

Extracts about Hull from

Black 1919: Riots, Racism and Resistance in Imperial Britain

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Hull's location favoured links into continental Europe via the North Sea, trading chiefly in coal, but the port was also heavily involved in the northern European passenger trade and trans-shipping overseas European migrants. Hull also had a large share of Britain's trawler fishing trade. Hull's position on an estuary allowed her inland waterway connections with the coal fields of west Yorkshire and the major industrial towns of Lancashire and the Midlands. Industrial goods were exported from Hull to North and South America, the Far East and the British colonies in Africa and the West Indies. For a century from 1851, Hull's largest employment sector was in transport, which included seamen and dock labourers as well as road and rail workers. For example, in 1911, 30.7% of the total male workforce was employed in this sector.¹ This concentration of workers in a few industries led to wider social pressures. Hull, like so many thriving port cities, registered very high over-crowding in the working class areas.² By the mid nineteenth century, Hull resembled a 'gigantic slum'. Hull's population doubled between 1871 and 1901 to 240,259³ placing further pressure on already overcrowded areas and by the end of the century, most accommodation in the oldest part of the city down by the docks was let in single rooms.⁴

In the port of Hull, the lack of good standard, affordable living accommodation placed pressure on the poorer workers in the city and many, including seafarers fell into pauperism. Some black and South Asian residents in Hull were forced into the workhouse in the Edwardian period. Of thirty sailors admitted to the Hull workhouse in the years 1905-9, nine were from the West Indies and five from India. In 1909, a Trinidadian sailor, together with his white English wife, was admitted to a Hull workhouse after falling into destitution. The Colonial Office contacted the man's father, a skilled worker on the Trinidad government railway. He agreed to contribute to his son's repatriation costs, but the sailor decided to stay on in Hull and soon left the workhouse after he found employment.⁵ Not all black colonial residents of the port were sailors, two other West Indians, a labourer and a street trader ('hawker') were also admitted to the workhouse in these years.⁶ By 1919, Hull had a small, established black population of African and West Indian workers and their families.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century settlements of 'Arab', i.e. Adenese and Somali sailors were founded in the tramp steamer ports of South Shields, Cardiff and Hull. In the mid 1880s, the Peninsular & Oriental line became the first British shipping company to employ

¹ J. Bellamy, 'Occupations in Kingston upon Hull 1841-1948' *Yorkshire Bulletin of Economic and Social Research* 4 (1952), 39.

² Lee, 'Demographic characteristics of port cities' (1998), 164.

³ R. Brown, *Waterfront Organisation in Hull 1870-1900* [Occasional papers in economic and social history no. 5], (University of Hull Publications, 1972), 1.

⁸⁴ E. Gillet and K.A. MacMahon, *A History of Hull* (Oxford: OUP, 1980), 281, 327.

⁸⁵ Committee on Distressed Colonial and Indian Subjects, Minutes of Evidence, 23 July 1909, 13.

⁸⁶ Committee on Distressed Colonial and Indian Subjects, Minutes of Evidence, Appendix 5: 96-7.

sailors out of the British port of Aden. Before this, Adenese and Somali sailors were employed on French steamships, generally as ship's firemen. 'Arab' sailors often transferred to British ships, where the pay rates were higher; joining them at continental European ports such as Marseilles. Many of the seamen were peasant farmers; often they were 'temporary sojourners' who worked only a few years on British ships before returning to their village of origin to recommence a rural lifestyle. Others settled permanently and married into the local white population. In Hull, an 'Arab' settlement, estimated in 1920 at between 60 and 100, was established.⁷

From Ch 3 Riot events chapter

The port violence in Hull in May 1919 did not reach full-scale riot proportions. However, the outbreak of fighting bore some resemblance to the riots in Glasgow and South Shields in that it occurred in and around the local merchant shipping office. In Glasgow, in January 1919, a trades' union appeal to rid British ships of Chinese crews contributed to the white sailors' attack on British West African sailors. In Hull, a similar local union appeal apparently motivated black British sailors to turn on Chinese sailors.

A mass meeting of seamen and firemen in the port held under the auspices of the 'International Seafarers Union' heard claims that despite growing unemployment among British sailors, employers' continued to use lower paid aliens to undercut British sailors, saving £3 a month per person for shipping companies who employed foreigners out of British ports.⁸ Following the meeting, a group of black British sailors cleared Chinese sailors from the Hull merchant shipping office.

