Crossing Continents

Memories of life: home and abroad from Brighton’s Black and Minority Ethnic group with WRVS Heritage Plus
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*WRVS Heritage Plus BME reminiscence group pose for a group photo at a heritage session.*
WRVS Heritage Plus Project

Portslade

Introduction

The WRVS Heritage Plus project is a Sussex-wide project funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund. The project is running in five different areas across the county, with the aim of celebrating and recording people’s individual and community histories.

This book is the result of ten weeks of reminiscence sessions based on childhood experiences with a group of people, all over 50, who attend the Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) group at a community lounge in Brighton (see picture over), and who wanted to share their histories and memories of Crossing Continents with each other and us.

The group were facilitated by WRVS Heritage Plus volunteers, Imogen Lycett Green and Gemma Crowther. The project was kindly supported by the Black and Minority Ethnic Community Partnership (BMECP) and by Brighton Black History group.

The full, rich lives we have included here are just touching on the histories of those who came regularly to the sessions with the BME group, and it’s been hard to know what to leave out, as well as what to put in.

WRVS Heritage Plus works in partnership with Brighton Pavilion Museum who kindly let us loose in the museum and gave us an inspiring talk at its History Centre about the Royal Pavilion’s time as a hospital for wounded Indian soldiers and Ghurkhas during the First World War.

This will hopefully be a resource that will enable others to remember more of their history, and teach those reading it about the growing up in other countries and the multi-cultural country that we live in today. We hope it is also an insight into some of the wonderful, creative, warm people whose memories helped to create this book.

Nicola Benge

Heritage Plus Project Coordinator

Summer 2009
Where in the world?

Sathi Sivapragasm: Sri Lanka
Nirmala Shukla: Kenya
Maureen Harkess: Jamaica
Shirley Williams: British Guyana
Josephine Saravanamuthu: Sri Lanka
Effat Salehi: Iran
Sayyed Mohammed Shojaeian: Iran
Uma Jariwala: India
Darshna Amin: India
Eileen Gumbrill: England
Teresa Gomez: Chile
Sally Sowky Raheymoom: Mauritius
Yvonne D'Avilar: British Guyana
Farah Mohabti: Iran
Cuthbert Williams: Jamaica
Assaad Ghali Geris: Egypt
Urmila Pattini: Kenya
Chandun Rupani: India

A. Ahmed Ayub: Kenya
Taira Mills: British Guyana
Ted Chapman: England
Pushpa Kohli: Kenya
Nalini Patel: India
Indira Patel: India
Hometown

Yvonne

I grew up in a family of twelve: six sisters and five brothers. I was number seven. As children, we all wanted to play. We played outside. When the whole family came, we took the opportunity to play. Neighbours kept an eye out on the neighbourhood’s kids.

Guyana’s a country of many rivers. We had many opportunities to play in water. I couldn’t swim. I was scared of water. I still can’t swim.

Sathi

I’m from Ceylon (Sri Lanka now). I was born in 1944. I have five brothers. I had to play boys games most of the time - cowboy’s games.

When I was a child, I had a lovely life. We had a house by the seaside. I wasn’t allowed to swim in the sea, but my brothers were in the Ceylon swimming team. I had a lot of younger brothers and sisters; a lot of babies to look after.

I went to normal school. I didn’t like it. My brothers went to a top private school. At secondary school I went to a top convent school seven miles away. I had to take two buses to get there. My brothers were jealous that I could travel that way.

Cuthbert

I was born in the hills. My father was a farmer. We all worked in the fields (the boys). My mother was a post mistress in the post office... I lived there until I was sixteen.

When I lived in the bush, there were no nearby roads or people. There was family nearby though. Us children went around with catapults. We shot birds and cooked them. My father grew bananas. We had goats, cows and donkeys. There were lots of wild animals around, such
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as small rodents and bats. There were mongoose who got rid of the snakes. They fed on the chickens instead.

The girls didn’t work on the farm. They didn’t do anything in the fields. All the boys worked in the fields – you’d be given a calf each to take care of and to feed and when it got big, our father would sell it and give you a share of the money. My sisters would sweep up and help mum. In harvest time, boys wouldn’t go to school.

The more sons a man had, the more wealthy his father would become because it meant more labourers. I was fortunate to be the youngest. My brothers had a harder time with all their work, but I had to do that later on of course. The girls ended up with a better education than the boys because they went to school regularly, whereas the boys had to work a lot in the fields.

We always had stuff smoking on the fire, like meat or root vegetables. I hated breakfast: cornmeal and banana porridge. We had it every day. On Sunday we had rice and peas for lunch.

**Josephine**

*Mum died soon after I was born. I was taken by my aunt to my grandfather’s house. My father was in town so he couldn’t be with us. My grandfather and aunt and uncle were wonderful though. I was the baby of their house!*

**Effat**

My dad was an army officer and was often in training. Mum didn’t work. I was born on April 1st. We went to school like normal kids. I had one sister and six brothers. My parents moved from Tehran to the north of Iran when my dad retired.

