

Black History Month

Celebrating the achievements of Black women in the UK

October 2023



We are pleased to publish this Cordis Bright article for Black History Month 2023. This year's theme is *'Saluting our Sisters'*, which is centred on highlighting the crucial (and often overlooked) roles Black women around the world have played in shaping global history and inspiring social change.¹ This article focuses specifically on the achievements of Black women in the UK by highlighting the careers of five women who worked to reduce social inequalities in some of the sectors in which Cordis Bright specialises e.g., criminal justice, children's services and health and social care.

During Black History Month, we acknowledge that it is imperative to recognise the impacts and scale of racism. In our upcoming Pulse Special, we will explore the effects of systemic racism in the form of disparities in health outcomes. However, Black History Month is also an opportunity to celebrate the achievements of Black people, and therefore we hope that this article offers a more positive outlook by stimulating further conversations about ways to better recognise and appreciate the efforts of Black women in the UK.

¹ www.blackhistorymonth.org.uk/black-history-month-2023

1 Kathleen Wrasama

1917-1996

An influential community activist, Kathleen's efforts to house Black people in London contributed to the development of the UK's housing services.



Kathleen was born in Ethiopia, and as a young child, was brought to England by Christian missionaries in the early 1900s.² Throughout her childhood, Kathleen grew up in various children's homes in Yorkshire.³ Kathleen was often the only Black child in these homes, and she experienced racial abuse and was isolated from playing with other children.³

Kathleen did not accept this poor treatment, and, as soon as she turned 13, she escaped from her last children's home.⁴ Making her way across the countryside, Kathleen managed to secure a job as a day labourer on a nearby farm.⁴ As a teenager and then a young woman, Kathleen continued to work on multiple farms across the UK, before gradually making her way to Stepney, East London, in the 1940s.²

After marrying Somali sailor Sulaban Wrasama in 1945, Kathleen decided to open a boarding house in Stepney specifically for Black sailors.² This boarding house aimed to meet the high level of housing need of Black sailors, who often found it difficult to access housing due to racial discrimination.² In some cases, Kathleen noticed how Black men were turned away from bomb shelters during air raids.² To address this inequality, Kathleen also founded the Stepney's Coloured People's Association, an organisation dedicated to improving housing for Black people across London. Today, the organisation is regarded as being instrumental in the development of the UK's housing services.⁵

² www.ibhm-uk.org/post/kathleen-wrasama-dedicated-her-life-to-helping-the-black-community-in-britain

³ www.blackplaqueproject.com/biography/kathleen-wrasama

⁴ www.vogue.co.uk/arts-and-lifestyle/article/black-women-british-history

⁵ www.generationrent.org/2022/10/24/black-history-month-the-fight-to-end-housing-inequality

2 Monica Lewin

1925-1998

Monica was the first Jamaican woman to become a fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons of England and held posts as a house surgeon and physician across London.



Monica Lewin was born in Jamaica in 1925.⁶ As a child, Monica and her two sisters were given scholarships by the Jamaican government to attend a prestigious local girls school.⁶ Monica and her sisters were among the first Black students to enter the school, and faced racial discrimination from their classmates and teachers.⁶ Monica worked hard to gain another government scholarship – this time, to study medicine at the Royal Free Hospital in London.⁷ In 1944, Monica travelled to the UK and undertook her studies.⁷ After qualifying, Monica held an impressive series of posts as both a house surgeon and house physician in the Royal London Homoeopathic Hospital and the Elizabeth Garrett Anderson Hospital.⁷ In 1962, Monica became the first Jamaican woman to become a fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons in England.⁷

In the early 1960s, Monica briefly returned to Jamaica, where she was one of the country's few female consultant surgeons, as she was determined to help treat people with gunshot and machete wounds caused by political violence in the nation's capital.⁷ Travelling back to England in the 1970s, Monica continued to work as a locum consultant surgeon for female patients, whilst also spending time with recently released adult prisoners to help reintegrate them into their local communities.⁶

⁶ www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736%2821%2900995-8/fulltext

⁷ www.rcseng.ac.uk/news-and-events/news/archive/black-surgeons-past-present

3 Daphne Alison Omotayo Obang-Oyway

1948-2010

Early in her career, Daphne established one of the UK's first community mental health teams, before becoming the nation's first Black female social services director.

