In 1976, the Notting Hill Carnival marked a turning point not only in the street party but in the relations between black people and the state.

Over-policed, there was a pervading tension and uneasiness that inevitably erupted. A massive conflict between carnival-goers and police resulting in carnival-goers successfully pushing back 1,600 police officers, throwing rocks, bottles and cans as groups, and then dissolving into the streets. This was the first major violent confrontation involving the black masses since the ‘race riots’ of 1958.

Notting Hill Carnival was the setting of extreme racialized violence. Fascist thugs descended on the West Indian community, assaulting and attacking them over the course of a fortnight. The Metropolitan Police had turned a blind eye as these gangs terrorised black people in the streets and in their homes. In response, the black community self-organised counter-violence and a great confrontation exploded in the streets.

Kelso Cochrane’s racially-provoked murder in 1959 further cemented Notting Hill in the centre of conversations about race in Britain. Notting Hill Carnival was created in 1965 within this context by a community organiser in the hopes of creating something fun for the neighbourhood kids to engage with. However, it transformed rapidly responding to the needs of the community invested in it.

The 1960s marked it as a multiracial, working class and primarily local affair, but by the early Seventies it became a means for black people in Britain to assert themselves culturally and as a majority. This metamorphosis was partly catalysed by socio-political factors as well as cultural influences.

The riots that defined the 1976 Carnival would play as significant a role as the confrontation in 1958. With a turnout of about 250,000 people, the majority black, in 1975, this cultural event began to be seen as threatening to the State. Culture is a potentially dangerous and mobilising force, which is terrifying to state authority. The deployment of police officers went from 60 in 1975 to well over 1000 in 1976.

The confrontation left up to 500 people injured, many of them police, with 60 arrested and charged. This riot caused a shift in how black people were viewed by the state, the press and the police, setting in place the mass criminalisation of West Indian and African communities in Britain.

THE 1950s

Notting Hill Gate was a deprived area in the post-World War II period. It had some of the worst housing in London, some lacking running water and electricity. These slums were occupied predominantly by British working class and West Indian migrants. Notting Hill was a stronghold for Oswald Mosely’s Union Movement, a far-right fascist political party, and the White Defence League.

After World War Two, immigrants from the West Indies struggled to find lodgings, leaving slums in west and south London as the only alternatives. Teddy boys, white working class men had begun displaying hostility to black families in the area which was exploited by Mosley and other far-right groups. In 1958, mobs of 300 to 400 white people, the majority of which were Teddy Boys, attacked black people and their homes. The Metropolitan police turned a blind eye, which left the black community to organise self-defence.

The term ‘race riot’ implies that both black and white men were out in the streets, on equal terms, initiating violence. However, West Indian families were terrorised both physically and psychologically and only engaged in violence as a means of defending themselves. Through this self-organising, black people were able to repel their aggressors. The state responded by passing ‘exemplary’ sentences and punishments to individual thugs and reassuring the new migrant labour force that they would be protected and need not organise in self-defence again.

In 1959, Kelso Cochrane, an Antiguan resident of Notting Hill, was stabbed by a group of white men. Detectives refused to see his killing as racially motivated. However, paired with the confrontation the previous year, the government organised an investigation into ‘race relations’. Both incidents were the influence behind Claudia Jones’ concert hall carnival and other events celebrating Caribbean culture. All this preceded the implementation of immigration controls, the first being the 1962 Commonwealth Act, which curtailed the migration of West Indians to Britain. Nonetheless, North Kensington became central for anti-racist activism and demonstrations calling for racial unity.

THE 1960s

It was on the foundation of these events that a remarkable woman, Rhaune Laslett, would dream of people dancing in a procession through the dilapidated streets of Notting Hill Gate. Laslett was a community activist who had set up playgrounds and play groups for local children and provided support to young migrants who had been recently released from prisons. Born to a Native American mother and a Russian father, Laslett embraced her mother’s culture. One night she had a prophetic dream of a festival with children dressed in different cultural costumes, with musicians playing music from all over the world.

In 1966, she organised Notting Hill Festival alongside members of the London Free School, a collective of radicals such as Andre Shervington and John Hopkins, Junior Telfer and Russ Henderson. The first edition of Notting Hill Festival was a multi-racial street party made possible by Laslett’s connections with the council, police and wider community. Primarily for children, it was led by a stage coach with an African band led by Ginger Johnston, a steel band formed by Russ Henderson and even had an early Pink Floyd performing in All Saints Church Hall.

The multi-cultural element of the festival was essential as Laslett wanted to foster better communication and collaboration between the different communities living in the area. Hundreds of West Indians flooded into the streets after hearing the steel band play. The following years more and more West Indians got involved, building off the Carnival tradition of their birthplaces. The Notting Hill Festival was characterised by co-operation across ethnic lines, especially between West Indians and British working class people. Working class solidarity was fostered as communities struggled against local authorities over housing, schools and neighbourhood amenities. The first Festival had drawn 500 revellers, half of which were West Indian.

