

# West Indian soldiers in Britain

Although not a common occurrence, several West Indians joined the British Army in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, long before the creation of the West India Regiments. Like many British-born younger sons of higher-class families, several white West Indians purchased commissions in the Army, before the practice was abolished in 1871. Like their British counterparts, some families developed traditions of military service which continued beyond the purchase of commissions. For example, the brothers Douglas and James Alleyne of Barbados enjoyed highly successful military careers in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Several West Indians of African heritage also enlisted, and came to occupy something of a niche role. An enduring belief in the innate musicality of black people meant that many regiments desired to have black musicians as part of their regimental bands, and many black West Indians were recruited accordingly, forming the majority of such black musicians. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries music played a vitally important role in Army life, with certain tunes representing orders; for example, a command to advance or to withdraw. Due to their importance on the battlefield, the musicians were a key target for any enemy force, as killing or injuring them would disrupt the operation of the opponent. This is demonstrated by the infamous Charge of the Light Brigade, in which more trumpeters were killed, captured or injured than any other rank. The distinctive uniforms that regimental musicians wore, normally the regimental colours reversed, only helped the enemy to target them. The Guards regiments stationed in London took this differentiation even further, by dressing their black musicians in uniforms inspired by those worn in the Ottoman Empire.



West Indian bandsmen at the Changing of the Guard  
Image © National Army Museum, London

The desire for black musicians from regiments across Britain contributed to the spread of the black community throughout the country. Whilst they appear to have been well-treated in their regiments, black servicemen in Britain in this time did come across some racist treatment; a well reported story tells of one West Indian soldier, whilst walking along the Strand in London, was abused by a man, whom he promptly knocked down. However, it was by no means universal. Many married British women and settled happily, with their regimental comrades frequently acting as godparents to their children. William Afflick, born in St. Kitts 1781, married his English wife Elizabeth before 1810 and, after his service in the Napoleonic Wars, including in the Iberian Peninsula, France and the Battle of Waterloo, settled in Gore Lane, London and seems to have remained there until his death in 1855. The social status they enjoyed in Britain, where slavery had never been legally recognised or practised, would have been unthinkable in the Caribbean.

Despite this, some indeed did opt to return, such as George Rose. Rose had been born as a slave in Spanish Town Jamaica in 1787. He escaped to England and enlisted in the 73<sup>rd</sup> Regiment of Foot in August 1809, fighting in the European campaigns of the Napoleonic Wars, including the Battle of Waterloo where he was severely wounded by a shot to the arm. He eventually rose to the rank of sergeant in 1831, the first known black regular soldier to do so. After his discharge in 1837, he lived in Glasgow for some years before returning to Jamaica in 1849 as a Methodist missionary. He remained in Jamaica until his death in 1873.

Contrary to popular opinion, some men of African heritage, including West Indians, were able to achieve officers' commissions in the nineteenth century. Amongst their number was an Ensign of the 49<sup>th</sup> Foot, James Swaby, who was born in Jamaica to John Swaby and a woman of mixed race, making him ¼ black, a Quadroon by the contemporary Caribbean racial classifications. This did not only include the regular Army but also the British militia. Nathaniel Wells, the son of a white planter and a slave, was born in St. Kitts and inherited his father's wealth. Moving to Monmouthshire, he became Deputy Lord Lieutenant for the county and secured a commission in the Monmouthshire militia, although his resignation in August 1822 may have been influenced by his experiences during riots a few months earlier.