Information about the Hull violence is sketchy. A brief account appeared in the Hull branch report of a seaman's union newspaper. 'During the past month there was a little disturbance in the street - the coloured seamen clearing the Shipping Office and Yard of Chinese crew - with the result that the Master decided to take Britishers.'⁹ The *Marine Caterer* account of the incident unusually connected the 'coloured' seamen with the term 'Britishers.' It is interesting to speculate whether black sailors in Hull were only deemed 'British' when they took action in support of the white sailors' union campaign against the employment of 'Asiatics.' This newspaper was the journal of the National Union of Ships' Stewards, Cooks, Butchers and Bakers. A delegate of this union, J.B. Fye, was prominently involved in the February riot at South Shields where an 'Arab' crew was not allowed to board after the interference of Fye of the cooks' and stewards' union, and Gilroy of the NSFU.

Hull had a relatively small black population around this time. In June 1920 it was estimated at between 60 and 100.¹⁰ However, even this small population faced resentment by elements of the local white population during 1919. A few days after the shipping office episode fighting took place between a group of white people and three or four black sailors. Only one person, Manuel de Siloa, a black Portuguese subject (possibly hailing from the Cape Verde islands) was arrested for the incident. De Siloa was charged with wounding two people: a white ships' fireman and a local woman. After these smaller-scale incidents in 1919, rioting the following year reached a level of intensity to bear comparison with all but

⁹⁸. *Hull Daily Mail*, 21 June 1920, 4.

⁸. *Marine Caterer*, Vol. 9 No. 13, (June 1919), 204. See chapter two for full details of the various pay rates for sailors and ships' firemen.

⁹. *Marine Caterer* (Liverpool), Vol. 9 No. 13, (June 1919), 204.

¹⁰. *Hull Daily Mail*, 21 June 1920, 4.

the most prolonged rioting of Cardiff and Liverpool in 1919. The 1920 Hull riot is described in a later chapter.

In Hull, a violent clash at the harbour between black and Chinese sailors, there were no recorded arrests. A few days later a fight between three or four black men and some [presumably white] 'Britishers' led to the arrest of Portuguese West African ships' fireman, Manuel de Siloa, on two counts of wounding. De Siloa was alleged to have slashed a local woman and a British fireman with a razor during a fight which followed on from a shouting match on the street.¹¹ He was described in the press as 'an excited foreigner [who made use of a] ... razor.' Although de Siloa was accused of wounding, he himself received a wound in the mouth which required six stitches.¹² The outcome of the wounding charge against de Siloa could not be traced. No white people were arrested for their part in the fight.

Chapter 6 Repatriation

'Lieutenant Commander Kenworthy (MP for Central Hull) asked the Prime Minister what steps have been taken to repatriate coloured labourers at present in the country?

Mr. Shortt (Home Secretary): Those who are British subjects cannot, of course, be compelled to go back, but every opportunity is being offered them to go.' (House of Commons debates, vol. 117, 26 June 1919, col. 327).

Following the inter-departmental committee's recommendation, local repatriation committees were established in Glasgow, South Shields, Salford, Hull, London Liverpool, and Cardiff: all were ports that had witnessed riots. The new committees administered the revised repatriation arrangements under the joint auspices of the Board of Trade, the Ministry of Labour, the Ministry of Shipping and the Colonial Office. The purposes of the new committees were:

1. To collect information as to the numbers, nationality and countries of origin of the coloured men in the port, together with information as to the state of employment and the numbers desiring to be repatriated.

2. To arrange for publicity to be given to any Government schemes of repatriation; to explain such schemes to representatives and other local individuals and bodies concerned, in the interests of good government and the coloured men themselves.

3. To endeavour to secure that any coloured men who have a genuine claim to reside in this country should be given reasonable opportunity of obtaining work.

4. To interview individual men and urge them on the advisability of accepting repatriation and point out the difficulties that they are likely to experience in obtaining work if they remain in this country...¹³

A letter from the Secretary of the Hull repatriation committee to the Ministry of Labour in August 1919 detailed local black sailors' continued objections to repatriation:

¹¹. *Hull and East Yorkshire Times*, 17 May 1919, 10.

¹². *Hull Daily News*, 31 May 1919, 1.

¹³. TNA CO 323/814 481-482, Ministry of Shipping to CO, July 1919.

