

# BLACK LIVERPOOL IN 2021



**As I began writing this article in May 2021, only a few weeks had passed since Councillor Joanne Anderson made history, becoming the first Black woman directly elected as the mayor of any city in Britain.**

A triumph for Joanne, for Liverpool-born Black people and a triumph for the city. No one was more proud than Black women in Liverpool, who had mobilised and campaigned tirelessly to support Joanne and her vision of fairness and justice for everyone in the city. They celebrated like it was 1999. The Right Honourable Kim Johnson, MP was at the celebrations, the first Black woman from Liverpool elected as a Member of Parliament. Another historical first. And another first for Liverpool-born Black people. What does this tell us about Liverpool and about Black Liverpool in 2021? The news is good, very good and we have a lot to celebrate. But let's not jump to premature conclusions about what it all means.

Many things have changed in Liverpool since 1981, and some of them because of the uprisings. In the very first of these articles, I described how Black people in Liverpool in 1981 shared many things in common with Black people in other cities in Britain. Including too many of us confined to low paid and low-skilled jobs; too many of us unemployed and in poverty; too many

of us with low levels of educational achievement. Too many of us confined to under-served neighbourhoods, with limited resources. Too many of us still experiencing too many antagonistic interactions with the police. Too many of us continuing to be plagued by racist stereotypes in schools, media and popular culture. And too many Black women and girls facing too many wicked combinations of all these obstacles to living their lives and pursuing their dreams.

In the first article I also described four ways in which Black Liverpool and Black people in Liverpool were different from Black people in other cities. I described our national and ethnic origins, our experience of segregation and economic distress, and our memories of slavery in Liverpool itself, as compared with memories of slavery in the Caribbean or forced labour in Africa. I highlighted that we were not the children and grandchildren of immigrants from the Caribbean – we were (and are) the Black British citizens that traced our origins overwhelmingly to Africa and back multiple decades, generations and even centuries in Liverpool itself. It was this combination of features – unparalleled elsewhere in England – that led the Gifford Inquiry into our situation in 1989 to describe Liverpool as a city with 'uniquely horrific racism', and to demand that the city power brokers 'Loosen the shackles'.

Many of these differences in our experiences remain the same today, in 2021. Racial inequality is still

widespread, as is unemployment and poverty. All made worse by COVID-19, and the lockdown. We are still concentrated in Liverpool 8, though there's a small Black population outside Liverpool 8, most noticeably in Kensington. Mainly African immigrants arrived here from the 1990s, their children and grandchildren are born here. The Black population is far more diverse today, with French-speaking and Portuguese-speaking Africans, a far larger Somali community and many others. Many came from outside the realm of English-speaking British colonies, like Rwanda and Burundi. There's also a sprinkling of Black families living in Allerton and Woolton. Antagonism with the police force – especially involving young Black men – hasn't gone away. Schools still have a long way to go, and the universities are still way behind in representation and how they are supposed to serve us. We still see a dismal and pathetic number of Black faces working in city centre shops. Institutional racism still plagues too many lives, compounded by class inequality and sexism.

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But of course, there are differences too, including some of the faces of local political power and the façades of many buildings. The physical environment of the city – and in Liverpool 8 – looks totally different from 1981. Liverpool One, the Albert Dock and Pier Head, massive student accommodations in the city centre, and a totally revamped Princes Boulevard. Yes, Princes Avenue just had a massive facelift, and the new plaques and information panels tell a far better story than when the statue of Huskisson ruled the roost. And the impressive structure of Kuumba Imani Milenium Centre. I almost don't recognise the place. The way I remember Prinny Avenue – as we used to call it in the 1970s and 1980s – is different. The Ibo, Silver Sands, Ghana and Sierra Leone nightclubs. The Liverpool 8 Law Centre. The frontline on Stanhope Street corner, and the bookies. All gone. I asked my brother recently what it was like living in Liverpool after all these decades. He told me, "Ste, I feel like I've moved to another city. It looks totally different from when we were kids".

There are other differences too. More people in power than ever before express commitment to ending racism, and we've had a formal apology for Liverpool's role in

the transatlantic slave trade. The International Slavery Museum – the largest in Europe – provides more accurate, more comprehensive and more inclusive information. Our knowledge of the who, what, when, where and why of slavery is far better now, than in 1981. Far, far better. The pace of the fight for racial equality has even picked up since the killing of George Floyd in the United States in 2020, and the emergence of a Black Lives Matter movement in Britain.

