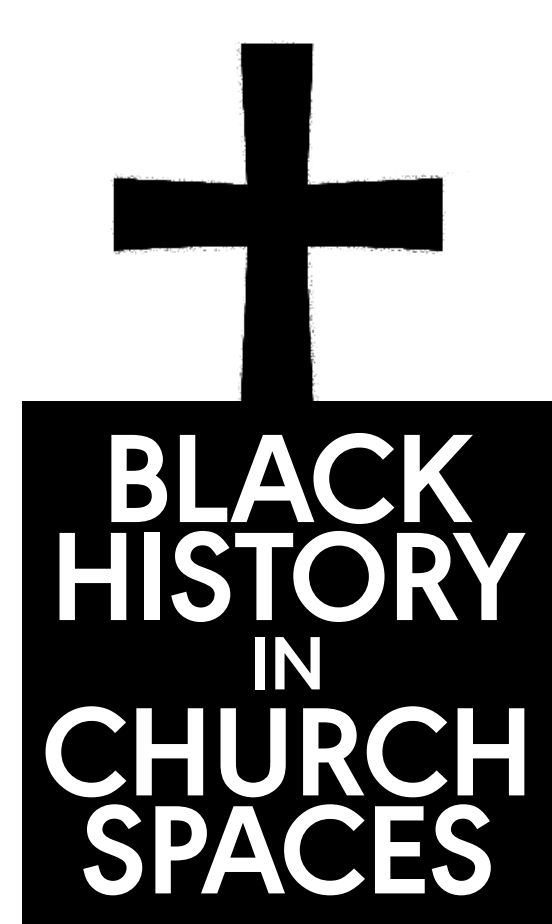




The WWI tragedy that history forgot



Above: Reverend Isaac Wauchope Dyobha
Source: Common Wealth Graves Commission, Remembering the sinking of the SS Mendi 105 years on.

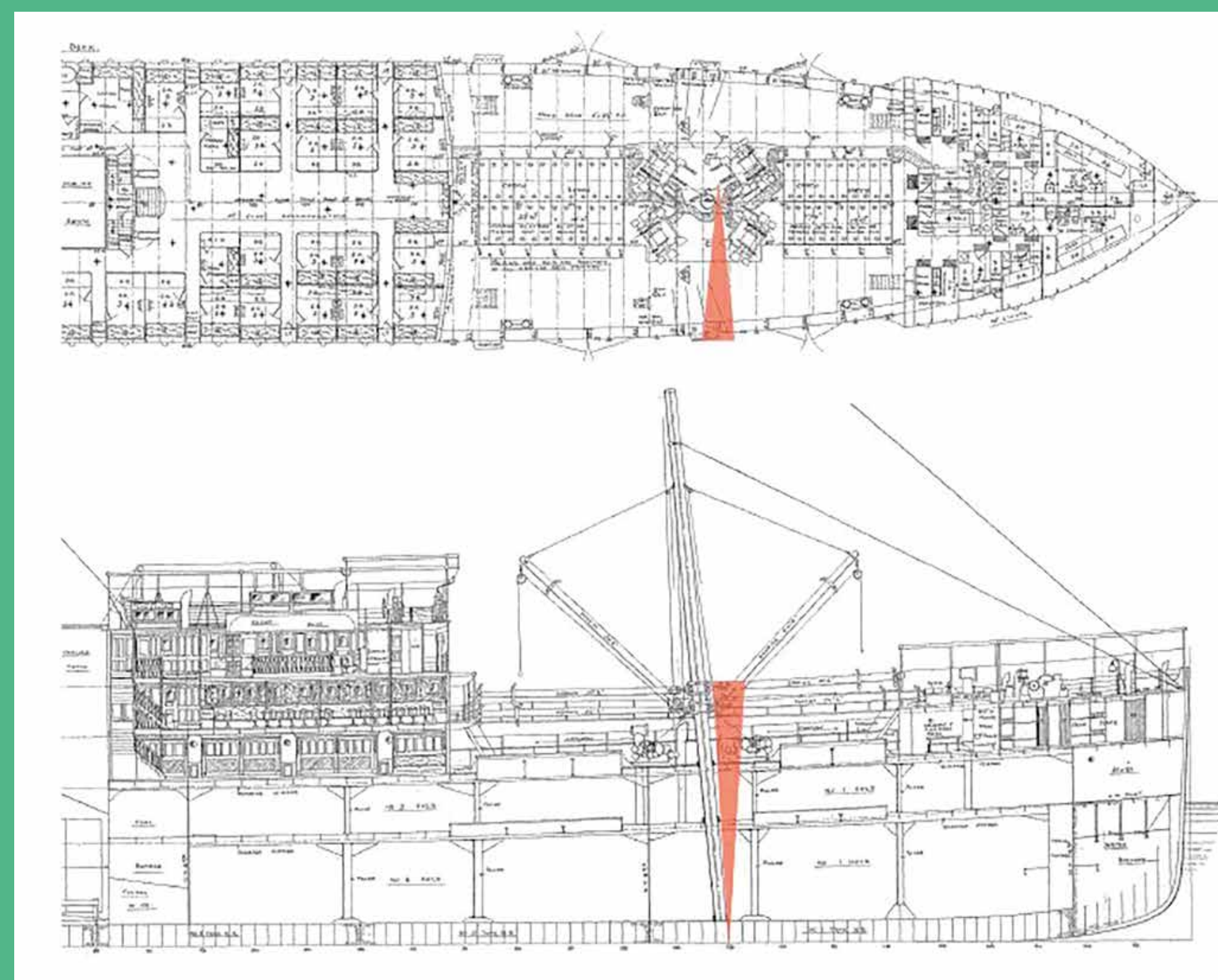
During WWI, 21 000 Black African men were recruited from South Africa to help the British Empire defeat Germany and its Ottoman allies. They formed the South African Native Labour Corps (SANLC).

