

Kamal Chunchie

Kamal Chunchie was born in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) to a migrant Malay family. Little is known of his early life in Asia, except that he once worked as a police inspector in Singapore.

King and Country

“They were all frightfully patriotic out there at the time, and he came and fought for King and Country.”
Muriel, Chunchie’s daughter

Chunchie was inspired to travel to London to join the Middlesex Regiment, seeing action in the trenches . . .

“He had to go ‘over the top’ with them and it was his job to get them all up and going. He must of hated what became of them. They were just being slaughtered.”
Tony, Chunchie’s grandson

It appears that Chunchie fully integrated into army life . . .

“They wanted him to become an officer and he said ‘no’ . . . he wanted to stay with his mates, the boys that he’d trained with.”
Tony, Chunchie’s grandson

“He got wounded twice, he got gassed once, and he put down a rebellion on board one of the ships - they didn’t like the cook and they were all going to shoot him.”
Muriel, Chunchie’s daughter

During the war, Chunchie learnt how to box, saw concerts of opera, and met his future English wife while on leave in London. He was gassed and injured, and sent to Malta to recuperate. There he played cricket, his biggest passion, one which he continued after the war as the only ‘coloured’ member of the Essex Gentlemen’s Cricket Club.

Conversion

It was during the war that Chunchie found his calling as a Methodist preacher . . .

He became converted to the Christian faith while he was out in the trenches . . . you can imagine the bombs falling everywhere . . .”
Muriel, Chunchie’s daughter

His conversion, and carefree lifestyle, caused conflict with his family back home; his father had been the leader of the Malay Muslim communities in Ceylon . . .

“[His father] put a Fatwa on him. His name was crossed out of the Koran, and his brothers were given the job of hunting him down, which, thankfully, they never did.”
Tony, Chunchie’s grandson

“He smoked and he liked to drink and he partied . . . he had an allowance, for quite a long time, from his father, until he became a Christian during the war, and then that allowance was stopped”

Muriel, Churchie’s daughter

The Methodist Church tried in vain to tempt Churchie abroad to work as a missionary . . .

“He reckoned that he’d come [to the UK] to be a missionary! He thought he could do more good here. He felt that the converted here needed more help than the unconverted abroad.”

Tony, Churchie’s grandson

Coloured Men’s Institute Of Canning Town

Britain’s navy and merchant ships were often manned by colonial workers. Churchie felt sympathy for these ‘coloured’ seamen, who were rejected from the pubs and hostels of London’s docklands; his Christian sense of duty would lead him to serve the country once more.

“He’d found a seaman wandering around without any shoes, so he took his off and gave them to him.”

Tony, Churchie’s grandson

In 1928, Churchie established the Coloured Seamen’s Institute in Canning Town – a charitable community centre with meetings, meals, games and even day trips to the seaside for the ‘coloured’ seamen and their families. He gained a remarkable reputation across London as a kind and charming man.

“He was the only coloured person in the area, and, in those days, people used to doff their hats to him”

Tony

Churchie’s relentless networking earned him V.I.P tickets to the Queen’s Coronation and the 1948 Olympics.

“He used to go to the Royal Empire Society to play bridge and snooker. He probably networked as people do today. Try and get help if he could; drum up some support.”

Tony

His family were not always protected from the prejudices of the day . . .

[Other children] would say ‘you’re living with a nigger!’ I was used to having fights . . . That people saw him as a nigger; how stupid can you get? It’s my grandpa!”

Tony

By the Second World War, as Churchie found it harder to secure funding . . .

“His idea of living was to help his fellow man. Financially, in the end, he couldn’t because there was no money . . . my grandmother had to re-mortgage the house to bury him.”

Tony

Later Life

Chunchie always held a strong affection for the empire . . .

He probably feared that once the empire was gone, that what held us all together would go.

Tony

He was even recruited to special branch . . .

“We used to go to Speaker’s Corner. He used to take me, I suppose as his cover . . . He would just listen and watch. There was an awful lot of students from all over the commonwealth countries and he’d be out to see if there was any trouble brewing.”

Tony

His sense of duty to his kinsmen remained throughout his life . . .

“He became a fire warden [during WW2] and went out every night, standing on roofs, looking for fires.”

Tony

Though the unwanted memory of the First World War lingered on . . .

“Like a lot of soldiers from all the wars, he was never really happy talking about his plight.”

Tony

Chunchie died in 1958, not long after the Coloured Men’s Institute closed.

“I saw him the night before he died. [They] asked if there was anything he’d like and he said ‘yes, glass of brandy and a cigar’. And that was the way he went out . . .”

Tony
