



BLACK

BRITISH



CHAMPIONS

IN



CYCLING



Exhibiting a constellation of lives in cycling

Words & Illustrations: Dr. Marlon Maneyeffe

"He was my role model. A great man with a great heart."

These are the words of Sir Bradley Wiggins, a contemporary British icon of cycling, speaking to the significance of his relationship with an early mentor and cycling coach Russell Williams – a British-born man of Afro-Caribbean heritage. Sir Bradley's response appeared on my [@blackchampions_](#) Instagram page. It was in

acknowledgement of my development of an exhibition of oral testimonies, memorabilia and photography showcasing the lives of Black British champions in cycling. This exhibition was intended to mark and celebrate the year 2018 as the 70th anniversary of the HMT Empire Windrush first arriving in Britain. Although it was not the first ship to do so, the Windrush is

widely known for transporting many Afro-Caribbean migrants and citizens of Britain to the country in 1948, at the invitation of the British government. As a key moment in British history, it forged the beginning of a 20th century ethnogenesis. A Black British identity emerged, and through cultural and ethnic interactions, it led to a new way of seeing our national identity.

As a cyclist, a Black British educator and a scholar with Afro-Caribbean heritage I wanted to create something to recognise our multicultural interactions and diversity. I wanted to represent this through cycling and share it with the wider British public. Made in Britain: Uncovering the Life Histories of Black British Champions became my concept and project. I saw the 70th anniversary of

the 'Windrush Generation' as a perfect opportunity and time to bring these representations in cycling to the fore.

I began the project in January 2017. A key aim was to collate and share stories of the excellence of black, British-born Champions who from their grassroots entry to the sport had achieved 'glory' as medalists and winners at British, European and World Championships and international stage races.

I have been involved in the sport for nearly 30 years. I mixed racing with my work as a primary school teacher. I have been a school cycling coach, a volunteer national schools cycling championships event organiser and a racer in my own right (TT, road and track). A significant moment came for me after winning an E12 race. I jumped early and outsprinted the bunch by about 10 lengths. After the finish, the late British cycling great Mr. Keith Butler approached me and suggested I give track sprinting a go. I didn't live very near to a track at that point. But I took his advice and went on to win multiple medals at British, UEC European Masters and UCI World Masters Championships.

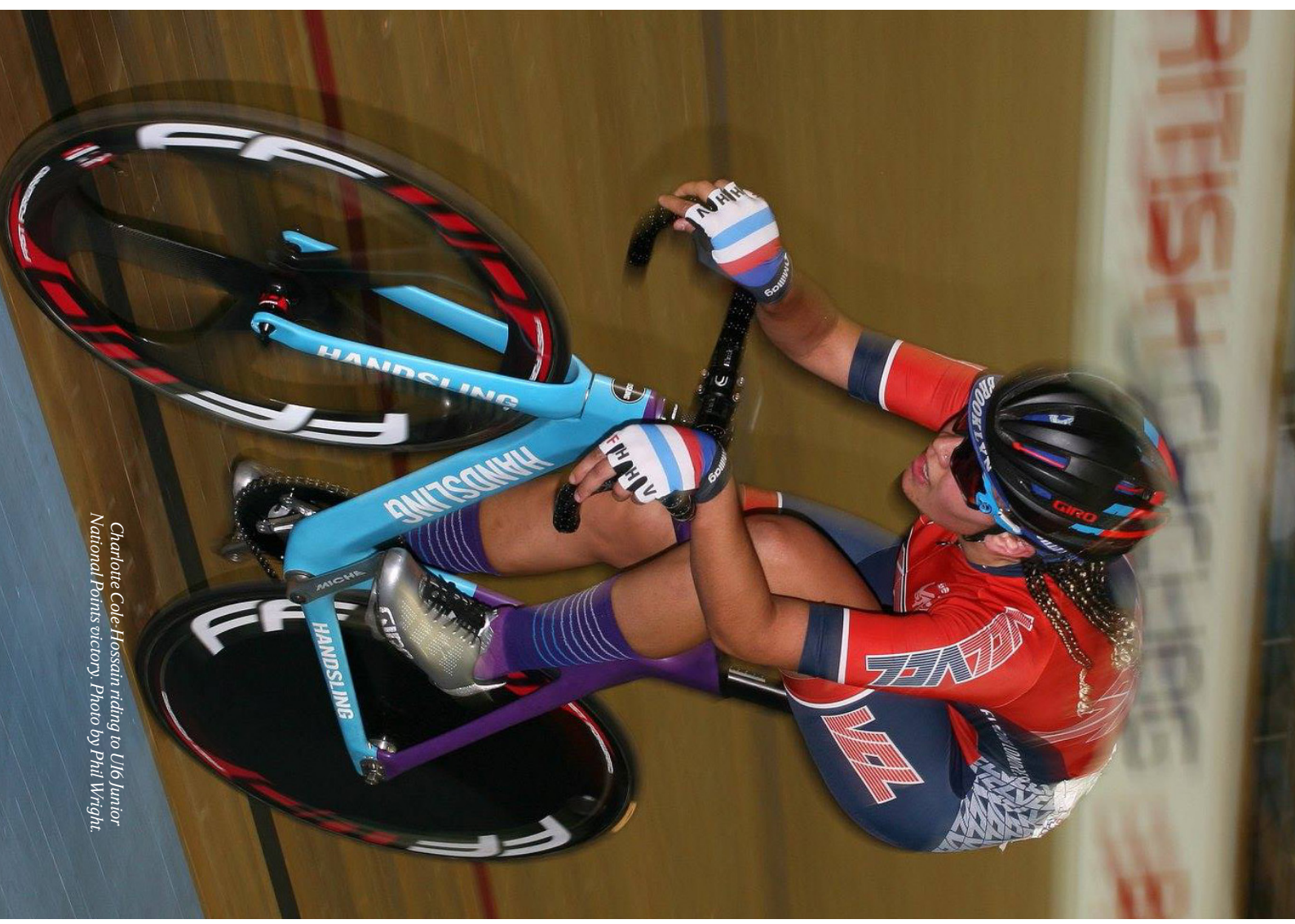
When reflecting on my cycling racing experiences, knowledge, and ethnic identity, I sensed