At the same time, there were no major attempts by the white community nor the state to suppress black people as a whole, or any major black cultural activity. Confrontations between black people and the British state took place in relation to black culture. While there had been no major conflicts, black cultural events were regularly targeted throughout the 1960s. At this time, black cultural expression was extremely private, reserved for house parties and blues parties (house parties with alcohol for sale and a nominal entrance fee). These events were often raided by police under the premise of responding to noise complaints, looking for a missing person or suspect, or to intervene in the illegal sale of drugs or alcohol.

Black political organisations throughout the Sixties and well into the Seventies were systematically attacked and destabilised by the British state. Nonetheless, the black community found solidarity in their working class neighbours as well as the radical residents of the area. Hippies, artists, musicians and radical activists organised alongside local families in the neighbourhood, struggling against bad landlords and corrupt policemen.

The Notting Hill Festival was not seen as threatening, because it was organised by primarily white people with the support of North Kensington Amenity Trust with the co-operation of the police. Following 1958, the police were eager to be seen as nice by black people, and to be nice to black people by the wider white public. Towards the end of the decade, the festival was increasingly becoming West Indian in culture. Many of the migrants had come from places with a carnival tradition or were talented artists and musicians who volunteered their services willingly. The Notting Hill Festival increasingly became a symbol of black unity.

THE 1970s

Between January 1969 and July 1970, the Mangrove restaurant (which had only opened in 1968) had been raided by police 12 times. In addition, David Oluwale’s drowning in 1969 was the result of systematic psychological and physical brutalisation by police officer. Anger was rising amongst Britain’s black community over structural racism. Moreover the rise of black power movements were inspiring the creation of black centred organisations and groups.

Laslett decided to cancel the Festival in 1970 amid rising tension in the area. However, Russ Henderson and Selwyn Baptiste and a number of other artists took the helm. The 1970 Carnival had two steel bands and drew 500 attendants to the streets. Laslett withdrew from organising as many black people wanted the Carnival to be in black hands. No longer as multi-cultural as it had been at its inception, Notting Hill Carnival appealed to West Indians as a way of affirming their culture in a tense climate.

Racialised discrimination pervaded the black British experience, and the class solidarity of the previous decade had waned. Enoch Powell’s ‘rivers of blood’ speech played on fears of race war, and increasing unemployment enabled competition between working class white and black people. A physical manifestation of this divide in North Kensington is seen in the building of the A40 flyover which displaced entire communities.

The early 1970s was defined by numerous raids on black cultural spaces and ensuing confrontations between black people and the police. The Mangrove was regularly harassed to the point of demonstration. In 1972 supporters of the Mangrove organised a rally, chanting “Hands of Mangrove”, which led to a confrontation between the police and protestors. Nine people were arrested and tried over 10 weeks. All were acquitted as police evidence did not hold up in court.

The following year in May, the Notting Hill Metro Youth Club was raided, and 16 black youths were arrested after a confrontation. Four were charged with affray and yet again, all were acquitted. In August 1972, a north London black youth club was raided by 100 police officers. In October 1974, the Carib Club in Cricklewood was raided after four police visits over a two week period, resulting in a confrontation that led to 12 black youths being tried for affray. All were acquitted after police evidence fell apart under scrutiny.

Mugging and pick-pocketing were constructed as black crimes, which justified police profiling black youths under the ‘sus’ law. These police raids harnessed a sense of black people being under attack from the police. The ‘70s also introduced the rise of the National Front and black power movements. Up until 1972, policing black Britain was not seen as important. Notting Hill Carnival in the 1970s evolved into a source of black pride and unity in a state that repeatedly targeted and harassed them.

From 1970 to 1972, Notting Hill Carnival was disorganised and small, centred around Trinidadian music and culture. Nevertheless it was pivotal in the formation of first generation black British experience. In 1973 Leslie Palmer took over and formatted it, introducing different Caribbean islands in order to branch out to the wider West Indian community. Under Palmer’s leadership, Notting Hill Carnival took the shape that we recognise today.

The first Mas bands were introduced, a steel band procession featuring several groups, and static sound systems and stages for pop music performances were introduced. These additions made Carnival more appealing to a new generation of black people. Children of African and West Indian migrants, disillusioned with the British state but also too far removed from their parents’ cultures, were drawn to the street culture of reggae and Rastafarianism, seeing Babylon as London and ‘toasting’ as their rebel language. Each year the Carnival grew in attendance but it wasn’t until 1975 that huge numbers flocked to the Carnival. Palmer publicised the event through Capitol Radio and Radio London, which drew over 250,000 people, the majority of them black youths.

