

## Windrush: Portrait of a Generation

'A brilliant life: Windrusher Alford Gardner'

*In conversation with Jim Grover: February 14<sup>th</sup>, March 15<sup>th</sup> 2018*



Alford Gardner: March 15<sup>th</sup>, 2018  
Photo: Jim Grover

Alford Gardner was born in Jamaica on 27<sup>th</sup> January 1926, one of 10 children. Like many other Jamaicans, when 'The Mother Country' called for help during the second world war, Alford responded. He joined the RAF as a motor-mechanic and engineer and arrived in England in 1944 aged 17.



Alford Gardner (right); Blackpool 1944

He completed his initial training in Staffordshire and was then posted to Moreton-in-Marsh in Gloucestershire. After the war he completed a 6 month engineering vocational course in Leeds. In December 1947 he returned to Jamaica 'in time for Christmas'.

R.A.F. FORM 1394.

**ROYAL AIR FORCE.**

**BRIEF STATEMENT OF SERVICE AND CERTIFICATE OF DISCHARGE OF**

The corner of this certificate to be cut off if the airman/airwoman is discharged with a "bad" character, or with disgrace or if specially directed by the Air Council.

SURNAME GARDNER OFFICIAL No. 713306

CHRISTIAN NAMES Alford Dalrymple

Date of enlistment 17.3.44. Terms of enlistment emergency. Duration of present emergency.

(a) Date reported for regular service 17.3.44.

(b) Branch of Air Force in which enlisted R. A. F. V. R. R.A.F. trade on discharge Motor Transport Mechanic

Date of discharge 1st March, 1948. Rank on discharge Leading Aircraftman

(c) Cause of discharge On termination of engagement under

(Para. 652 Clause 1 King's Regulations and Air Council Instructions.)

(d) General character (i) during service Very Good (ii) on discharge Very Good

(e) Degree of trade proficiency:—A Satisfactory B

Special qualifications

(f) Medals, Claps, Decorations, Mentions in Despatches, Special Commendations, etc. None

**DESCRIPTION OF ABOVE-NAMED AIRMAN/AIRWOMAN ON DISCHARGE.**

Date of birth 27.2. 1926 Marks or scars 1 Scar Right Foot.

Height 5 ft. 8 1/2 ins.

Complexion Dark

Colour of eyes Brown Colour of hair Black

Airman's or airwoman's signature [Signature]

(g) Brief statement of any special aptitudes or qualities or any special types of employment for which recommended:—

**General Character Good. His work as a Mechanic is above average under supervision, but has tendency to lose interest in his work without that supervision.**

(Signed) [Signature] W/CMDR.

Commanding No. 39M. U. R. A. F. COLERNE, WILTS.  
Royal Air Force.

Attention is directed to Notes (a) to (g) on reverse.

ROYAL AIR FORCE ACCOUNTS UNIT.  
DEC 20 1947  
BRITISH WEST INDIES

Unit Date Stamp BRITISH WEST INDIES

Alford Gardner: December 1947 discharge papers.  
Photo: Jim Grover

*'...But I had no intention of stopping in Jamaica. My brother and me decided we were going to go back to England no matter what...didn't matter how we were going to find the money...we were just going to go back. The lifestyle was different...and the wages were so poor. I'd done a 6 month engineering course in England but there was no engineering work in Jamaica. So there was no way I was going to stay in Jamaica.*



Alford Gardner 1948 passport.  
Photo: Jim Grover



Alford Gardner 1948 passport photo

*When we heard about Empire Windrush my brother was in Kingston quick to book his fare. One of my sisters lived in Kingston and knew someone working in the shipping office and heard about the ship long before it arrived...so she put my name down for a ticket. When I arrived there was a long queue but I got my ticket.*

*My mum told me to ask my papa for the money and he gave me £50 to cover the £28 fare. He was a policeman, and it was a lot of money, but my dad understood...he had been in England and France in the first world war.*

*My mum cried...I cried...she was so happy me coming home and so sad when I went back but she knew I'd made up my mind.'*

Alford knew 40-50 fellow 'Empire Windrush' passengers (out of 492 plus a few stowaways): ex-RAF colleagues, people he knew from other islands and a few close friends who had been on the same course as Alford in England.

