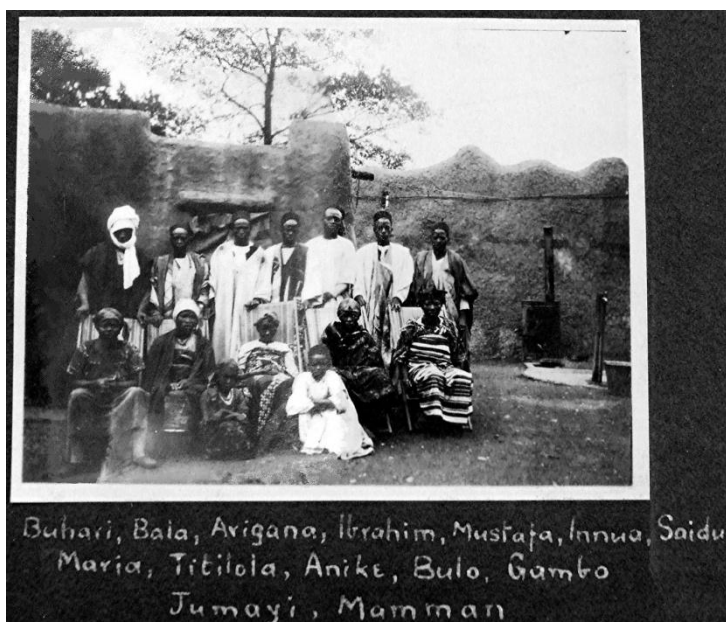
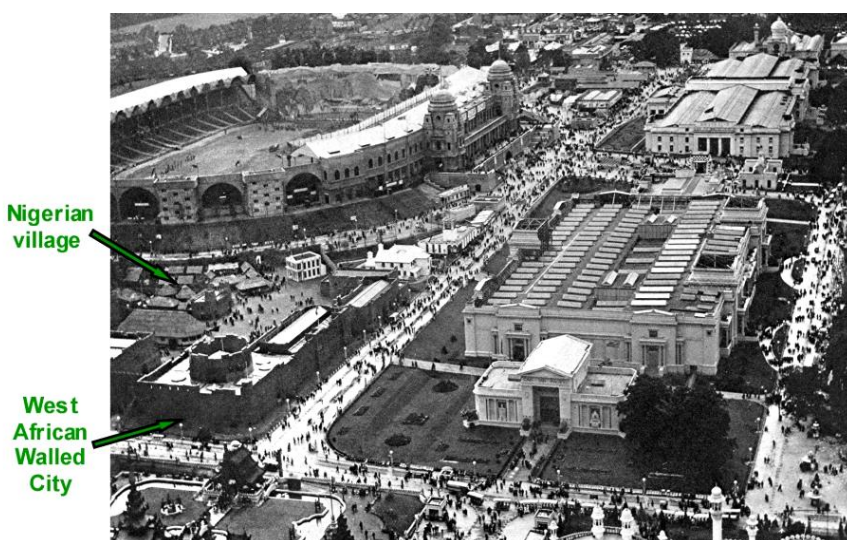


When Nigeria came to Wembley, 1924

The world came to Wembley in 1924 for the British Empire Exhibition. Its aim was to promote trade, and to help people from the countries of what is now the Commonwealth to get to know each other. Each country had its own building or "Pavilion" on the large site, in addition to the great concrete "Palaces" showing off Britain's arts, engineering and industries. In the shadow of the new stadium, a "Walled City" housed exhibits from the Gold Coast (now Ghana), Nigeria and Sierra Leone. Its design was based on the massive mud walls of Kano, in Northern Nigeria.

The West African nations had brought more than sixty people to demonstrate their craft skills, and to show the millions of visitors to the Exhibition what their daily life was like. Inside the walls, each country's compound contained a native village. In the Nigerian village (marked on the aerial photograph), families from different regions and tribes across its vast territory lived side by side.