I looked after my brothers. My mother had problems with her hands so I washed the dishes for her. My sister swept. My brothers helped with cleaning.

*Effat and family 1954. Effat on far left.*

We didn’t have T.V. so we went to watch T.V. in a coffee shop (when T.V. first came to Tehran). Every Friday,
Mum would take us to see movies. We used to watch 'Days of Our Lives' and 'Gilligan's Island' on black and white T.V. In the summer we slept on the roof and we used to try to watch our neighbour's T.V.

We always had a lot of guests. Family would travel to see one another at New Year. We would never allow our guests to go to a hotel; that's not our culture.

Mohammed

My city has had lots of poets. It has a long history linked to Persia.

There were lots of parks and gardens in Neishaboorn and lots of horses and carriages. But now there are many taxis and buses. Now everything's been modernised.

We lived in a big house with a fountain and gold fishes, plenty of fruit such as apples and grapes; and we had beautiful roses.

In total, there were three girls and four boys in my family. I started school at six. For six years I was at Junior school and for three years I was at Intermediate school. I went to university after passing my high school exams.

Assaad

We lived on a farm in Egypt—it was isolated. Our roots were there. People didn't marry from outside. Then we moved to Sudan for my grandfather to work on the railways. Sudan is a huge land. The biggest land in Africa—bordered by 13 countries.

The long river Nile was good for agriculture. It was a rich country. People moved in from Libya and Saudi Arabia. There were Ethiopians and Indians too. They were all in school with me.
Eileen

I was the last of four. My mum and dad and mum’s mum, my sister who was nine years older than me, my eldest brother who was five years older than me and my youngest brother who was two years older than me; we all lived together in the same house.

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We lived on a lovely wide road. You could play out in the street in those days as there was no traffic. Often there were horses and carts. Trees lined the pavement and we had a small garden at the front of our house.

My mum played piano and dad used to have a sing-along. Under the stairs we stacked coal. In the kitchen you had a fire lit... it was lovely and warm in there, beautiful.

We had a bath on Friday nights. The tin bath used to come in from the garden. I was lucky, I was the first because I was the youngest - it was nice, hot soapy water - and everyone else went in after. Yes, I was the lucky one. I was brought up on shredded wheat. I still love it!

Shirley

I was born in my grandmother’s house in the country. The grandparents on my mother’s side were rice farmers. They sold rice, fruit and supplied milk to locals. Everyone knew everyone else. I was in a family of three - I had one sister and one brother. Mum was one of ten and so was dad.

On my father’s side, his dad (my grandfather), was a tailor. I remember him teaching my dad how to measure and sew a shirt. Mother was an excellent seamstress. Every single girl in my grandparents’ families learnt to sew and cook. Mum made our clothes: mainly
dresses for me and trousers and shirts for my brothers. Everything was made by my mother on a Singer machine.

As children, we didn't pay much attention to war (World War II). Mother listened to the BBC 'World Service'. Mum and dad liked listening to the news. My grandparents had no electricity so they didn't have what you call blackouts. They had oil lamps.

In my early childhood I kept moving because of my father's profession as a pharmacist. Between the ages of one to five we lived in a prison compound where my father had his pharmacy. I grew up being looked after by prisoners – and all my siblings too. We would be rocked to sleep on hammocks.

**Farah**

My mother was a famous tailor. She married my father because his name came up several times when she consulted the Koran.

When I was seven months old, I went to Bombay, India with my parents via Pakistan. I have one brother and two sisters. I'm the eldest. I grew up in an apartment in Bombay. My father had a coffee shop and drugstore similar to Boots the chemist.


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Schooldays

Maureen

I went to a Methodist church school in Jamaica. I was 3 when I went. The thing I remember most was paying for it. It was thruppence — they asked for my money when I went in. All I remember is looking out of the window waiting for recess when we could pick up the fallen mangoes from under the mango tree.

The next school was a long way to walk. Somebody had to walk with us — my uncle or cousin. I had short legs then. I remember around that time I had climbed up a lamppost and got a big splinter in my leg and I had to walk to hospital. I went to many different schools: St. Mary's, and then I went to Kingston. I never liked the Kingston school at all. It was very strict. If you didn't have any part of the uniform you got the cane. Once I remember I refused to go because I didn't have one part of my uniform. I was under 10.

When I came to England I was at school in Kilburn and I had all sorts of friends from the Caribbean. I always remember one tall girl — she took me in like a little sister.

Ted

I was born in 1940 and my parents moved to Brighton in 1942. Many Londoners moved down in the war.

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My schooldays were happy. I went to a local school in Bedford Street. It was Catholic too. We were taught by nuns and lay teachers. Once a week we went to a church service. There was a confessional box. There was a school choir too.

Then I went to St John the Baptist school. The teachers were kind but strict. If you did something really wrong you got the cane or the strap. I once said to the teacher if you give me that I'll give it you back and I did, I hit him back with the strap. After that they banished corporal punishment from the school altogether. I think the teacher was a bit frightened by what I did, and they didn't want it to happen again.