South Africa's white Prime Minister Louis Botha objected to their being armed and encouraged to shoot white men, so their work included building and maintaining trenches, roads, railways, ports, and harbours. Despite their being unarmed this work was often conducted under fire on the front lines. Over 7,300 of the Corps would die on the Western front and in South West and East Africa.

On 21 February 1917, the SS Mendi was transporting 913 members of the SANLC through the foggy English Channel to France when the SS Daro, a Royal Mail packet boat, smashed into its side. The SS Mendi was breached and sank. The Captain of the SS Daro did not help in recovery efforts but was never charged over his failure. Six hundred and forty-six men of the SANLC died in the water.

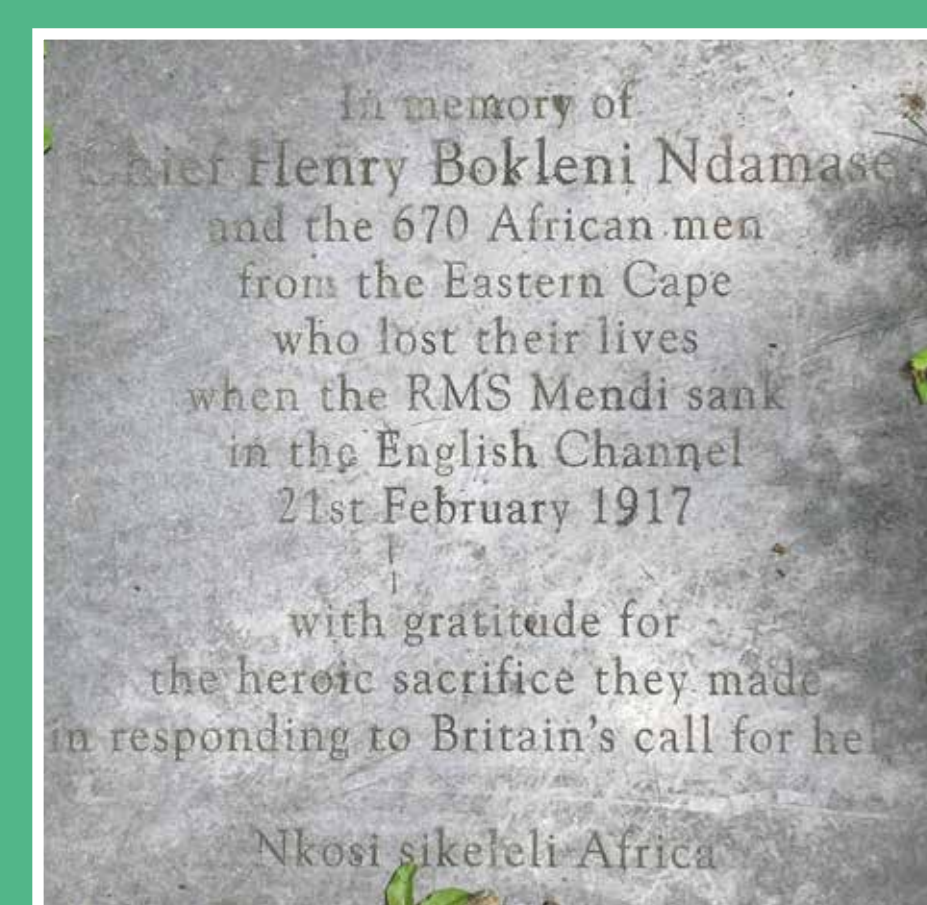
Among those who drowned was Isaac Williams/Isaac Wauchope Dyobha, previously a minister in the Congregational Native Church of Fort Beaufort and Blinkwater, who had volunteered as chaplain and translator, to help the war effort and serve his community. Oral tradition in South Africa has it that as the ship was sinking, he spoke these final words to the men while they performed a traditional 'death dance':

"Be quite and calm my countrymen ... you are going to die, but that is what you came to do. I a Xhosa, say you are my brothers, Swazis, Pondos, Basotho ... so let us die like brothers. We are the sons of Africa. Raise your war cries, brothers, for though they made us leave our assegais in the kraal, our voices are still with our bodies."