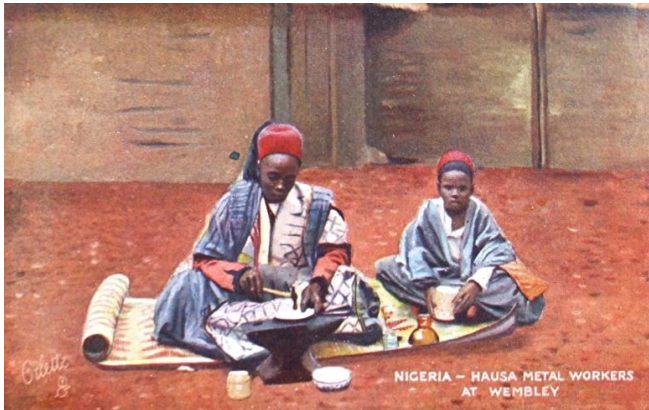


The collections at Brent include an album (Acc. 587 in the Wembley History Society Collection) which was donated to the Society in 1964 by the man who was resident superintendent of the Nigerian native village at Wembley in 1924. This picture from the album shows some of the families inside the village. Buhari was a bead polisher from Ilorin in western Nigeria, who came to the Exhibition with his wife Titilola, a potter, and his sister Anike. Bala, a silversmith from Kano, was living in the village with his wife Gambo, daughter Jumayi and brother Mamman.

Innua, another silversmith, and Saidu, a weaver, were also from Kano. Arigana, whose wife Maria was with him, and Ibrahim were leatherworkers from Maiduguri in the north east of the country. There were also several woodcarvers from southern Nigeria. Each of the craftsmen had their own workshop, and the goods that they made were admired and bought by visitors who, for the first time in Britain, could experience African life at first hand.

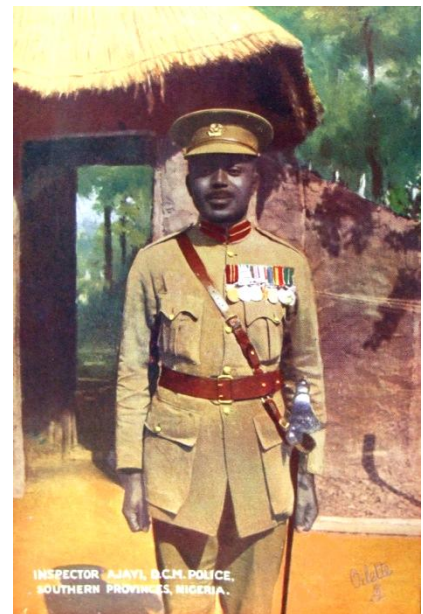
The last couple in the photograph above, Mustafa and his wife Bulu from Kano, can be seen in a picture from another of the collections at Brent, a series of images taken at the British Empire Exhibition in 1924 by Fred L. Wilson, a photographer from Harlesden. Mustafa was a

tailor, and this photograph (Acc. 1904/15 in the Wembley History Society Collection) shows him at work in front of one of the huts in the village. Another image of the Nigerian craftsmen at work comes in this postcard from the album, which shows Bala and his brother, Mamman, although whether he brought the



heavy iron anvil from Kano or was loaned it at Wembley is an unanswered question. The “oilette” colour picture was obtained by a skilled artist painting a black and white photograph with special paints.

Three other “oilette” postcards in the album, which were produced from photographs taken in the village and sold at the Exhibition, show the men who provided security for the valuable exhibits in the Nigerian pavilion. Police Inspector Ajayi (right) from Lagos brought his son Albert with him to Wembley. He was assisted by two Nigerian Regiment soldiers from Ibadan, both of whom had fought in the First World War campaigns against German forces in Africa. Company Sergeant Major Belo Ojo D.C.M. had been in charge of an artillery battery. Regimental Sergeant Major

