

A Bombay "Bevin Boy", 1944 to 1945.

In January 2006 Kingsbury resident Elizabeth Clarke gave some old photographs, and information about them, to Brent Archives.

Because of this thoughtful donation, an aspect of the Second World War which could easily have become lost history is now part of our shared history.

Mr Dhala in Kingsbury, 1944/45.

[Photograph by John Clarke.]



The contribution to the war effort of the "Bevin Boys", the young conscripts who were sent to work in British mines from 1943 onwards, is now widely recognized, but it was not just the coal industry that was short of labour. Millions of women also worked in factories or on farms, and as early as 1940 skilled engineers were being transferred from Jamaica for essential war work in "the mother country", Britain. Workers and factories in countries of the former Empire also produced wartime supplies.

By 1944 there was an urgent need for more skilled workers in Britain, to supply the armed forces' needs for the D-Day invasion and liberation of Europe. The Clarkes were one of two families on the Valley Farm Estate in Kingsbury who agreed to provide accommodation for men coming from India to work in local factories. They did not know what to expect, and were amazed to find that the young man billeted with them was light skinned and spoke perfect English.

Mr Dhala came from Bombay, and was a Parsee by religion. He was a qualified engineer, and proudly called himself a "Bevin Boy" as he, too, was helping the war effort in a strategic industry, probably at the De Havilland aircraft factory in Stag Lane. He was also a member of the St John's Ambulance Brigade, and was delighted to find a local branch in Princes Avenue.

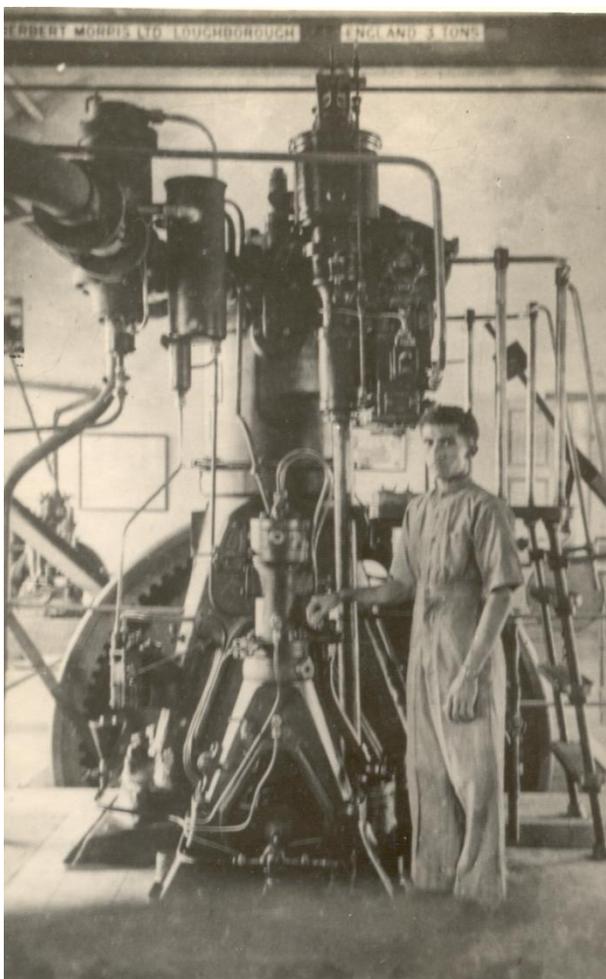
Mrs Clarke had been told that her guest was to expect English food, but one day she offered to make him a curry. He wanted to help, and produced a jar of dried chillis. She suspected he had not cooked before when he insisted on putting in a large spoonful! The curry was so hot that even he could not eat it, and Mr Dhala left the cooking to his host after that.

The whole family was sorry to see him go when Mr Dhala went home in 1945. It was difficult in wartime to buy presents for his family, and Mrs Clarke was so horrified at the poor quality of some cutlery he had purchased that she gave him a tea knife from a boxed set that she had. Elizabeth and her brother had learned a great deal from the experience of having an Indian worker living with them, and whenever she uses the tea knives now, and sees five instead of six, she still remembers him.

Mr Dhala sent an airgraph letter from Bombay when he arrived home, thanking the Clarke family `... for having given me the best treatment while I was with you ...'. Mrs Clarke kept in touch with him by letter for some time, but around 1947 his letters stopped. The family feared that he had been killed in the sectarian violence which followed the partition of India and Pakistan, as part of their independence.

The contribution of skilled foreign workers to the WWII war effort is a part of our heritage that is hardly mentioned in the history books, but one which deserves to be remembered.

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Left: Mr Dhala at his workplace, 1944.



Right: Mr Dhala in St John's Ambulance uniform, probably outside of the St John's hall in Princes Avenue, 1944/45.