Until recently the contribution made by Africans and Caribbean service personnel during the First World War has largely been untold. In popular language, it has been airbrushed from the historical landscape. I believe the Centenary Commemoration of the Armistice 2018 has provided an opportunity to address this omission.

The Research Project
The project was commissioned by Churches Together in England in 2014 in order to make up for decades of historical neglect. The Heritage Lottery Fund contributed £62,000 for which we are grateful. The aim of the project is primarily to educate and inform current and future generations about this missing strand in WWI history, a subject widely taught in schools across Britain. More importantly, I hope to engender a sense of pride among young black children about the contributions made by their ancestors. The project produced a travelling exhibition which is available on loan to schools, universities, churches and community groups. My role was as a member of the Steering Group.

The aim of this paper is to offer an opportunity to learn more and to recognise the part played by African and Caribbean servicemen. It is partly based on the exhibition titled ‘They Also Served’ as well as additional research I carried out separately. It will explore the recruitment process, the experiences and general involvement of people of colour.

What the paper is not about
It would be impossible to detail within this short paper the contributions made to the war effort by all people of colour. Therefore it will not address the contributions made by Chinese, Nepalese, Sikhs or Indian servicemen. There has been some work done separately on the Indian Army and the Great War, however, I must acknowledge that India sent a number divisions and brigades. Indian soldiers, many of whom were Sikhs were allowed
into the front line at the very beginning of the war at the Battle of Ypres and bore the brunt of many a German offensive. By 1919 India had provided 1.5million volunteers.

**The Recruitment of Caribbean Volunteers 1914**

When Caribbean volunteers, including men from Panama, British Honduras and British Guyana attempted to enlist with the British Army at the outbreak of war, they were categorically refused from joining. Historian Ross Coulthart wrote in his book “The Lost Tommies” and I quote: ‘The British Army’s Manual of Military Law stated any negro or person of colour was an alien: furthermore, aliens would never be allowed to hold a rank higher than a non-commissioned soldier”.

However, the Manual tied itself in knots by also stating ‘serving black men were entitled to all the rights and privileges of a natural born British soldier’. This led to an erratic and often inconsistent recruitment strategy. I would add, it also failed to acknowledge that Caribbean people living under British rule were legitimate British subjects. (Does this remind you of a similar argument earlier in 2018 regarding the Windrush debacle?)

What was the thinking behind this claim that Caribbean volunteers should be refused from participating at the start of the war? A senior War Office Clerk was quoted as saying that ‘coloured men would be most dangerous to the efficiency of operations because they lacked the ability to be efficient soldiers…we should discourage coloured volunteers’.

So why this narrow-minded policy when two centuries before Britain recruited enslaved Africans during the war of American Independence (1775-1783). At that time, the West India Regiment was formed to help defend George III’s interest in the American colony. According to John Ellis’ book “Black Soldiers in the British Army” during the Napoleonic wars, former African slaves were not only recruited but some were promoted to positions of authority over white men.
How were Caribbean Volunteers deployed

At the outbreak of World War I in 1914, there were approximately 1.7 million people living in British West Indian colonies many of whom had a strong sense of loyalty to their King and the ‘mother country’. Irrespective of the deep-seated prejudice of War Office officials, a number of Caribbean men determined to join the struggle, travelled at their own expense across the Atlantic to enlist with regiments around the Britain. (More about this later on).

With huge losses on the Western Front, King George V intervened with the following appeal: “it was wrong to continue to ignore the offers from the West Indians to participate in the struggle”.

This appeal had a profound impact on recruitment. The War Office was forced to recant and in 1915 the British West Indies Regiment (BWIR) was formed at Seaford, Sussex in England. This regiment was made up of 11 battalions comprising over 15,600 soldiers of whom 66% came from Jamaica.

Since Caribbean volunteers were considered by the War Office as incapable of being deployed as combatants, they were enlisted in the Labour Corps and given dangerous labouring jobs such as digging trenches, loading ammunition, transporting essential equipment and supplies. Coulthart wrote: “The Labour Corps was vital to the war, with many men, equipment and supplies to be transported. Mostly the old, unfit and foreigners were placed in this unit. Their work may not be glamorous but can be summed up in four words – ‘No labour No battle!’” As the war progressed and, with the growing loss of British lives, change came for some Caribbean servicemen. They soon found themselves fighting alongside men from every nation. And, they certainly proved they were more than capable of trench warfare.

Among the many Caribbean volunteers were the young Marcus Garvey and Norman Manley both of whom later became influential politicians and National heroes of Jamaica. Upon being promoted to Corporal, Norman Manley wrote about the violent prejudice he encountered from others of the same rank who resented him sharing status with them. But he recalled the great affection that grew up between him and the Cockney soldiers.
Another young recruit was my uncle, Charles B Thomas, born in Trinidad in 1899. Documents held in the Trinidad & Tobago archives revealed that he joined the British Expeditionary Force and was sent to France. He served there with the 8th Battalion until he was shot in the right leg and returned to the island. He disappeared for a while from his family unable to speak about his experiences, as so many British servicemen who felt that people back home will never understand. In Sebastian Faulkes’ popular novel “Birdsong” Captain Stephen Wraysford said: ‘When it is over we will go quietly among the living and we will not tell them...We will seal what we have seen in the silence of our hearts and no words will reach us’. Nothing more is known of my uncle’s military activity.

