

Friday 21 October 2011

## **Documents from The National Archives added to UNESCO Memory of the World Register**

[Documents](#) that give a rare glimpse into what life was like for Caribbean labourers over 100 years ago have now been added to the [UNESCO Memory of the World Register](#).

In collaboration with archives, museums and libraries from countries as diverse as Jamaica to the USA, The National Archives for England and Wales submitted documentary heritage to UNESCO that chronicle the mass movement of West Indians to Panama and include historically significant events such as the construction of the Panama Canal.

The collection brings to light the Caribbean's connections with Central America and North America and the mobility of people in the region at the time describing the movement of over 100,000 West Indians who made new lives in Panama. For many, this was the first opportunity to take control of their own lives and seek their destiny abroad.

### **Guy Grannum, Discovery Product Manager said:**

*"It is a real stamp of approval that our records relating to the West Indian experience in Panama are acknowledged in this way. They are vital to the collective Memory of the World demonstrating the value and importance of archives for the preserving the history, heritage and experience of people and their families".*

The papers highlight the daily lives and working conditions they endured in Panama. They also reveal the cross cultural contributions and influence of the early settlers, the social impact their migration had on colonies and the community.

Also illustrated are the continued contacts between the West Indian emigrants and their families despite the large distances between them and loved ones in their ancestral homes.

In 2010 UNESCO UK National Commission, launched the UK Memory of the World National Register in Parliament, listing 10 of the UK's most important archival holdings, from King William's Charter to the City of London; the World War II WRVS' Air Raid Precautions Records and the archives of the Company of Scotland (now RBS), recording early trading to Africa and the Indies in the late 17<sup>th</sup> Century.

### Ends

For media enquiries please contact the press office on **0208 392 5277** or [press@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:press@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk).

### Notes to Editors

#### UNESCO Memory of the World

UNESCO established the *Memory of the World* Programme in 1992. It originally came from a growing awareness of the parlous state of preservation of, and access to, documentary heritage in various parts of the world. War and social upheaval, as well as severe lack of resources, have worsened problems which have existed for centuries. Significant collections worldwide have suffered a variety of fates. Looting and dispersal, illegal trading, destruction, inadequate housing and funding have all played a part. Much has vanished forever; much is endangered. Happily, missing documentary heritage is sometimes rediscovered.

This is The National Archives' second successful submission. The previous one related to the slave registers (T 71) and the other co-signatories were Bahamas, Belize, Dominica, Jamaica, St Kitts, and Trinidad and Tobago.

#### Details of the documentary heritage

- **The National Archives, United Kingdom:** The records which range in period from the early 1900's to 1930, focus primarily on reports and correspondence between and among officials in the British Colonial and Foreign offices, British West Indian Governors and representatives such as British Consuls in Panama and other Central American missions. The information in these records contain issues such as immigration and movement of West Indians between Panama and the British West Indies and other countries in Central America, labour conditions of West Indians, experience of West Indians during the construction of the Panama Canal, labour and political agitations by West Indians for better working conditions, census figures, and some information which relates to West Indians recruited into the British West Indian Regiment during World War I.

#### The National Archives

**For the record, for good...** The National Archives is a government department and an executive agency of the Ministry of Justice (MoJ). As the official archive of the UK government and England and Wales, we look after and make available to the public a collection of historical records dating back over 1,000 years, including records as diverse as Domesday Book and MI5 files.

Our 21<sup>st</sup>-century role is to collect and secure the future of the record, both digital and physical, to preserve it for generations to come, and to make it as accessible as possible. We do this by devising technological solutions to ensure the long-term survival of public records and working to widen access to our collection. The National Archives also advises on information management across government, publishes all UK legislation, manages Crown copyright and

supports the wider archive sector. We work to promote and improve access to public sector information and its re-use.