

A Journey Through Black History

African Caribbean People in Nottingham Exhibition





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Executive Summary

I am Veronica E Barnes, Chairperson of the Blue Mountain Women Group, I worked in the community for a number of years and I was fortunate to be associated with the Association of Caribbean Families and Friends. Being aware of the ground breaking work the Association of Caribbean Families and Friends Education and Cultural Centre delivered in Nottingham from 1979 – 2003, at the closure of the said centre some documents and items left at the Centre was saved from destruction by members of the Blue Mountain Women Group.

I was pleased and excited when I was asked by the Founding father of ACFF Mr. Eric Irons to become a member of the association, and later as founder and Chair of Blue Mountain Women Group, he asked if our group would be willing to become custodians of the resource left in the Centre.

In Nottingham over the years since migration of the Windrush generation various community groups, projects and organisations folded leaving little or no record of the development and work carried out by people from the African Caribbean Community

I feel it is very important that the History of the African Caribbean people be preserved for future generations to learn from this collection, the contributions made by their parent's grandparents and great- grand parents. The collection is invaluable and will enable the younger generation to educate themselves, build self – esteem empower this generation and the generation to come to feel valued.

As Marcus Mosiah Garvey states "A people without knowledge of their past history origins and culture is like a tree without roots"

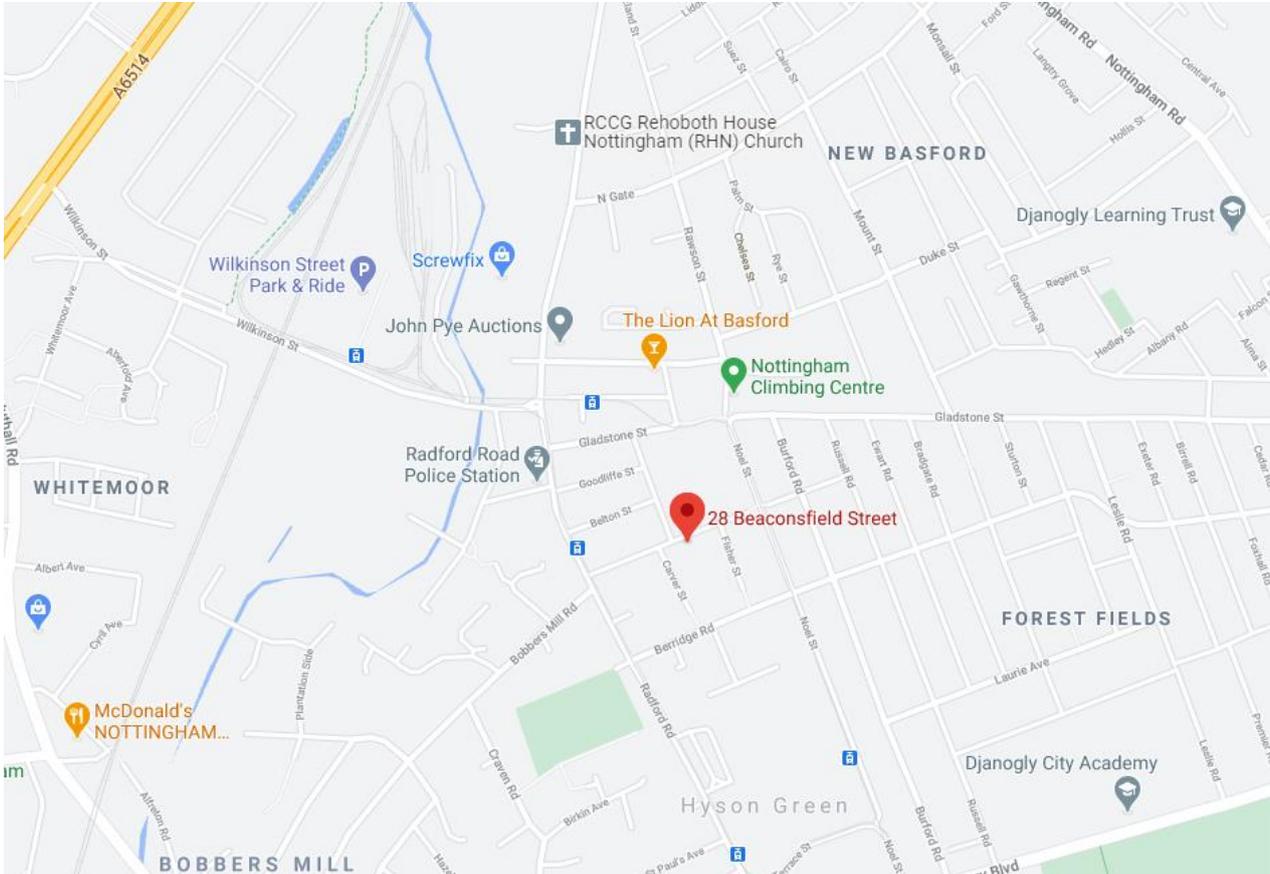
This quote is imperative to continued work that needs to be done in relation to the African Caribbean people here in Nottingham and the Global family of African people.

