

DESPITE his 66 years, Horace McKenzie has the lean physique of a man half his age. He puts this down to daily training in Gojujukai, a martial art in which he is a 'black belt'.

"I started training in my forties because as I got older I wanted to keep fit and be able to walk the streets and defend myself," he says.

Feeling the need to defend himself is nothing new for Horace. He arrived alone in London from Guyana in 1956, aged just 17, at a time when open hostility towards immigrants from the Caribbean and Africa was commonplace.

"I'd walk past pubs with signs that said 'No blacks, no dogs, no Irish.'"

This made him angry but there seemed little option than simply to avoid such places.

"Otherwise you'd end up fighting and I never fancied going to jail."

It wasn't just the odd pub sign that made his new home seem less than welcoming.

"When I got off the train in Victoria it was cold and foggy and completely different from Guyana. People were looking at you strange, like you got 12 heads and 15 hands."

By 1958, racial tensions in the area of west London where Horace lived were reaching breaking point and that summer the streets erupted in the now notorious Notting Hill race riots.

"There were lots of us young Caribbean men. It was a fight against the white boys, so we had to join together - Jamaicans, Guyanese, Dominicans, Trinidadians, Barbadians. We had to join together to survive."

Fighting back felt good.

"They realised we weren't easy to overcome, that we could stand and fight."

And after that the racism eased off a bit."

But for an unqualified black youngster trying to make his way in London, everyday life was tough.

"What kind of jobs do you think they gave to black people in those days - kitchen porter, washing up, cleaning - that's all you were expected to do."

Long journey home

Horace found work in the kitchens of the US military's officers' mess in Gloucester Road. But when a friend suggested he join him at sea as a pantryman on a ship ferrying cargo

between Rotterdam and New

York, Horace seized the chance. Not that he was naturally suited to a seafaring life.

"It was fun on board, but I was seasick almost every trip."

Returning to London after almost a decade at sea, Horace decided he needed a trade and took a vocational training course in tailoring.

"I could still run up a jacket and trousers today if I had to."

In the meantime he had fallen in love with reggae music which was making a big impact in London. And not long after moving to the Barnsbury Mews estate in 1975 - a nice place to live he says - he joined up-and-coming reggae band Dambala as percussionist on the conga and shake-shake.

The group were praised in the music press for their vitality and street-cred, appeared on BBC TV, toured Holland, and even supported reggae superstars Aswad. By 1977 they were on the verge of signing a lucrative recording deal.

"We really seemed to be heading for the big time."

But tensions between the band members caused the group to split just as they were about to make it.

"Why do people have to mess things up just when they're going good?" asks Horace.

But any bitterness quickly fades as he talks of a plot of land he owns in Guyana, the coconut and citrus trees he has planted there, and plans to eventually build a house for his retirement.

As Horace talks of life 'back home' and his desire to spend more time there, he becomes increasingly animated. And in his eyes you catch a glimpse of that plucky seventeen year old, full of hope and expectation, stepping onto a foggy Victoria platform all those years ago.



Pugin Court resident HORACE MCKENZIE tells JAMIE ELLIOTT about dealing with racism, his brush with music stardom and how, after almost 50 years in Britain, he is building a new life in Guyana.