1. The inadequacy of the gratuity. The men state that even if the full amount was given to them on arrival it is insufficient to tide them over the interval between the time of landing and finding employment, and to provide any small capital required to establish them in any business. Further in most cases the men would not receive the whole of the gratuity owing to reductions for redeeming pawned articles.

2. The men complain that foreigners receive preference of employment on board merchant ships as against them, the coloured men, who are British subjects.

The committee pointed out to these men that Masters and officers of ships have the right to choose whom they will in picking a crew. It may be added that when the Repatriation Scheme was brought forward, many of these men had small sums in hand, but the delay in providing ships for repatriation has led to the exhaustion of these funds.¹⁴

Such problems with the repatriation scheme meant that black colonial British sailors were reluctant to commit themselves to it. Criticisms such as those from black sailors at Hull were discussed at a further meeting of the inter-departmental committee at which it was decided that no further amendment was necessary and the basic two-part £6 gratuity remained.

The inadequate compensation offered to black people under the revised repatriation scheme often featured in reports from the local committees' to central government. As noted in the Hull sailors' protest, placing possessions in pawn was common amongst sailors during periods of unemployment while ashore. By mid-1919 this familiar course of action had become a necessity due to the long-term unemployment experienced by many black workers after war's end. Local repatriation committees could use their discretion to obtain the release of essential clothing for the men from pawn, deducting this from the gratuity, but often this meant that black sailors were returned to the colonies as destitute as they had been in Britain.

The tardy concession to allow the wives and families of black workers to be repatriated with them removed one of the sailors' long standing objections to the scheme. In Hull, which had seen an earlier protest against repatriation arrangements, at least two families left under the revised arrangements. In October 1919, R. Joseph and G. Steede applied for repatriation to Canada and Barbados respectively, with their white wives, and their children.¹⁵ Before he left, Steede was part of a deputation made up of five West Indians and two West Africans that met with the Hull repatriation committee in November 1919 to complain about their treatment in Britain, including victimisation by trades' union officials. The deputation predicted that 'similar treatment would be given to white men in their native colonies.'¹⁶

1920 riot in Hull

Further Sea Port Riots and Disturbances

Many of the riots which broke out in 1920, 1921 and beyond in Britain's seaports were caused by the same economic and social issues which had brought about the wave of rioting in 1919. In June 1920, a fierce riot in Hull in June 1920 was due, according to the Hull branch officer of the Cooks' and Stewards' Union, to mounting employment pressure in the port caused by shipping companies discharging black sailors signed on overseas in Hull rather than at the port of engagement. The union official's report went on to say that the poor

¹⁴. TNA CO 323/816/6, Copy of letter from Hull Repatriation Committee to Ministry of Labour, 28 August 1919.

¹⁵. TNA CO 318/350, List of Appeals for Repatriation, October 1919.

¹⁶. TNA CO 318/352, Chief Constable of Hull to CO, 25 November 1919.

economic situation in the merchant shipping industry, meant that black sailors discharged in Hull found it more difficult by the day to find a ship out of the port.¹⁷

Trouble broke out around 10 p.m. on a Saturday night after black and white men had been drinking in a public house. A large crowd gathered and chased a black man, later identified as Marell Pigott, who took out a revolver and fired in the air and then at his pursuers. James Devaney, a member of the chasing pack, was hit in the cheek. After the shooting incident involving Pigott, the white crowd moved on to an area of the town where black lodging houses were situated and began to vandalise them.

Two houses in Lower Union Street were damaged as were numbers 72 and 74 Pease Street. The violence continued into the early hours of the morning. Despite a strong police presence in the area, two black people were injured and a further seven or eight were taken into protective custody. One white man was also reported hurt with a cut wrist. The riot continued on into the following night. Fifteen people were admitted to the local infirmary with injuries sustained in the rioting, one with life threatening injuries.

