

Black History Archive short – scripted by Catherine Leen, as read by Helena Short

In 2016 the Liverpool Central Library was presented with an archive of documents and letters that recorded the plight of black soldiers and seamen left stranded or destitute in Liverpool after the First World War.

The documents and letters had in the previous year come to the attention of Writing on the Wall, a Liverpool based charity that works with diverse communities across the city, who put a call out for volunteers to help organise the material. Within 18 months, the documents that formed the archive were collated, organised, digitalized and made available to the public via the Central Library.

Many of the letter writers were from Africa and the Caribbean and had volunteered to fight for England during the war only to discover on demobilization that they had no rights, were left destitute and banned from employment due to a colour bar imposed and supported by the unions.

The letters reveal not only the experience of daily racism faced by the men and their families but the response of the British establishment to their pleas for help, with responsibility passed between various government offices.

The letters (which date from May 1919 to November 1920) from the black service men are both hand written and typed, provide an eloquent and personal account, while the responding correspondences from government and local councils are typed, on official headed paper and in the main brief.

The dignity of the men is palpable; the letters are not begging or aggressive but rather articulate a sharp sense of injustice as citizens who had come forward to defend their motherland only to be impoverished and discriminated against when no longer of use.

The collection also includes a list of 82 names and addresses of black workers and servicemen compiled by the African Christian Association. It was this list that inspired the volunteers to research the men further to try and acknowledge their life, their history and give them a presence, which had earlier been so cruelly denied.