

THE BRITISH MUSEUM: 50th ANNIVERSARY OF THE MUSEUM'S HISTORIC CLOSURE

THE INSIDE STORY

The Christmas holidays of 1972 at my home 2 St John's Mansions, Hackney was, in spite of grappling with enormous work-related issues, a happy time. I basked in the afterglow of the British Museum Charity show, as well as my breakthrough as a writer when my first Article "Carnival in Trinidad" was published in the magazine *Race Today*. Together, the Show and the Article were my biggest achievements to date. They boosted my confidence. I felt that I'd been making a mark as an agent for change in race and sex discrimination in the British Museum; and furthermore, being a published writer, my focus was on greater engagement with Bloomsburyites: those very interesting, influential people who had formed the publishing-intellectual hub in London.

By the turn of the New Year, 1973, I had been in my Flat for two years. My son, now two and a half years old, added immensely to the joy of family life; and significantly being a parent, my sense of individual and community responsibility deepened. For one thing, since my son's birth, the need to earn more meant doing Overtime; working longer hours. I also felt that the weight of the additional responsibilities of my Leadership role in the struggles of Staff to improve pay and working conditions, were fully justified! Why? Because work could not be separated from home; and vice-versa. Thus enjoined, I felt what I was doing in the service of workers at the British Museum (and in other Forums nationally) had humane, and universal resonance which connected the particular with the general.

In Britain, the Conservative Government was tightening the screw, the sharpest pain being felt most severely among the worst paid; essentially those in the Public Sector, especially those in the Civil Service. To supplement earnings, workers in London received "Threshold Payments" and "London Weighting;" incremental annual payments to top-up very low wages which, it was hoped, would maintain parity between wages and prices. The need to understand this confirmed that I and my fellow workers were at the centre of a deepening divide and struggle.

As I now knew well, Trade Unions were necessarily integral to the "Collective Bargaining" which determined pay and working conditions, locally and nationally. The Trades Union Congress and its General Secretary, Len Murray, were key players in the System of Industrial Relations and Government Policy-making. At the time, no love was lost in the war of attrition between Employers and workers, which could not be masked, as Strikes, and the threat of Strikes, in various parts of the country became symptomatic of the industrial-economic malaise. So having had "Winters of Discontent" in years past, now these bitterly January days were proving to be especially bad.

Among Coal-miners, there was widespread and growing tension, but they were not alone: This was also the problem among workers in the Public Sector. Rising discontentment could not be ignored; and for me every penny in my brown pay packet was precious; especially by the end of 1972, when confronted by austere circumstances. Thus, of special significance

was the fact that my first income as a writer was the 15 Guineas for my Article in *Race Today*; a most warming Christmas windfall!

HISTORIC DAY: “THE BRITISH MUSEUM IS CLOSED.”

But soon after the Christmas festivities, as workplace tension became increasingly tense, especially among a few of my colleagues, members of other unions, who were vocal and active in “Socialist groups.” One of them was Mike, an amiable Trotskyist who expounded the virtues of his ideology at various gatherings in local cafes and other well-known meeting places in Bloomsbury. Put simply, Mike was the “Marxist Mike” and his admirers could think of nothing more pressing and important than spreading the message of International Socialism. One means of doing so was by selling the *The Socialist Worker* paper, at the gates of the British Museum, and elsewhere, in Bloomsbury.

Since my Election as the first Black Shop Steward in the British Museum, Mike had regarded me with unspoken suspicion. He, like most people at the time, did not know what to make of me: He assumed that I was not an ideologue, and therefore, not well-versed in Marxist thought and Socialism. Given this perceived ideological deficit, he was to some extent, right. But fortunately, with so much else going on in my life, I did not feel deprived or lacking either in knowledge or effective leadership commitment. Then, one day, at the front gates of the Museum, I expressed my views as clearly as I could: I told Mike that my day-to-day “programme” incorporating job protection and improvements in pay, working conditions and fundamentally the end of race, colour, and sex discrimination, were the key, pragmatic way forward in advancing what I believed in. He need not have worried about my ideological perspective for I reminded him of the immediate circumstances of people on low pay; saying that I lived locally, but thought internationally. Alas, my words fell on deaf ears. Nonetheless, I was largely inclined towards progressive policies; ever-ready to work with Mike, as well as others.