I had two favourite teachers. One was the PE teacher and the other the science teacher. He came from Ireland. All you had to ask was "Do they do that in Ireland?" and he'd be off. By the time the second bell came round he'd still be talking and we'd start putting our books together and we wouldn't have done any science at all. Still in all the 'A' levels and 'O' levels in science we got the highest scores than of any other subject.

The PE teacher was a lady. She had the right attitude to physical education. I threw the javelin and won some medals. Also I took up boxing and was Sussex junior champion. I did the Air Training Corps in school and then went into the RAF.
As for bullying, if it was found that two boys were having a fight during break, they’d take the boys into the boxing ring in the gym to get on with it.

When I was 8, I lived in Woodingdean and there was very heavy snow one winter. I walked from Woodingdean to Bedford Street and I only saw three people all the way. When I got there the school was closed and I had to walk all the way back again!

**Uma**

I went to school at 5. They were happy days. I went to infants then primary. I am a Hindu. The bell would ring in class and we would all pray together. First period was exercise, then another period. I was in Surat, in Gujarat in northern India. We learnt in Guajarati, Hindi and then diverted into English later.

I went to private school until I was 11. I was very good at games, and maths and English. And music. We did singing in Guajarati, and Indian dancing. We’d always play games. I passed the 11th grade exam and when I was 16 I went to college to study psychology. My father had travelled and seen England and he knew he wanted me to have an education.

**Eileen**

I was 3 when I went to school. We used to have to put canvas beds down – like the army ones – which folded up and we had an hour’s sleep every day at school then we played games and then we were picked up. I didn’t stay very long at school. Well, I was so young.

We didn’t have a playground really so we used to go over the road to play in the church grounds. Then we had to come back over the road for lessons. All our
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teachers were so kind – there was no bullying. I think it’s disgusting when kids get bullied.

I loved singing, and country dancing. I always enjoyed PE. I loved doing exercises – I still do. And if our parents could afford it, we went away for a fortnight. I went to the Isle of Wight, Bournemouth, South Devon, North Devon. We went to the east coast as well, to the constitutional holiday camp.

Then the war came along and we were evacuated to Brighton. I went to St Mark’s school then. You know down by Lidl’s, the other side’s now an industrial estate well there’s still the old school bell there. Have a look. I loved school. Well, I’ve loved all of my life!

Farah

I started nursery in Bombay when I was two years old. I used to be in an English school, but I spoke Urdu with my friends and then Farsi at home. I enjoyed it all. I had good friends and school was not difficult for me. The alphabet was difficult though because I had grown up with the Farsi language. But the teacher was pleased with me.

I remember well there were big problems when Ghandi was assassinated. The school was shut and we had to come home and there was trouble at my father’s coffee shop. Hindus and Muslims were fighting and one person was killed outside the coffee shop. The school bus
my mother's brother Mohammed, a Muslim. I will never forget his kindness — teaching me the Farsi alphabet.

The teachers helped me too. They understood I had difficulties. There were punishments. If you got in late in the morning, everyone was punished. We had the strap on the hand and also you had to go and stand in the corner of the classroom. Fortunately I was always punctual so this never happened to me.

It was part of my Baha'i family tradition to respect the school teachers and be punctual. In Tehran I went to the Mina School. I had a friend called Vagi — one of a Jewish family who lived next door to me. She was the same age. Every morning we went together to school. We played together with my sister too. Then I went to the high school. It was a private school. We had a very strict head — she was called Barnum Hanam. Even if you wore short socks instead of long ones you got a punishment.

We used to do calligraphy classes in high school as well. We had ink and a special pen. We did the lessons half in English and half in Farsi. We also did knitting once a week and in art we did needlework. We had an exam where you had to make a tablecloth and we also had competitions. I won a lot of prizes for calligraphy and art.
We played games – I was good at volleyball. I had a wonderful older friend I played with called Sudabi. We saw somebody take a photo of us playing volleyball in Tehran. But we could never find the photo. I asked at the school but nobody knew. Time passed. I got married, and eventually came to Brighton. We lost everything. I had no idea where that photo went.

Then 28 years later it was International Women’s Day in Brighton and the woman chair lady asked me to make a story of my country. I went to the Brighton Library researching and I found the picture! Can you believe it? After all those years! And in the Brighton Library!

**Assaad**

There were Ethiopians and Indians. They were all in school with me. The Indians brought culture, cinema, and X-rated films about crime and love.

So my school was an Italian Catholic private school where we were taught by nuns. My family are Christian, but at the school there were all sorts – Muslims and Jews too. My family wanted to protect me from other religions. I was a Coptic Christian – very strict. A child is like stone – what you put in him stays with him. From an early age I wasn’t allowed to play with the other children – I had to stay with my own kind. It was hard for a child.

