

# Connecting Histories

Newsletter

Issue 2 - Autumn 2005

## Getting involved with *Connecting Histories*

Over the past 3 weeks, a group of volunteers has been working on the Vanley Burke archive, receiving training in basic preservation and cataloguing practice. Volunteers have taken the opportunity to engage with the archive in a unique way, getting a feel for a collection that covers the experience and progress of the Black community of Handsworth and Birmingham since the 1960s. By doing this the group have made a valuable and permanent contribution to the City Archives, while "putting the world to rights" over interesting debate and conversation.



This program of activities is ongoing and volunteering on the *Connecting Histories* project provides various opportunities to work with archives, heritage and community groups.

## Want to do some research for yourself?

Would you like to join a weekly Black History Research Group? Over 8 weeks members of the group will be given an introduction to different types of archival documents and historical research skills, which can be used for family history or researching Black history in the city.  
Contact: [Connecting.Histories@birmingham.gov.uk](mailto:Connecting.Histories@birmingham.gov.uk) or phone 0121 464 1607.

## From Baltimore to Birmingham



*Birmingham Journal, 18 June 1864*

Thanks to Patsy Davis from the Irish Heritage Group for sending us this newspaper entry which she found when going through The Birmingham Journal in the Local Studies section of the Central Library. It refers to John Thompson a "man of colour" who was living in John Street, Birmingham but who came originally from Baltimore in the USA and who fought in the American Civil War in the battle of Bull's Run. The entry comes from the newspaper for 18 June 1864 and it describes Thompson's arrest for being drunk and disorderly in Bull Street and assaulting a Mr. Thomas Barker with a cigar box. In his defence 'The prisoner said he had been "treated," and, not being accustomed to drink, it had overcome him.' This is one of the earliest references to Black people in newspapers that have been found locally.

We know that there were Black people living in Birmingham in the 19th century and we are currently trying to collect as many references as possible telling us who they were so if you have found a similar entry in a local newspaper, or in any other historical document, please let us know about it. John Thompson's story will now be added to our learning package 'How to Research Black History and Heritage' which is being developed at the moment and will be available on the *Connecting Histories* website when it goes live in March 2006.

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**Birmingham Afro-Caribbean Organisation**

## **Do you have information, photographs or papers relating to the Birmingham Afro-Caribbean Organisation?**

The organisation was founded in the 1940s by Dr Piliso, a Black doctor from South Africa who lived in the city. The City Archives has been given some papers relating to the organisation by Mr Henry Gunter, the organisation's chairman during the 1950s, and who can be seen in the photograph on the far left in the back row next to Dr Piliso.

We would like to hear from other people who were involved in the organisation or have information.



*Executive Committee of the Birmingham Afro-Caribbean Organisation, 1950s [MS 2165]*

## **History, Heritage and Education**

This is the name of a new degree course at the School of Education at Birmingham University, which started this October. Central to the whole degree is an understanding of culturally diverse histories and the course aims to give students a solid grounding in historical study, some practical experience of working in the heritage sector and an understanding of issues surrounding lifelong learning.

Designed with support from Birmingham City Archives, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, the National Trust, English Heritage and the Barber Institute, it will be useful for anyone wanting to work in archives, museums, media, heritage or cultural sectors.

Contact Dr Malcolm Dick: [m.m.dick@bham.ac.uk](mailto:m.m.dick@bham.ac.uk)

## **Small Heath Rainbow Project**

The Small Heath Rainbow project is an exciting new project to develop an innovative exhibition illustrating the main changes that have occurred in Small Heath since the 1950s from the perspective of ordinary people and in particular from the view point of first generation immigrants. The project will also provide the opportunity for Black and minority ethnic communities to record their service during the Second World War.



*Naila Suleman, Project Manager, Small Heath Rainbow Project*

Naila Suleman, project manager, is keen to involve volunteers in oral history interviews and research. Although formal qualifications aren't necessary, IT or admin skills would be helpful and a good standard of written English is needed for transcribing the interviews. Naila is particularly keen to involve people who can speak another community language in interviewing people whose first language is not English.

Contact Naila Suleman: Small Heath Community Forum, 42 Chapman Road, Small Heath, Birmingham, B10 OPG. Tel: 0121 685 7277.

## **Tracing your family tree**

Have you ever had the urge to trace your family connections in the Caribbean and Africa, but didn't know where to start? Well help is at hand. Yardley District Libraries and *Connecting Histories* will present an advice session on Black Family History with Paul Crooks whose book "Ancestors" charts his family's extraordinary story of struggle and survival. Paul will speak about "the importance of family history in understanding who we are, who we were and what is expected of Black people in the Diaspora".

***This session will take place at 11am Saturday 22 October at the South Yardley Library.***

*For more information and to book your free ticket, phone: 0121 464 1944.*

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## Featured Collection



*'Roy at his shop on Soho Road', 1970s © Vanley Burke [MS 2192]*

## Vanley Burke Archive

**"There is no time like now.  
There is no waiting for the moment."**

Vanley... on capturing the photograph,  
21st September 2005.

**... on his work, his collection, his community  
and why he does it**

"They say that a camel was meant to be a horse, but it was designed by a committee. I've always used that metaphor. It's for an individual to convince others that what they have to say is worth hearing [and then] persuade to part with information that they have, whether it's physical or verbal."

"It's just about the ability to see something others may be unable to see, in terms of the value. Then show people. They need to see their contribution to this community. I mean, they have been contributing to this thing from the 50s and its gone beyond. But there is no reference anywhere. It's about having themselves reflected, they are so desperate to see themselves. But this will be there, it isn't going anywhere, you know what I mean...?"

"This is us, this is me. There's nothing bigger than the work that I do, because it is important. We have been so... demoralised through the visual, and other, representations over the years that the least you can do is try to show something that gives a fairer representation of the average person's contribution."



*African Liberation Day, Handsworth Park, 1977.*

**... on his favourites**

"One of the best sets of photographs I've taken... and it's the first time, I think, I've shot about 350 or 60 photographs in one day, more than 10 rolls of film... it was African Liberation Day 1977. One of the photographs is of a white man outside the Thornhill Road [station]. Someone said to me, 'I don't know that man, he looks "secret service", photograph him'. He [the white man] was so impotent in the sense that he had nothing, because he was totally out numbered.... But that was the event... that was when we took over the street. And personally, I believe that was when we lost a lot because we didn't build on the politicization of that day."



*African Liberation Day March, Soho Road, Handsworth, 1977.*

## Vanley Burke Archive continued

### ... on the rewards

"A young poet shook my hand and said; 'thank you for taking the photographs. Without them we wouldn't have that link with the past... which we so desperately need'. This is somehow what I saw that the need was... It's good to be able to have people come up to you and say 'thank you' for the material."



... on this photograph 'Two girls walking' [above] taken on one of his tours of South Africa, about 1996.

"Dangerous... On top of some high rise buildings overlooking this camp, secret servicemen would stand with guns... and behind those windows would be ANC men with guns... At any point they would start to shoot"

*[to right] just a few of the flyers, posters, newspapers and magazines that Vanley has collected [MS 2192]*

### ... on collecting material

"You know the posters on the street, advertising the dance and all of this sort of thing... every now and then, when they get wet from the rain, they would just peel off. I would roll them up and put them in the boot of the car."

**Vanley Burke is a celebrated documentary photographer. A member of Handsworth's African Caribbean community, he has been documenting, from within, the life and development of his community since 1967.**

The Archive is a vast collection, made up of Vanley's photographic work and material he has collected, giving depth and context to much of the content of his photography.



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