress and RF Collins, Chairman of the Organising Committee at the Commonwealth Unity Week celebrations, July 1963. Photo courtesy of the Irons family.



Lawrence Lindo, Jamaican High Commissioner to Britain at the Commonwealth Unity Week celebrations, July 1963. Photo courtesy of the Irons family.

Despite Irons' stellar record, he was not immune from criticism. Apart from the racist reactions to his appointment as a magistrate, he was also at times criticised by West Indians in Nottingham. For example, in 1975, a plan by the Nottinghamshire education authority to send Irons and Derek Sowell "to the West Indies to study Jamaican culture was criticised by members of Nottingham West Indian Nationals Associations". As the trip cost "nearly £1000", the group "accused Nottinghamshire education authority of squandering ratepayers' money" ("West Indian protest over visit to Jamaica", *Times*, 27 Nov. 1975). Additionally, according to Daniel Lawrence in *Black Migrants: White Natives*, Irons was "someone often criticised for presenting an unduly optimistic and complacent portrayal of the situation" (1974, p. 126).

Nonetheless, it is undeniable that Irons' exemplary voluntary and professional service had a significant impact on the integration of Nottingham's ethnic minority population within British society. He brought attention to issues of racial discrimination in both social and employment settings and sought to engage with diverse groups of immigrants in his efforts to foster a more equal society.



Outside Buckingham Palace after receiving the OBE in 1977. Eric Irons with his wife, Nell, and two sons, Andrew and Adrian. Photo courtesy of the Irons family.

Awards & Recognition

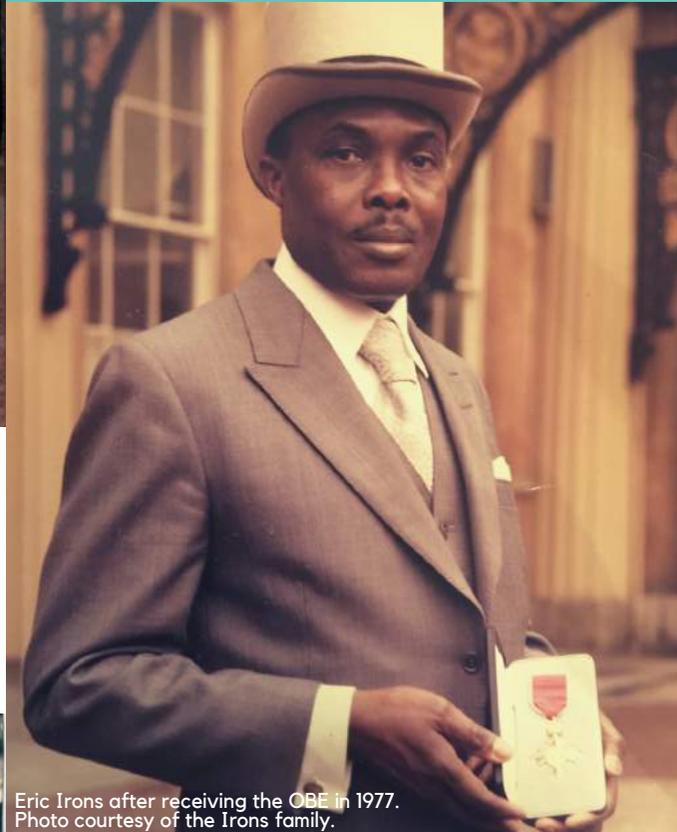
Eric Irons was awarded an OBE and the BH (M), the Jamaican Badge of Honour for Meritorious Service, in August 1977 in recognition of his work for social justice.



"We in the Nottingham West Indian Ex-Services Association had, with other Commonwealth ex-servicemen groups, campaigned over many years for Britain to recognise the contribution and sacrifices of those from the Commonwealth who had served for Britain in the first and second world wars. We were extremely proud when the Memorial at the Gates of Hyde Park was inaugurated by Queen Elizabeth II in November 2002. Here the Queen is meeting the members of our Association after the ceremony" (Irons, p. 139). Photo courtesy of the Irons family.

Honorary Degree

Irons also received a Citizen of Honour Award from Nottingham City Council in 1996, and an Honorary MA Degree for Improving Race Relations from the University of Nottingham in 1999.



Eric Irons after receiving the OBE in 1977. Photo courtesy of the Irons family.

Retirement

He retired as a Justice of the Peace in 1991 from work and much later in 1991 but continued his voluntary work within the community until his death in 2007. In 2019, a plaque in his honour was unveiled at the National Justice Museum, Nottingham.



Eric Irons being congratulated by the High Commissioner of Jamaica, Arthur Wint, on his award of the Badge of Honour (Meritorious Service) in December 1978. Irons with Nell, and sons, Paul, Ben, Andrew, and Adrian. Also present, Cllr Fred Rudder, Chairman of Nottinghamshire Country Council. Photo courtesy of the Irons family.

His Memoir

This educational pack is based primarily on information acquired from the unpublished memoir of Eric Irons. According to the Irons family, his wish for his memoir "was that it formed part of his legacy to us that we might better know and understand the challenges of the past and appreciate the opportunities of the future in a multi-cultural society". It is envisaged that this resource pack will provide a comprehensive tool for teachers in educating students about his early life in Jamaica and pioneering work in Nottingham.



Eric Irons being awarded an Honorary Master of Arts Degree for Improving Race Relations by the University of Nottingham in 1999. Photo courtesy of the Irons family.

Black Magistrate

Nottingham welcomes Britain's first black magistrate.

Non-Fiction / 1962 / 5 mins

From the collection of:



Watch for free

<https://player.bfi.org.uk/free/film/watch-black-magistrate-1962-online>

Play the video for the class and discuss the following questions:

Discussion Questions

- 1) What do the various interviews tell you about the state of race relations in Nottingham at the time?
- 2) Discuss the causes and impact of the race riots in 1958, along with Irons' role in its aftermath.
- 3) Do you think race played a factor in his appointment?

4) What do you think was the impact of appointing a Black magistrate?

Overall question based on resource:

What has Eric Irons done for local diverse ethnic communities and the promotion of equality in Nottingham?

See our Slavery and Racial Terminology Glossary for Activity 2: Black Contributions to Racial Equality in Nottingham.