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**Taira Mills**

I was born in British Guyana. Out of five children two died and three lived. I am a Muslim. We were well educated in Islam. I obey my religion Islam now, I pray at home. I went to an English school, the Bethel Government School when I was five years old. Three
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teachers I remember up until second standard – Miss Blair, Mr Bacchus and Mr Ali.

My sister became very ill and had to go to hospital so my mother took me out of school when I was twelve to look after my three siblings. And then when I was 15 my mother married me off. You are married for good or bad. It is a made match. My first husband died. I came to England around 1980 and married my late husband Ron. We were married for 8 years then he sadly died. Then I was on my own for 8 years. Then I met Ted and that’s it!

Yvonne

At five, I went to the St. Mary’s Catholic school in British Guyana. I loved school. I thoroughly enjoyed it. There was a long walk to school but I didn’t mind. There was registration and then we did exercises, followed by school lessons. We did singing as well. Nuns ran the school. They were pretty ok. I got on well with them. They were good teachers.

My best subject was maths and multiplication. I was very good at art too. And domestic science. We used to have to leave our school a group of us and go over to the domestic science block. We learnt to get the stains out of our clothes, we learnt cooking, sewing and washing. I loved domestic school. I love learning different things. I sewed for myself when I was older and made my own clothes.

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Because it was a catholic school we had to go to church a lot. We had to learn the catechism – that’s a booklet about the Roman Catholic church. If you could retain it all you could make your first communion. You know, dressed in white like little brides. You had to do confession if you did communion. But I don’t believe in the confessional side of it. Who has the powers to forgive?

I felt like I had to make up something every time. What could I say I’d done? I pray. I’m a firm believer, but without the paraphernalia. To confess I used to feel I had to tell a lie. It baffled me. I didn’t dare ask the adults what to do. I just had to make things up.

I was in hospital in 1993 when I did finally give it up – the Catholicism. A nun came to me and said would you like to have a communion? I said fine but no confession. And that was it.
Food and Celebrations

Shirley

I didn’t spend much time in the kitchen as a child. My father’s policy was that he paid enough money for his children to go to school and that they should finish their homework before being allowed in the kitchen! Consequently, I never got to cook until I was in England. My mother did curries, rotis, cooked rice, yams and plantains. She used a lot of fresh vegetables and chicken.

Mohammed

I like my food...well, if you don’t put good petrol in a car then the car doesn’t run! My mother usually cooked everything for the family. There weren’t facilities to cook like there were today – only kerosene and wood. The most delicious dishes we had were cooked over a wood fire – rice and saffron for example. You could smell it cooking from a hundred metres away.

I learnt to cook from my mother. As a bachelor I cooked for myself. I like dishes such as tuskabab (lamb, onion, potato and cinnamon) and khorshet (which contains meat such as chicken or beef). There is also a delicious yoghurt which you have with water and mint. It tastes salty and refreshing. When we drink tea in Iran, we place a sugar cube in the mouth and not in the tea.

In Iranian families it is normal to have gatherings and feed up to sixty or seventy people. Older people normally sit at the top of the room and younger people at the bottom. We say prayers before we eat and when we are full, we say ‘Thank you God’.

Effat

I started school, in Tehran, when I was 5 – a little earlier than the others. My mother had asked the teacher of I could sit in for a year, just to look but not do anything. But I took everything in and when they tested
me I passed the exam even though I was a year younger than everyone else. I was top of the class. Very good at school – I always got 20 out of 20. I used to walk to school.

My uniform was black with a white collar. We had to have tidy hair and we had milk at 10 am. I remember in 1st grade I liked my teacher's shoes very much. When she was writing on the blackboard with chalk you could see her high heeled shoes. I loved those high heels.

I used to play I'm the teacher at home. I would wear my dad's glasses and sit and my cousins and sisters were my students. After 6th grade I went to a mixed school. It was nice in a way.

Yvonne

We grew flowers in our front garden and kept provisions such as sweet potatoes and yams at the back. We ate lots of fish, sweet potatoes and yams. Our grandmother was the greatest person for planting – she used to plant nuts and seeds from fruits we'd eaten: Star apple, Sapodilla and Chap fruit.
Mohammed

On the way to school we would walk through the bazaar. You walked under an arch into a covered hall and there were merchants selling everything. During the winter the weather was cold and there was this merchant selling roasted chick peas. There was a big oven with sand on it and a fire under it and they put the damp chickpeas on top until they roasted and we used to buy a bag and pour half into one pocket and half into the other pocket to keep our hands warm the rest of the way. We couldn’t eat in lessons so we had to wait until break and then start eating them.

I remember in 1st grade there was an inspection and the inspector went to the blackboard and wrote 111 and asked the class what that was. I said, a hundred and eleven, and I was given a book as a prize. They were very pleased with me.