I will draw upon this quote throughout this report as it is so pertinent to what is happening to Black people at this present time in our societies.

So with this in mind the Blue Mountain Women Group looked for ways in preserving this collection hence the next steps were taken to archive the collection through the Nottinghamshire Archive.

Background of the Resources

Association of Caribbean Families and Friends Education and Cultural Centre (ACFF)



ACFF Association of Caribbean Families and Friends was a pivotal meeting place for many years. It was established in the 1970's by a group of individuals from the African Caribbean Community

The founding mothers and fathers usually meet in each other homes before finding a meeting place on a weekly basis at the Nottingham International Community Centre on Mansfield Road.

As the community grew and more people became pollicised even the accommodation at the International Community Centre became limited.

Being most concerned about the educational achievements of the African Caribbean children and young people and his desire to combat the negative stereotyping and under – achievement of our children. Mr Eric Irons along with a number of other individuals took this bold initiative to establish the Association of Caribbean Families and Friends (Education and Cultural Centre) which would encapsulate the needs not only of the children but also the African Caribbean community.



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Prior to the establishing accommodation on the site of 28 Beaconsfield Street, Hyson Green, Nottingham they were already planting seeds of the Jamaica (and varied culture of the other Caribbean islands) to discuss and plan activities for celebrations during public holidays. The Beaconsfield site proved more than adequate for the rapidly growing crowd of interested Caribbean people. For one it was central, easily, accessible, transportation was more than adequate especially for women travelling alone from the meeting or from work during late evenings.

This was a new and exciting time for these new arrivals making a name for themselves and settling into their new found community which most had begun to develop, and more importantly transferring the skills and abilities from the Caribbean to their new community. Having more space where individuals can develop created opportunities for more people to become involved with the organisation.

The list I have compiled of the founding Fathers and Mothers (were collected from a number of individuals we talked with) of the newly formed Association of Caribbean Families and Friends (Education and Cultural) Centre is as follows:

Mr Eric Irons	Founder
Arabell Smith	Main initiator and Worker of Activities and function at the Centre
Avon Browne	Past Secretary& Treasurer of ACFF Cultural and Study Centre
Ulda Butler	Treasurer and Child development officer for field work. Work extensively with John Wray in the field trips to various sites of learning and creative activities
Mr & Mrs Wildman	Alverdeen Housing Association and the Credit union Mr. &Mrs Wildman were active member in the development of the Centre
Mrs Pearl Hinds	Befriending committee
John Wray	Committee member Headmaster of local School and Head of children Activities, at ACFF
Mr. & Mrs Barclay	Executive members of the committee with responsibility for Association, ACFF Credit Union
Louise Garvey	Secretary of the Committee Social and cultural Activities
Mr Herman Deane	
Mr & Mrs Morrison	
Mrs Mitchell	





Michael Egbokham

Connie Francis

Chris Francis

To name but a few who worked tirelessly to make the ACFF the Centre it was.

As the group gained notoriety even the space at the International Community Centre Mansfield Road became too small for the burgeoning crowd; and another place was urgently needed and sought by Mr Eric Irons.

Along with his group of enthusiastic visionaries they set about creating programmes of Caribbean, folk lore drama storytelling and much more.

The purpose for taking on this challenge is my understanding of the teaching of one of the Caribbean most outstanding Visionary, Teacher, Political Activist and Orator Marcus Mosiah Garvey.