*'We stopped in Bermuda for 4 days and were allowed off the ship. Me and some of my friends decided to have a picnic. The colour bar was rough with notices like 'no blacks'. A man said we couldn't be where we were...we were just sitting and eating what we had bought and leaving no mess...we weren't bothered and took no notice. We walked about. I had the best ice-cream I have ever eaten...rum and raisin...there was a queue so I just joined it. Next day we went back it was all sold out.*

*The mood on ship was brilliant...brilliant. Barbadians and Trinidadians lived in one part of the ship, Jamaicans in another. You could meet your friends, move about freely...and sleep where you wanted to. The women [Windrush carried 60 Polish women passengers] were kept separate.*

*We spent our time gambling...night and day...cards...dominoes...dice... anything going. You play one...you lose...you find another and hope you might win. But you had to keep a watch on your money as there was no way to get money in England. I had a lot less when we reached England but I still had something.*

*A friend of mine, Kennedy, was always walking around selling a slice of peaches for six pence...or a prune for a penny. I don't know where he got his supplies from but everyday it was the same: 'Alford my old boy...long time no see...have a prune!'. And then there was Kitchener and his calypso: anything that happened...anything that moved...anything he heard...he wrote a song about it! We had a good time...it was a happy ship.*

*As we got close to England we were happy because it wasn't cold. The main thing we were looking forward to was meeting the girls. A lot of the lads were still in the RAF, on leave, and coming back. They'd written to tell them what time they were coming so their girls were there to meet them at Tilbury. And the RAF were there begging us to come back to the RAF...we were experienced men...'we'll raise your rank'...they were begging us. But it wasn't for me...I was not going back...three months before I left England for Jamaica these ex sergeants and flight engineers came to Moreton in Marsh where I was stationed and told us there was no chance of getting promotion. Now that the war was over there were just too many of us and not enough work...so I wasn't going back.'*

Like so many who arrived from the Caribbean both in 1948, and over the next 10 years, Alford's plans were to stay for 5 years or so, earn some money and then go back to Jamaica. The first priority was somewhere to live, and Alford, along with his brother and 2 friends, travelled from Tilbury to Leeds, which he knew from the 6 month training course there. When they got to Leeds their hoped-for accommodation fell through and so for the first few weeks they were moving about, sometimes sharing 4 in a room. One of the group heard about a man who had bought a house to rent and so Alford ended up sharing 'Bed, Breakfast and Dinner' accommodation with 8 others for most of his first year in Leeds.

*'Five of us then decided to buy a house together in Leeds...we put together what little we had and found the £400 that bought a reasonably big house in Regents Terrace. Each of us had a room...we cooked down in the basement and there was a church across the road if you wanted to go. Each of us found a girl.*



*Alford (with guitar) with friends outside Regent's Terrace house in 1953 before setting off to play cricket*

*It took me three weeks to find my first job. It was very hard...everywhere you went...there was no work...nobody wanted me. I went to the labour exchange every day...twice a day. Every time a little old man would say 'Sorry son...nothing for you'. That happened for 3 weeks...so I am thinking of going back into the RAF...*

*...And then one day there was a man outside the labour exchange and he asked 'What sort of work are you looking for, son?' So I told him I was a mechanic and he asked me 'Can you strip an engine?' and I said 'That's the easy part...the damn thing is putting it back together again!'. And we laughed. 'When can you start?' He asked. 'Right now' I said and he took me in his car. 'Any more of your ex RAF lads looking for jobs?' he asked. And so 4 of us started work at this little engineering place, Commercial Engineers, in Leeds.'*