Caribbean troops saw active duty in most theatres of war, fighting in European battlefields of France, Belgium and Italy, in Egypt, Mesopotamia and East Africa, Palestine and Jordan. As all servicemen, Caribbean men suffered frostbite and trench foot, they were contaminated with lice, were gassed and were blown up. But yet, they could not become commanding officers. Only white men could command the British West Indian Regiment. One of these officers, Lt Col Charles Wood-Hill described Caribbean troops ‘as some of the most loyal and devoted members of the Empire, with a great desire to participate in the struggle’. (Stephen Bourne “Black Poppies”).

In my research of the Memorial Gates website, I came across the case of Winston Churchill Millington, a Barbadian gunner of the BWIR. In 1916 his regiment sailed to Egypt and ended up in battle with the Turks whom Winston described as ‘ferocious fighters’. His commanding officer praised the work of the Caribbean gunners who he said ‘were cheerful, cool under fire with great ability to carry on under difficult conditions’. General Edmund Allenby wrote to the Colonial Governors of the British West Indian islands saying ‘I have pleasure to inform you of the excellent conduct of the machine-gun section. All ranks behaved with great gallantry and in no small measure contributed to the success of the operation’.

It is difficult to understand how these examples can be described as ‘not being capable!’
To date we know soldiers from the BWIR units received 81 medals for bravery, with 49 servicemen mentioned in Despatches and 2,500 killed or wounded.

**Joining the War Effort in Britain**

Winston Churchill said: “...men of destiny do not wait to be called...” As I mentioned earlier, a number of Caribbean men eager to join the war effort travelled at their own expense to enlist at depots around Britain. For some young men this was an opportunity to escape the poverty and lack of opportunities in their islands.

A quick search of the British Newspaper Archives confirmed their arrival in Britain. *The Manchester Courier* of 12/10/15 reported that ‘a large contingent West Indians have arrived in England, all men speak excellent English...’; another report in the *Yorkshire Evening Post* of 09/09/15 stated that ‘an advance contingent of West Indians comprising a number of men from British Guyana now arrived in England...’

A young man arriving from British Guyana was Lionel Turpin. Documents held at Clifton Park Museum in Rotterdam show that: “Turpin was born in Georgetown, British Guyana, his next of kin is shown as his father John Turpin of Georgetown”. The records went on to say that ‘Lionel enlisted in the York and Lancaster Regiment on 5th August 1915 and trained at Regimental Headquarters in Pontefract for his role as a front line infantry soldier supplying troops with the essentials including food, water, ammunition and petrol..’

On February 1918, Lionel was posted with the Kings Royal Rifle Corp when he was wounded. He was discharged from the army ‘unfit for further service’ and died in Birmingham in 1929.

Another recruit who paid his own passage to Britain was William Robinson Clarke from Jamaica. He joined the Royal Flying Corp, the air arm of the British Army. Clarke won his wings in 1917 and promotion to Sergeant. Professor A.S. Phillips of the University of the West Indies described some of Pilot Clarke’s achievements at his funeral in 1981. The commendation read: “Robbie Clarke’s exploits as a flyer may be termed as legendary. In 1917 on an operation flight he was attacked by five German fighters in the air, though
severely wounded he managed to fly his RE 8 to a safe crash-landing behind allied line...that places him in the very special category of the genuine war hero”.

**African Recruits from British Colonial Africa**

Some two million soldiers were recruited from across British Colonial Africa. The Kings African Rifles, in existence since 1901, added significant numbers of new recruits at the start of the First World War. Nearly 32,000 African soldiers served in this regiment, approximately 4,000 were killed. Large numbers carried out vital roles fundamental to sustaining the war effort as carriers or auxiliaries as part of the Labour Corps. The British enlisted a further 55,000 as combatants from Nigeria, the Gambia, Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), Uganda, Kenya, Nyasaland (now Malawi) and the Gold Coast (now Ghana).

African troops were actively engaged on the battlefields of Europe, the German colonies on the African continent and the Middle East. It is a little known fact that the first shot fired in the First World War was on 7th August 1914 by an African, Sergeant Major Alhaji Grunshi of the Gold Coast Regiment. Africa was the site of the first military action by British land forces in the German colony of Togoland. Grunshi was awarded the Military Medal for his part in the East African Campaign.

Histories of the First World War frequently overlook the African theatres of war. For Africans, the campaigns in the Cameroon and East Africa were as fierce as any in Europe. African and British troops continued fighting two weeks after the Armistice was signed on 11 November 1918 as the news did not reach them. Historian James Willson said “The African theatre was no side show...” In fact, the war on the Continent of Africa brought widespread hardship and huge loss of African life, helping to defend Britain.