that this project was made for me to develop and share. I knew enough folk in the cycling community. I am an academic specialising in critical history and narrative inquiry. I knew exactly which Black British champions I could approach, and where to find them to get their oral testimonies.

Black British Champions In Cycling

Maurice Burton was my obvious starting point. This is because I knew that he was the first Black British national champion in cycling by virtue of winning the 20 km scratch race in 1974. He progressed his career on the continent by becoming an amazing and respected six-day racer. During our interviews, Maurice provided me with a stimulating account of his life growing up in south London – from joining the Velo Club de Londres (VCL) to becoming British champion, from being denied a place on the 1976 British Olympic cycling team when arguably he was one of the best sprinters in the world, to racing and competing with the likes of Eddy Merckx, Patrick Sercu and Felice Gimondi.

I was also keen to interview his son Germain Burton. He was an U16 British champion, an U23 European champion and a winner in the team pursuit at the



Charlotte Cole-Hossain riding to U16 Junior National Points victory. Photo by Phil Wright.

UCI Track World Cup in 2014. In contrast to his father's story, Germain spoke more to the support offered by his father and established networks which made his path to his successes in cycling smoother.

Russell Williams was a champion racer and youth cycling coach who I already knew about. His racing career spanned three decades from the 1970s to around 2000. He was an 18-time British champion on the



*Maurice Burton British 20km Scratch Champion 1974.
Photograph courtesy of Maurice Burton*

track and road. He raced as a professional with the best of his peers in Britain and across the world. He was the winner of British titles at all levels: schoolboy, junior,

senior and masters. At the end of his career, he had moved with his family to Australia. Still, I managed to make contact with him via Facebook and carried out several interviews with him which became the basis of his oral testimonies at the exhibitions.

David Clarke was a professional road racer who I had seen racing quite a bit in south-east England. He had won British Cycling Premier Calendar races and performed well at international stage races, with his finest achievements including overall victory at the Tour of Cameroon in 2009 and a mountain stage plus the King of the Mountains classification at the Tour of Alsace in 2004. He was also King of the Mountains at the Tour of Ireland in 2012. He was the best-placed British rider in the 2012 Tour of Britain. He was also a multiple medal winner at the British National Hill Climb Championships. I made contact with David via Facebook and met with him in the Midlands on three occasions to carry out numerous interviews to develop his oral testimonies for the exhibitions.

