

# BLACK BLUE PLAQUES

## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

plaques, people, heritage, walks, history, put, lions, London, commemorated, monuments, society, suggestions, Nubian Jak, Black, Belfield, blue, events, scheme, contribution, buildings

## SPEAKERS

Laurajane Smith, Jak Beula, Tony Warner, Howard Spencer

### **Narrator** 00:00

If you walk through the streets of central London, it won't be long before you catch sight of a blue plaque on the outside of a building. There are thousands of them dotted around the city today. The scheme started 160 years ago, at the height of the British Empire, to commemorate famous people and the buildings with which they had an association. Typically, although not exclusively, the people honoured were wealthy or eminent white men. And what counted as heritage was commonly understood as the product of their deeds. We now live in a time where that understanding of heritage is being challenged. And this challenge is reflected in the growing numbers of plaques put up to celebrate the contribution of previously underrecognized sections of society. In this film, we look in particular at the work of two organizations, Black History Walks, and the Nubian Jak Community Trust, and their efforts to ensure that the contributions of Black people are recognized and commemorated as part of the semiotic landscape of the city.

### **Tony Warner** 01:16

On this walk, we're pulling out all the African Caribbean history that's in the streets, the buildings and the architecture because there's lots of it here, if you know what to look for. So I'll be your guide today. My name is Tony. And this walk starts and ends near Bank tube station. So let's begin.

Black History Walks is an organization that runs walks, talks, films, bus tours, and river cruises on Black history in London. So we have about fifteen different walking tours in north east, south and west, we have walks in Harlem, walks in Theatreland, walks in Elephant and Castle. I'd done all the regular kind of typical London walks into central London; I'd done like, Jack the Ripper tour, Ghost tour, Charles Dickens all kind of ones that you see, you know, advertised in the mainstream. I done all them and there was never any mention of Black people at all.

The walks themselves are educational in that if you get, I don't know, 10 people in a walk, you might have one person who's 25, one who's 35, one who's 55, and you might have kids as well. And the way I do the walks is quite interactive. So by the end of the walk, you will have the young people learn from the old people and vice versa, depending on what topic we're looking at, even as we're walking from point to point, there's education taking place between not just the generations, because they might be from the same generation, but they have different experiences and they talk to each other about what

they've just heard. The importance is to give people that history so they know what happened. And also another thing is that they may have been to that place or lived in that place for like 10,15, 20 years or so and never heard the story before. So it's about giving people back in effect, the history that they should have heard about, learn about, when they were growing up, when they were going to school, which has not been part of the kind of mainstream narrative.

**Howard Spencer 02:57**

The Blue Plaque Scheme started in 1866 by the Society of Arts, which became what's today the Royal Society of Arts. They were acting on a suggestion by the MP William Ewart, who's probably best known for his role in the foundation and propagation of public libraries. He got up in the House of Commons on the 17th of July 1863 and suggested it might be a good idea if there was some way of inscribing on houses that had been lived in by famous people - and he did use an ungendered term. He set the ball rolling and the society marked - slightly belatedly, three years later - picked it up and started to look into ways of doing this. There were women included. I mentioned that Ewart's initial speech was sort of ungendered in its - in its suggestion of commemorating famous figures, people. There were, among the thirty-four, there were four plaques to women, so not very many, but there were some. Sarah Siddons, the actress, was the first woman to get one. The oldest surviving plaque to a woman is the one to Fanny Burney, a writer. Joanna Baillie, the writer has got one, too.

**Tony Warner 04:04**

We also raise funds to put up plaques, blue plaques to people have not been recognized by history or by the mainstream, rather. The connection between our blue plaques and the English Heritage blue plaques is that English Heritage does not have enough blue plaques to Black people. In London I think it's only like 4% of their plaques are to Black people - 4%. And London is something like between 13 to 14% Black.

**Howard Spencer 04:29**

The people that are commemorated now - it has changed a lot over time, you know, I mean, it's a lot more representative. The steering group that we set up on Black and Minority Ethnic Representation was set up about, I think, about , seven years ago, something like that. And there had been prior efforts to work with organizations such as the Black and Asian Studies Association in order to get nominations through in that area.

**Tony Warner 04:57**

So we work with a group called Nubian Jak. Nubian Jak is a very well-known blue plaque or Black blue plaque installing organization.

**Jak Beula 05:05**

Okay, so I'm gonna go over here. So we memorialize the wonderful diverse presence in London and around England by putting up these plaques and statues. And this particular one is to Greensleeves.

