

# ERNEST MARKE

## *A lad caught up in the riots*



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### **Racial Tensions**

1919 was the first year of peace, but it was also the year in which racial tensions exploded throughout Britain. Race riots were caused by a strong feeling of unrest, fuelled by white ex-servicemen who felt that they had returned home from the battlefields to a country that was not fit for heroes. A scapegoat was needed, and in 1919 it was Britain's African and Caribbean

communities in the seaports that were targeted.

### **In the Army**

Ernest Marke was born in Sierra Leone, but at fourteen decided to stow away to England. Lying about his age (he told the recruiting officer he was eighteen) he enlisted in the British Army with his pal, Tommy McCauley, a young West African who was also from Sierra Leone: "That was the finest thing that ever happened to me, for apart from the military uniform which appealed to me it made me feel grown up. The two months I spent in the army were very happy times. I encountered no colour prejudice of any kind and the feeling that we were all in the same uniform was a strong one."

### **Problems Back in England**

On demob, Ernest returned to Liverpool: "I found it very difficult to get a job, in fact all black people found it difficult to get work as the soldiers were coming back home from the war, and they were given preference. Where the

black man had a job he was sacked so that the white man could get that job. Blacks could not get jobs even to sweep the streets.”

### **Caught up in the riots**

“I was in civvies and I went around the corner...Suddenly a crowd says, ‘Here’s one of them niggers, get him.’ Oh my God, I started running and good job I wasn’t far off from where my house was but before I could get there some women with clogs on and shawls over their heads says to this mob, ‘Leave him alone, he hasn’t done anything to you’. So I got away.

“On another occasion myself and this boy from St Lucia we got off the bus at Lime Street, walking towards the Adelphi Hotel, when suddenly this crowd saw us, like a pack of wolves they started chasing us. They was shouting ‘black bastard, nigger.’ We really were frightened. Again it was a woman who saved me. She heard the noise and opened her window telling us to go round the corner and through the back alley, she opened the back gate for us and in we went. The crowd passed, they couldn’t find us. I really thought we

were gonna be killed that time and I had actually knew this bloke who was killed with the riot you see, killed by one of these crowds.”

It was a 24-year-old Bermudian seaman called Charles Wotten who was murdered, sending shock waves throughout Liverpool’s black community. Said Ernest: “After that I bought a razor, most of the boys carried razors, not to hurt anyone but just for their own protection. And when the next mob started coming towards me they cornered me so I pulled out this razor and started slashing, they ran.”

Ernest said that the police refused to help black victims because some of them were very prejudiced.

### **Quotations from Ernest Marke’s Autobiography *Old Man Trouble***