

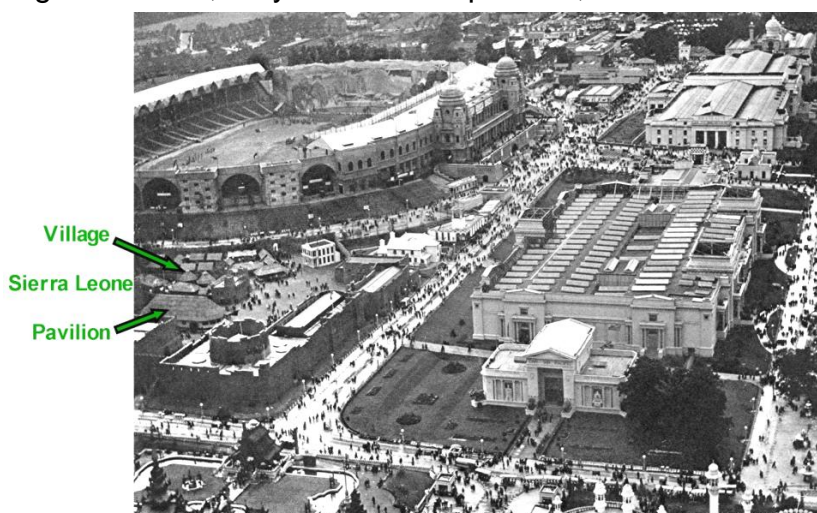
Sierra Leone at the British Empire Exhibition in 1924



The First World War (1914-18) saw soldiers from across the Empire fighting in support of its “mother country”. After the war, it was decided to hold a great exhibition, which would promote trade and *‘enable all who owe allegiance to the British flag to meet on common ground and learn to know each other.’* Wembley, in north-west London, was chosen as its site. Two years of frantic construction saw the building of a stadium, vast Palaces of Industry and Engineering, and Pavilions to house exhibits from over fifty countries around the world. On 23rd April 1924, King George V declared the British Empire Exhibition open.

< An admission ticket and programme for the exhibition.

The three British-controlled West African countries, Nigeria, Gold Coast (now Ghana) and Sierra Leone, decided to work together for the exhibition. A “walled city” was built for them, its design based on Kano in Northern Nigeria. Inside, they each had a pavilion, and there was a native village divided into three sections, one each for people who had come from those countries to display their craft skills and products. This aerial photograph shows the walled city next to the stadium, with the huge pavilions of Canada and Australia to the right, and the minarets of India and moat around the Burma pavilion at the bottom of the picture.



The exhibition had 17 million visitors in 1924, including many ordinary people and school groups from around Britain who came to discover a world that they had only read about before. Few people owned cameras in those days, but there were lots of postcards on sale which could be bought as reminders of what you had seen. The card shown here was from a



painting of the Sierra Leone section of the native village, including some of the people who lived there for six months during 1924. There may really have been some palm trees planted here when the village opened at Wembley!

This postcard, and all of the other pictures, come from the collections at Brent Archives: www.brent.gov.uk/archives.

There were about sixty people from the three West African countries living in the native village at Wembley. This photograph shows them all in front of the cafe which supplied tea and cakes to visitors. The villagers from Sierra Leone are in the middle (you will see a larger photograph of them later). The Nigerians are on the right of the picture and those from the Gold Coast on the left. The seated men were exhibition organisers, representing the British Governors of the West African countries.



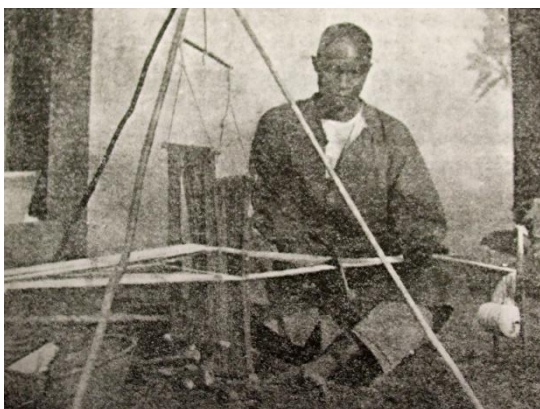
The Sierra Leone pavilion was a thatched building in the courtyard of the walled city. The inside of its roof was covered with a beautiful display of woven coloured cloths. There were



displays of the country's main produce at that time, palm oil, cotton, ginger and piassava fibre. Forest Ranger Fobawa (whose wife, Bundu, was with him at Wembley) was on hand to tell visitors about timbers, such as "monkey-apple", which Sierra Leone wanted to export.

< The courtyard inside the "walled city", with the Sierra Leone pavilion on the right and the Nigerian pavilion behind it.