Daphne was born in Freetown, Sierra Leone, in 1948, and moved to England as a child.⁸ After attending school in Leicester, Daphne went on to graduate from the University of London with an honours degree in English.⁸ After this point, Daphne decided to train as a psychiatric social worker.⁹ Shortly after qualifying, Daphne began working in London's East End.⁹ In this early stage of her career, Daphne established one of the UK's first community mental health teams, as she worked across Croydon, Tower Hamlets and Camden.⁹ However, a major turning point for Daphne arose in 2001, when she became the UK's first Black female social services director.⁹

Daphne's post as a social services director was in Bracknell Forest Council.⁹ This was a challenging role as, just days before Daphne's appointment, the council been severely criticised in a joint review report from the Social Services Inspectorate and Audit Commission for failing local people.⁹ In addition to this pressure to improve performance, Daphne also faced high staff turnover rates, ongoing tension with local voluntary organisations and a lack of direction in the department.⁹

Daphne was not only able to overcome these issues, but she also made enormous contributions to social work and social care, particularly through her involvement with ADASS' Inclusivities Committee, in which she organised a number of seminal conferences on equalities issues and conducted a major survey of the attitudes of social care staff towards race and ethnicity.⁸ In 2007, Daphne took part in a major debate within ADASS to urge social care services to better recognise the impact of racial discrimination.⁸ In this same year, Daphne was appointed Deputy Lord Lieutenant of East Sussex.⁸

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www.adass.org.uk/adassmedia/stories/National%20Leads/Equalities%20and%20Inclusion/ADASS%20pays%20tribute%20to%20inclusivities%20champion.doc

⁹ www.theguardian.com/society/2001/feb/21/socialcare.publicsectorcareers

4 Olive Morris

1952-1979

In her campaigns against inequalities in housing and education, Olive established networks which helped to empower Black and minority ethnic women across the UK.



A tireless political activist and community leader, Olive was born in 1952 in Jamaica.¹⁰ Olive moved with her siblings to south London as a child, and left school without any qualifications to work clerical jobs in multiple offices.¹⁰ In 1969, when she was 17, Olive was brutalised by police when she defended a Nigerian diplomat outside a record store in Brixton, who had been falsely accused of stealing the car that he was driving.¹¹ At the time, tensions between the police and Black communities were particularly high, and there were few laws protecting the public from racial discrimination.¹²

This injustice sparked Olive to establish networks for Black and minority ethnic women in the UK, including the notable Brixton Black Women's Group, in order to mobilise women to push back against equalities, particularly in housing and education.¹¹ In the early 1970s, Olive also became involved in the UK squatters' movement, as she began squatting in underused buildings to draw attention to the fact that thousands of families (who were predominantly Black or from ethnic minorities) were on waiting lists for housing when many of the capital's buildings remained unused.¹¹

¹⁰ www.blackhistorymonth.org.uk/article/section/civil-rights-movement/how-olive-morris-fought-for-black-womens-rights-in-britain

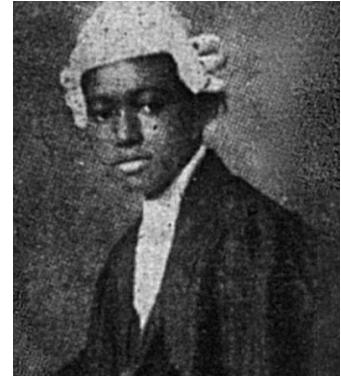
¹¹ www.nytimes.com/2019/10/30/obituaries/olive-morris-overlooked.html

¹² www.blackhistorymonth.org.uk/article/section/civil-rights-movement/how-olive-morris-fought-for-black-womens-rights-in-britain

5 Stella Thomas

1906-1974

A highly successful lawyer, Stella is credited with establishing the UK's first multi-racial social rights group.



Stella Jane Thomas was born in Lagos in 1906, and travelled to England in 1929 to study law at Oxford University.¹³ Whilst at university, Stella became the first Black African woman to be called to the bar.¹³ In addition, Stella was also one of the founding members of the League of Coloured Peoples, a British civil-rights organisation which brought under one banner the interests of African, Asian and Caribbean minorities in Great Britain.¹⁴ Today, the LCP is generally regarded as the first serious attempt at establishing a multi-racial group in Great Britain.¹⁴

In addition, Stella remains famous for her challenge of renowned historian Dame Margery Perham's lecture at the Royal Society in 1934.¹³ In response to Dame Perham's proposed imperial solutions to unrest in African countries, Stella stated '*We do not need you to send anthropologists to advise on development. We Africans with education, are able to develop our own systems and determine what is best for us*'.¹³ After graduating, Stella returned to Nigeria, where she became the country's first female magistrate.¹³

¹³ www.innertemple.org.uk/celebrating-diversity-at-the-bar/stella-thomas

¹⁴ www.gatehouselaw.co.uk/black-history-month-stella-thomas