Africa, Leeds West Indian Carnival and New Briggate histories

Transcript

(Ambient soundscape of people talking, drinks glasses clinking, engine noises from cars on a road, the notes of a saxophone player busking in the background, with a pulsing house music beat fading in and out, and a Caribbean-inspired carnival dance track also fading in and out)

Welcome to East Street Arts' Sounds of New Briggate, a podcast series hosted by local people with local stories that celebrate a unique and vibrant high street in the heart of Leeds… New Briggate. With each episode we spotlight a different aspect of life on New Briggate and its fascinating history. In this episode, we're joined by Joe Williams to explore Black history and the relationship with Leeds West Indian Carnival and New Briggate

Due to the social and historical content being discussed in this episode, there are references made to the transatlantic slave trade, outdated terms of reference around racial identity, themes of colonialism, and racism.

(*Joe Williams speaking*)

When tasked with delivering research into New Briggate and connections with Leeds' Black community - two polarising connected historic narratives posed an immediate challenge. Upon delving further into these opposing narratives, it turns out they helped to provide a context for a wider general local history whilst also highlighting the significance of the first Leeds West Indian Carnival, that processioned along New Briggate, on their way to Leeds Town Hall, the half-way point, where they would express their presence and return to Chapeltown. The first of the polemic narratives was the narrative of a hugely successful African-American Shakespearean tragedian actor named Ira Aldridge, who was very popular in mid-19th century Leeds and all over Britain. New Briggate has an obvious theatre scene that is still vibrant today. The second, more challenging narrative was a slave-owner buried in the church on New Briggate, who brought over an enslaved African from the West Indies, mentioned by Leeds historian Ralph Thorseby, in his early 18th century diary. This West Indian, who was born in the 1600's, is probably one of the oldest Africans buried in Yorkshire over the centuries. The challenge is, young people don't want this history imposed on them, they didn't create it and they've enough on their plate already with social media, social exclusion and peer pressure. The West Indian Community does not have the financial capacity, largely, to cater for their needs, like other communities might do for their young people. The community is working on it, but hopefully narratives like that of Ira Aldridge can assure them they have an innovative internal resource that can rise above the imposed degradation, no matter how hostile the environment may be perceived or experienced. But even one of the most celebrated of Africans in British history cannot avoid being tarnished with the British brush of degradation. So, in trying to tell the story of the significant role that Africans have played in Yorkshire's history, that culminated with thousands of mostly peoples of African descent and their allies taking over the central streets of Leeds with loud colours and infectious rhythms – it all fits in with the legacies and challenges toward understanding Leeds today.

(*Sound effect of an old fashioned early typewriter clicking away, fades out*)

The “LEEDS TIMES,” Saturday, March 1st, 1851:

“Mr. IRA ALDRIDGE the AFRICAN ROSCIUS, made his first appearance for the present season on Monday night, and played Othello, - an arduous character for any gentleman to essay, and one in every way calculated to test the quality of a performer. When we say that Mr. Aldridge played the part excellently, we know the thought will rise in many minds - “Aye, very well – for a Black.” The first time we witnessed his performance we were disposed to measure him by a different standard, and “make allowance,” as the phrase goes, for his being “only a negro;” but we had not got over the first act before we discovered that the Caucasian race has not monopolized all the talent which the world owns. Black as he is, Negro that he is, Mr. Aldridge not only proved himself a gentleman and a scholar, a man of refined feelings and acute perception; but something more – he so admirably pourtrayed the various passions which agitate the human breast, and so chastely delivered himself of the sentiments set down by the immortal bard, as to stand out in bold relief from all the other actors. And on Monday night last, we found that he had lost none of those qualities which have made him everywhere a favourite. His address to the senators, in the first act, was finely delivered, and the last scene was admirable and effective. There was something touchingly true, too, in his pourtrayal of the physical and mental prostration, the crushed and broken hopes and aspirations, of the once gallant and noble soldier, after the subtle poison of jealousy had done its work. At the close of the play, Mr. Aldridge was called before the curtain and briefly thanked the audience for their warm greetings. The play was very well put upon the stage; and the house densely crowded in every part.”

Some in today’s society might think this review a little ‘too woke’, perhaps? He was only a bloody actor, so what? Big deal! What’s the fuss about? Others may want to know more about this ‘Ira Aldridge’ and discover a first marriage to a lass from Northallerton, a Yorkshire stocking-weaver’s daughter; or how he came to be buried in Poland and his contributions toward helping to develop an English department at the University in Lodz. Instead of just focusing on one individual of exceptional qualities, this podcast will present a procession of personalities and historical statements that subvert the norm of degradation. Before that, excuse my manners – who am I, that’s talking to you?! Well, actually, I’m still answering that one, through no fault of my own… I was lied to about my personal history by my family, as well as my cultural heritage by the British schooling system and wider society. The name’s Golding, Joe Gol… well, actually, it’s Williams, Joe Williams. I’ve so much to thank both Mr Golding and Mr Williams for - a double paternal narrative of love, with an amazing Jamaican heroine at the centre. That’s my personal story, which, like my wider cultural history and heritage, was kept hidden from me and caused all kinds of unnecessary personal pain and confusion. Life eh?! I run Heritage Corner, who constantly curates and delivers the award-winning Leeds Black History Walk. 2024 is our 15th anniversary year of bringing communities together. Heritage Corner highlights the narratives of a shared humanity to challenge the legacies that built institutions based on the degradation of other human beings. The work of detangling dehumanisation and exclusion from institutions continues today. In 2022, I was invited to be part of the 150th anniversary of Roundhay Park through a commission from the company, here in Leeds, A Quiet Place, who I’d worked and learned with on several occasions. These kind of projects were uniquely inclusive in their delving into