In his book the 'Philosophy of Marcus Garvey' he states: "*A nation without knowledge of their history is like a tree without roots*" Our understanding of our history is rooted in values and traditions of our Afrocentric past. We have gleaned from our history that we are teachers of mankind, creators of world civilisation and true to history custodians and preservers of human kind.

Our hope is, the collection will offer teachable and learning material to people young old and anyone who wishes to learn about the history of the Caribbean people. It will be one of many collected by various other individuals and groups in other parts of the country. However, we believe this is an important collection as an initiative that is specific to Nottingham; it makes visible the importance of our cultural, social and the racial dimension of our history that has been invisible for a very long time.

Our History appears to be of limited or no concern to white Society but other communities need to know and appreciate the contribution made to this country by Black people.

The two exhibitions would not be possible without the number of individuals who volunteered to give their time knowledge and expertise to this project.

We started out on this journey with little or no knowledge of Archiving or how to preserve the collection in our care. Neither had we any idea the journey would be so complex and the many people we would meet on this journey. Although some did not share our historical, political, economic or social beliefs' and values we knew we had to move forward whatever the challenges.



To say it is a difficult task, putting this together if not time consuming, and a mind-blowing task is an understatement. Keeping focus was one way of keeping our aim and objectives fresh. When we think of our ancestors, people who treaded this route before us, it gave us the strength and courage to stay enroute to the end.

We are mindful that many of our younger generation are unaware of the contribution made by their parents, grandparents and great grandparents to this society and we want them to understand how proud they should be of the sacrifice their fore-mothers and fathers made and never be ashamed we would like the younger generation to hold this statement to be true

“Without the inclusion of the contribution made by black people British history is seriously misleading and incomplete. The Caribbean people are an integral part of this contribution and should be recognised for it”

As the late Peter Fryer author of the book *Staying Power* intimates:

Equally we cannot heal or erase the scars of that history unless we know and understand the basis of the past in particular the place and role Black people were expected to play in it.

Knowledge of our history is imperative as it will enable us to make informed choices on the role we wish to play in British society.

Over time many more people became involved with the activities and functions of the centre

According to Mr. Avon Browne a past secretary and treasurer of the ACFF Cultural and Study Centre In the 1980's it became crystal clear a 'Driver' was needed in the form of Director to move the Association forward. Also apparent was the growing diversity of its membership, many were not of Caribbean descent. Therefore, the name change was necessary to include Friends; for the group to become the Association of Caribbean Families and Friends

Mr. Eric Irons always the visionary, suggested to his team of enthusiasms to seek Section 11 funding from the local Education Authority which would enable them to employ their first paid Director for the Centre with a view to employ more part-time paid staff, the first Director was Mr. Len Garrison from London and the rest is history.

The ACFF went on to create a Credit union; its members were instrumental in the formation of Karibu Trust Hostel for Youth and many other projects benefitting people in the community.

In the mid-1980s, Mr. Garrison took his knowledge and experience of ACER 9 Afro Caribbean Education Resource to Nottingham where he was employed in the role of director of ACFF (African Caribbean Family and Friend) to promote and develop the existing vision of the Centre.

Here he was instrumental in establishing EMECA – East Midlands African Caribbean Arts – and organisation that promotes positive cultural practice in the arts, particularly the black visual arts. He also developed local history work around George Africanus Nottingham first black entrepreneur.

Bearing this in mind we have decided to pick out from the collection some of what might be describe as treasured pieces. We believe some images of family and friends are still fresh in many people's mind and might still be easily identified of a bygone youthful age.

We are hopeful that the memory of these images will instil a sense of pride in the heart and minds of the people in these frames as well as members of the Caribbean Community.

We have chosen as treasured pieces from the collection Roots Rock Reggae, Caribbean Field Trip to the Commonwealth Institute.



Roots Rock Reggae

Roots Rock Reggae was a musical event which took place annually on the Forest recreation ground during the 1970's

Music has always played a significant part in the lives of Black people and especially the young today whose methods of culture and entertainment no longer exist yet it was not that long ago.

Music is an excellent vehicle which helps to highlight the contribution made to British music industry by African

Caribbean people. It is also a mechanism that can be used to break down racial barriers and petty prejudices, and bridge the generation gap among younger and older people within our communities.

