



Interviewee: Melda Liburd – aged 68

Interviewer: Liz Bloom

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Arrival

My name is Melda Liburd. I first came to Britain in 1961 on the 4th June. I came here in my late teens at the age of eighteen and a half. Back home in Nevis we could not get jobs - it's still bad there like everywhere in the world - so a lot of us tried to emigrate to Britain to see if we could find work. I came on an Italian ship; it was fantastic. It was called Irpinia, and we stopped at about twelve different islands. From Southampton we travelled up to St Albans by train where I met my boyfriend who had moved here ahead of me ... and I stayed. I've lived in St Albans a very long time.

When I first came to England...first of all, when I got on the train in Southampton up to St Albans with my partner, I would notice how bushy it was. I was shocked! I really was shocked to see so many trees! Because when you were back home they gave you the impression that the streets were covered with money; well not really covered with money but you know what I mean - all glittery and everything. When I first reached St Albans, there were just a few West Indians or black families, you would call them, in St Albans. My first home was in 18 Gombards. My boyfriend used to work nights and I used to work days, you see, and we found it difficult because you couldn't go and knock on anybody's door; you had to be careful where you were knocking because the minute they saw the coloured people....the people here weren't used to so many black people coming in and knocking on their doors. They would say straight away, "You're at the wrong address." So they'd point out a house where our own people could go, you know. Eventually, people started getting used to the idea of having black people around. I think there was a man called Herbert Greaves, who used to live on the Verulam Road; he had about two houses and you were referred either to him or to this man at 18 Gombards. They'd point you in the direction of the black landlords. It was difficult and it was awkward to get jobs. It was really awkward. A lot of our men were working at the Rubber Works where there were a lot of West Indians and Pakistanis. The Rubber Works was famous for that.

Work

I was really fortunate to get my first job in St Albans City Hospital kitchen canteen. I used to do coffee for the matrons and outpatient doctors and then in the afternoon - 3 o'clock or 3.30 - we used to do tea, biscuits and cake. I had a lovely supervisor - her name was Maureen - and even now we still get on. She always says, "Melda, my dear!" She was my boss and she was ever so kind and helpful and she used to say, "If you don't understand

anything, just ask me; I will point it out to you.” She was very generous as well, and that makes a lot different. That was my first job. Later on, my son was born there and he is now 46 years old.

My next job was at the Ballito stocking factory here in Fleetville. At Ballito, there were different stages of production, starting from the bottom with someone putting the yarn on. The machine would wind it on and make the stocking. You’d be given a pile of stockings, whether size eight and a half or nine and a half - that was the sizing in those days. Now it’s small, medium and large, but in those days we had half sizes and whole sizes. When we were packing, we were given a bundle of stockings and you would have to fold them. There would be two stickers next to you; one with the size on and one with the colour. So you folded it, pushed it into the bag, pushed the flap down and then you stuck on the size and colour labels and it was ready to go out; boxed up and sent out.

I lived in Fleetville for a very long time. I had a place in Hedley Road and we lived there for a number of years. I also worked in Sutton Road, which is at the back of Morrisons. I worked there in a small factory called Eastex. Formerly it was Nicholsons where they made coats; very expensive coats. Eastex had another factory in Luton; here, it was only a small branch. I was a machinist; we used to make skirts and I used to do the first part of it. I used to stitch the pleats in. They were marked first; somebody would mark the length of the material out, and then we used to stitch it to the full length and then put the zip in and then it was passed onto somebody else for them to put the waistband on; or if it was to be lined, it went to somebody else to put the lining on. And that’s the way the product was until it got right to the end. It was then pressed and passed on to put the hooks on. Then somebody would check and cut all the loose threads off it and make sure there were no holes or damage to it. Somebody would finally check to make sure that all the pleats were lined up properly because Eastex skirts were very, very expensive. The cheapest skirts in those days were £19, except when we had sales; we’d get them much cheaper then. Other than that, everything had to be perfect. They also had the big factory in Luton. I think they had four floors in Luton. They did evening wear, wedding gowns, dresses and blouses - the whole lot.

I spent eight years there and they decided to close it down. So I went off to Marconi Instruments which was in Longacres. We still called it Fleetville; I don’t know what they call it now. I spent 11 years there in Marconi which was a very nice company to work for. We used to make parts for submarines – underwater instruments. We used to form the resistors and slot them in on this board and they were passed onto somebody else to be soldered on the wrong side. We had to make sure the resistor values were correct – each colour on the resistor is a number and you had to make sure they lined up otherwise the instrument wouldn’t work. It was a very technical job. You had to have your wits about you; you had to make sure you knew resistor colour codes. I enjoyed working there; I should have been there still. When I left (1988) it wasn’t closed, it was closing; we all started to find other jobs. I was one of the first black women to work in Marconi. I was very

proud because when they had Open Day and all the overseas visitors came, everybody would be looking at me, to see me in a big department. They would be talking and looking back at each other and looking at me again ... and I didn't mind; I enjoyed it because I enjoyed my job. Marconi was a brilliant place to work for. They gave fantastic parties for your children. It was very, very nice.

Day-to-day Life

We all used to keep together. We'd visit one another; go to one another's houses at weekends to sit and drink. Our favourite drink, definitely, in those days, was Crabbie's ginger wine or Stone's ginger wine; not a lot of spirit or anything. When we got together in each other's' homes, we played music and we'd probably get up and dance. In those days when you arrived in England you had to make sure you were either coming to a family or you'd be joining your boyfriend or somebody like that. So they would invite us out and I would invite them out and we'd sit and eat and drink. We'd go to our own homes and make our own entertainment. And that's just how it was at first until people got used to us being around. When I went to St Albans market I might meet one or two black people. You would try and talk to them and find out where they were from. I would say that I live in Gombards or Verulam Road and of course give them the address and that's how it got around. But, it was quite difficult because some people would not even speak; even now, some people don't speak, you know. But, other than that, I can't say anybody bothered me here in St Albans. I remember in St Albans, we had all the shops. We had 'Home and Colonial' that had all the foreign food. They had garlic sausages - the long ones. We had Baxter's in Chequer Street...you'd get cheese and pies and all that on Saturday morning. We used to have Sainsbury..... we would go for the biggest chicken at £1.50, you know. You'd choose what you wanted; chicken giblets, wings, legs and everything. You just picked up what you wanted and go and pay.

The majority of West Indians are either Anglican or Methodist. But after a while, we got to know each other and then they'd say to you, "Oh, I go to that church up there; I could pick you up!" You know what I mean? As the years went and as more people came here, it started to develop, everything between the black and whites started to develop because some of them got a bit friendlier. They found they had to mix with us more and they became more friendly and then more helpful. But I have not come up against any race thing; I have not, and I've been here since 1961.