Leeds' history and highlighting wide narratives of social diversity. This, I believe, is part of Leeds' tradition, which I will later portray through two local industrialists. The story of Roundhay Park would be told, with diverse narratives woven into the programme that incorporated engaging theatre and arts skills and activities for the public. For my section, I was fortunate to engage a young local multi-lingual poet, mentored for many years by established Leeds poet Khadijah Ibrahiim. Gina Tavares Manuel was only 24 at the time, and I had seen her perform in the native tongue of her forbears from Angola and Cape Verde. There were so many coincidences in our creative partnership, including research into Cape Verde highlighting it as an important refuelling spot for British tobacco traders en route to or from Virginia, a British slave colony. Roundhay had a wealthy merchant family whose tobacco came from slave plantations in Virginia and there were many other such manufacturing traders in the town too. Gina was also then a resident of Roundhay and we created the role of a local resident writing reflections in the park and making connections to nature and her ancestral homeland. Cape Verde was Europe's first slave-based sugar colony, captured by the Portuguese in the 15th century. Gina's words were beautiful, reflecting her surroundings and her bright spirit. Many people of migrant heritage from the African diaspora, are unaware of their ancestral connections to Britain, or more particularly to Leeds. Gina wrote herself and her migrant mother's status into the history of Leeds in two tongues, out of the five languages she spoke, including Japanese. West Indians who created the Leeds West Indian Carnival were not able to be so direct, they didn't have the evidence that the next generation have unearthed. Gina was a pioneer too; ready to represent the voice of invisible contributors to Britain's economy. And toward that end, Gina, myself and other workers in Chapeltown, created Heritage Crew, which hopes to engage young people in Leeds' heritage, and the wider reference to the international economy. We have sadly been deprived of this voice, from Gina. A great loss to Leeds' creative future. Gina unexpectedly and sadly joined the ancestors in early January, 2024. This podcast is dedicated to our Gina, and her family, particularly her brothers, who she loved with abundance. A force of light, touching and inspiring so many. Asé.

(*Portuguese Folk Waltz fades in and out*)

(*Joe speaking*)

So, we've heard about Ira Aldrige, and now we're going to find out about John Lewis, Samuel Kershaw's servant, and I would like to introduce, err, a local researcher, who's dug up some amazing stuff around Black history here in Yorkshire, and his name, is Danny Friar. Hi, Danny.

Hi, Joe.

Hi.

Thank you for having me.

Thank you, and err, we'll look forward to some of the information, err, that you have to share with us. Erm, we're looking at, erm, the intelligence of Africans and how it's mis-represented or excluded in history, and we're looking at the Leeds West Indian Carnival, we've just talked

about Ira Aldrige a little bit, err, and you know, all of Carnival and Ira Aldrige arel connected with New Briggate, and so of course, is John Lewis. Erm, how, how did we meet?

We met in May 2017.

Yes.

There was a social media post that asked for researchers that were interested in researching Carnival history.

Yes.

And I sent you probably an overly long email.

And I thought, this person is very passionate, very enthusiastic. Let's get him on board,

Because I really wanted to be-

Yes.

-a part of it.

And, and I know you said that, erm, your mother was, err, pregnant with you in her tummy and she attended Carnival

Carnival, yeah.

And you've been hooked ever since! As a baby!

Yeah, I felt the rhythm in the womb, and that was it.

Yeah, and, and on that project, we learned a lot about the history of Leeds West Indian Carnival, how, erm, and, and particularly how it relates to Saint Kidds, because most of the people, err, from the West Indies in Leeds, are from Sint Kidds, they're the majority, err, population here and, err, that it was introduced from Trinidad.

Yeah, so what we think of as Caribbean Carnival-

Yes.

-is from Trinidad, In Saint Kidds and Nevis, they have something similar called ‘Christmas Sports’.

Yes. Yes.

Which is more where they go round to house…

House to house.

Village to village, play mass…

Performing, yeah, and playing mass and performing and…

Yeah.

…music.