The outbreak of the 1920 Hull riot indicates how little things had changed for the black population of Britain in the twelve months since the main phase of rioting. Similar attacks to those in Hull in June 1920 were mounted on black and 'Arab' boarding houses in the 1919 rioting in Glasgow, South Shields, London, Cardiff and Newport. In fact, a local newspaper editorial on the Hull riot drew a direct line between the incident and the port riots of 1919: 'The ill-feeling between some white and coloured men, which has been 'boiling up' in certain ports, notably those on the South Wales coast since the Armistice has extended to Hull...'¹⁸

Yet in Hull 1920, as so often occurred in 1919, many local press reports of the rioting chose to emphasise, not the unemployment difficulties of merchant sailors in the port (which the union newspaper the *Marine Caterer* had stressed), but sexual relationships between black men and white women: 'When paid off [black seamen] are not averse to flourishing their wages to attract white women.'¹⁹ Both local and national press seemed agreed on this cause of the rioting. The *Times* reported on 21 June 1920: 'The outbreak is a recrudescence of trouble which has been simmering for some time, and is due to local resentment at the relations between coloured men and women of the town.'²⁰

Police bias was evident in the 1920 Hull riot. Four black men were arrested (two on very serious charges), yet no white people were arrested, despite attacks by a white crowd on black boarding houses. During the first night of rioting in Hull on 19 June the police made no attempt to arrest white rioters. The following night, despite the dubious precaution of barring black people from all public houses (a policy which was also pursued by the authorities during the American 'race' riots of 1919) rioting broke out again.²¹ Black people stayed indoors, but a large white crowd stormed an area where black people were thought to be living. Two black men were discovered by the crowd. One retaliated to the white attack by firing a revolver and a white man, Harry Wilkinson was gravely injured by three gun shots.²²

Twenty-seven year-old Tom Toby, a West African fireman based at Dartmouth was next day charged with intent to do him grievous bodily harm. Toby, a fireman on the *S.S.*

¹⁷ . *Marine Caterer*, Vol. 16 No. 1 (July 1920), 5.

¹⁸ . *Hull Daily Mail*, 21 June 1920, 4.

¹⁹ . *Hull Daily Mail*, 21 June 1920, 5.

²⁰ . *Times*, 21 June 1920, 11.

²¹ . *Times*, 21 June 1920, 11.

²² . *Hull Daily Mail*, 21 June 1920, 5.

Oristano, was described as ‘a short, thick-set West African negro’ in the press.²³ Toby was charged with shooting and maliciously wounding Wilkinson. A police sergeant who was attracted to the area by the sound of screams, found Toby lying on the ground. Toby had a cut hand and said that he had been fighting. The sergeant found a gun lying nearby, along with five spent cartridges. He arrested Toby, but due to the continued presence of a hostile white crowd, he led him away through one of the houses previously wrecked by the crowd. The ferocity of the white onslaught is evident by reports of the extensive damage to black lodging houses during this riot and by the method of Toby’s removal. At his trial the jury accepted Toby’s plea of self-defence and he was found not guilty.

During the court cases which followed the June 1920 Hull riot several black people were charged with serious gun offences. Marell Pigott, who had been involved at the outset of the rioting when chased from the public house, was charged with the unlawful wounding of James Devaney. Pigott stated that his intention in firing his gun was self-defence and that he had intended to shoot into the air to frighten the 200-strong crowd. He said that the gun had gone off again accidentally when he was surrounded.²⁴ Pigott’s account is supported by other evidence. When the police moved in to take him into custody, Pigott was pinned to the ground with six white men on top of him, ‘one of whom suggested he be strung up from a lamp-post.’²⁵ While he was being arrested someone stole £15 from his pocket. The judge at York Assizes did not take the threat to lynch Pigott seriously. The judge dismissed his plea of self-defence and sentenced him to nine months’ hard labour on the charge of unlawful wounding of James Devaney.

A group of eight black people was also taken into protective custody during the white attacks on black occupied boarding houses. However, somewhat unusually during the port riots, police later charged only one, Isaac Wilson. Wilson was found to have an unlicensed revolver in his possession. He was fined 10 shillings (50p) for his offence.²⁶

Another black person arrested during the weekend of rioting, Joseph Stanley, was charged with ‘causing a crowd’. At his trial, Stanley described how black residents were told to move on by police while white people were allowed to loiter in the streets. He also claimed that a police constable stood and laughed at a fight between a black man and white instead of stopping it. Stanley was found guilty and was bound over for six months.²⁷

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²³ . *Hull Daily News*, 21 June 1920, 1.

²⁴ . *Hull Daily Mail*, 14 July 14 1920, n.p.

²⁵ . *Hull Daily Mail*, 21 June 1920, 5.

²⁶ . *Hull Daily News*, 21 June 1920, 1.

²⁷ . *Hull Daily News*, 21 June 1920, 1.