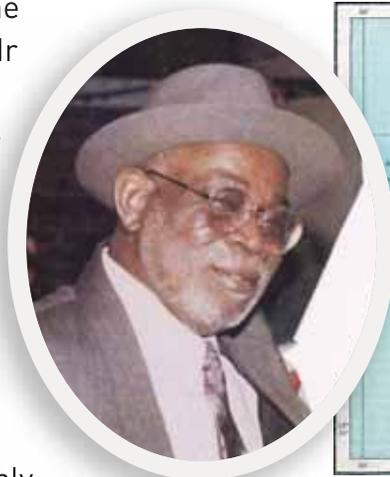


# UNDERSTANDING MIGRATION THROUGH ORAL HISTORY

Andy Green

I was privileged to have the opportunity to interview Mr Hillman Legister ‘Scotty’ Black in 2012 and capture his story as part of a heritage project, which involved collecting oral histories from people living in the Highgate area of Birmingham. A year later he passed away. This article is humbly dedicated to his memory.



Mr ‘Scotty’ Black

With permission of Highgate Baptist Church



Map of Jamaica in 1931. *The pocket guide to the West Indies and British Guiana, British Honduras, Bermuda, the Spanish Main, Surinam, the Panama Canal* by Sir Algernon Aspinall; revised by Professor J. Sydney Dash, 1931.

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## Diary Entry, 21 February 2012: Meeting Mr ‘Scotty’ Black

I am sitting on the floor of Mr Black’s flat, in the middle of the Birmingham Highgate district. On the walls hang framed pictures of Bob Marley, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X. On the back of the front room door, a crumbling poster advertises an early twentieth-century meeting to promote racial equality.

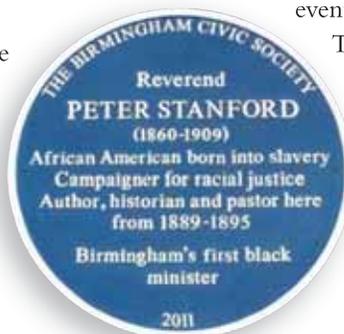
‘Scotty’ Black was born in Jamaica in 1931; he came to Britain the year after the *Empire Windrush* sailed. Travelling the country, moving in and out of Birmingham, working in many different cities, in later years ‘Scotty’ permanently settled there. He’s now been a member of the local Baptist Church on Conybere Street for over twenty years.

Near the flat is a Greggs bakery, a post office, a betting shop. A crossroad of human journeys, cultures, industrial legacies and faith stories, this landscape has been constantly reshaped by patterns of urban redevelopment and social migration.

Mr Black hasn’t been too well recently, so it’s been decided that we should meet here at his home. With me is Rev’d Paul Walker, who’s known and supported ‘Scotty’ for many years as minister and friend. A test match plays on the television. I want

to start asking a few simple questions to get the oral history started. But as Mr Black looks at me, I suddenly realise how over-awed I am at this task of asking Mr Black about his life. What right have I to ask anything? But the tension breaks, and Paul and ‘Scotty’ start chatting about changes they’ve seen in Highgate. Sharing reminiscences, we slowly unearth images of Birmingham, Jamaica, Africa, Cardiff, Ireland, the people and events that history books never seem to mention.

Through pauses, silences, digressions, conversations and jokes, a patchwork of words and fragments trails through Mr Black’s home. Borders are crossed; oceans are travelled; memories re-emerge into the light. The recording is finished. The past is never over.



Blue Plaque to the Rev’d Peter Stanford at Highgate Baptist Church, Birmingham  
Courtesy Birmingham Civic Society

## The Value of Oral History

By focusing on the personal context of social experience, oral history can liberate memories that often challenge the boundaries of local and national narratives, extending our awareness of

the wider human experience in all its continuously changing movements, encounters, struggles, thoughts and feelings.

When affordable recording technologies emerged in the second half of the twentieth century, the process of capturing the unheard voice offered both ‘amateur’ and ‘professional’

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The *Empire Windrush* arrives at Tilbury Docks in 1948.

researchers new opportunities to address profound gaps in the written historical records. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, enthusiastic grass-roots pioneers turned to oral history as a tool for capturing information about industrial heritage, working-class life, or events that took place during the War. By the 1980s, oral history had been readopted by a politicised generation of activists seeking to document Black history, women's experiences, and many other marginalised social perspectives. Since then, from the 1990s until the present, many new community histories have emerged through the creation of digital collections, exploring ongoing issues of identity and migration in the contemporary landscape.

Still often treated with suspicion by the academic world, oral history retains a crucial, empowering capacity to recognise and value the importance of each individual voice within our society. For those who become involved in the collaborative process of question and answer, the results are often unexpected and transformative, unsettling traditional assumptions that heritage can be explained in linear narratives or elitist accounts of the past. ●

**Dr Andy Green** is a freelance heritage researcher and oral historian.

**Further Reading**

The 'Celebrating Highgate' archive will be deposited in the new Library of Birmingham and made accessible to the public. A film about the project can be viewed at: [www.vimeo.com/43453758](http://www.vimeo.com/43453758)

# Transcript Fragments:

## Oral History Recording of Mr 'Scotty' Black

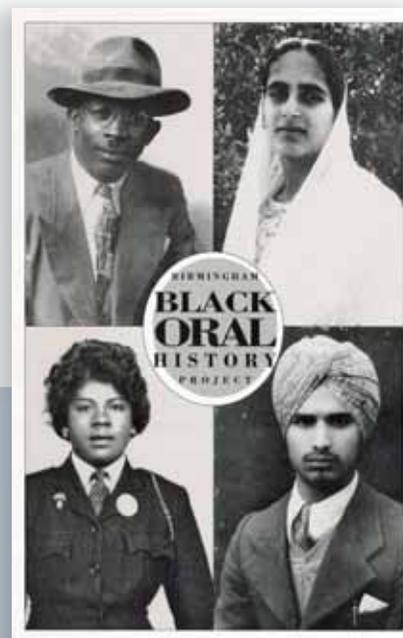
[...] 'when I came here, and met with certain people, maybe they were people I was working with, some of them would say to me, 'Why do you leave Jamaica and come here, when there is no night there?'

[...] 'I live here for a great period; I left an went to Coventry; came back here, an left an went to Cardiff; came back here, I went to Leicester, you know, because, you was seeking the best accommodation to live, an the best place you'll be able to get jobs, you know. Because, days gone by before, those periods, Birmingham was the cream concerning jobs.'

[...] 'I can give you an instance. Some of my boys was mechanic. An they didn't know about blueprint. And yet, they used to direct the foreman sometime, about the job, because, those boys in Jamaica, mechanic, you have to say they make a car out of nothing, bits and pieces and, you know, things like that. Yeah. It was wonderful.'

[...] 'the nicest thing is for your granny sit down and you lay back in her lap and she combing your hair and she's telling you about Africa, she's telling you about this ship that land in England with slaves. I knew people who came from Africa to Jamaica, before they died, and things like that. So I was taught a lot about those sort of things, you know.'

*Birmingham Black Oral History Project. The Land of money? Personal accounts by post-war migrants to Birmingham, edited by Doreen Price and Ravi Thiara, 1992*



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## GET INVOLVED IN ORAL HISTORY

Visit the website of the Oral History Society: [www.ohs.org.uk](http://www.ohs.org.uk)

provides an introduction to what oral history is and offers practical advice to those who want to record individual lives and experiences. There are also links on the map to the Midlands pages. Your local reference library, archives and museum are likely to have information about oral history resources and local groups in your area which collect oral histories.