And then, that, that project was organised by Susan Pitter, and there was a great exhibition at the Tetley, and it was a wonderful project. Erm, so going back in history now, just to represent, err, Africa's intelligence, I look at two golden ages. Err, in Nubia, there was the 25th dynasty of Nubia, which was all Nubian pharaohs, who ran for close to a hundred years. It's not a matter of comparing them with the Greeks and the Romans, and who was best, it's just that we have no representation of that to show that Africans led very structured civilizations. And the second golden age, which is, err, coming up, we'll mention Mansa Musa, erm, of West Africa during medieval times who was the richest man in the world ever, and built universities. But here there was misrepresentation and especially through minstrelsy, which was the top show for over a hundred years. And, err, you live in…?

I love in Armley.

You live in Armley. You found some information in regard to that in Armley?

In, erm, yeah, so in West Leeds they seem to have more minstrel shows than any other part of Leeds. Armley, Bramley, Pudsey, and they had, err, they put on shows with professional minstrels.

Yes.

And they put on shows with amateur minstrels from those areas.

Yes.

Including a troupe of female minstrels.

Yes.

Performed.

So explain these minstrels, what, what…?

So minstrel shows, were usually white performers.

Yes.

If they came from America, they could sometimes include Black performers.

Yes.
But they would ‘black up’ their faces…

Including the Black performers!

Including the Black performers.

To exaggerate their… features?

Features.

Shall we say, yep.

And they would perform in a… caricature… way, erm…

Yes. So, stereotypes?

Stereotypical, comedy, version of African-Americans, and…

Yes.

Yeah. And they would sing songs and..

Yes.

Yeah. So it’s like, a stereotype of an African who's seen as, you know, licentious?

Yep.

Yeah. Yeah. Umm, and were there any special troops that stood out for you?

Erm…

You mentioned…

There was, there was the female, the all, there was an all female troupe which I’d never come across before.

I've never come across that either. An all female troupe of minstrels? Wow.

Yeah, in West Leeds, performing in West Leeds in the 1890s.

Yes, I've seen adverts for Armley, for minstrels-

Yeah.

-and they would use the N-word very brazenly.. “We're looking for ‘N-word’, umm, to perform as minstrels”, and it was quite…

Well, what's surprising is, the local newspapers, Yorkshire Evening Post in particular, used the N-word into the 20th Century.

Yes.

And there's even an article that they published, I think, in the 1880s?

Yes.

Where they say, “we can't use the N-word anymore”.

Well!

Then they continue to use it.

Mhm. Yes, ok… in rebellious, ‘anti-woke’ spirit. Yeah. Yeah. Ah, ok. And was there objections? Where the voices speaking out against minstrelsy?

Erm, not as such. There was a few voices who thought it was low entertainment, but nobody was saying, really, that it was racist or wrong. There was people who were allies. There was, for example, there was a missionary.

Yes.

Who travelled to Barbados in the 1870s, 1880s, when he came back to England, he came to Leeds.

Yes.

Erm, in the 1890s, he spoke at the missionary, err, not a missionary, sorry, he spoke at the, erm, Methodist Chapel in Armley, which is just around the corner from where I live. And basically, he said that the West Indian Africans, which is what he called them, rather than the N-word.

Yes.

Were just as intelligent as White Europeans would be under the same circumstances. So in other words, he was saying that if the Africans in the West Indies were given access to education and materials, books and so on, that they would be just as intelligent as the White Europeans were. And he was saying this in an area that had more minstrel shows then any other part of Leeds.

And so did he have something to say about that?

Well, he was essentially saying, you know, when you're mocking these people, you're wrong. You've got it wrong.

Yes. And so we have this legacy of degradation in terms of representation of Africans. What do you think could be done about that today? Better representation in terms of positive figures from history?

Yeah, definitely. I think what we need to do is, we need to integrate African History, into ‘History’.

Yes.

We still need a Black History Month, but we should be getting to a place where we don't need one.

Yes.

Where, when we're teaching children in schools about the Romans, we should be teaching them not just about Julius Caesar, but the Ivory Bangle Lady.

Yes.

When we teach children about the Tudors, we should be teaching them not just about Henry the Eighth, but about John Chandler, who was Henry the Eighth’s Black trumpeter.

Yeah. And he was paid to ask for a raise, and he got the raise.

Yep!

So that's amazing. So we, we can turn narratives around. Now, the Leeds historian, err, Ralph Thoresby, made an entry into his diary in the year 17…

1708.

1708. And there, there's a surprising entry, isn’t there?

Yeah, he, he wrote that he went to the Leeds Parish Church and among the people there was his cousin, ‘Kershaw's Black’.

And you've done some more research, and found out who this ‘Kershaw’ is?

Who was Cousin Kershaw?

Yes.

And who was his, quote-unquote, Black?

Yes. So his, his, his ‘Black’ was, his, erm, servant.

Yes.

Who we found out was baptised when he arrived in England. He arrived in England sometime around 1706.

So this means he was born in the 1600s?

Possibly.

Yes. Yes.

I mean, he could have been younger than six.

Oh, I see. When he arrived, he could have been a boy.

Yes… there's another young boy who came from India around the same time, 1720s…

Wow.

Who was baptised in York. And he was three years old.

Right.

