

EULALIE KELLY

A British Black History Story

Told by her daughter, Sheila Howarth

Twenty-one days by sea from St Kitts to England —
and seventy years of life, family and belonging in Leeds, West Yorkshire

Introduction: Our Family Story

This is the story of my mum, Eulalie Kelly, and her journey from St Kitts in the Caribbean to England. It is also the story of our family, of growing up Black in Britain, and of finding identity, pride and belonging in Leeds, West Yorkshire.

Mum came to England with hopes for a bright future. Her life here would bring hard work, love, family, racism and challenges—but also community, resilience and generations of achievement. This is her story, told by her daughter, Sheila Howarth.

The 1950s: A Journey to England

When my mum was seventeen, her uncle left St Kitts to come to England after the Second World War. St Kitts was then a British colony. As he left, he told her mother, “Tell Eulalie I will send for her.” Mum’s first thought was, “I don’t want to go to Britain. It’s cold.”

True to his word, her uncle sent for her when she was eighteen. Mum boarded a ship bound for England. She had not realised just how far away England was. The ship stopped at ports throughout the Caribbean, collecting West Indian passengers who were travelling to what many had been told was the promised land—a place where the streets were supposedly paved with gold.

Mum had grown up in a family whose relatives owned local supermarkets, so she had not fully understood how differently other people lived. Some of the women on the ship shocked her with the language they used, which she felt was not ladylike. She spent much of the journey in her cabin until she befriended a white American woman travelling first class. Mum spent the rest of the voyage with her.

She arrived in Portsmouth on a hot, sunny day in August. She was surprised by the heat and thought it was a sign of the bright future ahead. But when she travelled by train to Leeds, her dreams began to fade.

Her aunt and uncle met her and took her to Chapeltown, where her accommodation was a room in a gloomy brick terrace house. She had left behind the idyllic life she knew in the Caribbean for a very different reality.

Her aunt found her a job sewing clothes at Burton’s factory, where many West Indian women found work. Mum settled into a life that did not seem to offer much of a future, but she made the best of what she had.

In England, she met my dad, a dashing man from St Kitts who had persuaded her to come. He loved women, but Mum fell in love with him all the same. They married in 1955 at Roscoe Methodist Church on Chapeltown Road. Her aunt was one of the bridesmaids, along with Anna, a white fellow machinist. The reception was held at my aunt’s house on Hamilton Avenue.

My parents were among the first Caribbean families to buy a house in Chapeltown, an area that was then home to a large Jewish community. Word spread among people arriving from St Kitts: anyone coming to Leeds could stay with us for a while as they found work and somewhere to live. Our home became a place where newcomers could get settled.

1957: My Story Begins

I was born in August 1957, a year after my sister. As far back as I can remember, England seemed cold and miserable. I did not know any different. I did not understand racism; I thought being called the N-word was simply part of everyday life.

In those days, television was black and white. We watched programmes such as the Black and White Minstrel Show, in which white performers blackened their faces and sang. Images like these helped make racist treatment seem normal to a child who had little else with which to compare it.

Before I started school at five, Mum had taught us to read and write so that we would not be at a disadvantage. Caribbean and Asian children were sometimes wrongly treated as though they had special educational needs. On my first day at Cowper Street School, I was placed in a basement for special lessons.

I remember that day as though it were yesterday. They asked our names and whether we could write, spell or speak English. I gave my name, wrote it and spelt it. I was quickly moved into the main school.

There I met a girl called Elizabeth, who had blond, curly hair and blue eyes. She came up to me, licked me and said, “Urgh, you don’t taste of chocolate,” before walking away. I was not offended at the time because I did not know any better. I had seen similar treatment of Black people on our black-and-white television. Looking back, I can see how early children were exposed to racist ideas.

The 1960s: Learning Who I Was

By the 1960s, I was beginning to understand who I was. I listened to my parents talking with their friends, and three events in particular stayed with me. The first was the Bristol Bus Boycott.

The Bristol Bus Boycott, 1963

The Bristol Omnibus Company operated a “colour bar”, which prevented Black and Asian people from working as bus drivers or conductors. The policy had support from the local branch of the Transport and General Workers’ Union, and racial discrimination in employment was not generally prohibited by UK law at the time.

In 1963, campaigners including Paul Stephenson, Roy Hackett, Owen Henry, Audley Evans and Prince Brown organised opposition. Stephenson arranged for Guy Bailey, a qualified young Black man, to apply for a bus job. When the company discovered that Bailey was West Indian, his interview was cancelled.

On 29 April 1963, campaigners called for a boycott of Bristol’s buses. Many people stopped using the service, while supporters organised demonstrations and pickets. Students from the University of Bristol also joined in.

After about four months, the company announced on 28 August 1963 that it would end the colour bar. On 17 September, Ragbir Singh, a Sikh man, became the company’s first non-white bus conductor, followed by other Black and Asian employees. The boycott became an important moment in Britain’s civil-rights history.

