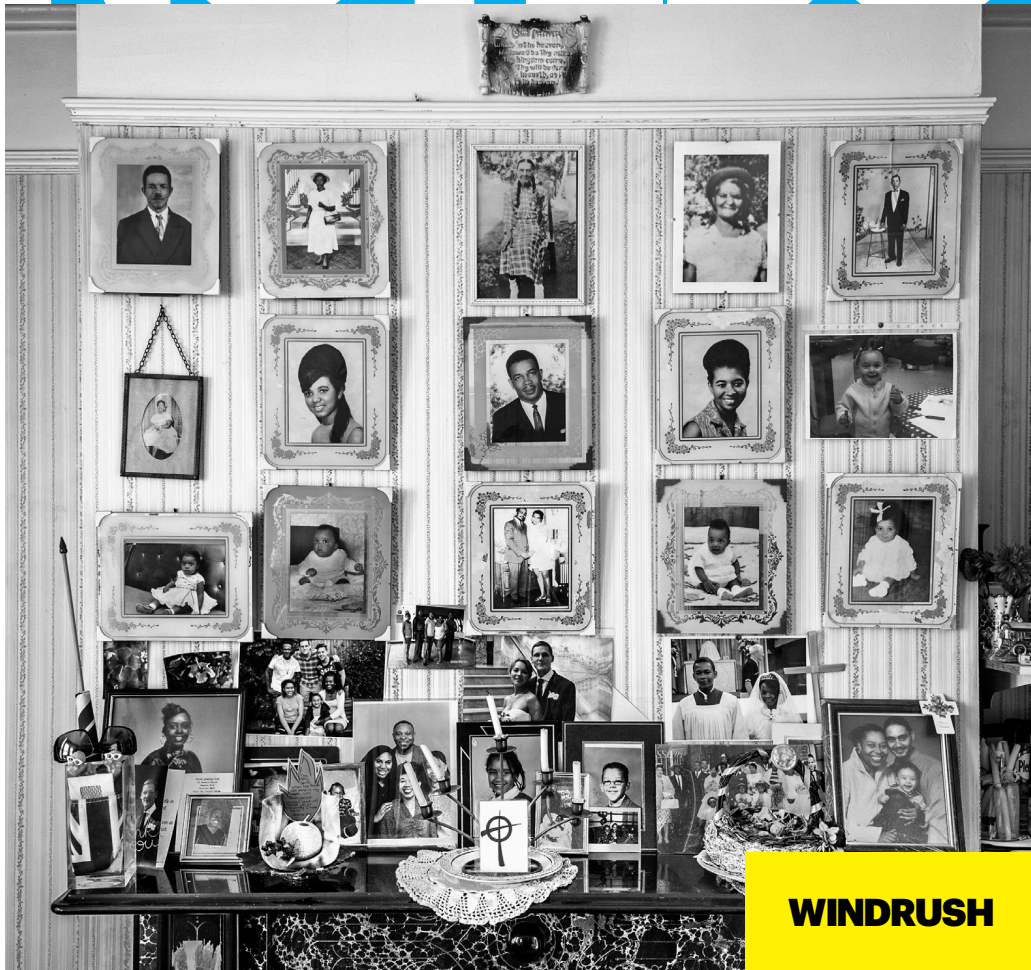


NOTEBOOK



Alford Gardner, 92, one of the last surviving passengers of the historic HMT Empire Windrush, tells his story

"I decided to move to England when I was 22. Circumstances in the West Indies were different back then – England was a lot bigger, richer and more interesting. My mum cried, I cried. She was so sad to see me leave, but she knew I'd made up my mind.

"The atmosphere on the boat was brilliant. There was always music. We spent all our time gambling, so you had to keep a watch on your money. I had a lot less when we reached England, but I still had something.

"I knew what to expect, as I was actually coming *back* to England. I was here in the RAF during the Second World War. I had some friends in Leeds who I'd lived with, so I headed there. But they'd decided they couldn't put me up any more – the neighbours didn't want it. I didn't let it bother me. I'm good at telling when people are friendly and when people are hostile. The motto is 'one love'.

"In those days when you went to a dancehall, the first thing you heard was 'no jiving', because we were black. In London's Mecca dancehall we were told we couldn't go in if we didn't have a partner. But sooner or later you found a partner – I met my wife at Mecca in Leeds. My original plan was to come to England for five years, earn a lot of money and then go back home – but within three years I'd bought a house, got married and had a child. I never looked back.

"The past 70 years have been brilliant. I've got a beautiful family, and I've had such happy times. I was never tempted to go back to Jamaica to live. I'm still a Jamaican, though; a Jamaican happily living in England."

Alford is part of 'Windrush: Portrait Of A Generation', a free exhibition by Jim Grover at gallery@oxo until 10 Jun; windrushportraitofageneration.com

"My mum cried, I cried, but I never looked back"

