

‘There is an African proverb that goes, “until lions write their own history, the tale of the hunt will always glorify the hunter”,’ says Mia Morris, founder of the Black History Month website that publicises the event. ‘Despite the significant role that Africa and its diaspora have played in the world civilisation since the beginning of time, the contribution of Africans and people of African origin has been omitted or distorted in most history books. That is the reasoning behind Black History Month.’

It was launched in 1987 following a campaign led by Ghanaian Akyaaba Addai Sebbo. Sebbo worked for the Greater London Council (GLC), which helped him stage the first event just as it was about to be abolished by the Thatcher government for being too radical.

Black History Month (BHM)’s wider origins go back to 1926 when Carter G Woodson launched Negro History Week in the US, which then became Black History Month and was marked every February. Carter, editor of the Journal of Negro History, chose February because the birthdays of Abraham Lincoln, the president who ‘freed the slaves’, and African American social reformer Frederick Douglass fell in that month.

The main impetus for the British version lay in the supplementary schools movement, Saturday and evening schools set up in the 1960s and ‘70s by black parents who were no longer prepared for their kids to be fed a Eurocentric version of history. For many children it would be the first time they learned about black scientists and writers or heard Africa talked about in a positive way.

‘There were two elements to the supplementary schools movement,’ explains Eric Huntley, who set up one such school in west London with his wife Jessica. ‘One arose out of the racism of

the system, the other was in response to the demand that black children be taught about their history and culture.'

This in itself was an outcome of the cultural activism that underpinned community campaigns that followed the mass arrival of people from the Caribbean in the 1950s and '60s. Britain wanted their labour but not their presence and relegated the migrants to second-class citizenship. The response would be summed up in the slogan, 'Here to stay, here to fight'.

The Huntleys, originally from Guyana, went on to found a publishing company and bookshop in 1972, seeking to deepen political understanding of the plight of black people as well as help build a Black British identity. They called it Bogle L'Ouverture after Paul Bogle and Toussaint L'Ouverture, two Caribbean slaves who became freedom fighters. Among its early titles was Walter Rodney's groundbreaking *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. Theatre and art similarly flourished in the backstreets, virtually ignored by mainstream society but gathering strength and momentum regardless. Now many of those pioneers have become the modern day heroes of BHM.

The highlight of the inaugural BHM was a talk by US scholar Dr Maulana Karenga. This year he was back to give the Glanville lecture at Cambridge University's Fitzwilliam Museum in which he argued that ancient Egypt should be interpreted within an African context. It was one of 6,000 events all over Britain, from the big cities to provincial towns.

It is a testament to the success of BHM that it has spread from being a minority affair to being taken on board by the establishment. Most local authorities regard it as a mark of pride to sponsor BHM events and even those with sparse black populations will delve deep to unearth their own "black histories".

Hence the 18th century abolitionist and former slave Olaudah Equiano appears in a municipal account of the black history of Devon, a rural county in the south west of England, because he spent time there, alongside John Hawkins, a local grandee who became England's first slave trader in 1562.

The country's museums and galleries are also keen to get involved, adding gravitas to the proceedings. Three years ago Glasgow Museums staged an exhibition around the portrait of wealthy tobacco merchant John Glassford and his family to reveal the city's little known links with the slave trade, while in 2008 the British Library in London hosted a talk by Tommie Smith, the US Olympic sprint champion famous for making the black power salute on the medal podium in the 1968 Mexico City games. This year the same institution revisited the 1980s riots in Britain's inner cities, which would go on to transform the country's race politics.

People are really spoilt for choice in a month packed with plays, talks, film, exhibitions, book readings and even the odd beauty contest. The tone is mostly instructive and celebratory, with audiences tending to be mixed, proof says its adherents, that Britain's multicultural society works.

As children were originally the main targets of BHM, schools also take part, particularly those in the cities with a large intake of black students. In fact October was chosen as BHM because it coincided with the start of the academic year. 'I really love Black History Month,' enthused 15-year-old Isaac Kwasi whose London school put on a special concert to mark the event. 'To me it's like [Notting Hill] carnival when you are on the centre stage and can be proud to be black.'

But just as corporate social responsibility arm of big business is

one of the first targets of tighter budgets, deemed to be an expendable add-on, so BHM is being scaled down in these days of austerity. Now some local councils concentrate on staging events where an appearance fee is not required, like promotional book readings. Meanwhile, the Greater London Authority, the successor of the GLC, last year slashed its BHM budget from \$209,850 to \$15,900 amid much protest.

What do you expect, challenge those who claim BHM has been hijacked by the state. The late singer and writer Cy Grant once described BHM as 'a mere distraction or act of appeasement' for which black people held out the proverbial begging bowl. 'Is it not a shame/that black activists bite the bait/you can have de money/if you don't buck the state,' he wrote in a poem titled Black History Month.

Others dislike the idea of black history being pigeon holed, even 'ghettoised', into a single month. Academy Award-winning actor Morgan Freeman told the US TV show 60 Minutes in 2005 that BHM was ridiculous. 'You're going to relegate my history to a month?' he asked. 'I don't want a Black History Month. Black history is American history.'

People complain that promoters are only interested in putting on "black" events in October. This leads to many similar events competing for the same audiences, leaving some to fall by the wayside because of low turnouts.

The journalist Afua Hirsch, writing in the UK's Guardian newspaper earlier this month, also pointed to the 'dishonesty in elevating people such as Muhammed Ali and Mary Seacole into simplistic figures of black pride.' Seacole, a Jamaican nurse famed for her care of wounded soldiers during the Crimea War in the 1870s but later airbrushed out of history, regularly does the

rounds during BHM, although some have questioned whether she would have actually considered herself “black” according to the standards of 19th century Caribbean society.

‘In an ideal world, the month would not be necessary because educational establishments and the national curriculum would fully recognise and appreciate the contribution of black people throughout history,’ says Mia Morris.

‘The black community uses the month as an opportunity to demonstrate pride in its creativity, respect for its intellectual prowess, and a celebration of its cultural identity which is far too often misrepresented when it is not being ignored in the mainstream.’

She is part of the team behind Black History 365 magazine, which attempts to get away from the straight jacket of a single month, while some BHM organisers now present ‘black heritage seasons’, which begin in October but go on for much longer.

‘Having fought so hard for recognition, it is a bit strange to knock the idea of Black History Month,’ said Bea Hines, who was planning to attend two shows put on by the International Slavery Museum in Liverpool, both of them free.

‘I’m really grateful for the opportunity that I can learn and enjoy what I was denied as a child growing up here.’