I might have been only six years old, but I understood what it meant. People were standing up against discrimination, and their actions were making a difference.

The Leeds West Indian Carnival: The Day I Became Me

The Leeds West Indian Carnival became one of the most important cultural contributions of the Chapeltown community. Its beginnings came in 1966, when community pioneer Arthur France MBE, alongside fellow students Frankie Davis from Trinidad and Tony Lewis from Jamaica, organised an indoor carnival event. France wanted the celebration to move outdoors and reflect the vibrant Caribbean street processions connected with emancipation and cultural history.

The first official outdoor parade took place in August 1967. Troupe bands from Leeds, Birmingham and Manchester travelled through the streets from Potternewton Park to Leeds Town Hall. Although some older residents initially worried about how the event might be viewed, the carnival became a great cultural success. It has since grown into one of the UK's best-known Caribbean carnivals, attracting large crowds to Chapeltown.

In 1966, my uncle Arthur France came to our house and I heard my parents discussing a carnival. I was a young girl, born in Britain, who had never been to the Caribbean. The only Black people I had seen were those in Leeds, where we were a minority. I did not really know what a carnival would mean.

The first carnival in Potternewton Park changed that. If I say I came alive, I mean it. I saw a park full of Black people, alongside people from different communities—Irish, Greek, Jewish, Asian and others. My senses came alive: the smells, the tastes, the colours and the sound of steel pans.

That was the day I realised I was a Black girl, not a “nigger”. I was important. That was the day England became a country of colour to me, rather than a grey, miserable place. I was ten years old, and now I am nearly seventy. I have never missed a carnival. That was the day I became me.

The carnival gave me a sense of identity and belonging. It showed me that our culture was something to celebrate and that our community had a place in Britain.

Martin Luther King Jr: A Hero for Life

The third important incident was connected to our television. We were one of the first households to buy a colour television because Dad loved boxing. Muhammad Ali—whom many people knew by his earlier name, Cassius Clay—was a boxer everyone wanted to watch, and people came to our house to see the match.

As children, we used to come home from school for lunch because Mum did not trust the school food. She often had the news on television. One day, on 4 April 1968, the news announced that Martin Luther King Jr had been assassinated.

The news affected me deeply. I asked Mum about him and began learning all I could. To me, he is—and always will be—my hero. His courage and his fight for equality helped me understand more about the world and the struggle for civil rights.

1968–1970s: A Country Divided

I remember watching television in 1968 and hearing Enoch Powell's “Rivers of Blood” speech discussed. It made me feel that Britain was becoming politically divided over race and immigration. I could not understand why people hated us so much, especially when I heard words like Powell's.

Racial tension and conflict were visible in several parts of Britain during the 1970s. Events included clashes at Red Lion Square in London in 1974, unrest in Chapeltown in Leeds in 1975, confrontations at Notting Hill Carnival in 1976, the Battle of Lewisham in 1977 and protests against a National Front meeting in Southall in 1979.

These events were not all the same, and each had its own causes and circumstances. Together, they formed part of a period in which racism, far-right organising, community resistance and the relationship between Black communities and the police were major issues in British public life.

As a child, I struggled to understand why people could be so hostile towards us. I was learning that the country we called home did not always welcome us equally—and that people in our communities continued to stand up for their rights.

The 1980s and Beyond: Building a Family

By the 1980s, Mum had settled into life in Britain. She raised seven children, all of whom went on to have jobs and build lives of their own. In our family there have been secretaries, a nurse, a welder, an engineer, a dancer and a cook, among other roles.

Our family is culturally mixed. I have been married to my white British husband for 42 years, and my brother has been married to his Chinese wife for 30 years. In many ways, we have become our own community, joined by different backgrounds and experiences.

Mum arrived in England with one suitcase. She was eighteen when she made the journey, and she is now ninety-one. Over the years, she has built a family of seven children, nineteen grandchildren and twenty-four great-grandchildren—a total of forty-eight people across our generations.

Her story is one of courage, adaptation and determination. She came to England not knowing what awaited her. She faced a difficult start, worked hard, raised her family and helped create a home where others from St Kitts could find support. Her legacy is not only the family she raised, but also the strength and sense of belonging she helped pass on.

Our Story Has Only Just Begun

When I look back, I see a journey that began with a young woman leaving St Kitts on a ship, travelling for twenty-one days towards a future she could hardly imagine. I see a mother who made a life in Leeds, a family that grew across cultures, and a community that found pride through its history, music and carnival.

I also see my own journey: from a child who did not understand racism, to a young girl who found her identity at the carnival, to a woman who knows the importance of remembering the people who came before us.

Mum's life is part of British Black history. It is also our family history—full of struggle, love, resilience and hope.

Our story just began. How will it end? The answer belongs to the generations still to come.