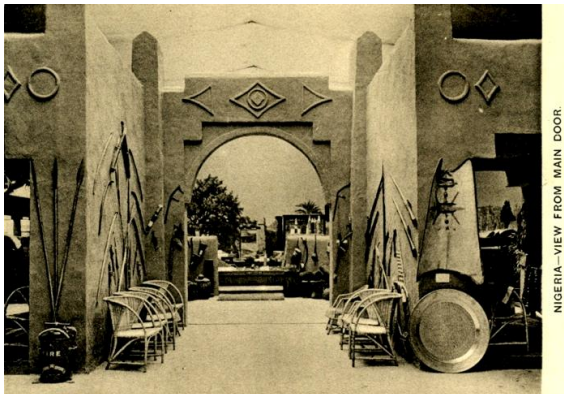


This picture is of three-fold interest. It shows one of the Nigerian soldiers, second to none in bravery in the war. He wears the D.C.M., M.M., with bars, etc. This wonderful Nigerian gateway with over 100 carvings, a feature of the Walled City, comes from the Alafin of Oyo. On the right the inscription tells its own story.

Belo Akure (left), who lived in the village with his wife Obiyi, was an infantry soldier and a decorated war hero. He had been awarded the Military Medal in 1917 ‘for bravery in the field’ during operations in the Rufigi River area of German East Africa (now part of Tanzania). He was much photographed by visitors to the Walled City in 1924.

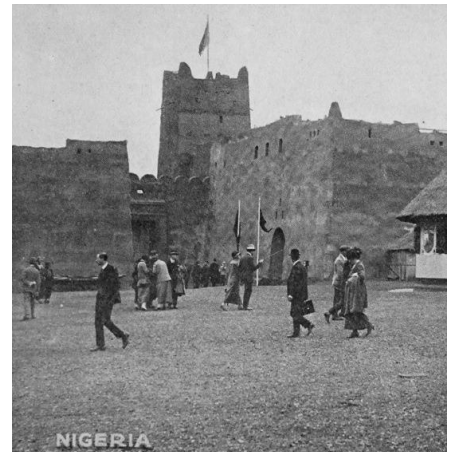
Nigeria's Pavilion at the Exhibition was built in the same style as the mud-walled city it stood inside, and was packed with displays showing the crafts, agriculture and industries of the

country. At its centre was also a beautiful exhibit about the butterflies and insects which could be found there, including a nest with live ants.

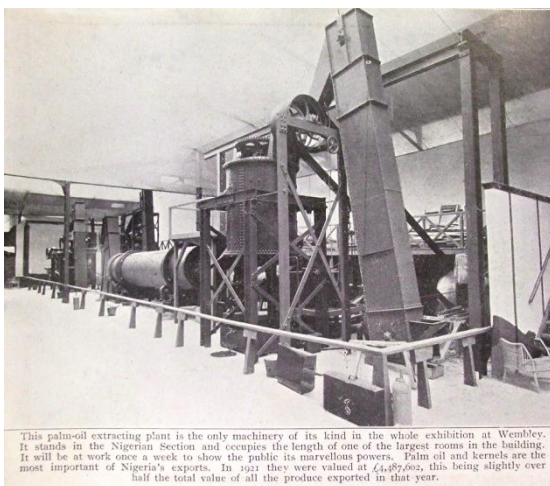


< Inside the Pavilion,
from the main door.

The Nigeria Pavilion,
from the courtyard of
the Walled City >



The Pavilion included a working palm oil extraction plant, demonstrating Nigeria's main export crop at that time, and had many hand-crafted products on sale, such as carvings and leatherwork, as these illustrations from a magazine article show.

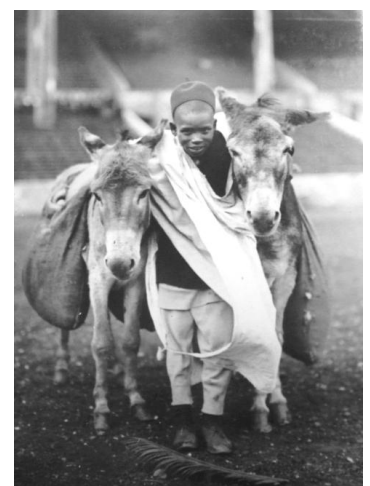


This palm-oil extracting plant is the only machinery of its kind in the whole exhibition at Wembley. It stands in the Nigerian Section and occupies the length of one of the largest rooms in the building. It will be at work once a week to show the public its marvellous powers. Palm oil and kernels are the most important of Nigeria's exports. In 1921 they were valued at £4,877,002, this being slightly over half the total value of all the produce exported in that year.