My home was in a new street. They tried to destroy all the housing so we went to another place. It was near the park in Nishawar. There I went to a special school. It was well supported by the government authorities. We had to learn everything with the help of seeing and making. So, for instance, in history, if we were learning about the history of Persia, we had to make figures and hats and clothes and dress up and live it. It was like theatre. So one day you were a soldier, or a king, or a first minister. I was there between 6 and 12 years old.
You learnt a knowledge of everything through practising and seeing. So if you were learning about plants you would actually plant some.

Then I went to intermediate school for 3 years and then high school. I was good at maths and physics. Algebra was one of my best things. I still remember some of the formulae and calculations.

Sally
I played marbles as a child. I also played with elastic, skipped with a rope and did hopscotch. We played a lot of games because we didn’t have computers in those days or T.V. We played outside all year round. Nowadays, we worry about our children playing outside whereas when I was young, my parents didn’t have to worry at all.

Maureen
We played Jacks with pebbles, spinning, Tops, Snap, Happy Families and Hopscotch and skipping. We often played on the beach. My childhood was short in Jamaica. I moved to England when my grandmother summoned me to come and live with her there. I always had lots of friends in England though, where I moved to with my grandmother in 1960. Lots of my friends wanted to come to the Caribbean.

Eileen
We used to have mum’s old washing line and joined it together with others from across the street. We used to play Whip Top, putting coloured chalk on the top to make pretty patterns.

We used to collect cigarette cards too (with those pictures of film stars). We used to line the cigarette cards
with film stars on them against the kerb and knock them down with the other cards. And we used to make two teams. One would say a film star’s initials and the other team would have to guess the name of the film stars by asking different questions about them.

I collected marbles, which I got from the sweet shop. I also used to go roller skating. My friend and I went roller skating lots and weren’t happy until we got holes in the bottom of our skates!

We played on the see saw, slides and in the sandpits in St. James’ Park. I had lots of good friends in those days, like Gladys, Peggy, Alma, Doreen and her sister Lillian...

Cuthbert

There were boys and girls games, but we all played them together. Remember the hula hoop craze? We did that. We did the usual things like spinning tops - we used to paint the tops too. We went out with catapults to shoot things like lizards and made these catapults by cutting up sticks.

A favourite thing of ours was kites. We made our own. We used to strip the skin off bananas and chop them up to the same length, turn one across and one another way.... and we used flour and water for the glue. We used beeswax to make the kite string stronger. The string was made from the bark of the banana trees. And then we used old clothes - strips of old cloth - to cover the kite.
**Shirley**

We dressed up in mother’s old stuff. We used tea sets and pretended you were inviting guests. I always used to like climbing trees and picking the neighbour’s fruit. Well, the fruit was there and she wasn’t eating it so… (!)

My dad used to make a Christmas tree from scratch with old cords (rope) and wire, colouring them green while my mother baked Christmas cake. I always remember that at Christmas time, Mum used to make decorations from old stockings.

**Mohammed**

Well there were groups playing, like football and volleyball and single player games like kite and running with wheels... we used to make skateboards. You were always proud of your skateboard if you had one in the community.

We used to play marbles too. In the beginning, there was no glass or factory-made marbles. We had to cut stone to make spheres. We had to find proper rocks to make our marbles.

**Efiat**

We were the same as everybody, playing with rope and balls. I had dolls and I used to make dresses for them. When I was seven years old, dad brought a doll from America for me. This one was soft, had beautiful eyes and hair, whereas my other dolls were plastic.
Do you remember blind man's bluff? Well they say it is based on the following story:

For centuries, Ceylon was not known by the rest of the world except by the Arabs, who traded cinnamon from Ceylon. The best cinnamon in the world. However, in 1505, a Portuguese ship washed up on the shores of Ceylon.

In Ceylon, no-one had seen white people and took stories to the King of Ceylon that some men had washed
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ashore who had red hair like fire and who ate only stones (stale bread). They were led to the King.

However, instead of being taking the easy way, which should have been a 6 mile journey, they were led the long way in a maze like way to confuse them. It took six days to get to the King. This was done because the King didn’t want the foreigners to see the way into the Kingdom and therefore be able to return home and plan its future capture! To this day children play Blind Man’s Bluff.

Pushpa

I played with children near my home. There were thirteen or fourteen houses near me. More were erected as I got older. My three brothers and three sisters and I played bottle tops and threw sticks and people had to go and find them. There weren’t any toy shops near my house, but I went sometimes to one with my dad.

Nalini

We played skipping and hoops and played with dolls. We made toys at home and sewed clothes for dolls. I grew up with my brother and played his games - like rounders.

Uma

I played the same games as the others. My father was a diamond merchant. I am the second of eight-four
Effat

My mother usually cooked. We had milk in a bottle at breakfast. We had one bottle each and it was wonderful! I taught myself to cook. The first time I cooked rice after I had married Mohammed, I accidentally put baking powder instead of salt in the rice one day and wondering what was happening to the rice when it kept boiling and boiling over! Food is not as important to me as it is to Mohammed. I'm a good cook though - I can cook for fifty or sixty people, no problem!
Cuthbert

I was never involved in the preparation of food. I always had people cooking for me - my mother, the air force and Shirley. We always had a lot of soup in my childhood home. We sold all the good stuff that we had and used the old stuff. We had banana porridge for breakfast. You would boil green bananas and mix it with milk. With cornmeal porridge you would grate the corn or beat it down to make the porridge itself.