So being relatively new to working class Leadership, as I learned more, I maintained vigilance on the job! This required dedication; and while tackling workplace problems as they related to National policies, I gained more “Industrial Relations” experience and studied ideologies and movements (while continuously organising and attending meetings, of one sort or another) the Jury was still out as regards my fully-formed beliefs. I was very much on a learning curve; and given my general Humanist-Socialist orientation, Socialist theory mattered little, for I was in word and deed, an “activist;” a Doer and Organiser! My task was not simple. Of necessity, increasingly. I had to multi-task; and being present at an ever-increasing number of meetings, I was left in no doubt that my responsibility as a workers’ Leader in the British Museum made me a target for the ubiquitous Socialists. Mike was always around. One day after a meeting, still unsure, and distrustful of my orientation, he said:

“You are an ‘Empire Builder.’ That’s what you are!”

The note of accusation in his voice sounded his alarm. I was dumb-founded.

“How could I be?” I asked, “I’m committed to my members and the Union.”

“Of course, you are,” he said. “You are a Career Trade Unionist.”

I had not heard this expression before.

“How could I be?” I said. “I am not a well-paid salaried Full Time Trade Union Official. I am a Volunteer – a devoted front line, workplace Volunteer!”

At this juncture, I reviewed my position and noted that I was always in the firing line; the prime target, not only was I perceived by Managers, but also by sceptical members within my own Civil Service Union Branch; before whom I conducted my Leadership role in a manner that was, at all times, open and transparent.

But, for “Militants” like Mike, who belonged to another Union within the Civil Service, representing clerical grades, this was not enough. Thus lapsing, once more, into condescending mode, branding me as Socialistically “uneducated,” I was quite uncomfortable with such simplistic Socialist Agendas as Mike and others of like mind, were advocating with Brother-like, Comradely passion. Through my own zeal in channelling my Branch members’ essential concerns, I was hoping to find another more realistic way. As I said to Mike and my Socialist colleagues, “I have never been a Marxist. If anything, I am a Ron Ramdinist.” This reference to my self-belief generated a sharp look of displeasure from Mike which took me aback. Nonetheless, my relations with Mike remained friendly; and we continued to work closely on all essential matters.

Earlier, and increasingly toward the end of 1972; the pay of those on the lowest incomes, had become so urgent that since my first letter to Sir John Wolfenden about the much-talked about Charity Show, I now wrote to him about the outcome of a recent meeting on the vexed question of money. “Charity” and “Pay,” the juxtaposition of action past (the “Show”) and action to come so soon, just 21 days apart, was hardly imaginable for everyone concerned. Given that money was a matter of heightened National interest, I also expressed my concern in a letter which was published in the CSU journal *The Whip* in January 1973. The timing was opportune: Entitled “Wanted: A Fair Crack of the Whip,” I wrote: “I wonder if the Government realises...the effects of its brutal freezing of the pay of the Civil Service Executive Classes.

We may even be approaching the day when representatives of all Unions affiliated to the National Staff Side **will combine in united and effective retaliation against any government which in the future, fails to give the public service a fair crack of the whip.**”

Time was of the essence: and predictably, as discontent deepened and debates became more heated, the CSU, joined by other Unions representing middle management and higher grades in the British Museum, agreed to act; and, it was my responsibility as CSU Secretary to write the draft of the “Leaflet” about a propose “MASS MEETING” to be held in the Museum’s courtyard. Though the radical action to be taken was justified, I could hardly believe the audacity of what we had decided. “A preposterous thing!” someone had said. This was perfectly understandable, for such a “thing” as a Staff “Walk Out,” was unheard of; and should the “action” happen, like the Charity Show, it would be another *extraordinary* first in the Annals of the long history of the Empire-oriented, world-renowned British Museum. So here I was, once again, self-conscious of being at the heart of the British Museum and the British Empire, playing a central, radical role.

Against this background, in the first week of January 1973, I was mandated to approach CSU Head office for its support of our unanimous decision to take “Industrial Action” in response to the Government’s “Pay Freeze.”

At this critical time in its development, as I’d done all along, I felt strongly that Branch 849 which I’d been devotedly strengthening for months, should not be allowed to slip back to the old days and old ways of disorganised, unenthusiastic association! We must go forward together, I felt, as we had been doing since my Leadership began: So now with the Branch’s Mandate, and the joint National agreement of the other four Civil Service Unions, I drafted and eventually typed these words:

“BM PAY FREEZE PROTEST MEETING

As you will probably have read in the national papers, the CPSA and SCS are nationally and officially calling upon every member to attend Protest Meetings against the Pay Freeze on 10 January. The CSU has agreed that local branches may participate and will have Official backing.

In the light of the above, the British Museum branches of the CPSA, IPCS and CSU request you to attend a Mass Meeting to be held in the Forecourt of the Museum at 10.00 a.m on Wednesday 10 January.