*We were paid £2 4d an hour...others were getting £2 6d...it was because we were coloured...but I didn't mind. It was harder finding a job being coloured and there was some deliberate intimidation...I went into a foundry and they were flashing red hot iron all over the place...sparking red hot billets. But I was OK...it didn't bother me.*

*A friend at work said to me...'Best thing to do is to join the union'. So two of us decided to join the union. We walked in one night. The President looked up: 'What you bloody lads doing here?' Fred said 'They've come to join the union'. 'They can't join the union...can't join the union without a job'. It was because we were coloured. 'They've got a job'. 'Who the bloody hell gave them a job? You need to be proposed and seconded'. So another man there said. 'I propose him.' And the Vice President, sitting beside him said 'I second him'...and then we were voted in and now we were in the union'.*

Alford's working life was tied to the fortunes of the engineering industry in and around Leeds, before its demise. After Commercial Engineers he spent a year at Yorkshire Copperworks; 6 years at the Barnbow Tank Factory which he left in 1957; and then 20 years at International Harvester, beginning as a machinist and latterly working in the medical room at nights.



Alford Gardner with colleagues at presentation at International Harvester to mark completion of first aid course. Bradford Works; 16<sup>th</sup> May 1966.

He left International Harvester in 1981 at the age of 55, taking early retirement as part of a redundancy programme.

Week-ends were for girls, partying, dancing, playing his guitar, gambling, and cricket. In 1948 Alford founded 'The Caribbean Cricket Club' in Leeds which also celebrates its 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year; he was the team's wicket-keeper.



'Caribbean Cricket Club' founded by Alford Gardner in 1948. Alford is third from right in front in pads with wicket keeper gloves. Photo: Early 1950's



Champions of inter-departmental cricket competition at Barnbow works. Photo: 1957/58.

*'Gambling gambling...it was horses during the day and poker during the night. There'd always be a house with a game on...and partying. Friday night? Gamble. Saturday? Horses during the day...then gamble. That's what we did mainly.'*



*I used to go to a gambling place straight from work...gamble all night...come home get some breakfast ...get changed and then off to the horses. There were some lads who were good gamblers...but there were some, including Jamaicans, who came from Manchester to play, who cheated like damned thieves. I wasn't any good as gambler...and when a lad really enlightened me on how they were cheating me...I packed up poker just like that.*



Alford Gardner (second from left) with friends. Photo: 1949

*'With the girls we danced...those were the days...beautiful days. When I was free, single and dis-engaged, I had a girl to dance the waltz with...a girl to dance a quick step with...and a girl to dance a rumba with! A lot of people didn't like Leeds girls attached to Jamaican men...but we didn't care. There was a half hour jam session in the Mecca...beautiful...some people didn't like it...we loved it. In those days when you got to a dance hall...the first thing you heard was 'no jiving'...because we were black. In the Mecca in London we were told we couldn't go in if we didn't have a partner...it was rife around London and in Manchester...but sooner or later you found a partner. Those were beautiful days.*

*'I always had a good time wherever I went...Blackpool, Burnley, Bolton, Leeds. I met some beautiful families...including of the girls...beautiful people...so friendly. I had no problems being Jamaican. I knew what to expect...and had lived here before. If I went anywhere and didn't like the atmosphere then I am off. I didn't have any problems. I'm easy going...I take things as I find them. When I was much younger I got caught up in some fights...all part of growing up...but as I got older I just walked away.*

Alford married Norma in 1952 and became a family man, having 9 children (one who died at birth) over the course of 12 years. He is now a grand-dad to 'over 20', and a great grand-dad to '5 or 6'. 3 of his sisters are still alive and his brother lives in Cleveland, Ohio. Each year he goes back to Jamaica. His family is scattered around the world but they get together at Christmas every year and for special occasions. Last year they all met in Santorini to celebrate a family wedding; the photo sits in pride of place in Alford's small sitting room.