He was baptised.

Yes.

Which is really heartbreaking to think that he'd been brought that far away from his family.

Yes.

And he was baptised in Winter…

Yes.

In a coach. I've been to the church,

And he was probably just a… fashion accessory.

Yeah, he definitely was. But back to John Lewis.

Yes.

So he arrived, we think, around 1706.

Yes.

And the reason I say that, is because he got baptised in 1707. To be baptised, you had to have an understanding of the Bible and the system of the, the Baptism. And, erm, Ralph Thoresby, he writes in his, erm, journal that the, the family who baptised him had gone to

great pains to instruct him in the Christian religion. So that would take some time, especially if there is a language barrier.

Yes.

Which there could possibly have been.

Yes. No, not if you came from the West Indies. If he was from Jamaica, is it?

Yes. So we think he was from Jamaica.

Yes.

But…He could have…

Yes, he could have still had an African language, perhaps?

Yeah.

Right. Okay. But yep, we know that for sure, but, you know, we'll go with these questions.

It's a possibility, yeah.

Yet. Yeah. Still, too, if he was a young boy…

Yes.

To instruct him in understanding the Bible…

Yes.

Would take, at least a couple of months, he w- he was baptised at the beginning of 1707.

Yes, so we can take it that Samuel Kershaw was quite successful in his plantation business, cuz he's buried in St John's Church. And it's not really for poor people that, that, that the cemetery there in the courtyard. So, we don't know much about John Lewis. He doesn't have a voice. So. Well, thanks very much for this, err, discussion, Danny, and all this information. I'm going to try now to give John Lewis a voice.

(*Joe speaks in a Jamaican accent, embodying the spirit of John Lewis in the graveyard of St John's Church on New Briggate)*

"This graveyard has seen so much over all these years. The cheapness of slave-grown cotton in America allowed for innovation with mechanisation, which the early residents here, in this cemetery, did not have access to, but they did well. The worthy merchants of Yorkshire did much to repair the land after, after… Well, after dat William the first… what he did to the people and the land is unspeakable. Near obliteration for rebelling against Norman rule. The invaders, eventually laid down infrastructure, organisation and a mission, that

would see the rise of impressive cathedrals and abbeys, and take young men off to crusade in foreign lands. The hospitaliers, that you call St. John's Ambulance today, well, that came out of the Crusade experience, and many other things. New worlds and markets awaited Yorkshire's entrepreneurial spirit to rebuild what was destroyed, starting from new.Surviving Anglo-Saxon families joined Norman aspirations to build a unique society and in 1207 the town of Leeds was made official. We arrived. I say we, for all my life's work was in service to England, even before my Jamaican birth. My African forbears survived that middle passage and literally went to work, non-stop, for the rest of their lives, for Britain. I may not be buried in this graveyard, here at St. John's Church, but my master is. He held plantations in the West Indies, like others – not all were as successful as he. I observed that faith goes a long way, alongside hard work and intelligence. I come here, to this graveyard, because like to stand by the wall, that allows you to look down on New Briggate below. From an increasing flow of mainly horses, carts and stage-coaches, to omnibuses, trams and motor cars. Large lorries, taxis, motorcycles and now electric scooters! Pedestrians may have changed, but their behaviour is largely the same, well, that is… until the arrival of the West Indians! So many memories flooded back. I've seen many West Indians and Africans pass through, and some have resided here over the centuries, but I had never seen so many in one mass, playing mass, as they call 'Carnival'. I never got to see Emancipation in the West Indies, but I heard all about it. Rebellion was on the lips of most plantation workers when I was there and we were also made to watch the punishment for those who were caught. Being brought to England, to be the house servant of our master, to live in a better life than my parents, and even many citizens of this town, Leeds, I witnessed the poverty and rage behind the raw ambition of these people. Whilst a similar brutality existed in my ancestral homeland, both African and Arabic slavers – but, an' is a big but - being a slave for life is completely different. Europeans introduced chattel slavery to the world, not only were you a slave for life, but for generations, after generation, after generation of hopelessness. I can only imagine the scene in the West Indies upon emancipation. All over the West Indies and America they resisted and earned their right to freedom. But, it may come as a surprise that a citizen of Leeds played a strong and direct role in that, too. Yes, Wilberforce wasn't the only one campaigning, bless him, he was really more concerned with the reputation of Britain and he was right, so many Briton's won't even talk about this history, for shame.We'll meet Quaker chemist and abolitionist, Thomas Harvey, later. In 1967, the streets of Leeds echoed to the sound of the steel drum as the first Leeds West Indian Carnival paraded past this church on their way to the Leeds Town Hall, filled with the celebratory spirit of freedom, the energy of defiance against hostility and a resilience to access what their enslaved forbears could not. I joined in, yes, I did! It was wonderful. No adult could see me, at least I don't think so, but I know a few children did – they probably thought I was just in some strange costume. Through this carnival, these children were learning about the rebellious spirit of Nanny, Cudjoe, Bussa, Sam Sharp and many others who fought directly against slavery. I believe if I was there, I would have joined them too. Freedom is something you have to be prepared to give your life for. Your Luddites, here, in Yorkshire, witnessed new machinery transforming their way of life, their culture, their heritage, and sought to do something about it – they attacked and destroyed all the new machinery they could get their hands on, and they too, were brutally punished. Yet, they helped lay the foundation for social justice, just like those resisting oppression everywhere. When Leeds was a small woollen market town, and Liverpool just a tiny fishing village, who could've forseen the transformation that would take place through transatlantic trade? Harewood House, our local grand stately home, landscaped by Capability Brown, are open about their connections to