A section of Nigeria's shop window at Wembley. It shows some of the beautiful leather work and carvings which are finding a ready market with the British public. Shoes, for instance, were sold out this week and cables were despatched to Lagos for fresh supplies.

In July and August 1924 the Nigerian men took part in the finale for the Pageant of Empire, which was staged in the stadium. The "Daily Chronicle" newspaper took a number of photographs of them during rehearsals for this, with many riding horses or camels.



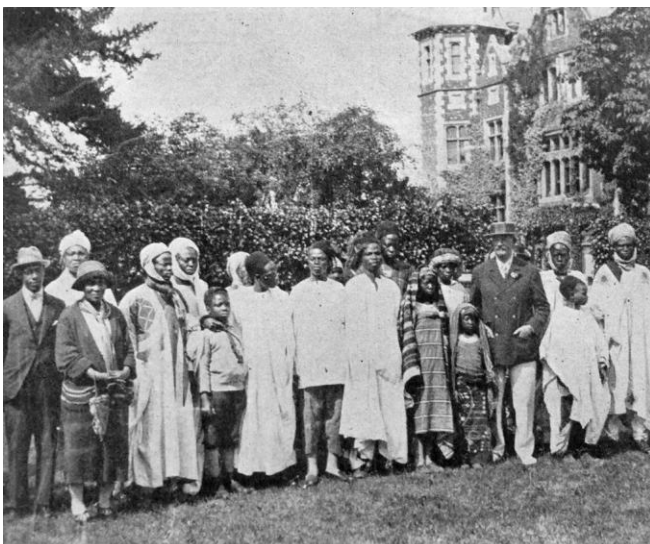
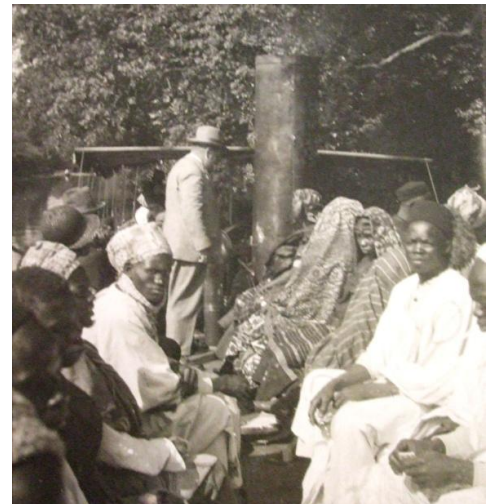
Only one of the pictures (of Mamman with two donkeys) was actually published, but proof copies of all of them are also included in the album.

The Nigerians were not confined to the exhibition site for their stay in England. Their village was not ready when they first arrived, by ship from West Africa, in March 1924, and they were given lodgings in Bloomsbury. As well as seeing some of London's sights, they had several excursions to discover more about the Empire's "mother country". At the end of July they were treated to a river boat trip along the Thames, first travelling to Windsor by char-a-banc (an early type of motor coach).



The party sailed up the river on the pleasure steamer "Sunbury Belle", receiving friendly waves and greetings from local people, although few had probably ever seen West Africans before. The boat moored for lunch at Maidenhead, then went on up the Thames to Boulter's Lock before returning to a private landing stage at Taplow Court.

Lord Desborough, a famous sportsman and politician who had organised the 1908 Olympic Games, showed the group around his home, then had his photograph taken and chatted with some of them in its grounds. The couple in western clothes on the left of the photo below are probably Mr and Mrs T. Clarkson Williams from the medical department at Ibadan, who provided health services for the villagers.



The welcome that the Nigerian visitors received was part of the Exhibition's purpose, to bring people together to get to know each other better. It was this spirit which helped consign the old-fashioned idea of "Empire" to history. The album does not say what the Nigerian villagers thought of their time at Wembley in 1924, and it would be interesting to know, but at least Brent Archives has this record of their time here!

Philip Grant, April 2014.