Birmingham Baptist Churches Exploring their Black History Project
12 February 2026
Oral history interview of Thelma Balfour @ her home in Birmingham.
Present: Gale Richards (principal investigator) and Leoner Gardner-Howard (co-researcher)

Gale: So, I'm Gale Richards. This is Leoner Gardener and it is Thursday 12th February 2026 and we are in the home of Thelma Balfour. So, Thelma, can you just tell us your name, when and where you were born? You might tell us for example your maiden name aswell and then we start there and then we'll continue to ask you some questions.

Thelma: Well, I'm Thelma. Here we go again. My name is Thelma. It was Thelma Sims. That was my maiden name. And I came to England June 1962. I wasn't in Birmingham. I was only in London.

Gale: Where did you come from?

Thelma: Oh, I came from Jamaica. St Ann, Jamaica. I was born in St Ann. Then came in1962 to England, down in London. And I was in London for five years. And then I met my husband and he had relatives in Birmingham. So, he wanted to move to Birmingham…
Ends at:1.27.

Starts at:1.57.
Gale: Okay, so I have two questions. How old were you when you came to England?

Thelma: 23.

Gale: What was the name of your husband?

Thelma: Um, Bert, well, Lebert. But Bert for short.

Gale: Okay, and surname?

Thelma: Balfour.

Gale: Ah, so you became Mrs Balfour?

Thelma: Yeah.

Gale: Okay. And what kind of work were you doing in the UK? Well, you may not have been.

Thelma: Yeah well, jobs were very easy then, because I used to jump from one to the other. I used to work in a, before your time, in a Wimpy Bar, what they call a café these days. And then from that, I went to,..the other one, oh, can't remember the other one. But the last one, I went to, I used to work in Collard and Bolter. That used to be a sweet factory. And I stopped there until I moved to Birmingham.

Gale: Okay, so tell us more about your time in Birmingham.

Thelma: Yes, so I came up to Birmingham in 1960, 1965. I didn't do much there because I was pregnant. So, after the baby was born, I used to work at Stratford Road. They used to make bags, cash bags. And I stopped there until, I don't know how long I stopped there for. And then I moved from there and went to Birmingham maternity. That's what it called in them days, till it's changed now to the Women's. And I worked at Birmingham maternity for around, I think I was there for about ten years. Then I moved from there and went to the Women's hospital in Shorey Green Lane. And then after that close, I moved from there and went back to the QE [Queen Elizabeth Hospital], to the women's. No, to the Birmingham maternity, and then they changed it to the Women's.

Gale: And what were you doing at the hospital? What kind of things were you doing?

Thelma: I was an auxiliary nurse there.

Gale: Ah, so working with lots of people.

Thelma: I used to work in the theatre.

Gale: So, how did you end up at Edward Rd Baptist Church?

Thelma: Oh, when I came up to Birmingham, I was living in Moseley. That's where Bert's cousin used to live. Well two cousins. One lived down here and one in Moseley. And I used to go to the St Paul's Church on Moseley Road. And then one day, when I was working at, I can't remember where, but I met this lady, Mrs Green. That was Vivien's mother, Winston's mother-in-law. When you meet her, she says, oh, where do you come from. So, I said Jamaica. Oh, whereabouts. So, I say so and so, and so we start talking and talking. She said, oh, so you know my mother-in-law, and blah blah, anyway, so she said do you go to church? I said, oh well, sometimes. So, she said, well, you can come down to Edward Road. I said, where is that? She said where do you live. I said I live in Moseley. She said, oh so you just come across so and so and so and so. That's how I ended up at Edward Road. After that we then moved down to Cannon Hill Road which was very good.

Gale: Very close to [Edward Road Baptist Church].

Thelma: And so, I started going to Edward Road.

Gale: Do you remember roughly what kind of year that might have been?

Thelma: It was [19]69. Mrs Green was there. Mrs Waite wasn't there, because she had an accident. There was a lady that used to be up at George St, Mrs White. And Gloria Grey. And Mrs Messam. And Mrs Gordon. Mrs Messam and Mrs Gordon they lived on the same road.

Gale: So, when you arrived, they were already there?

Thelma: Yeah. Mr Gordon never used to come because he was Adventist. Mr Grant was there. He was the first Black Deacon.

Gale: So, you remember Mr Grant.

Thelma: Yeah. But he went home and then he used to write to us. But after a time, by now, he must have passed away.

Gale: So, Mr Nathan Grant

Thelma: Yeah.

Gale: So, what do you remember of him? Do you remember anything about him. What was he like?

Thelma: Not much. Because we only used to meet up on a Sunday. And you just say hello.

Gale: So, he was a deacon, and the only Black deacon at that time. For those times, 1970s, that's quite early compared to other churches, to be a deacon.

Thelma: Yeah. But there wasn't a lot. It was Miss Boyce. She was a deacon. Miss Freeman, she was a secretary.

Gale: So, were they white British people?

Thelma: Yes. Ruth and Gladys…and Glady's husband, he used to be a lay preacher and he was the one that blessed one of my sons.

Gale: In the church?

Thelma: Yes

Gale: What was his surname?