One of the few females in this project was Charlotte Cole-Hossain. She is a double British champion and the first female of Black British heritage to win a national title. Her cycling career



Charlotte Cole-Hossain at Herne Hill Velodrome. Photo by Phil Shepard Lewis.



and successes were nurtured at Herne Hill Velodrome. She is from the Velo Club de Londres and follows on in their tradition of producing great Black British Champions from south London such as Maurice Burton and Russell Williams.

Christian Lyre is a three-time UCI Junior World Champion in track sprint disciplines. He raced in teams with and against the likes of Jason Kenny and Sir Chris Hoy. Following in the footsteps of Maurice Burton and Russell Williams, in 2006 Christian was the Good Friday International Track Meeting White Hope Sprint Trophy Winner. I knew Christian well from my own track sprinting races and made contact with him for the sharing of his oral testimonies through numerous interviews.

It was Christian who put me in contact with current Great Britain riders and BMX champions Tre Whyte, Kye Whyte and Quillan Isidore. This path altered the focus of my project a little, in that I was originally strictly interested in showcasing just those Black British champions of road racing and track cycling. Still, I took the opportunity to meet and interview these BMX stars and also Shanaze Reade, who herself has won medals in the women's team sprint event at the UCI Track Cycling World



Dr. Marlon Moncrieffe & Sir Bradley Wiggins

Championships. This path also led to my meeting BMX legend of the 1980s Charlie Reynolds – King of the 360° jumps, and the first man in the world to land the 720° jump.

The 1992 Star Trophy Series Winner Mark McKay also features in the exhibition.

All in all, my sample of cyclists covers 50 years of Black British representation in the sport, from the 1970s to the current day. How do their experiences speak to diversity, representation, access and inclusion in the sport?

Diversity, Representation, Access And Inclusion

Some commentators today speak of the need for diversity, for representation and inclusion of minority ethnic group people in the sport of cycling. This is a welcome call, seeing that it is a sport seemingly dominated by the white British majority. However, no reference is given by those commentators to the career experiences of the cyclists mentioned above. What could be

[PUBLIC RESPONSES]

"This exhibition has changed my perception of bike racing. I always only ever saw white faces. It's fantastic. I didn't realise these people existed! Amazing exhibition. Thank you!"

"Fascinating, heart-warming histories that demonstrate determination, grit and staying power."

"Although still not highly represented there is a bunch of inspirational diverse riders who have fought to put themselves amongst the best in the sport."

"I have been able to gain knowledge that I didn't know."

"All were worthy champions but it seems that the system overlooked them due to race."

"It's such a well-curated experience and a really joyful celebration of an overlooked subject. Thank you!"

"Fascinating exhibition telling an important story!"

"This exhibition highlights a side to cycling I had never seen before. The determination to get to where they had then for it to be taken away makes you question society."

"Very impressive commitment and incredible achievements."

"Fantastic exhibition but I feel angry for the lost opportunities for some of these great riders."

learned from these? Could an understanding of commonalities between past and present help provide coherent recommendations for the future of the sport in terms of diversity, representation and inclusion?

There is no doubt in my mind that the sport has been and currently is dominated and represented by white athletes and is organised by white people. However, my own experiences of access to and inclusion in the sport during the early 1990s were completely positive. I was welcomed, supported and mentored. My experience of grassroots access is reflected in all of the oral testimonies of the Black British champions I have interviewed. In fact, it is a collective perspective that counters the current discourses of recent commentators concerning lack of grassroots access. All of the Black British champions in my research acknowledged the support that they gained from white people who were significant to them as coaches or mentors. Of course, they also discussed the uneducated haters in the crowd stuck in their worlds of racist ignorance.

The oral testimonies of the cyclists show congruent patterns of hostility and barriers they faced in progressing their careers, especially where they started to win big and sometimes against the odds. This upset certain people and certain rivals. Competition and desire can bring out the best or worst in people. Patterns in the oral testimonies also show that a stand-out minority ethnic group cyclist with a darker

skin colour' giving a beating to the majority white-skinned competitors is more than likely to be the target of haters, from fellow riders to organisers to national selectors.

The Exhibitions

Two exhibitions open to the general public have been curated: one in Brighton during December 2018 and another in London at 'The Big Velo Fete', Herne Hill Velodrome, during June 2019. The oral testimonies collected during my field work are the central focus. This is because the voices and lived experiences of the Black British cyclists provide the hub to learning about the sport through an alternative and arguably marginalised discourse. Added to the oral testimonies were memorabilia provided by the cyclists: national champions' jerseys, medals, sashes, trophies and photographs. All were to assist with embellishing specific aspects of the given narratives. I approached well-known cycling photographers such as Paul J. Wright, Phil O'Connor and Dave Hayward for their endorsed support with photographs.