the West Indian chattel slave plantation system. The house was built on the profits from sugar grown on slave plantations in Barbados, Trinidad and Jamaica. The family today have gone out of their way to help tell that story and create opportunities for West Indian communities to be proud of and express their ‘higher heritage’. In the 19th century, ‘Factory King’, Richard Oastler, campaigned for local children’s working hours and told the Leeds Mercury that those who ‘shed tears for negroes were ignoring the child slaves under their noses’. He was right in that, can’t argue ‘dere, but not the either with us or either with them tone. That’s like our polemic political posturing today, divisive. Both the Factory Act and the Emancipation Act passed around the same time, largely because nationalism, here in Britain, was used as leverage… not a good look to keep child slavery going in Britain whilst giving Blacks freedom in the West indies! But, it was the birth of manipulative ‘whataboutism’ you might say. In Yorkshire you had your staunch whigs, conservatives and aristocratic entrepreneurs needing to repair expensive properties and invest in their children’s futures and cared not about the morals of their methods, at home or abroad. Some were immensely successful, but not all, many took risks and failed spectacularly, to be forgotten about. There were also those whose initial investments in transatlantic plantation goods were reinvested into other industries, as the Guardian Newspaper recently learned of their origins in profits from slave grown cotton. The Leeds Mercury, surprisingly, an abolitionist paper, has a similar narrative, ironically. Then there were dissenters, many industrialists, who were also Quakers, Unitarians, Methodists and other conscience based denominations of Christianity. The original breakaway from Catholicism is evidenced by Kirkstall Abbey, here in Leeds, where Britain gained economic independence from Rome for the first time in nearly a thousand years. The small market town was fueled by the wool from the Monk’s keeping sheep. This Norman economic system needed a boost that the Catholic Church didn’t want to change, it needed to keep Britain and other colonies small – so they decreed that only Spain and Portugal could profit from the so-called ‘New World’. Well, if King Henry VIII hadn’t destroyed the Catholic infrastructure, then Spain’s wealth and power would introduce mandatory Spanish speaking as Britain’s main language. So, instead Britain turned to gain its own wealth from Africa and other places, to remain independent and secure its borders by building a navy that it didn’t yet have. Africa’s gold helped to do this – sparking local trade, industry and cultural transformation. To do this, Britain had to build a new identity, which they modelled on Greece and Rome. Any other influence was kept hidden in plain sight. For example, in Leeds, one industrialist built a factory modelled on an Egyptian temple that was built by the Greeks, and another industrialist, around the same time, wrote that Greeks and Romans learned from Black Egyptians – imagine that! Ooooh! Controversial. So who were these blokes? So… in the blue corner! We have John Marshall, once of Water Lane, Flax Manufacturer, building a monument in tribute to Horus, one of the main Egyptian deities, but in recognition of the Greek ingenuity, as they built it, or rebuilt it, the Edfu Temple that his factory was based on… And in the red corner! We have Wilson Armistead, also once of Water Lane, South Leeds; a Quaker Mustard Manufacturer, founder of the Leeds Anti-slavery Society, who, in 1848 wrote a book, ‘A Tribute to the Negro’ recognising that Black Africans created a society that is the real foundation of European arts and science. Imagine! A White man writing a book about Black people having a successful society! How radical! Contenders… get ready to rumble! H-hold… on, no, wait… we have news just in, they were both abolitionists! This is not as polemic as it sounds. So both things can be true? This was all before the carving up of Africa, in 1884, where the empire would not entertain such liberalism. But we’re getting ahead of ourselves. So, it was cotton that fuelled the industrial revolution here in Leeds, it was cheap, plentiful and profits could be fed into