As Civil Servants we receive our Pay Increases through ‘Pay Research’ negotiations. These compare our wages with those of similar workers outside the Civil Service. Hence, we are always at least 12 months behind all other workers. Please make sure...that we get 100% attendance at this important meeting.”

The Leaflet, signed by Ron Ramdin (CSU); Mike McGrath (CPSA), M. Salisbury (SCPS) and Jim Mullard (CSU). Hundreds were printed and distributed to members of Staff, Readers, Visitors and the general public.

And so, in conjunction with the National Action planned for 10th January 1973, British Museum Staff duly assembled in the spacious Fore-court framed by the grand façade of the Colonnade. Against this impressive background, the stage was set; and the Media: print, radio and television were all present and easy. The excitement arising from this historic moment was palpable: Then, after two National Trade Union Official speakers, and Mike, had had their say, I stepped forward: Holding a white megaphone, I addressed the crowd, the majority of whom were among the poorest of London’s poorly-paid. On their behalf, the words that I spoke were delivered with utter conviction. During those moments of standing up and telling truth to power; of unprecedented British Museum and National Media exposure, something had changed forever: Both in terms of how I saw myself and how I was seen by the members of the British public. Why so? Because it was a time of Racist murders and violence; and significantly when there were so few Black Spokesmen in Britain.

When the formalities of that day had ended, many members of Staff congratulated me on my Speech; the **uncompromising stand** that I’d taken of championing a fundamental, common cause, both locally and nationally.

First and foremost, as a Writer, even before I'd spoken to the Mass Meeting about much-needed money, I'd been aware that the area near the Museum and its environs, was Charles Dickens's neighbourhood! I was therefore mindful of the poverty and appalling Social conditions that had existed in nineteenth century London, the setting of *Oliver Twist*; a literary work that had an enduring effect upon me. According to one account, Dickens had set Fagin's infamous den in the novel, in Field Lane, a location just a short distance away, which ironically was close to Hatton Wall, the location of CSU's Head Office. In those heady, extraordinary moments of the Closure, I thought: How incredible! Here I was, far away from the scene of the childhood memories of my Trinidad village, standing on the steps of the British Museum having addressed, as a much-trusted spokesman, the plight of London's poor and poorly-paid of whom I'd read with wonder as a boy.

As I was about to leave the Colonnade one of the Museum Security Warders tapped me on the shoulder. His stern expression was in sharp contrast with so many people who had approached me earlier: "Why don't you go back home," he said, "and cause trouble there!" In democratic England, to be fair a multiplicity of views were expected; and, of course, I was respectful of all views. Thus, through my representation of the essential need that we should all earn more, I had, for better or worse, become a central figure in an unprecedented action in one of the most conservative Institutions in Britain; in other words, a Strike! But the workplace militancy into which I was plunged, was not why I'd joined the British Museum Staff as a Library Assistant. I'd come hopeful of betterment, in particular, of furthering my ambition of becoming as good a writer as I could be. This was, and remained my passionate, evolving and persistent desire, which was now tremendously heightened when I first saw the wonderful shrine-like Round Reading Room, where some of the world's greatest literary figures had sat, thought and written books that had transformed millions of peoples' lives! Thus, each day at the British Museum, as I wrote and aspired to produce meaningful texts: At the very least, I had hoped to achieve work of the best literary quality. But, my immediate problem was this: How does a poor immigrant achieve authorial eminence? This was an interesting and important question which, for the first time since I'd landed as a stranger on the shore, had compelled me to consider my Exile and estrangement in England. So the Warder's comment: "Why don't you go back home" provoked *other* questions: It generated a commitment to explore in greater depth the idea of "HOME" as the prerequisite of advancing my literary career.

Later that day, I read the banner headline in the *Evening Standard*:

"THE BRITISH MUSEUM IS CLOSED BY CIVIL SERVICE WALK OUT." The following article stated:

"A protest mass meeting of nearly 400 Civil Servants this morning closed the famous British Museum's Round Reading Room and galleries... It is believed to be the first time that the Reading Room has ever been closed by Industrial Action.

The gathering of Civil Servants covered members of Museum Staff including uniformed Warders and Security Officers, Cleaners, Clerical and Typing staff and Library Assistants. Ken Thomas, Deputy General Secretary, of CPSA described it as 'an historic day for the

British Museum and Civil Servants, nationally.' Mr Thomas said they were part of a mass movement of Civil Servants throughout the country making their protest known to the Government."

