

THE LIFESAVER OF LIVERPOOL

James Clarke made a career of helping others stay water-safe in his adopted home



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On 1 May 2025, the Liverpool City Council unveiled a new mural honoring local hero James Clarke, “a pioneering figure who dedicated his life to saving others, teaching water safety, and building community in the city he made his home,” the Council noted.

The powerful grayscale mural painted by artist John Culshaw stands sentry over Athol Village in the heart of the Kirkdale community.

Commissioned by Mandela8, a Liverpool-based non-profit supporting public art installations, in partnership with Riverside, another Liverpool non-profit that’s focused on revitalising neighbourhoods, the image centers on James Clarke, who was born in Georgetown, Guyana, in 1886.

“Presumably he first learned to swim in the country’s many waters,” writes Celeste Henery in a 2018 article in *Black Perspectives*, an online publication of the African American Intellectual History Society.

At age 14, Clarke stowed away on a cargo ship bound for Liverpool, arriving in the English City in 1900. Priests from St. Augustine’s Church on Great Howard Street found the cold and hungry teenager wandering the streets and took him in. He was quickly adopted by an Irish family



James has two plaques dedicated to his memory across Liverpool

who lived on Scotland Road, close to the canal where he often swam and dived in after other children. The family had Clarke baptised as Catholic and he later found work on Liverpool’s docks. In 1914, he married Elizabeth Murphy, a white Irish woman, and the couple had 13 children.

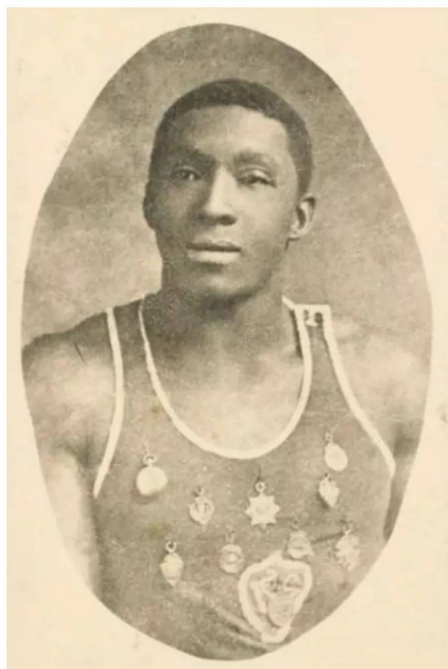
A terrific swimmer, Clarke joined the Wavertree Swimming Club and also swam for the Bootle club. While swimming for Everton, he helped the team win several North Lancashire League cups. He also likely played water polo with the Woolton Polo team, and he was well known for staging noteworthy synchronised swimming routines, a practice he kept up well into his later years, Henery reports.

While Clarke also ran and boxed, he

was best known and is still remembered for his efforts as a lifeguard and swimming instructor. During the course of his time in Liverpool, Clarke taught hundreds of kids how to swim, coached swimming, and became the city’s most visible lifesaver. He’s credited with saving dozens of children and adults – often dock workers and seamen – from drowning in the River Mersey and the many canals and docks across the city.

“Because of his strength as a swimmer and his lung capacity, locals, including the police, called upon Clarke to retrieve people from the city’s many bodies of water,” Henery writes.

In 1911, Clarke received an award certificate from the Liverpool Shipwreck and Humane Society for rescuing a man



He was a member of two swimming clubs

in Waterloo docks. He also often jumped into the Leeds & Liverpool Canal to assist neighborhood children who got into trouble while playing in the canals.

But it wasn't all happy rescues, Henery reports. "Police used his skills for more somber tasks, summoning him to recover drowned bodies. These experiences and his passion for swimming led him to advocate for and provide swimming lessons to children, as well as to coach the police swimming and boxing teams."

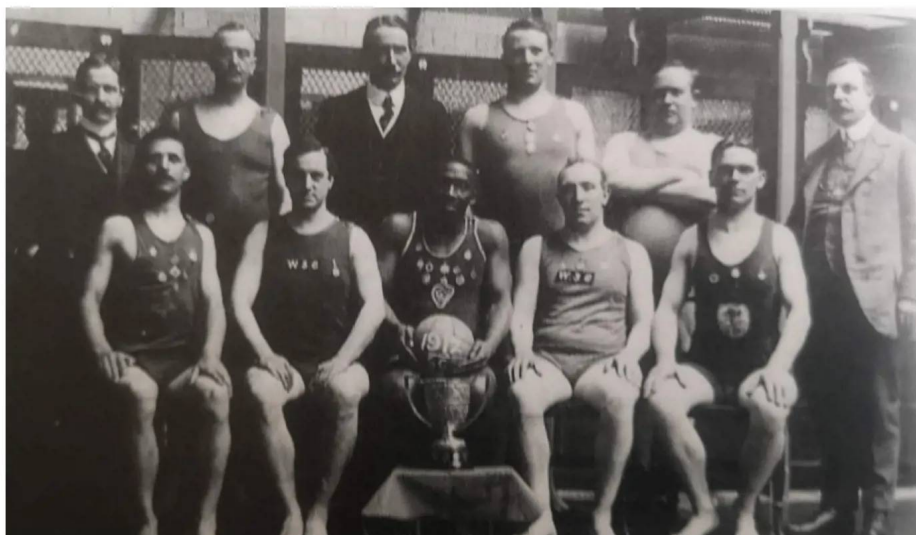
In fact, Clarke was a passionate promoter of swimming lessons for everyone, and he spent many years working at Burrough Gardens Bath, cementing his standing as a pillar of the community.

"James was a natural teacher, patient and kind, and he quickly gained a reputation as a skilled instructor," reports Black Wall St. Media. "He often taught children from poor families who could not afford swimming lessons, and he did so for free. It was this selflessness that endeared him to the community, and his dedication to his students that made him a hero."

Despite the challenges of being an immigrant and Black in the UK during the first half of the 20th century, nothing seems to have held this aquatics professional back from the job he was apparently born to do; Clarke was said to have often told his own



In May, the Liverpool City Council unveiled a new mural honoring the local hero



James was also a keen water polo player and synchronised swimmer

*Clarke was said to have often told his own children,
"let colour be your last excuse, not your first."*

children, "let colour be your last excuse, not your first."

For his efforts in keeping Liverpoolians water safe and pitching in when the worst case scenario came to pass, Clarke received several honors over the years, including a silver chain with eight medals he'd earned for competition and lifesaving feats. In 1986, he became the first Black man to have a street named after him in Liverpool. Two plaques dedicated to his memory have been unveiled at Eldonian Village Hall in Vauxhall and at the Liverpool Aquatics Centre.

At the unveiling, Kay Jones, curator of the Museum of Liverpool, which houses several of Clarke's items, noted that "James Clarke left an incredible legacy on the city that is still visible today – physically through the street named after him, but also crucially through the lives of the many people he saved from drowning and their descendants across the world. Teaching local children how to swim – after rescuing many of them from the Leeds & Liverpool Canal – inevitably had huge positive impacts upon generations of local families."