I couldn't have many sweet things. We were a poor family so couldn't afford sweet food. That was for the rich people who lived in town. I do remember though, my sisters sending chocolate from England when they were working at Brighton General Hospital. Otherwise, I had peppermints sometimes.

Oh, we ate lots of fruit such as mangoes, pears and breadfruit. I loved roasted breadfruit, yams and sweet potatoes. Yes, fruit and vegetables played a large part in our diet. And with meat, well nothing was wasted. Meat was a luxury. You could make dishes out of skin, blood and entrails. I didn't like my diet so much as a child, but looking back, it seems healthy.

Josephine

Our staple was rice—but on special occasions we had milk rice, spiced—a kind of rice pudding. We had a

Sathit in one of her beautiful saris

Sri Lanka and the food was not very good there. We always used to have Buffalo yoghurt and honey though. We called it curd.

Sathi

There were coconut trees everywhere in Ceylon. So coconut was a staple in the diet. All the curries were made with fresh coconut milk. We grated the coconut with a special tool. Then we squeezed the coconut three times to get the coconut milk from the pulp. You got
the water from the coconut with three squeezing. Our new year is April 14th—rice pudding is a celebratory food for then.

**Maria**

I used to look after my brothers and sisters when my mother went into the Congolese forest to look for food. My mother used to bring organic food from the forest. We ate fish, cassava, yams and sweet potatoes. And they were all cooked over a wood fire. I learnt how to find and cook foods from my mother.

Ahmed and Maria, friends from the BME group

**Teresa**

I grew up in the mountains in Chile. My roots are indigenous, like American Indians. I lived with the Mapuche people in a big community, near a river. I learnt to catch fish with spears. We took milk from cows and used it to make butter and cheese.

We survived off the land, with wheat for bread and potatoes, for example. The whole community lived in houses, and in the summer we used to make a tepee to hold celebrations. Whenever an animal was killed, the
whole community would share it. We lived naturally; in harmony with nature, and shared everything.

Yvonne

My mother and grandmother did the cooking. They didn't want the children to be in the kitchen, so we stood by the doorway and watched. As I got older, I had the opportunity to cook at home.

I remember the smells of cumin, curry powder, tomato puree, onions and garlic. Mother used to use a lot of vegetables in her cooking such as sweet potatoes and plantains. She also used a lot of fish such as salted cod, crab and prawns. I loved fish and still do. Now I get fresh fish at Hove from the fish market at the Lagoon.

There used to be a pepper pot which was used. It comes from the Ama Indians. You would grate cassava, squeeze the juice out of it and boil it. It would create a dark substance like soy sauce and you would put it in a pepper pot with cinnamon to flavour meat. It could take about four hours to cook. Cooking was also done over a wood and coal fire. You'd put a grill over the fire and place the pots over that to cook food.

Assaad

We lived around a central courtyard garden. The animals were kept in the middle—chickens, cows, sheep. We ate from what we had. In the courtyard, they built a clay oven—a Bakri, in which you burned charcoal, wood and shavings under a grill. My mother baked bread and biscuits every day. I used to sit at her feet and she would feed me every ten minutes.
She made cheese. Sometimes we would even take milk directly from the cow.

We had the Nile river you see, all this fresh water. We would dry vegetables from the garden and preserve onions in bottles with salt. The water was so clear and cold. Everything in the house was directed by the sun and the river Nile. When it rained we had tubes made to collect and store the rain.

Farah

On the 21st March, the day of the spring equinox, we have the Baha'i New Year. We fast for 19 days before, then it's celebration time and the beginning of Spring. It is called Naw Ruz and means New Day. It's a holy day and celebration when no one should work.

Iranian people have another festival at the same time with the same name. It stems from a Zoroastrian tradition many years ago. During Iranian Naw Ruz, you make a table pretty with seven things each beginning with S in Farsi which are important to the New Year celebration and all the family gather round to eat together.

Naw Ruz table layout, Iranian style

Representing the items on the table in the picture on page 53
Eileen

We always had good dinners. We had fish or meat every day. We had meat with potatoes, green vegetables and parsnips; a roast every Sunday. And on Mondays we had bubble and squeak, which was lovely with pickles. My sons still do bubble and squeak on

I went to school from nine until twelve noon, had two hours for lunch and then went to school from two until four thirty. Every day at six when dad came home, I'd ask him for a penny and I went to get a pennorth of chips. Sometimes they'd put crackling on it.

I did used to get ice-cream. I was lucky; Nan used to use her money so I could go on school trips or on holiday with her. I would get ice-cream on these trips.

What other meals? We had steak and kidney pie and liver and bacon. Mum cooked all the meals, except on Christmas Day when dad did a Christmas roast. Mum did all the shopping and housework. She was glad to get rid of us when we went out on the street to play!