This focused industrial action was indeed part of a "mass movement." The next day, *The Times* reported what Gerry Gillman, Deputy General Secretary of the Society of Civil and Public Servants (SCPS) had told the cheering gathering at the British Museum: "The worm has turned," he'd said, adding "If we behave like a worm we shall be trodden on. The time has come to tell the Government that injustice to the Civil Service must stop for it was the fifth time in the past 12 years that the government has broken its Pay Agreement." Moreover, Fred Fagan, Industrial Officer of the CSU, cited the Government's intransigence on pay matters, and said that Branches would support selective Strikes, if necessary. Beyond the British Museum, there were Mass Meetings across the country, as well as the lobbying of Members of Parliament. The seriousness of the Pay issue was reflected the next day in *The Times* report which added:

"After many stoppages in the Civil Service throughout Britain yesterday, Union leaders said they could begin selective Strikes within six weeks unless the Government moderated its stand on negotiations in the Wage Freeze."

Mr Clive Bush, Vice President of the Civil and Public Service Association said machinery already existed to prepare for Strikes; and a mass meeting of representatives of 260,000 Civil Servants was scheduled to take place in a few days which would decide what action should be taken. "Government departments were disrupted," *The Times* added, "as protest meetings were held during working hours. In London, more than two thousand Whitehall Civil Servants in Central Hall, Westminster, in the morning, heard Union officials criticize the Government. Earlier, about twenty members of the Cabinet Office staff took a note to 10 Downing Street..."

Overall, the National coverage of the issue of low pay was **the** big news off the day! Incredible, would have been an appropriate word to describe the "HISTORIC CLOSURE" of the British Museum. But what struck me most forcefully then, as now, were several powerful images, especially the evocative main picture in *The Evening Standard*: A close up of the stress-worn, deeply-lined faces of uniformed Warders; haunting expressions of men whom I knew very well! Many of them had survived enemy fire in the Second World War and I was very proud to be their representative and Spokesman! But, of course, some who were of a more conservative attitude would have (and did) deduce from my outward appearance (thick long hair, blue jeans and a general lively demeanour) that I was a sinister-looking figure; and therefore, I must be a "Communist!" and "Trouble-Maker!" My appearance and outspokenness that memorable day also carried strong negative feelings among many that, once and for all, my "Promotion chances" were doomed! And, looking back, so it proved to be. Indeed, this perception, on the part of some concurred with the view of the Warder who'd said: "Why don't you go back home and cause trouble there!" On the night of the day of the British Museum's "historic Closure," sitting alone in my Flat, (much as I'd done on the night after the Charity Show, an event that had taken place

indoors in the warm cosiness of the New Lecture Theatre) in reflective mood, I thought about what had happened that day **outdoors**: The historic Industrial Action in the exposed, windswept courtyard of the British Museum that wintry Wednesday morning. Just three years earlier, having been a newcomer and knowing so little about the rough and tumble of Trade Unionism, now I was in the thick of things! I considered the fact that in spite of all the Militant talk and threats, Trade Unions were clearly not “revolutionary,” but essentially reformist organisations. Nonetheless, the Mass Protest that day was, without doubt, not only about thinking, but DOING the unthinkable; in effect, not only had Staff dared to take radical action in the frosty, Conservative Bloomsbury Village, they had done so in an EXTRAORDINARY WAY and, in, of all places, that great bastion of the Establishment : The British Museum!!

The “worm” had indeed turned; and having played a central role in this action, quite rightly, I knew there would be *consequences* for me personally. For now though, that was not my concern for I was caught up in the struggle against injustice. I wondered too, what would Karl Marx, a regular User of the hallowed Round Reading Room, have thought about the radical action taken by workers in this very place where he had sat so often and elaborated upon his evolutionary ideas. Would he have been unhappy about the disruption of the smooth running of the Round Reading Room Service of which he was a prime beneficiary? After all, was it not he who had reportedly said: “Save me from the Marxists!” Perhaps he did not say those words. Such were among the thoughts on my mind before merciful sleep overtook me.

About a month *after* the unanimously-praised Show for Charity, what would be the general response from Museum Staff about my leading part in the collective Closure of the British Museum? For better or worse, this public show of my outspokenness propelled my popularity (or notoriety in the eyes of some!) upwards: I became far better known. This, it must be said, was not something that I desired; rather, it was a consequence of humane and necessary “action;” the result of cause and effect. But, as with everything that I’d done hitherto in carrying on my Organiser-Spokesman-Representative duties, there was no lack of zeal or passion. As a consequence, it seemed the perception of me was not one-sided, but ambivalent: For some, I was a man deeply-driven by “Good Causes;” for others, I was seen as engaging in hopeless revolutionary pursuits. So from that very moment of *speaking out* in the full glare of the Media at the Museum on behalf of Black and White Staff of *all* grades, I’d become a “marked man” and; as such, it seemed a line of thinking in the minds of some was set in train that would, with time, become irreversible and ingrained. Thus, within just thirty one days from December 1972 to January 1973, perceptions of me had shifted from being the long-haired Black Man, who assisted the poorly-paid and master-minded the seemingly impossible, unprecedeted Charity Show for the Save the Children Fund to being a “dangerous Radical.”

