

## THEO and NORMA SOBERS

### *Deep Freeze, New Family*

Theo and Norma Sobers live in Bath and have been married for 33 years. They both come from Barbados, and were friends there before emigrating to Britain. Theo came here in 1960, and Norma followed two years later. They married in 1964 at Walcot Church, Bath. They talk with Shawn Naphtali about their life together since then.

**So what made you come to England in the first place?**

**Theo:** I think I was influenced by friends, really. Most of my friends were leaving, and my best friend at the time encouraged me to come over.

**Why was everyone coming to England?**

**Theo:** At the time, we were told the job prospects were good. I think a lot of people wanted to take the chance and see what it was really like. I wanted to see for myself.

**What sort of work were you looking for?**

**Theo:** Oh, I don't think you had that in mind, it was just work to get money. The type of work was not the priority.

**How did your family take it?**

**Theo:** They encouraged me as well, but at the same time they didn't want to see me go.

**You've been here for 37 years. Did you always plan to stay so long?**

**Theo:** For most of us, including myself, the plan was five years. Back then, five years was a long time. Ten at the very most. Did we plan to stay indefinitely? No.

**And what made you come over? (addressing Mrs Sobers)**

**Norma:** Well, like he said, friends were leaving. You just wanted to see another part of the world and earn some money. And my sister came over, she was my only sister, and we'd always done the same things. Little Sister wants

to do the same as Big Sister.

**Were you looking for a particular type of job?**

**Norma:** No, not particularly. I just thought whatever job came along I would be willing to have a try. My first job was at a geriatric nursing home in Leicester, doing auxiliary nursing at the time.

**Did you have the same five-year plan, or did you plan to stay longer because of your sister?**

**Norma:** Well, no one thought they would be away from their family for thirty-odd years. We all thought we would come for a short stay and then return. But five years turned into ten, ten into twenty and now it's over thirty.

**Did you travel to England alone?**

**Norma:** Yes. I knew no one else on the flight, but I got talking to other passengers and by the time we landed we were like a close family because for everybody, it was their first time leaving home.

**How old were you then?**

**Norma:** That would be giving my age away a bit, wouldn't it! Well, I had just turned 21, because in those days you had to be 21 before you could sign documents. My birthday was in March, and right after that my dad helped me pay for my flight. I was met at Gatwick Airport by my cousin, and I was quite amazed. I kept looking out for the nice houses and pretty gardens which I thought England would be full of, but all I could see as we travelled was the back of houses and little chimneys on top. I wondered if they were a whole lot of little factories, because in Barbados, the only time you saw a chimney poking up into the sky was on top of a factory which was grinding sugar canes, you know, or engineering work.



**How long was it before you first contacted each other again in England?**

**Norma:** Theo knew I was coming over, and he came to London to meet me in a matter of days, actually. I was staying with relatives. He came back to Bath and I went to Leicester to my sister who was doing her nurse training and he used to visit me there. When my sister finished her training and decided to leave, that's when I came over to Bath.

**Theo, what kind of work were you doing at the time?**

**Theo:** Engineering, just as now.

**What drew you to Bath in the first place?**

**Theo:** I lost my job in London. I decided to come to Bath visiting family for a weekend, and happened to get a job, so I came here to live.

**How did you lose your job in London?**

**Theo:** According to the foreman, I was late back at work, but I didn't think I was. It's fair to say he didn't like me very much, always used to pick on me, reasons unknown. I think that was the best chance he had of getting rid of me. There was no union or anyone to complain to, so it was just his word against yours. He took me to the gov'nor and said I was late, and according to him I had no intention of making any excuses or whatever. So the gov'nor said, 'if you can't get on, one of you has to go!', and it was obvious it had to be me. I wasn't going to say sorry for something I didn't do. That's about it.