*'I met Norma in the Leeds Mecca Dance Hall in 1947...she was a beautiful little dancer. It wasn't love at first sight...I was a rogue with lots of girls! She was a tailoress in the Kirkstall Road. When I came back in 1948 we got together...living in a room together. Howard was born in 1951 and we got married in 1952.*

*Before we got married...as a gentleman...I called up to her house to ask her father for her hand in marriage. Father came in...took one look at me and said: 'What are you doing here?' 'Get him out of here...get him out of here'. So I just turned and walked out and Norma came with me. Her mother was alright. But her dad was delighted to have a grandson. He never fancied me...but he loved his grandchildren. We got married in the registry office...I was 25 and Norma was 21. We had a party in our house with all our friends...we had a good drink and a good dance.*

*I bought us a house. There was a gentleman in a firm who was buying up houses for West Indians...and then you paid him back. So we got talking and he said he'd help buy me a house. I was earning a very good wage at Barnbow so could pay it off very quickly. I wanted a house near a school...I had 2 young lads with one on the way. They bought the house and all I did was go down every week-end and pay them something...and after 16 months it was mine. Cost me £400. He suggested that we got into the business together of buying up a couple of houses doing them up and selling them...but Norma said no we've got our house.*

*All Norma wanted was a big family and a house. Never wanted anything else. She loved her babies. The happiest times in her life was when she was pregnant. She was dead keen on taking care of our family. Our house was like an open house...kids dashing in and out. We're living in a rough area but we'd have no problems. If I heard of any trouble, I'd nip it in the bud...my wife was the same. We were fine...I was earning a good wage. I was a bit of a rogue at times...and Norma found out after a time. But first and foremost was my family.*

*And then Norma left in 1982. After 30 odd years...the kids had grown up and left home...her friends told her she was wasting her time staying with me...I was going out every minute...she should leave me and have some fun and so she decided to go.*

*All of a sudden I came home one night and she was gone...she never said anything...we never had a row or anything...we never fell out...she just left...she was gone. She was in her late 50's, I was in my early 60's.'*

Norma has since passed away. Alford got together with Jean who he had known since 1947; Jean looked Alford up after her husband had passed away and they settled in Jean's house in Bramley in Leeds. Travel was a shared passion (Norma hadn't wanted to travel) and they travelled the world including to Cuba (5 times), Dominican Republic (5 times), Egypt, India (he was in Goa when the Tsunami struck), South America and Mexico.

Jean passed away in 2007 and Alford now lives alone in Jean's old home. He fills his time watching all types of sport on TV (on the day I was there I was keeping him from the Winter Olympic Curling!), supporting the West Indies cricket team, catching up with his friends over regular bingo sessions, and spending time with his eldest son's (Howard) family who also live on Leeds. Each year he visits family in the US and Jamaica, and stays in touch with his one surviving brother and three surviving sisters.

He has remarkable and boundless energy, a wonderful and frequent laugh and comes across as a man 30 years younger than his 92 years.



Alford Gardner, February 14<sup>th</sup> 2018.  
Photo: Jim Grover

He looks back on his life with me:

*'How has the last 70 years been for me? Brilliant...really brilliant. Such happy times. It was supposed to be tough...but I never really had tough times. I've lived a brilliant life here. I could have done with a few more shekels...it would be lovely to now have a big family gathering in America...but life's been perfect.'*

*I was never tempted to go back to Jamaica to live there...I'm still a Jamaican though. When I go back I can still talk like a Jamaican...people can't believe I've been here for so long. I'm a Jamaican very happily living in England. I never expected all of this Windrush attention...a complete surprise to me.*



Windrush presentation plaque (December 2003) on Alford's sitting room wall.  
Photo: Jim Grover

*I've had a beautiful life...the very best times. If I could wind the clock back and was stepping onto Tilbury once again...there's nothing I'd do different...absolutely nothing. Apart from getting one of my girls to meet me off the ship....'*



Alford Gardner with eldest son, Howard, in his home in Leeds. February 14<sup>th</sup> 2018  
Photo: Jim Grover