Josephine

I used to play at the bottom of the hill near the house, where there was a river. I bathed and swam and had coconut milk when I returned home.
Growing Up

Taira Mills

My father was a chemist and he worked on sugar estates so we moved all over Guyana. My father went away to Jamaica for work and while he was away my mother thought I should be married – too many children in the house already. So my mother's sister found someone from where I was born in Albany state. When my father came back from Jamaica he didn't like him. I didn't like him either. But my parents said I had to stay with him. We were married when I was 15.

In the first year I had a daughter then next I had another daughter and then a third daughter and then the fourth was a boy. My husband was 29 when we married and he was a tailor. I did a lot of sewing too, I sewed all my own clothes and for the children.

Eileen

I was a teenager in the war you see. We had been evacuated to Sussex. There were bombs dropping all over Brighton but we used to go dancing at the Regent dance hall. There was a springy floor, you remember. I used to go with the girls from work. Then we'd walk home together after. There was an orchestra usually and a cinema underneath. We went all the time. The girls that is. We didn't bother about boyfriends!
Shirley Williams

When I was 15 in Guyana, I used to wear a proper dress to go out, with pleats, all gathered in with a crinoline underskirt. Usually made with a bright floral material. And I used to wear heels with a pointy toe. We’d go to a play or the cinema. I’d go with my parents and we’d always be back by 8pm.

When I was a young nurse in Brighton, I lived in a nurses’ home. The doors had to be closed at a certain time. There were about 20 of us in training. Some people got kicked out. It was hierarchical in nursing – you didn’t mix with the older ones.

How did I meet Bert? [Bert Williams] Well he was creeping around the nursing home, wasn’t he?! No, really, Bert’s sister was a nurse, already qualified. He was based in the Air Force in Germany and he came over to visit his sister Blaine for dinner and she’d invited three of us to come along. He sent a letter after, saying could he take me to the cinema. It was poetic, I thought it was him, until I realised he’d copied down some Ray Charles lyrics!

Bert Williams

I was so happy to go to England. Where I grew up on the farm, I had to work, as a child. Always carrying water, letting out the chickens, working in the fields. I was 16 years old when I joined the air force and I came to Britain and I thought if I die this is Heaven. You could

Bert and Shirley’s wedding, 1965

switch the light on and off. Where I came from we had no electricity so you said, or my brother said at night, blow the light out.

So I left and I had no more mother and father telling me what to do. The food was the biggest shock of all – after all our guavas and mangoes and yams – brussel
Josephine

I was educated and I mixed freely with my cousins as an adolescent. There was no restriction. But my cousins respected girls — they knew how far they could go. They never took advantage. I was more interested in education than in marriage. I went to training college and became a teacher. Then I came to England and went to London University.

In England I met my husband. He was my brother’s friend. He helped me when I first moved into my lodgings in London. No, I didn’t like him at all. He was Tamil and I am Singhalese but in those days it wasn’t important. We came back from England and married in Sri Lanka. My family were not happy with the marriage so all my friends helped with the food and all the wedding clothes. I boarded with friends throughout that whole time. But of course over time my family became fond of my husband.

When we had children, because they had a Tamil name, we worried they wouldn’t get jobs because of prejudice, so we came back to England.
Farah

I met my husband because he was the second cousin of my mother. I was 16 years old. I had a plan to carry on my studies, but my parents encouraged me to get married. I would have stayed on at school till I was 18.

He was called Habib. He was a very nice man. He was very handsome and successful. He was 28. In the beginning I wasn’t very sure, but gradually I came to love him.

At my wedding there were 300 people. The reception took place in my aunt’s garden in a Tehran suburb. We got married in 1958. I wore a white dress from Paris. I had a tiara and a veil.

We came to England in 1981 with my husband and two sons. We came on holiday and the Iran Iraq war began while we were here. It destroyed the airport in Tehran and we couldn’t go back home. The new Iranian government took all our possessions and our house.
**Effat**

I married at 14. I was in Tehran. I went with Mohammed up to the north to Bander Pahlavi (near the Caspian sea) and I carried on going to school without the school knowing but still they found out and then kicked me out. Nobody pushed me. I wanted to get married.

**Uma**

I married in India on 25 May 1959, about 50 years ago. It was partly arranged, but we had met before. We had an interview to talk about the family. I had 2 children in India, but unfortunately one died. Then in 1964, my husband had a voucher to come to England, so he came here in 1964.

First he went to Preston in Lancashire with his Uncle. I came here in 1965, at that time my husband was in Luton. After 14 years we came to Surbiton in Surrey. After 17 years we came to Brighton in 1996. I lost my husband in 1997. I came here because my 2 daughters live here. They asked us to come here due to my husband's poor health. I am still here and I like it.
Mohammed

When I came back from Italy in 1966 my family tried to get me married. I had a job as a petty officer in the Navy when I was 21. I was assisting the instructor at the military base.

