

Sybil Pheonix

Sybil Pheonix was a nursing secretary in post-war British Guiana when she went along to listen to an up-and-coming British politician address a West Indian audience on the merits of seeking employment in British hospitals. 'He made it sound attractive', she said later. The politician's name was Enoch Powell at that time a willing supporter of the postwar recruitment drive to solve the desperate need for workers. He would shortly change his tune in dramatic ways, but Sybil was one of those captivated by his early promises. She sailed to England in 1956.

She arrived at Paddington Station and was astonished to see a white woman sweeping up dust and rubbish, 'I'm only accustomed to seeing white women who don't even sweep their own homes. They have six of us to do it for them.' Then she embarked on her journey through London's neglected and awful housing stock in search of a bed. The best she could find was an overpriced basement in Paddington. It was a converted - or semi-converted - coal cellar. 'Every time you light the gas, after about 15 minutes the water starts running down the wall. I cooked my 1st Christmas dinner in the country under an umbrella.'

She didn't think that she would be able to bear it, but honoured her childhood pledge to give orphans a better break than she had enjoyed herself and became a foster mother in Lewisham, South London. She gave a home to over 100 children, 11 of whom went on to university. Having trained as a milliner, she opened a youth group, organized choirs, helped to motivate the early race relations group, and became a Methodist lay preacher. In 1971 she was awarded an MBE, and was briefly the mayoress of Lewisham.

Hers was a brave career, often punctuated by disaster. She lost her own daughter Marsha in a car crash, and in 1981 the youth group building was burnt to the ground in an unsolved fire, suspected of being started deliberately by racist yobs. 13 young black people were killed, and Pheonix had to organise a memorial for them. 'I couldn't eat - the smell of burned people - for a long time. I couldn't keep anything down. Within 3 months I'd lost nearly 2 stone.' But she remained committed to her life's work. 'I was born a member of the British Empire...' she said. 'I'm nothing but British!'