There is something exciting of how the music and dance of the Caribbean and African people have dominated the British Music industry which have transcended into fashion and other cultural forms within the British Society. The roots rock Reggae Festival was an ingathering of young minds annually and became an excellent vehicle to acquaint themselves fully with their culture, if they decide to trace their history musically. Sadly, this event no longer exists and like most industry develop by people of African Caribbean descent has been gradually eroded washed away.

Nothing has been done by local authority to recreate this vehicle of cultural rehabilitation an ideal forum for young people to engage with each other in a most positive manner.



Caribbean Women at War

Although none of the women mention in this piece lived or was stationed in Nottingham it was agreed by group members that it is imperative these women be included in this report. Seemingly some did visit Nottingham to link up with the brothers in arms who either lived or was stationed in Nottingham.

While talking to people on the street and community centres I realised that out of every ten people interviewed nine did not know that more than two hundred women from the Caribbean (Known then as West Indies) enlisted to be part of the Second World War.

Tells stories of 200+ women from the Caribbean who sacrifice home family friends to volunteer for the war efforts in England as their contribution to the Second World War (World War 11)

Most people are not aware that more than 200 women from across the Caribbean enlisted as part of their patriotic service to the war efforts. Believing as they did that as part of the British colonies, they were supporting the “Mother Country” and it was their reasonable service to enlist to fight against the tyranny of racism.

This group of black women volunteers from the (then known West Indies) Caribbean resolved were here to fight against an enemy who considered them to be inherently inferior by virtue of their race.

This view although not to the same extreme, was shared by the very army officials under whose tutelage these women were fighting.

They had come to fight for and provide much needed support to the Mother Country. Little did they realise that all their efforts were viewed as irrelevant by the British Colonial Offices both in the UK and colonies. On their return to the Mother Country shortly after the end of World War 2 to join in the British victorious celebrations; no preparation was made for them to join in the celebration of those who contributed to World War 11. In fact, they were not even mentioned and made to feel like aliens.

Motivated by loyalty to their ‘mother country’ they sacrificed the relative safety of their island homes for the dangers of war. They were not even mentioned in the celebration.

The proud smiling faces of these racially mixed women as they paraded in their newly acquired uniform and bask in their newly found independence.

This was made crystal clear when a group of these women came back to England for a reunion and discovered some correspondence between the War Office and the colonies revealed deep rooted racism towards these eager arrivants. They were astounded.



We must impress upon the minds of our people not all the black women who enlisted came from the Caribbean.

In his Book Mother country Cecil Bourne intimated;

There were Black women born here during this period and before, some of bi-racial parents like Lillian Bader for example, her mother was English and her father from the Caribbean (some writers state Barbados others Jamaica) Another woman Esther Bruce mention as a Black Londoner worked as a rescue personal looking for dead and injured persons after an air raid. It is amazing how Easter Bruce and Lillian Bader jobs are akin to each other Bruce in Civivy Street work to collected dead bodies after an air raid and Bader scraped the remains of solders' who went on raid in enemy territory, remind me very much of the dirty work we did Cleaning those books and artefact clothed in mildew and fungus at the Nottinghamshire Archive

Her job was cleaning the planes that came back from a raid in enemy lines.

There were parts of bodies left in the plane of the person who left to go on those raids. Only now bits and pieces left of that human being Lillian Bader 1946

I am sure that must have been not only the most painful experience but the most horrific job in the war for those engaged in that part in the war. We see how Black people are regulated to the most menial job where ever they work always doing the jobs nobody else want to do. However, they feel they were sacrificing for king and country.

Among the Caribbean contingent as listed in the book: West Indian Women at War are:

Odessa Gittens from Barbados, Connie Marks from Jamaica, and Louise Osborne from St Lucia who eventually helped to train requites, and Camille Duboulay -Devaux an 18-year-old white St Lucian who worked as a clerk for the War Office. Lawrence and Wishart Caribbean at War p.149



I also think on Maya Angelou's poem

And still I rise

I believe with all my heart each and every one of African descent is part of that Dream and Hope of our ancestors and must never lose sight of their sacrifice and contribution to the development of Britain and other European countries. Wrenched from their family, community, country and the beauty of their environment lost forever were their names, culture, language and their real identity.