I asked Effat's parents. I had always like her and everything came true. At the marriage ceremony, there is a priest, a mullah and a licence from the government. It is a tradition in our religion to give a Mehrisah like a dowry but from the man, which the wife can then demand at any time.

Nirmala Shukla's 'Puja' (offerings)

Nirmala Shukla

I am from a Gujarati family from East Africa. We lived in Nairobi, Kenya. I came to England in 1954 with my husband and two children. We got married in 1944 and have been married more than 64 years. I had an arranged marriage when I was fifteen and a half. My husband Bhanu Kumar Shukla won a scholarship to come
here to Brighton for six years. Afterwards we went back to Nairobi, but we had changed. We only stayed a short while then we came back to Brighton.

We were the first Gujarati family in Brighton's history. I now have four children, seven grandchildren and two great grandchildren in England.

I speak Swahili, Gujarati, Hindi and English, but I didn't know any English when we came here. I studied English and shorthand typing here. I am a Montessori teacher and I was teaching in a Montessori school for about 8 years. I was very ill and had to leave the job.

My daughter got married in 1966 at the Friend's Meeting House in Brighton and had a traditional Gujarati wedding. It was the first Indian wedding in the town and people were stopping to take photos of us on the seafront. We were mentioned in the Argus, the local newspaper.

Assaad Ghali Gergis

I came to England to study Art and Design and got an HND in Art. I worked for 20 years as an Administrative Assistant. I am retired now in Brighton. I love Brighton, the seaside and the people in Brighton, they are all very nice.

Shirley Williams

I came to England in 1961 and studied as a nurse until 1964. My Mum and Dad came on holiday at the same time, so I was eased into the changes gently and felt less homesick because they were here for 6 months. I was in Brighton for three and a half years during which time I met my husband Bert.

We got married in 1966 and have survived to now. We have 2 lovely children and 2 gorgeous grandchildren. I have spent most of my 48 years here in Brighton, and I have always loved the place. I still work part time as a nurse. Perhaps this is home now for me but I still keep in touch with my extended family in Guyana.
Crossing Continents

Josephine Saravanamuth

I met my husband when I was on holiday in Britain. He was studying here. We went back to Sri Lanka and after a few months we got married. We lived there for a number of years, but my husband kept returning to Britain every 2 years to keep his passport open. When our children were fairly old we decided to return to Britain as the political situation was becoming very uncomfortable for people of Tamil ethnic minority.

We were received here very well, and the many friends which we had made on earlier visits helped us enormously to settle down. The children finished their education here. We had jobs and we were very happy, but unfortunately my husband died a couple of years after we came. With the help of good friends we are still here and quite happily settled.

The people here are very nice and friendly and very helpful. God bless them.

Sathi

I was in an arranged marriage. It is traditional custom in my Tamil farming community to be married within the community. I had a civil ceremony and a religious ceremony compatible with State and Society. My husband was already settled in England for 10 years and met me in Sri Lanka. I followed my husband in 1973 to Northampton and I came to Brighton in 2007.

Darshana Amin

I was introduced to my husband in India and married on 2nd December 1972. I went to live with my husband in Dar es Salaam, East Africa and we migrated to

Crossing Continents

England on 5th May 1974.

Urmilla Pattni

As traditionally practised in Gujarati Community, I was introduced to my husband during a family gathering. I was married in 1954 according to Gujarati ceremony combining civil and religious ceremony. I am widowed and living with my son in Brighton.

Eileen Gumbrill and Nicola Benge

Indira Patel

I came to England with my husband and children in 1972 because of Uganda's troubles. I wanted my children to settle down and have their education here.
About this project

The Heritage Plus Project is run by WRVS (formerly known as WVS), a charity which has been in existence since 1938. It is based in Sussex and aims to encourage people to explore their histories, and to participate in the process of reminiscence in a creative way through the mediums of crafts, photography, writing, performance and many other forms. It is also a way to create friendships across generational lines and promote respect for older people through education.

WRVS provides a range of practical services nationally to help and support older people to live well, maintain their independence and play a part in their local community. It works in partnership with other charities and organisations, local authorities and the NHS, supporting communities throughout England, Scotland and Wales to be strong and cohesive.

Volunteers play a vital role: nearly 55,000 of them - both men and women - give up their time to help other people and to make life better in their communities. Together with WRVS staff they deliver professional services with a personal touch.

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Crossing Continents

www.heritageplus.org.uk

WRVS Heritage Plus community history website!

This exciting website showcases diverse and fascinating personal histories from people within Sussex, including audiovisual extracts. Designed in part by WRVS Heritage Plus volunteers.

Archive your memories:

This website is a beautiful way to promote positive ageing along with archiving valuable memories that would otherwise be lost. This gives everyone the opportunity to record their stories, their lives and their loves or research their local area. Heritage Plus brings together people of all ages to explore their histories and life experiences – their shared heritage. This site will enable young and old to add their own family heritage for people worldwide to view and comment on.