production development, unlike wool, which didn't have that kind of power because no matter how low, workers in the wool industry had to be paid. Slaves growing cotton didn't. Wool benefitted from the mechanisation of cotton, and wool soon found it's power legs through transatlantic markets – everyone wanted British wool – well, Brits sent all over the empire did, they got the best. The roughest of blankets and clothing, made from waste and scrap wool, like shoddy, was sold to plantation owners to keep their savages warm and cosy… in the hot midday sun… working long hours, iitching, for empire. Generation after generation. Woollen and engineering goods going out, plantation goods coming in, to be manufactured and shipped out again. In the 19th century, designer Sir William Morris, passionately objected to the practices of a British Empire that forbade subjects in colonies from making their own textiles, as there were factories in Britain in need of contracts. Morris knew that ancient traditions would be lost forever, techniques that had not yet been documented. The local economies of colonies, in the world's largest empire, were decimated by instant greed. Only racial supremacy could justify such destructive behaviour and nationalism would take care of the rest, to subjugate so-called 'others' and make more profit. It's worth remembering that Britain had no experience of having an empire before, none. However, being vulnerable to invaders throughout history, failure was not an option. First came piracy of Spanish and Portuguese stolen goods, including slaves, gold and indigo, teh dye for textiles… then through the 1591 Battle of Tondibi, other Europeans gained access to West Africa's gold, too. Backing up.. Back in the 14th century the legendary Mansa Musa, valued at around £400 billion in today's money, which makes him the richest man the world has ever known, Mansa Musa built mosques, that were effectively universities, in places such as Timbuktu. At the times of the Ghana, Mali and Songhai kingdoms, from around the 9th to 16th centuries, an Islamic influenced empire, larger than Europe, needed nothing at all that Europe had. All three empires manufactured goods and traded with different parts of the world, but immorally, their real downfall was mistakenly increasing their reliance on their system of slavery as a tool for economic development. Europeans were then gifted an infrastructure to move into, exploit and build on for centuries. In Timbuktu, despite being wealthy with gold and salt, the number one source of income was once books. The university of Timbuktu reputedly had up to 25,000 students. Many European scholars acquired lost ancient Greek and Roman texts written in Arabic, which during the Dark Ages became the source of European enlightenment. The crash of West Africa's golden age led to fractions and warfares, all to avoid being enslaved. Europe swept up. Britain gained its first coin with gold in it, which helped to stabilise the British economy. This coin was called the Guinea, which is where some of the gold came from on West Africa's gold coast, the coin also contained gold looted from Spain and Portugal. Gold also created the foundation for Britain's new colonies. Africans were easily acquired to populate plantations in the America's. The foundation stone of the original Leeds Infirmary on Infirmary Street was laid by the founder of the Lascelles sugar dynasty, connections to the Yorkshire Penny Bank and arts buildings around the region point to how West Indians helped to grow Leeds' cultural development. Industry and transport blossomed alongside this growth, often with direct investments from the profits of transatlantic trade. The experience of West Indians is part of a shared heritage, there are rich stories that can convey our shared humanity and thankfully, there are those keen to tell some of the stories of how Leeds transformed from a town to a city with the contributions of millions of people associated with the British Empire in foreign lands. I recently followed a walk by Joe Williams as he commenced at the Town Hall on the Headrow. Of course, I was quite familiar with what he had to say and glad that someone was saying what needs to be heard…

“The four white lions”, he said, “outside Leeds Town Hall, are eroding with pollution”. And he raised the question, “where in England could lions be found?” Hmm, that is a good question, I never thought of that. Why are lions so popular here if they have no history here? Interesting. Perhaps it’s Biblical, most likely, the book of Daniel perhaps? We know Ethiopian rulers held lions in their palaces and will learn later about the son of an Emperor of Ethiopia who came to Victorian Leeds. “Now, if you enter the building from the front, admire the impressive pillared atrium and look up, you will see, written in gold, the words, ‘Europe, America, Asia and Africa’, this…”, said Joe, “... testifies to Leeds’ expanding markets for its manufactured goods”. Joe reflects on his parents and other family members who were invited to help to keep many of these industries going as part of the Windrush generation from the West Indies. His mother was a seamstress, his real dad, a bus conductor, and his step-dad a master carpenter. A few of his brothers initially worked in engineering, until they got tired of training local lads to step over them with promotion. Joe also reflects on the hostile environment that vexed his parents, as their humanity was degraded by people who had no place doing so, but were socially enabled to perform supremacy by default. The Windrush Generation were, for many families, the first generation of West Indians to have the opportunity, in several centuries, to earn a decent week’s wage for a week’s work. West Indians are only just now beginning to build wealth, which is difficult to explain to the younger generation.

Moving from the atrium through to the large hall with a good sized stage and a large pipe-organ, and imagine, a group of African American singers being the first to introduce Europe to authentic gospel music. Songs like ‘Swing Low, Sweet Chariot’ was adopted into British culture as The Fisk Jubilee Singers raised funds for their university in Tennessee for those recently emancipated from slavery. In fact, returning several times on their tour, by popular demand, you may be surprised to hear that they raised more money in Yorkshire than anywhere in Europe and named a room in their university after William Wilberforce in gratitude. Well, there goes that stereotype about stingy Yorkshire folk!

Standing outside again, on the famous steps, looking past the insurance firms that would have insured transatlantic voyages and other goods, Park Square is highlighted as a place where merchants and other professionals lived, including a merchant who like many other merchants in the town, had his tobacco came from a Virginia slave plantation – generating employment and pay for local folk, benefitting from the unpaid, for centuries. Apply that also to cotton, sugar, indigo and so many other plantation goods, and it all adds up to an immense contribution. Imagine after all that free labour, you also fight for Britain in several wars since the 18th century, and respond positively when Britain calls you to help rebuild after World War Two.