What we aim to bring to the prosperity of Britain is Black people contribution.

It's an honour for me to undertake this project. Believing this is a new era and no one can write our stories but us **"None but ourselves"**

I will join with the late Len Garrison and Peter Fryer author of 'Staying Power' when they write

As Maya Angelo eloquently quoted in her poem 'Still I Rise'

Out of the huts of history's shame

I rise

Up from a past that's rooted in pain

Leaving behind nights of terror and fear

I rise

Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear.

It all seems clear but not as clear as we would like it to be embracing this new day break as we merge into the twenty first century. Our hope is that we are leaving behind past experiences of racist terror and fear. A past that was and still is to a point rooted in pain, we try to understand and come to terms with newest findings of racist ideology associated with the 'Windrush' generations so called.

Bringing the gifts our ancestors gave: These gifts of gift of our ancestors are rooted in culture the Caribbean people developed in this country into a new daybreak which they have made clear and grew to become the Association of Caribbean Families and Friends.



Mr Irons J. P. OBE.

We the Women of the Blue Mountain Women Group applaud this son of Jamaica as one who truly reflects the spirit of his country's independence amidst the poverty and hardship.



Education

Mr Irons in one of his speeches at a cultural activity organised by members of the newly form Association of Caribbean Families and Friends (ACFF) with a few dignitaries (Movers and Shakers) from Nottingham Department of Education

Mr Irons states; ***“Although the Nottingham Educational department had gone through many permeations of change it still seem unable to meet the educational (among other things) needs of this new and emerging community of African Caribbean people”.***

The Group which have now become the Association of Caribbean Families Friends made a concerted decision that what was on offer was inadequate and did not meet the needs of their children

A new programme of image building was needed to reinforce self-esteem, self-respect and identity within the African Caribbean Communities.

Even after many years of intensive research, discussion, conferences reports and white papers the education system and teacher training institutions did no nearer understand the needs of the people they were supposed to be providing for. Let alone provide for the emerging demands of the African Caribbean people.

Education has many forms therefore some forms of learning are not always formal. One of Mr Irons 'dreams' was to build an educational institution akin to the Tuskegee College in Alabama one of in the Southern States of North America.

During the 1970's; vast numbers of black kids were expelled from school and left to their own devices. Often parents were **unaware** their children were excluded from school. Without parental care or guidance while out of school, these children were left to their device and could get into all kind of mischief.

A school like the Tuskegee school in Alabama would enable these children to acquire some life skills if they were not academically interested or found academic studies to challenging for them.

Ms. Arabell Smith co –founder and one of Mr. Irons trusted assistant was also an avid believer in the educational development of the African Caribbean people. A route she took in later years herself as a mature student to gain a number of courses in City & Guild with excellent passes.

Archiving Experience

(Image of the collection from bins and bags to archive packages)



Now the work begins. The group was introduced and welcomed by members of the Archiving team; we were showed around the Archive areas and given a brief of the work and process of Nottinghamshire Archive.

Over time working in teams with instruction from staff we learnt and carried out work such as categorizing items, listing materials, cleaning and storing items in order and right condition: for example, storing photographs in photographic envelopes and much more.

I enjoyed working with Blue Mountain Women Group team and some members of the Archive staff knowing that the African Caribbean Community Education and Cultural Centre documents will be preserved for the future generation.

Our work for the Blue Mountain Women at the Nottingham Archive started March 2017.

Most of the work we did was mainly cleaning of the books and artefacts which were in terrible condition, mildew, damp to name a few of the health hazard we had to contend with.

The collection which Veronica Barnes along with a number of other people from the community saved from the ACFF building was damp and soiled.

We had to wait more than six months after the collection was left at Nottinghamshire Archive building before, we could start working with the collection. The collection consisted of African Caribbean Historical artefacts, books, photographs and other items.

We were allocated a room on the ground floor known to us as a teaching room with a time frame from 10.00 a.m. to 12.30 p.m. every Wednesday.

We started with 3 volunteers as the room was not conducive to holding more than 4 – 6 people for each session (seemingly a health and safety risk).



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To get a wide cross section of people involved as volunteer's we had to keep a rota of 23 volunteers giving their time and experiences.