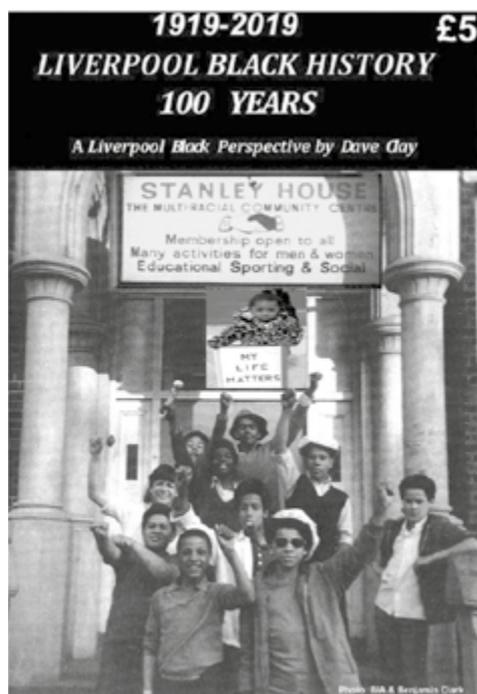


As I tried to figure out the overall balance sheet, I reached for Dave Clay's recently published book **A Liverpool Black History, 1919-2019**. Dave's book is a short, sharp no punches pulled story by one of the city's most active and well-known Black elders. It has clear, concise details, information and insights. An excellent overview of Black Liverpool past and present, covering every major topic of relevance to our lives, including the Liverpool 8 uprisings. Dave shares his own personal perspective from the frontlines for the last seventy years. All of it with his usual sense of humour, his appreciation for irony, and the influence on him from Black American music. He called his conclusion – 'Ball of Confusion'. That's right.

In his book, Dave evaluates what the situation for Black Liverpool looks like right now. He celebrates several historical achievements – especially in politics. Like the elections of Kim Johnston, Joanne Anderson and Anna Rothery. He reminds us that Calvin Smeda was elected as a city councillor in 2019. He points out that many young people are excelling in education and professional vocations. All reasons to celebrate. But he also reminds us of a number of terrible developments – including the loss of local clubs, the destruction of Granby Street, and gentrification; the demise of the Black voluntary sector and increased mental health problems plaguing the community. And the horrific increase in Black-on-Black violence.

Institutional racism is central to all of this and continues to have devastating effects on the community. To my mind, Dave's list of the bad is longer than his list of the good. But you don't have to take my word for it. Buy the book or talk to Dave. He's around.

Dave has done a great job and his book as a whole offers great insights. I'm sure he wishes that when he was a kid, he had had a book like this, written by one of the elders from a previous generation. I wish I had had books like this when I was a kid, too. He's done a great service to today's younger generation. They don't have to listen to the nonsense still being told in school – they have an antidote to put them back in good mental health. Dave ends by thanking all the family, friends and community that helped him, including financially, to publish the book. Another reminder that Black people achieve far more when working collectively than we do when working individually. A lesson from 1981 and a lesson for 2021.



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## **Professor Stephen Small**

**Department of African American and African Diaspora Studies,  
University of California, Berkeley**

Stephen Small is a Professor in the Department of African American Studies and African Diaspora Studies where he has taught since 1995; and he is Director of the Institute for the Study of Societal Issues (since June 2020). He earned his Ph.D. in Sociology at the University of California, Berkeley (1989); his M.S.C in Social Sciences from the University of Bristol (1983); and his B.A. (honours) in Economics and Sociology from the University of Kent at Canterbury (1979). He researches the history and sociology of Black people across the diaspora, including the United States, Western Europe, the Caribbean and Brazil. He has held visiting positions at universities in Great Britain, the Netherlands, France, Spain, Brazil, Japan and Zimbabwe.

His most recent book is *20 Questions and Answers on Black Europe* published in January 2018. His next book is tentatively entitled: *Inside the Shadows of the Big House: 21st Century Antebellum Slave Cabins and Heritage Tourism in Louisiana*, to be published in 2022. He is currently writing a book on

Slavery, Imperialism and their legacies in Black Liverpool. As part of that project, he's investigating the voices and visions of Black men and women from across Africa and the diaspora in anti-colonial movement for self-determination. He is co-editor of *Black Europe and the African Diaspora*, 2009.

Stephen is a child of the Windrush Generation, his dad having arrived in England from Jamaica in 1946. He was born and raised in Liverpool – the city with the nation's longest-standing Black population. He was a member of several Black and multi-racial organisations across England, and in the 1990s was research assistant to the Right Honourable Bernie Grant, MP, researching and lecturing on reparations and museums. He was a member of the Consortium of Black Organisations and the Federation of Black Liverpool Organisations, both in Liverpool, in the early 1990s. And he was a Guest Curator at the Atlantic Slave Trade Gallery at the Merseyside Maritime Museum (which became the International Slavery Museum in 2007).