No-one was prepared for such a crowd. There was a lack in provisions and a meagre force of 60 police officers. This shocked the state and organisers who engaged in lengthy negotiations in the lead up the 1976 Carnival. Now, the Notting Hill Carnival had become threatening. Civil opposition appeared in the form of local white residents who wanted it banned or moved to another venue, the latter an idea of a local racist organisation, Golborne 100. Additionally, Superintendent James Patterson was appointed to police the next Carnival. Patterson had suppressed a revolt in Anguilla, and the Metropolitan Police Commissioner, Robert Mark, wanted to implement similar tactics.

The Carnival Development Committee (CDC) nearly agreed to move it to Chelsea Football Stadium as different members were courted by Patterson. By April 1976, it was concluded that Carnival would remain on the streets thanks to the tireless campaigning of Race Today Collective and the local community – the majority of whom supported the event.

THE 1976 CARNIVAL

In the lead up to the 1976 Carnival, Race Today called on the West Indian community of Notting Hill to see that an attack on the Carnival was an attack on them. West Indians made up 40% of the local population and therefore had mobilising power in ensuring Carnival’s survival. Nonetheless the council refused to grant the CDC an alcohol licence. This was compounded by Patterson’s determination to crack down on the sale of alcohol by illegal street vendors.

Little transparency was given concerning the matter of policing and funding. Race Today called on the CDC to have a public general meeting which never occurred. Meanwhile, the CDC suffered from administrative issues, as musicians boycotted the organisation, feeling that their interests were being ignored. The Black Peoples’ Information Centre (BPIC) wrote letters to the Home Secretary, Commissioner Robert Mark and various newspapers, warning that the attitude of the local council, racist organisations and the police could cause an eruption of violence.

When Carnival finally started, attendants were surprised by the huge numbers of police. Each steel band was assigned a cordon of 20 officers, and the route was separated into six sectors. Portobello Road was closed to the general public, with police vans and ambulances stationed. It certainly appeared that the police had prepared for conflict. Sources claim that between 1,200 to 3,000 police officers were present. Such huge numbers enable aggressive and self-confident behaviour, with many black youths being targeted for ‘pick-pocketing’ and assaulted with truncheons.

Tension and uneasiness pervaded, with carnival-goers expressing a feeling of being on edge. On Sunday morning the Mangrove Restaurant was raided under the premise of looking for drugs. Apparently, violence broke out at 4:30pm at the junction of Portobello and Acklam road. Flashpoints for violence included Blagrove Road, Tavistock Road, Lancaster Road, and under the flyover.

While police had come in unprecedented numbers, the carnival-goers were much larger. In the summer and autumn of 1975, black youths had engaged in confrontations with the police across London and the country. Moreover, black people and culture had been increasingly brutalised by the police under the ‘sus’ laws. This was the perfect context to exact their revenge. The terrain proved useful as there was a construction site nearby which had left lots of debris available as missiles. Bottles and cans also proved useful. Knowledge of the streets and a sense of unity enable guerrilla style tactics with rioting youth amassing as one huge front, then dispersing after attack. Police had to resort to using dustbin covers as shields and we repeatedly pushed back. The violence raged on as police refused to withdraw. Between 300 and 500 people were injured, 150 requiring hospital treatment and around 60 people were arrested and charged.

The Notting Hill Carnival was never intended to be political. However, as it became dominated by West Indian culture and its numbers surged, it was politicised. Throughout the Seventies, Afrocentric themes and costumes were popular as a reflection of the Black Power and Black Pride movements that were occurring across the world. A generation of young West Indians abandoned their parents’ deference in the face of horrendous state brutality, choosing the culture of Rastafarianism over calypso.

Nonetheless, both were essential to what Carnival had become for the black British population, a means of asserting themselves in significant numbers. Following the riots of 1976, there were many internal and external disputes. Two organising committees, the CDC and the newly formed Carnival Arts Committee (CAC), competed for power and funding, and police numbers continued to grow, each year culminating in a confrontation between youths and police. The press and politicians blamed bad parenting and leadership within the black community.

Darcus Howe and the Race Today collective joined the CDC, while the BPIC was one of many organisations behind the CAC. The CDC maintained that Carnival was primarily cultural, while the CAC tried to politicise it. The truth is that Notting Hill Carnival was not radicalised by internal elements. What makes it radical is its existence as a mass gathering of black people in a country built off the exploitation of these people and their ancestors.

Such large numbers of black people is seen as potentially insurgent by the ruling classes, especially while this group has been the victim of structural and physical violence at the hands of the state. Even with Howe’s involvement as chairman of the CDC, Carnival did not become a means of mobilising people politically. He argued that Carnival was supposed to be fun, a place for people to relax and enjoy music and costumes. And whilst costumes and themes, especially in the Seventies, highlighted political issues, this was merely artistic expression, not political demonstration. What politicised Carnival was the police response, which by 1978 classified the cultural event as a demonstration and therefore requiring a ridiculous amount of police force.