**Councillor Emma Dent Coad 05:18**

Thank you so much Jak. And it's an absolute honour to be here this morning. Jak who looks to our history makers, and demands that - he - we are reminded by them every day. And we've had some

incredible examples, this must be the, I don't know, 6th, 8th? [Jak Beula: 81<sup>st</sup>] Oh 81st, but in North Kensington? It's the 8th that I've been to? [Jak Beula: 16<sup>th</sup>] 16th in Kensington I've been corrected.

**Narrator 05:45**

Heritage isn't just about putting up plaques and monuments. It's also about how the process of engaging with them could not only tell us about individual figures from the past, but also help us to understand our collective present, and the forces that shaped it. And it's the relationship between the values of the past, and those of the present, which means that heritage can also be a very contested term.

**Professor Laurajane Smith 06:15**

There's no such thing as heritage. And what I mean by that is, is the emphasis - the traditional emphasis that is, particularly in Europe, that is put on things such as buildings, archaeological sites, monuments, and so forth. These things are not in, in and of themselves heritage. So when I say there's no such thing as heritage, I'm saying, let's de-privilege the emphasis that we put on things in the analytical space and look at the idea of heritage as an ongoing, performative process of making, of making meaning.

**Tony Warner 07:04**

So I've heard sugarcane, pineapple, I'll give you a clue. It's a bad habit some old people have? [Crowd: Tobacco?] There you go, right. First of all, who do you see on the front there? Two Black people right in your face? Right.

**Howard Spencer 07:19**

I think the Blue Plaque scheme has become a partly democratic process. Because it works on public suggestions. And that has happened in an organic manner - people as far as we know, they just started sending in suggestions. And that happened quite early on in the London County Council's stewardship of the scheme. So in the Edwardian period. When we don't have the records of how the Society of Arts, or the Royal Society of Arts worked other than the minute books, and they don't really reveal a great deal. I mean, I think it was probably more of a closed circle.

**Professor Laurajane Smith 07:52**

I think theories tend to exclude people's lived experience. People do things with things. Heritage, whether we're talking about archaeological sites, museum collections, monuments, intangible events, or what-whatever, they are cultural tools that people use to help remember and to forget, that help them make - as I keep saying - to make meaning, to validate or invalidate a range of historical narratives.

**Tony Warner 08:21**

As you walked up into this area, did you see an animal in front of you? [Crowd: A lion] Lion, you reckon it's a lion? And this goes back to what you could call cultural appropriation that when the Europeans went to Africa, they saw the African people using lions and leopards as symbols of the strength and power and prestige and royalty and they copied the idea right, they just brought it, right, simple as that, right? So now let's think about how often we find these lions all across our society. For example, what does the English football team have in their T-shirts? [Crowd: Lions] Three lions, not three squirrels or

hedgehogs or badgers of foxes or bulldogs or deers, three lions that don't exist in this society, that are brought from Africa.

**Professor Laurajane Smith** 08:21

What some of my researches has revealed is that people engage with heritage sites or engage with intangible heritage events or sit down with their their grandmas and talk about family history across the - across the dining room table, whatever the heritage event may be. They engage in these processes, because it's a process of emotional investment in the memories and the historical narratives that are being generated.

**Tony Warner** 09:29

I'm gonna tell you one story of one Black guy who kind of symbolizes the massive contribution and effort and commitment and sacrifice made by Black people in general to World War Two, just by telling this one guy story right? But first of all, you got to give me marks out of 10 for how cool does this brother look. [Crowd: 'Awww', 'Dashing, dashing', '9.5', 'Handsome, very handsome', hahaha].

**Professor Laurajane Smith** 09:57

We're engaging in heritage because it gives us a sense of validation, it gives us a sense of the emotional legitimacy that we have in our own sense of identity and that of our own community, but also in the narratives and collective memories around that.

**Howard Spencer** 10:11

The charity was founded on the basis that heritage is a positive thing and an enrichment to people's lives and I'd like to think that blue plaques are the same thing.

**Tony Warner** 10:21

The type of heritage we're looking to address or represent is the heritage that's been ignored by the mainstream.

**Patricia Wheaton** 10:28

The Blue Plaque events are one of my absolute favourites. And that is because I'm all about legacy. And history. Legacy is something we feel because we have experienced it. It's something that we've lived, it's something that we will remember. The stories are best told, when we tell our stories, ourselves.