Nigerian-born abolitionist, Olaudah Equiano, fought at sea for Britain in the Seven Year War against France. Looking over to the Leeds Central Library, it is also pointed out that there is an original first edition copy of Olaudah Equiano’s autobiography, as well as a fellow African-born 18th century writer, Phyllis Wheatley, the first Black woman to be published in Britain. Equiano wrote a published letter to the Leeds Mercury in 1791, thanking the good people of Yorkshire for their efforts in the fight against slavery. Yorkshire was represented at the very first Society for Abolition meeting in London, campaigning against slavery in the

West Indies. Then, in the 19th century, the Town Hall held meetings for the Leeds Anti-Slavery Society, campaigning against slavery in America.

Over at the Leeds Museum, in nearby Millennium Square, you'll find a portrait of the tenacious African American abolitionist Frederick Douglass, who spoke in Leeds in 1846 and 1859. Because his speeches were printed locally, in the Leeds Mercury, they made other papers too. So, Douglass left America a fugitive slave, but returned an international statesman. On the third floor of the museum you will discover an Egyptian mummy, but not just any mummy, Nesyamun was a priest. What religion would he have been a priest of, in Egypt? It doesn't say in the display, however the Museum's bookshop does have written material that is quite informative.

Joe tells a story of how a woman walked out of one of his talks because she thought it was 'woke' to be linking Egypt with Africa! Imagine! Where else is it? "They're stealing our history, too!", she said, storming out disgusted. Institutions are between a rock and a hard place – still building and contextualising their own history whilst trying to respond to decolonising connections. Nesyamun practised the same faith system as neighbours Nubia and regardless of their relationship with Egypt, which was more multicultural, it is essential that there is representation of an evidenced-based ancient African civilisation that contradicts the exclusion of Africans from history due to slavery and colonialism. Many immoral things took place in the name of empire which has, on its own volition, brought shame to the city. Religious organisations cannot judge and the city's Cathedral has hosted the funerals of both murdered migrant David Oluwale and disgraced DJ Jimmy Saville. Both cases highlight systemic corruption that has popped the bubble of imperial perfection, demonstrating its damage to individuals and society. We are all grateful to those who investigate and publicise these narratives so the atrocities committed are never repeated. Joe says he is proud of Leeds and its welcoming of migrants. The gold pillar boxes commemorating the success of Leeds athletes, includes one for female boxer Nicola Adams, openly gay, and of West Indian heritage…how far we have come. However, let us keep exploring how we got here.

Crossing the Headrow to Park Row, we find number 18, where above the first floor is an impressive frieze, telling the story of Leeds trading with the world. Whilst this was installed at the turn of the 20th century, the African is represented in a loincloth, stooped over barrels of cotton, looking dutifully up at his 'master'. This is the only full-bodied representation of an African in the city. At least it subtly acknowledges the role of cotton in Leeds' history and the industrial revolution. On Commercial Street, we hear the story of the aforementioned Thomas Harvey. A hero in every way. He travelled to the West Indies to witness the atrocities of the 'apprenticeship system', which proved more brutal than slavery itself. Along with Joseph Sturge of Birmingham, they brought over a witness to testify about the atrocities of the apprenticeship system and it was brought to an immediate end in 1838. The Quaker abolitionist, Thomas Harvey, who had a chemist shop on Commercial Street, helped to coach 18 year old Jamaican, James Williams, in his testimony to Parliament. How many of us would travel for months to protest against wrongdoing to fellow human beings?

Walking up Lands Lane, toward the Headrow again, there is a blue plaque to Pablo Fanque, circus proprietor and celebrated performer, the first known circus owner of African heritage in Britain. He was second generation, and light in skin colour, but still identified in his lifetime for his colour. Born in 1810, he was buried in Leeds in 1871, due to a tragedy in 1848, when

his wife died during a seating collapse onto the box office where she was counting the night's takings. The plaque mentions nothing of the significance of his talent and popularity, but does strongly suggest that his circus led to the death of his wife. No mention of the inquest that resolved him of any blame. With shared heritage, it is important for there to be input from both sides, where possible, so such oversights can be avoided. Sadly, believe it or not, the worst culprits can be in the arts, who believe themselves to be so liberal that to talk about systemic racism is taken personally and they move heaven and earth to ensure they make their mark as anti-racists by 'not seeing colour', not seeing history purposefully hidden or the degradation that needs to be challenged, either. By not working in consultation, the traps of centuries of institutional and systemic racism are innocently fallen into. Pablo's wife, Susannah, was also a talented performer and the backbone of Pablo Fanque's Circus Royal's success.