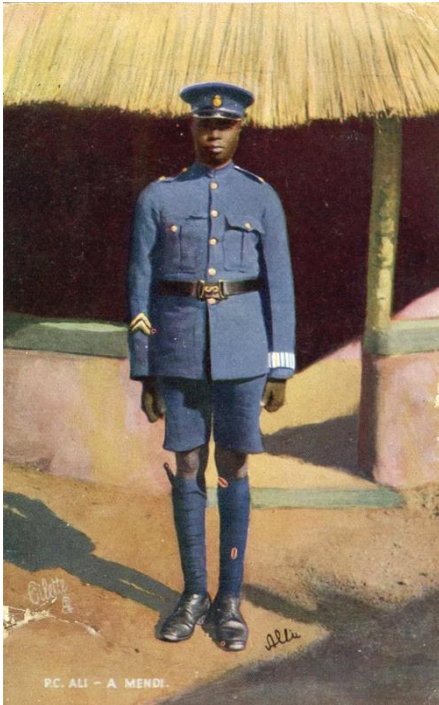
Native crafts were another feature of the Sierra Leone display. A barri, or weaving shed, was a popular sight. Here Momo Yatarra and Kui (who lived in the village with their wives, Binti Ture and Boi Jemi) made cloth on their hand looms. Visitors could buy a booklet written by Dr M. Easmon, a Creole man from Freetown, giving details about cloth making. These photographs from the booklet show: ladies spinning thread from native cotton, using a hand spindle;



a man weaving on a simple Mende loom; and

a finished Kpokpoi cloth. It was the women of a village who dyed the thread after it had been spun, using different plants such as Gara, which gave a deep blue colour.





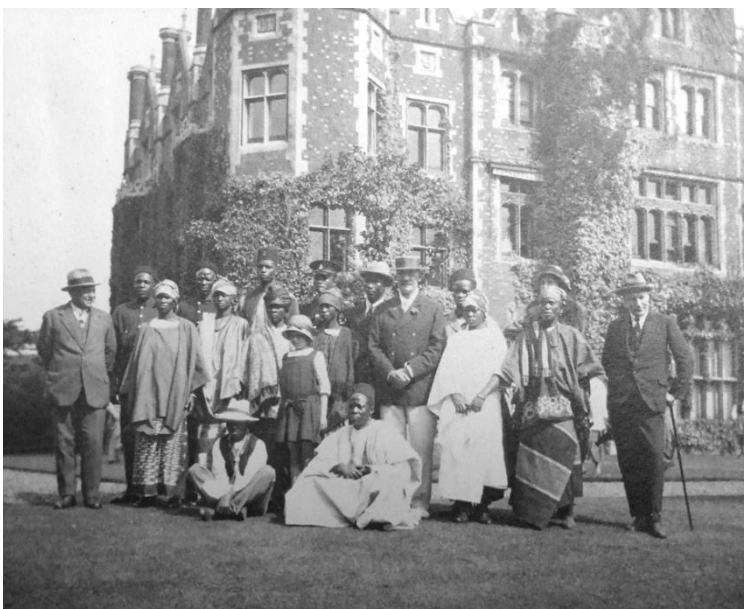
Sierra Leone had sent two men to look after the valuable objects in its pavilion. Corporal Madi Kaba was a soldier from the country's battalion of the British Army's West African Frontier Force. He lived in the village with his wife, Ai. Because of their colourful uniforms, the native soldiers and police at the walled city were a popular subject for the postcard makers. Corporal Kaba's fellow officer, Police Constable Ali, from the Mendi tribe, is shown on this card. The postcard was sent from the exhibition to "Audrey" in Devon by her aunt, in October 1924.

Although the people from Sierra Leone spent most of their time at Wembley working, the exhibition was closed on Sundays, so they did have some time to rest. One Sunday at the end of July 1924, the organisers took the West Africans for a day out on the River Thames. Their boat, the "Sunbury Belle", set out from Windsor (you can see its

castle in the photograph). They enjoyed a special lunch on board at Maidenhead. After this, the African party landed at Taplow Court, where Lord Desborough showed them round his large country house. He was a famous sportsman and politician, who had been in charge of organising the first London Olympic Games in 1908. He was interested to find out more about their countries, and spoke with members of the group, as well as having his photograph taken with them.



The people in this photograph I have not already mentioned are two Court Messengers, Amadu Kuate (and his wife Batti) and Manju Ture (with his wife Inkanku), and Mr Fode Fofanna, a clerk in the Exhibition Commissioner's office. The English couple on the right are Mr and Mrs Addison, who were responsible for the welfare of Sierra Leone villagers at the exhibition. Their daughter, Elizabeth, is standing in the centre, near Lord Desborough (in his straw boater hat).



I hope you have enjoyed meeting the people who travelled 3,000 miles by steam ship in 1924 to represent the 1.5 million inhabitants of Sierra Leone at the British Empire Exhibition. They helped teach others about their country, and I hope their story helps you to discover more about its history.

Philip Grant,
Wembley History Society, February 2014.