**Was it hard for black people to get jobs at that time?**

**Theo:** At the time I would say no, especially where I was. I must admit, though, they used to employ a lot of black people because we were seen as cheap labour. I would say at least 90 per cent of the workforce there was black. After I lost that job, though, I couldn't get another straightaway, and I didn't want to sign on the dole, and my money was running out. And that's when I got the job in Bath. The funny thing is that as soon as I settled in Bath, my mate in

London forwarded my post. It turned out I was accepted for most of the jobs I had applied for in London, but by then it was too late for the interviews.

**Norma, you mentioned working in hospitals. I've noticed a lot of West Indian women work in hospitals. Why do you think that is?**

**Norma:** Well, when we came over to England first, I think we liked caring a lot and it was quite easy to get work in hospitals. It was a job, and we all thought it was a nice thing, and you like to know you're doing something to help people, and you just stick at it.

**What sort of jobs did the black men find they were doing?**

**Theo:** They took up with London Transport in the early days. It was more secure. Actually, it was they who started a lot of the migration to England -- they came over to Barbados in the mid-1950s to recruit people to work on the buses. Other companies came over and recruited people to work in hotels, nursing and also in textiles. It was recruitment, and the reason black people took them [the jobs] was because it was secure -- not only a secure job, but accommodation as well. Even before leaving Barbados, we had to sit exams and have blood tests and everything. They were making sure you were educated and healthy before you came to England.

**Do you ever wonder what it would have been like if you had both stayed in Barbados?**

**Theo:** Well, yes sometimes, of course you do think back, but you will never know the answer. I can't say I have ever regretted it. There were times, when things weren't going too well, and as I said, most of us came here saying it would be for five, ten years at the most. But then you get commitments, and ten years have passed before you even think about it! That's how most of us have got stuck here ... but I wouldn't say I have any regrets. I know that a lot of people who stayed in Barbados are now doing very well, very well indeed. As a matter of fact, I would say better than many of us over here.



**Did you keep good contact with your family in Barbados after you came over?**

**Norma:** Oh yes, we never lose contact with family! Always wrote very often and was always promising to go back, but once you have children, it's not always that easy. The first time I went back was in 1972 with my two little children, but it was lovely! Seeing old school friends, mum and dad, aunts and uncles. It was lovely.

**Theo:** I always kept in contact with my family and wrote every week, but it was fifteen years before I went back on my first visit. I could have gone before, but I'm not a great lover of travelling, so regretfully, I left it as long as possible. It was nice when I first got back and I wondered why I had left it so long -- everyone was glad to see me, more than glad! Familiar faces, new faces, additions to families you never knew before -- it was great.

**How do you feel whenever you go back now? Do you still feel a part of that culture or slightly removed from it?**

**Theo:** In some ways, you've been living in another country for so long you find you have different habits and your culture fades a bit. I'm not saying it completely goes, but you've got to say you change a bit -- living in another country for more than half your life. Once you get back to Barbados, though, it doesn't

take long for your birth culture to come back.

**Norma:** It feels as if you're thawing out of a deep freeze. You don't have time to get used to it, though, because work will only let you have a certain amount of time off, and it's never enough. When you get back, you feel you need another holiday to get over the one you've just had! Once you're over there, though, you get into a few sea baths and you feel really happy.

**So are you planning to go back there to live?**

**Norma:** Well, we all have our dreams. I would like to go back to live some time. My dad died four years ago, my mum is at home. My sister lived in America for quite a few years but she's gone back to Barbados to live now. She's got her own house and so has my mum, but at the moment there's no great push. I'm looking forward to going back some time. We've got property over there at the moment which is being built. It'll probably be finished by the end of the year. When we go over and see it for the first time, we probably won't want to come back. With God's help, we would like to return to Barbados some time.

**Theo:** I've still got a few years more left before retirement, so I'd like to see that through, but hopefully, hopefully, some time, yes ...

Interview by Shawn Naphtali-Sobers

Photographs from the Hulton Deutsch Collection