By now, however, I’d attracted more suspicion and criticism, but I remained unduly troubled. This was the “zeal test,” I thought, especially because such unwelcome attention

upon me was unlikely to go away. If anything, I would become a bigger target for my detractors at this time of heated national Race and Sex discrimination debates, trade union power in Britain was perhaps at its zenith.

Taking the rough with the smooth, in the eyes of certain managers, I stood out, instantly becoming *persona non grata*; “a very bad seed” indeed in the eyes of the few. Thereafter, as everyone in the British Museum knew, I was a man to be closely watched. Recruited as a Library Assistant Grade II, after my first year’s probation, like everyone else, I was automatically regraded to Library Assistant Grade I. This was not a promotion for there were no additional responsibilities; and certainly no additional pay! Significantly, in these troubled years, because of widespread discrimination in employment (as well as housing!) for a Black or Asian person seeking a Clerical (White-Collar) job, nothing less than a University degree- qualification (preferably a British University!) was demanded. So, “Promotion” was another vexed issue.

Money, money, money! With a mortgage and rising family expenses, where and how could I get hold of *more* of it? My overall responsibilities ran counter to my needs. It was against this background that I counteracted my managerial detractors at the work-place who were determined to keep me in check, while they persisted in saying how committed they were to “Good,” and even “Better” Industrial Relations.

So given the multi-dimensional nature of the work that engaged me, at no time as Secretary was I able to relax. It was a relentlessly demanding task that required devotion: and I was a devotee! “The best Branch Secretary in the CSU nationally” is how John Sheldon, Deputy General Secretary of the Civil Service Union, had described me; a statement with which many people in the British Museum and beyond concurred; especially among the people who lived and worked in Bloomsbury, the Central London hub of intellectual life, learning and publishing. The “Good and the Great” frequented to hostelries. The Rare Books shops were *par excellence*; and, on the famous Museum Street, there were, at least six publishers. My writing ambition was known to a few distinguished literary men. One person who took a genuine interest in my writing ambition was the highly-respected Literary Editor and Publisher, Timothy O’Keeffe. For him, I had achieved an “extraordinary reputation.” He dubbed me: **“The Lenin of Museum Street!”** I may have over-reached myself, but I needed no reminder that the roles I played were bigger than me: There was always something more to what I was doing. While I had experienced what it was like to work very hard at something and gain some satisfaction, I was also aware that with Success, comes risk; that a willingness to learn meant being fearless, unafraid of more responsibility! Fortunately, my *passion* for learning and writing were undiminished. In this frame of mind, I prepared for the challenges of each day.

Soon after the Strike the British Museum, one Sunday morning as I approached the Irishman at the local Petrol Station, who regularly sold me the paraffin to heat my Flat, he seemed jollier than usual. Smiling broadly, he said: “I see you’re in the papers.”

“Who, me?”

“Yes,” he said, as he filled my empty plastic container.

“Which paper? When?” I asked, curious, but unsure which “paper” he was referring to. He walked briskly to his cubicle and retrieved a grease-stained newspaper. Opening it, on page 5 of *The Irish Press*, he pointed at a large photograph in which Ken Thomas, General Secretary of the CPSA, was speaking. Behind him, Mike was standing under a large CPSA Banner. Next to him, I stood awaiting my turn to speak from the steps of the British Museum on the day of the historic Closure. I was pleasantly surprised to see the image. My heart leapt! “You can have it!” the Irishman said.

“Thank you!” I said. As I walked away, it was abundantly clear that my hitherto very “public” life, had shifted: It had changed dramatically. My local British Museum popularity was raised to a higher National profile that was now set to grow. On my way home, I reminded myself that perhaps I could harness whatever “Fame” comes to me as I endeavoured to progress this phase of my “British Museum journey” as a Writer. Thereafter, being in the iconic Round Reading Room each day, surrounded by the Library’s millions of books, reinforced my confidence as I pressed on with a passion greater than ever on my novel-in-progress: *Carnival in Trinidad!*

RON RAMDIN

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This 50th Anniversary Commemorative Article is an Aspect of RON RAMDIN’S LEGACY.

For more information, please see *TURNING PAGES: The Extraordinary Autobiography of Ron Ramdin*.