Iconography

I wanted to represent each cyclist through visual portraits that would illuminate them as icons: Black British icons at least. I was not conscious of skin colour. I wanted to illustrate them as vividly as possible. I probably also had a sense of Marvel Comic imagery in mind when I created the multicoloured portraits. Still, these are a true

[PUBLIC RESPONSES]

"Every one of them experienced discrimination. It's a massive shame on the sport - on Britain!"

"They all had a very tough time to go through, but they were resilient and pushed through."

"I now have a heightened awareness of black achievement in cycling."

"I didn't realise that there were so many black cyclists."

"Structural prejudice came up in almost all of the testimonies as well as blatant prejudice."

"Brilliant exhibition. Please make this tour the country/world."

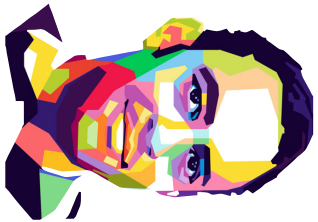
"I have learnt about the hardships of black people in the history of cycling."

"I wasn't aware of the underrepresentation of black cyclists' contribution to the sport."

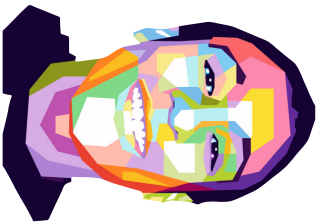
"This is amazing. Thank you for all your important work."

"It is an excellent exhibition. I've learnt the names of many talented young black cyclists who no doubt would be household names if it weren't for structural inequalities and racism."

"It's so important to recognise these champions - their achievements and the racism they faced at times. Brilliant work."



David Clarke



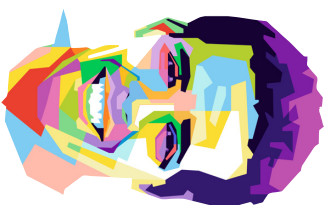
Christian Lyte



Germain Burton



Charlotte Cole-Hossain



Russell Williams



Maurice Burton

reflection of the cyclists in their prime, and each portrait creates for me a unique sense of the cyclists and their characteristics. I began with Maurice Burton's image and continued the process of creation for all of the other cyclists. The multicoloured portraits have become a recognisable feature of my exhibitions and work in showcasing Black British champions.

Public Responses (see above)

I wanted the general public to read the oral testimonies and give me feedback on these and my exhibition. They have provided me with outstanding appreciation of the exhibition's aim to uncover and showcase the excellence of Black British cycling champions, exhibiting them as a constellation of lives in cycling.

The public responses have recognised the double-edged nature of the exhibition, i.e., one of celebrating the strength, resilience and successes of Black British champions against the hostile, exclusive and discriminatory factors of 'whiteness' and 'privilege' and in some cases clear and indicative evidence of institutional racism towards Black British cyclists at the highest levels of the sport in this country.

"For me to be half the man he was when I grew up would have been enough."

I conversed with Sir Bradley Wiggins on Instagram messenger and invited him to attend my exhibition at 'The Big Velo Fete', Herne Hill Velodrome, in June 2019. He accepted without hesitation. We planned for him to conduct a Q&A and public conversation with his early mentor and coach Russell Williams. I had influenced Russell to fly over from Australia to England for this meeting. The quote above is one of many from Sir Bradley Wiggins, speaking to the presence of Russell Williams in his life when reflecting on the time he was a young aspirant racer who would cycle from his home in Kilburn, north London for training sessions led by Russell at Herne Hill Velodrome. Sir Bradley Wiggins spoke from the heart. It was a beautiful conversation, where genuine respect was shown between mentor and mentee.

I think that the greatest beauty in conducting this research work for my exhibition is that it has brought people together who haven't seen each other for many years. I witnessed grown men with tears in their eyes when coming together at my exhibition at Herne Hill



Maurice Burton winning an international sprint race against World and Olympic champions. Photograph courtesy of Maurice Burton.

Velodrome. I witnessed hugs and smiles and general happiness. This all comes from the love given through the sport. Friends coming together, reliving the days where they lost and won races, friends that have lived and breathed cycling. A key aim was to collate and share stories on the excellence of black, British born champions. What a privilege for me to be able to make this happen.