Above: floor plan and cross-section of SS Mendi indicating the point of impact. National Maritime Museum

There is a memorial to the men of the SANLC at Hollybrook Cemetery in Southampton, but also at Newtimber Church, West Sussex. This is because Sydney Buxton, the landowner at Newtimber and benefactor of the church was Governor-General of South Africa at the time of the tragedy. Parishioners at Newtimber have since established contact with descendants of those who died on the SS Mendi in the Eastern Cape, South Africa, who gave the church a memorial fighting stick as further tribute to their sacrifice.



Above: Matheson Nteleko and Thembeke Nteleko from the Eastern Cape laid a wreath at the SS Mendi memorial plaque at St John the Evangelist Church, Newtimber, in remembrance of their ancestors who lost their lives when the SS Mendi sank. Vitalis Ngwambi is on the left hand side of the photograph.



Above: SS Mendi's route
Source: Wessex Archaeology, Wreck of the SS Mendi



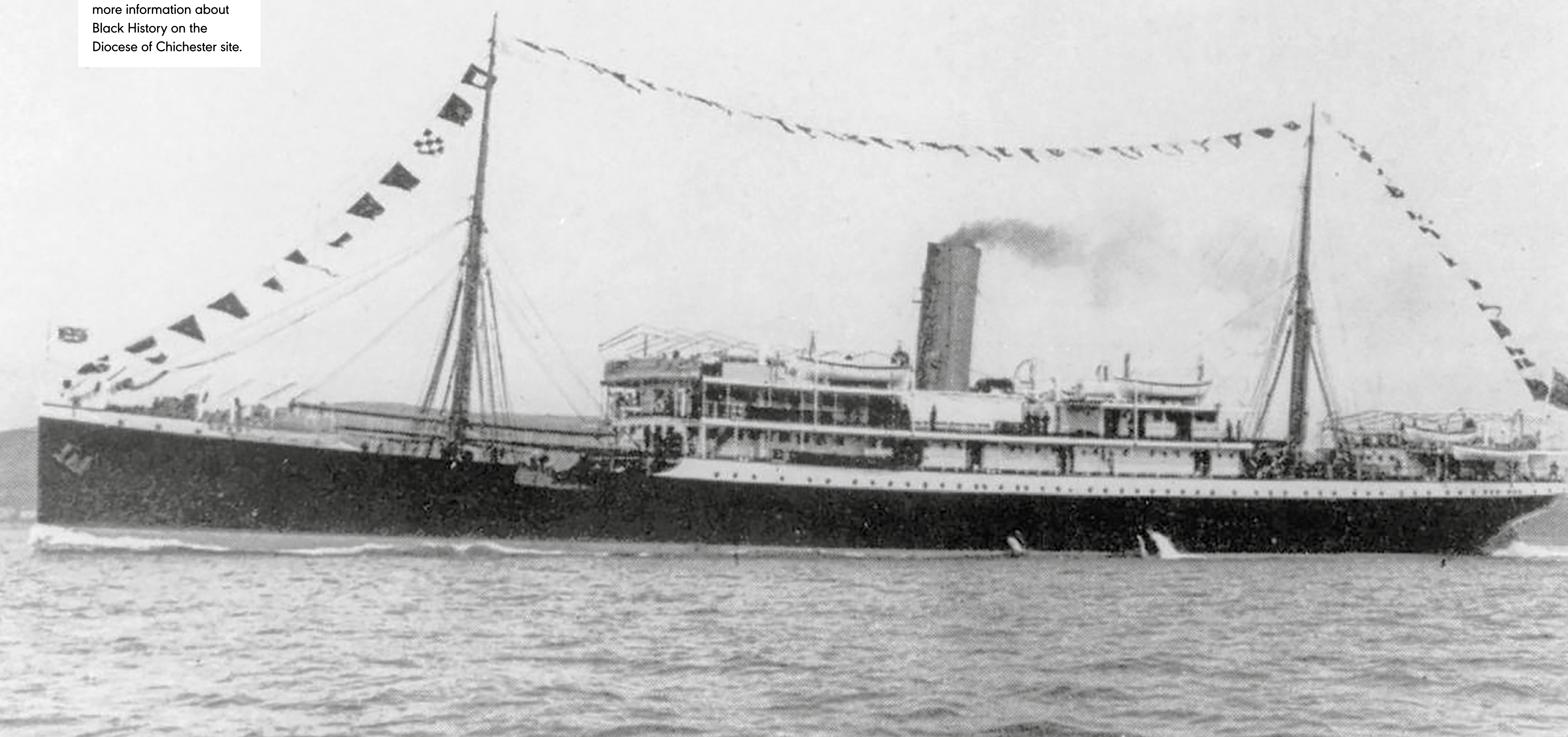
Above: SS Mendi's last voyage.
Source: Wessex Archaeology, Wreck of the SS Mendi

Right: men from the South African Native Labour Corp
Source: National Library of Scotland

Below: SS Mendi



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