**Tony Warner** 10:53

And basically, we can have sometimes identified the locations, then we raise the funds, and then Nubian Jak will put the plaque up.

**Jak Beula** 10:59

Well, I kind of stumbled into it really, I didn't come up with a master plan. I was invited to do a plaque to Bob Marley, by English Heritage. And based on the success of that, I thought, do you know what, there's so many names and figures, male and female, particularly of African ancestry, that need to be memorialized and highlighted. So that's how we got into doing plaques.

**Tony Warner** 11:21

So rather than kind of ask other people we've just done it ourselves.

**Jak Beula** 11:24

This is my 87th plaque.

**Tony Warner** 11:27

I'm his biggest sponsor, and we put up I think, 10 plaques so far, and as well, another 10 more to do. We have two more to do. We're actually working on one right now to a guy called Dr Cecil Belfield-Clark.

**Dr Latifah Patel** 11:38

As the first minority ethnic woman Chief Officer at the British Medical Association and the EDI lead I'm honoured to say a few words about Dr Cecil Belfield Clark and his long-lasting contributions to medicine and society.

**Howard Spencer** 11:51

It's been implicit in the scheme from the outset is that there's a positive legacy from the people commemorated. From 1956 there's a set of criteria under which the London County Council, later the great Greater London Council and later English Heritage, judge the suggestions for plaques. And the 1956 wording, which we still have is, "a positive contribution to human welfare or happiness."

**Jak Beula** 12:16

History, history chooses and dictates who should be honoured with those plaques.

**Tony Warner** 12:20

So this is the ivory bangle lady. They found her skeleton back in 1901, but with modern technology that - they were able to remake her face and also analyse the bones to work out she came from North Africa.

**Dr Latifah Patel** 12:33

Throughout history, many ethnic minorities have made significant contributions, but their achievements have often been overlooked and forgotten due to systemic racism and discrimination based on the colour of their skin.

**Tony Warner** 12:46

When you think of - I mentioned Belfield Clark, Tom Molineaux, Bill Richmond, there's a sister called Phyllis Wheatley – 'cause that's our plaque: we put that plaque up a couple of years ago, in Aldgate East. Phyllis Wheatley was the first Black woman to have her book published back in 1773. And until we put that plaque at that place, there in Aldgate East, there'd been no plaque to her at all. So there are people like that, who have not got the recognition they deserve for whatever reason. And that's why we do what we do.

**Black Walks participant** 13:16

The thing is you see these monuments, but you know they have a meaning but you never stop, you know. And all the symbols, especially the lion, you think, why does this country have a symbol of a lion you see it all the time, and it becomes the national symbol, but you never understand why? So just to be able to stop and think. That's what I really enjoyed about it and I'll be doing - analysing everything, when I'm walking, buildings, so it's really, really good.

**Jeanne Rathbone** 13:39

Like Jak, I believe in the importance of plaques and commemoration. But plaques are so easy and accessible. They're the ones that are along our streets. It is walking history and heritage and it is so important.

**Councillor Emma Dent Coad** 13:54

And to have him as part of our local history, the history makers, and for every time that people walk around the area where they're looking at the blue plaques, and will look him up and go, 'Oh my goodness, what an extraordinary person, he changed lives.'

**Howard Spencer** 14:08

I suppose it's a reminder that you know, we're standing on the the shoulders of giants or whatever, you know, that we're, we're – this- this is- this is also part of- part of a longer process.

**Laurajane Smith** 14:21

For me, heritage is always about people. You know, people use things to do things in society. For me, heritage is a process in which we are continually making meaning.

**Tony Warner** 14:32

And I suppose one reason we have all those statues around a place is to kind of recognize these heroes or these kind of important people and to remind the present day as to who they were, what they did and why they do what they did.

**Mayor of Kensington & Chelsea** or 14:43

And as Mayor in association with the Nubian Jak Community Trust I am delighted to participate in the unveiling of this plaque...

**Jak Beula** 14:53

After five, yeah, when it comes to one reveal it to the world. Here we go. Five four three two one

[Voice: Applause]

[Jak Beula and band]

**Jak Beula** 15:02

Thank you man, cheers.

[Jak Beula and band continued]

**Jak Beula** 16:19

African people, Black people have put themselves on the map and it's my job and other people like me to remind people like you and the viewing public of these wonderful, magical, amazing achievements that they have done. And that's the mission that I'm fortunate and privileged to be part of.