At the end of the war, Allied victory and wartime occupation of Germany’s colonies provided incentives and opportunities for fresh imperial expansion. The scramble for Africa saw the map of colonial Africa redrawn, establishing new boundaries and changing nationalities. The long term consequences of these changes still influence modern African states today.
Black Britons living in the UK at the start of WWI

There were long established settled communities around Liverpool, London, Birmingham and Cardiff, made up of men who worked on merchant ships. At the outbreak of war, members of those communities enlisted at recruitment centres around the country. As with Africans and Caribbean troops, Black British recruits were also controlled by military law which stated that ‘any negro or person of colour who was not of pure European descent could not become an army officer’. (David Olusoga “The World’s War)

To confound the policy that no ‘coloured soldier could be promoted’, we learn of the case of Walter Tull. Walter, born in Folkestone in 1888 of mixed heritage (West Indian father and English mother), was a well known and loved footballer. He played for Spurs and his face appeared on cigarette cards, so the army could not easily dismiss such a popular member of the community.

Tull was recruited to the newly formed Middlesex Regiment in December 1914 and was rapidly promoted to Corporal. In 1917 when the Army was in desperate need of men of officer calibre, Walter was recommended and after officer training in Ayrshire, he was appointed Second Lieutenant. Walter Tull is acknowledged as one of the first Black senior officers of the British Army and was decorated with the 1914 Star. Walter was killed in March 1918 during the second Battle of the Somme. His body was never recovered.

What about Black Women’s role in WWI

Of African and Caribbean women serving in the Great War, there is even less information about them. Nevertheless, while searching the Trinidad & Tobago archives, a note was found stating: ‘of a population of 370,000 in 1914, 3000 men were recruited for military duty and 41 women served as nurses. Stephen Bourne wrote in “Black Poppies”: ‘I have found nothing about black women working in the UK or with British medical services during WWI. There were African American nurses but they were restricted to working in field hospitals for black soldiers”. This is certainly an area for further investigations.
Shot at Dawn

The war did not only produce heroes, it handed down very severe punishment. I would like to mention two very special cases I encountered.

Firstly, of a young black 17 year old who was shot for abandoning his post. Herbert Morris from Jamaica suffered from severe shell-shock* after a major assault when over 2000 British guns fired over 4 million shells, the Germans responded instantly in kind. Morris complained: “I am troubled with my head, I can’t stand the sound of guns anymore…” He was shot at dawn for lowering the morale of the troops by deserting his post. (Stephen Bourne ‘Black Poppies’)

The other case is that of two young white men of the West Yorkshire Regiment. As part of a midnight raid on German trenches, they saw three-quarters of their fellow Yorkshire men killed or wounded. The two young traumatised soldiers went to a local bar to drown their sorrows. When they woke up the next morning in a field, their Regiment had moved on to the Front Line. The two were also shot at dawn. Herbert Morris and these two British soldiers, along with 300 others, were pardoned in 2007 as victims of war. (Ross Coulthart ‘The Loss Tommies’)

To sum up, I have told you this story to show that Black servicemen endured the same pain and horrors of war as men from Britain and other nations but they endured the additional burden of racial prejudice. But, it is evident that despite the discrimination policy of the War Office, pragmatic necessity meant that rules were relaxed at the discretion of certain recruiters. Some Colonial soldiers were in fact, combatants and were promoted.

To-date there is no accurate figures of the actual number of Colonial people recruited, died or injured during the Great War defending the ‘mother country’. To this end, it is hoped that others will be inspired to continue further research in Britain, Africa and in the individual Caribbean islands to determine the extent to which these men and women contributed, many of whom made the ultimate sacrifice in a war of empires.

The early 20th century saw the collapse of the Hapsburg, Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian and Russian empires but the British and French empires continued a while longer, thanks to
being propped up by the people and resources of their colonies; but not for very much longer. Black men’s experiences of humiliation and discrimination caused them to re-assess their place within the British Empire. They felt themselves as good as white men.

Further humiliation came at the end of the war when Army Order No. 1 granted a pay increase to British soldiers in 1918. Black soldiers enlisted in British regiments were informed they were not eligible because they were ‘natives’. Then in 1919, by Order of the Colonial and War Departments, Black soldiers were excluded from the Victory Parade in London sowing the seeds of unrest. This heralded changes in British colonies. Self-determination and the march towards independence were on the way.

Finally, this is a history that is interwoven and cannot be told in isolation. Men and women of all colours and classes fought alongside each other, bleeding and dying, side by side on muddy battlefields, proving they all served.

References:

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www.nationalarchives.co.uk
www.theyalsoserved.co.uk (Churches Together in England)

Archives:
Clifton Park Museum, Rotterham
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*shell-shock : post-traumatic stress disorder - many soldiers were afflicted with during the World War I (before PTSD itself was a term).*