We were not able to follow the directions for having all the volunteers present at the same time as specified in the bid put forward to HLF. Time and lack of space made it impossible to follow those guidelines for volunteers. We worked on the collection for the time allocated, however due to the volume of work we often had to work extra hours.

Outcome

One of the main outcomes of the project was to showcase two exhibitions which enabled us to promote our culture among others community groups and professionals. More people had the opportunity to see firsthand some individual's from their past with whom they could identify. For example, an individual on the photographic display might be friends in a social gathering, or members of their immediate family who had attended one or more of these functions.

The exhibition then became more personal, it gave them a sense of pride and purpose as well as a form of belonging they can then embraced the exhibition as their own.

We also realised there is a need for children from primary schools to be familiar not only with the historical pictures featuring the historical content of the exhibition, but also the literature which depicts the life of children from other part of the world and their stories.

We identified three (3) primary school children from the exhibition in the library who were very vocal and did mention how much they would have liked the exhibition to be displayed in their schools.

Our outcomes at the end of the project will enable us to produce merchandizing material to inform most education centres and the Shires of this collection to encourage access to the Archive so that the collection is viewed.

We want to keep the memories of our ancestors who were dislodged from their country of origin in Africa, families and social environment to a land/s alien to them and their cultures alive. We would also like to introduce some of the materials in schools and other institutions of learning, and hold exhibitions and video shows in the shires.

The Caribbean history can stimulate and enrich growth and development, build self-esteem and stability in lives of both the younger and older generation. Encourage healthy practices of who they are as a people and move them from not knowing to knowing. Eradicate negative stereotypes of themselves and others.





Changes to our Plan

A number of changes took place for example we wanted to get a number of schools involved especially those locally placed. However, this was not possible at the Nottinghamshire Archive as they were not able to facilitate such a venture.

It would have been difficult to move the large volume of the exhibition to other locations however; there is a large collection of children books that would be of immense value to their development if children could have access to them.

We did manage to hold a mini exhibition as a way of promoting the collection we invited Councillors, Community Activist and a number of other groups from Community Centres, organisations and individuals as a way of promoting the resource in the Archive. Unfortunately, teachers and school children were not able to attend due to the time constraints not to mention the onslaught of the Covid 19.

Our success

Most of the feedback we collected came from the exhibitions, as well as people we talked with on the street and others in Community Centres and organisations we visited.

We collected information about our successes by the Feedback Forms produced by our volunteers for our events. For example, one lady said ***"I was so glad I came I saw my auntie Nettie my mum sister in her nurses' uniform from way back in the day"***

However, we were told by certain members of the Nottinghamshire Archives staff that the feedback forms produced by Blue Mountain Women Group should be kept with the collection. From then on, we had no access to those feedback forms or the notes some of the attendees left by some of the items which they were able to identify their families.

Many of the people who attended the exhibitions were able to identify families and friends.

Some who were working on research were able to use some other material/resources in their research.

Although at times it was difficult to get access to what they needed, they felt as if the collection were imprisoned by the Nottinghamshire Archives staff.

People who benefitted

Many people benefitted from the project including young people, older women, individual who were engaged in conducting research and the collection of information within new and emerging communities.

Over four hundred (400) people benefitted from the exhibitions and gained knowledge from the exhibition resource.





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Now we have developed a website the information is now readily available to a wider cross section of people who can gain more information from the resource as a form of education and training.

Pictures & Videos

The pictures and video can be seen on the website. (www.bluemountainwomengroup.com)

Next Steps

Our aim is to continue in the development of the resource by holding more exhibitions, talks, producing tote bags made from Calico or other easily accessible material on which the images from the project can be printed. Using images from the collection will enable the group and the collection to become economically viable.

Conclusion

This archive collection offers a unique chance to do research based upon primary source materials. Some professions or disciplines require archival research as the foundation for many projects or papers. When you choose a particular source from an archival collection, you might be the first person to look at that document since the archivist who catalogued it. Using archives will ground your research in a particular historical context and could move an existing project in new directions. So, I urge you to take a look at it, please see the catalogue attached for the list of items available.

In conclusion the Blue Mountain Women Group would like to thank the Heritage Lottery Fund staff for all their support in making this project a reality.

Also, special thanks go to the volunteers, supporters and members in making this project a success. Thank you all.

