

# MEET ASQUITH XAVIER

## HE FOUGHT FOR BIG CHANGES, AND TO MANY HE IS CONSIDERED A HERO

Asquith Xavier worked in the railways and applied for a job at Euston station in London in the 1960s, but it wasn't straightforward for him to get this job. Asquith was first rejected for the job at Euston station because he was a black man, and at the time companies were allowed to discriminate in this way.

He decided to stand up for his rights and fought this decision, taking it all the way to parliament. His strength and determination overturned a whites-only recruitment policy in 1966 which was a huge moment in the fight for racial equality in this country.

**This is Asquith, he lived between 18 July 1920 – 18 June 1980, and this is his story.**



## EARLY LIFE AND COMING TO ENGLAND

Asquith moved to England from the Caribbean island of Dominica in 1956. He was part of the Windrush generation of West Indian people who moved to Britain after the Second World War.

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Asquith travelled back and forth to Dominica, when he could, to visit family and friends.

## HE BEGINS WORK AT BRITISH RAILWAYS

Asquith joined British Railways in 1956 as a porter, and he later became a rail guard at Marylebone station. However, the closure of the Marylebone main line meant guards were to be transferred to other London stations.

## DENIED PROMOTION BECAUSE OF THE COLOUR OF HIS SKIN

Asquith later applied for a promotion at Euston station, where guards were paid an extra £10 a week.

However, he received a letter to advise that his application had been rejected – despite being qualified for the job – because of the colour of his skin.

At the time, Euston station was operating a whites-only recruitment policy. This policy was agreed in the 1950s and enforced by the local unions and station management. It banned anyone who wasn't white from working in jobs that involved contact with the public.



People arriving in the UK between 1948 and 1971 from Caribbean countries have been labelled the Windrush generation. It refers to the ship MV Empire Windrush, which docked in Tilbury on 22 June 1948, bringing workers from Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, and other islands, to help fill post-war UK labour shortages.

**The Windrush generation made an enormous contribution to rebuilding our country and public services following the Second World War, as well as enriching Britain's social, economic, cultural, and religious life.**

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## CAMPAIGN FOR JUSTICE

Asquith fought this policy and campaigned for equality.

The Race Relations Act 1965, which banned racial discrimination in public in Britain, did not cover workplaces and so could not be used. However, he received the backing of a union official who wrote on his behalf to the head of the National Union of Railwaymen.

Hearing of his campaign, two MPs also wrote to Barbara Castle – the Secretary of State for Transport.

Asquith's hard work and determination meant his story soon made its way to parliament and, on 15 July 1966, British Railways scrapped the policy.

He was then offered the job at Euston station and had his pay backdated to May that year – the time his original application had been rejected.



The Race Relations Act 1965 was the first piece of legislation in the UK to make it illegal to racially discriminate. The Act banned racial discrimination in public places on the grounds of 'colour, race or ethnic or national origins'. However, the Act was criticised for failing to address vital areas where there was a lot of discrimination – including workplaces.

It was the 1968 Race Relations Act that finally made it unlawful to discriminate in workplaces.

## IT WASN'T EASY TO STAND UP FOR HIS RIGHTS

Throughout his campaign, Asquith received threats from people who disagreed with his campaign for equality. After starting at Euston station in August 1966, he also faced racist abuse and, at times, had a police guard. This was very stressful for Asquith.

He sadly died in 1980, at the age of just 59, leaving behind his wife Agnes Xavier and seven children.

## HIS LEGACY

**Asquith fought for his rights, and the rights of countless other people experiencing the same racial discrimination.**

To recognise his strength and determination, plaques have been installed at Euston and Chatham stations. The plaque at Euston was unveiled in October 2016, 50 years after the whites-only policy was removed. A plaque was revealed at his local station of Chatham, Kent on 24 September 2020.



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## CLASS DISCUSSION POINTS



- How do you think Asquith felt to be turned down for a job he really wanted, and was capable of doing, just because of the colour of his skin?
- Do you think Asquith was brave for taking his fight all the way to parliament?
- Do you think Asquith's actions have helped people today?
- How do you think things have evolved in the fight for racial equality since Asquith's time?