As stated, Joe has worked with 'A Quiet Word' and many other artists in Leeds who have generously provided him with a space to research, experiment and create. Must be a scary thing to put your head above the parapet to point out something that is wrong. As a teenager he was rejected from a successful audition because the director presumed there were no black people in 18th century Britain. Joe's headmaster corrected him and Joe was put back into the cast. Turns out the play's writer, Richard Brinsley Sheridan was an abolitionist. For over 40 years, Joe has been waiting to see the historical context of Black people in Britain presented regularly on the British stage, but this has not been forthcoming. He did his bit in 2005 with a play about Frederick Douglass, set in Leeds, at the then West Yorkshire Playhouse, now the Leeds Playhouse. 'Runaway Diamonds' was brought back in 2007 and again double toured due to popular demand. The Leeds Black History Walk was created in 2009 and eventually, the University of Leeds attained their first Black British History course in 2021. It is worth fighting for your humanity. If people only know about their degradation, then their failure becomes an expectation to themselves and those around them, generation after generation. Whereas, if there is researched evidence on Africa's contributions to arts, sciences and economy, then stories of dignity and humanity are needed to contradict centuries of degrading misrepresentation. Many artists visiting Leeds had such a mission in mind, including Louis Armstrong and many other Jazz artists that plays on New Briggate.

Crossing the Headrow one last time, we walk past my namesake, Lewis'. The store John Lewis has now moved down to Eastgate, but Joe recalls his seamstress mother taking him to Schofields for yards of material, followed by a trek through Lewis', before heading down to the market for the big food shop. If he was lucky, him say, he get fish and chips as reward for carrying heavy bags and not crying and complaining like a baby. OK, maybe he didn't want me to share that with you, but, I'll pass back to Joe, now."

(*Joe speaks again in his usual voice*)

Yes. Thanks John, yeah thanks a lot for that. Appreciate it. No, seriously! It was interesting to hear how you contextualise this history as something that is relevant to today. Unless we can, as a city, challenge misinformation and misrepresentation, generations will keep falling into that hole of degradation. Thanks again, John. Right, err, well, we're at the final section of this podcast now that we are back onto New Briggate and our John Lewis is standing looking over the wall at the city passing him by. We'll stay on the theme of degradation and go right back to where we started, with Shakespearean tragedian, Ira Aldridge. The Assembly

Rooms of New Briggate was just one of many venues that hosted minstrel shows, where white people would show that they were better ambassadors of Black people and their culture than Black people themselves. A whole industry flourished for 150 years as the number one form of entertainment in Britain in theatres, radio and television. When young Prince Alamayu passed away in Leeds, aged just 18 in 1879, one of his obituaries in a Leeds paper was next to an advert for Tute's Minstrels, where the 'N-word' is used to describe the performers, who were white. It was difficult for Black actors to go on the stage if they were not prepared to black up and this was the way the British public built a relationship with Black peoples. They did not understand the ancient connections to Black people's expressions and saw no logic in movement, songs and dances that once connected large communities to the rhythms of the Universe. Instead they were mocked globally, exploited and discriminated against generation after generation. Writers like Equiano and Phyllis Wheatley challenged the well promoted theory of Africans lacking intelligence, but only reached small audiences. Acts like Ira Aldridge, Pablo Fanque and the Fisk Jubilee Singers informed a wider circle of supporters of African humanity, but the public at large, the legacy of slavery and colonialism was stereotypes that have been stopped, but not broken down to take out the sting for those Africans wishing to explore their history and heritage, only to find degradation – which then leads to self-exclusion from social engagement. Irish and Black communities in America created new dance forms for the stage in the 19th century. Jazz musicians of the 1930's connected with Leeds' Jewish community, just like how Jewish communities in America helped to promote jazz as a new artform. These artists played on New Briggate, in clubs under the watchful eye of John Lewis opposite. New Briggate was also known for jewellery and pawn shops and one can't help but think of the jewels from Africa, diamonds and gold that found their way into Leeds. Slave- grown cotton kickstarted the industrial revolution in Leeds, as mentioned, to be replaced by wool in its ascendancy as Lancashire eventually dominated cotton. Wool production benefited from the mechanisation of cotton but didn't stop there. New machines were needed to make other machines and engineering prowess in Leeds grew along with their reputation, at the industry's foundation, was coal. Yorkshire miners provided the resource for miners around the British empire – the engines created from smelting iron with coal, provided tracks and carts to extract minerals of all descriptions for European colonisers. Leeds won large contracts when Africa was carved up by Europe in the 1880s, contributing to Leeds transforming from a town to a city.
The competing greed of Europeans could lead to the destruction of societies and the dispersion of communities that would gain the status of migrants, to be resented and exploited for more generations to come. So when John witnessed a procession of carnival revellers passing his master's church, where he likes to hang out, he witnessed the descendants of his ancestors laying claim to the streets of Leeds in protest against abuse, exploitation, exclusion and demanding their rights as human beings, by filling the streets of Leeds with vibrant colours and sounds never heard before here, but strongly connected to the growth of Leeds throughout its economic history.

(*Carnival dance melody fades in and out)*

(Ambient soundscape of people talking, drinks glasses clinking, engine noises from cars on a road, the notes of a saxophone player busking in the background, which fades in and out)

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