Thelma: Maxwell. John Maxwell. I think there was a minister there…Pastor Morgan, but I didn't know him, but I have heard about him.

Gale: So, Mr Maxwell you said was white British…a lay preacher.

Leoner: So, the only Black people in the church then were the ones you have mentioned.

Gale: So, Messams, Grants.

Thelma: Yes, and Mrs White, she who went to Canada…

Ends at 9.20

Starts at 9.31

Thelma: Gloria Gray…the Grays were here as well.

Gale: And, how would you describe the church when you arrived, the culture, the life of the church? – and how you fitted in, how you were received. What was it like when you first came to Edward Road?

Thelma: To me, everyone was quite friendly. There wasn't a lot of us. There were a lot of children. Sometimes once the kids went into Sunday school there was about eight or ten adults left in church.

Gale: Wow! So, this was still the 1960s, 1970s?

Thelma: That was in the 60s, coming up to the 70s. The parents used to take the children but they [themselves] didn't used to come. Like Mr and Mrs Lewin, they used to send the boys but they never used to come. Until the boys start rebel and saying "well you keep sending us and you don't come". Then they started coming.

Gale: So, what was your experience like of being in England, then. Not thinking of the church, but of England, in Birmingham, everyday work and life. Was that easy in terms of how you were received? Or were there any challenges?

Thelma: No, it was quite easy. In my walks of life everybody was just normal. Just hello and goodbye. I didn't find any prejudices there.

Gale: And so, what about culture. So, one of the interesting things about church and styles and life, is that people bring different ideas and likes and dislikes into church life in terms of how it is organised. So, when you have people coming from another part of the world into a church, sometimes that can inspire or challenge. So, tell me how the life of the church has perhaps has changed since you arrived, over the year, as different cultures starting with the Caribbean members like yourself that came. Describe how the life of the church has changed since you first started.

Thelma: Well, it has changed. When we first came you used to just come in and sit down and listen to the service and then go out. But then I think it was back in the 70s, and a pastor came, and he started to get Black people involved.

Gale: Tell me how the pastor did it and the kinds of things.

Thelma: Well, he come and he had like a meeting. We had a discussion. He says how would you feel like doing this? Or how would you feel like doing that?

Gale: So, why do you think he was so keen to get you involved?

Thelma: Well, it was what you call it a multicultural society, and he wanted more people to get involved with what was happening. Like you might come in and say, well, we can't always listen to you, we want to put in our bits or something. So, he said, alright then we will try this and see how it goes and if it's okay, we will carry on.

Gale: So, when you think of the Black members, as well as yourself and your husband, what did you contribute then? How did you respond? What things were you doing?

Thelma: Well, I was head chef and chief bottle washer. I used to do everything. I was washing, um, doing the cleaning. Doing the communion, doing secretarial, doing everything, you know.

Gale: So, at one point you became a deacon, didn't you?

Thelma: Yeah.

Gale: And your husband, also became a deacon?

Thelma: Yeah.

Gale: So, what was life like as a deacon? For both of you?

Thelma: Well, it was alright. Sometimes things could be very difficult because you might agree on this thing, and the other one disagree. But in the end, we all always just come together.

Gale: And did you have any particular responsibilities as a deacon? Were there things that deacons had to do?

Thelma: No

Gale: So, did you ever preach? Did you ever lead a service?

Thelma: No.

Gale: What about your husband?

Thelma: Oh yes, he would preach. Yes.
Ends at 14.42.

Starts at 19.23.

Gale: So, tell me more about Bert. As a preacher. You talked about this minister, asking the Black members, or members in general to do more in the life of the church. What did that translate to with Bert? What was he doing? So, he was preaching regularly, was he involved in committees and things?

Thelma: Yeah, he was, yeah, he was, when he was a preacher, he was a preacher. was supposed to go to um when some of these you know these, um, what do you call them with like lay preacher meeting and things but he said no he doesn't want to go he'll just learn from um read and then study his Bible and then he'll just um, leave it, um, to what the Lord wants him to do. So, Mrs Davis went. But Bert said he wouldn't go. But you know he take the service, and you know everybody said it was alright you know. Sometimes he doesn't get his words in the right context but you know he carried on.

Ends at 20.26.

Starts at 20.43.

Gale: Now, okay, I'm trying to think any other questions to ask you. What would you say, okay, I'll start with this – who would you say were the most influential Black church members in the life of Edward Road? As you think back over time, who had the most influence in terms of shaping the life of the church or doing things in the wider community? Who for you would that be?

Thelma: I think, um, Mrs Messam.

Gale: Okay, so tell me about Mrs Messam.

Thelma: Well, I can't say much about her. All I know, she used to be, she used to be, yeah, she was, she was there. She was, um, she was, um, what you call it, um, missionary, um, she was secretary, okay, secretary, missionary, missionary.

Gale: Missionary secretary.

Thelma: Yeah, she used to do, um, get, um, do all the correspondence, um, from the missionaries, them, you know, and thing. And when they, if they're coming

to, um, coming to England, she always have like, um, sort like, um, somewhere, like if they've got to go to London or somewhere, you know, she always, um, she always do that.

Gale: Was she also someone that spoke a lot? Was she someone that would speak in meetings? Or was she more of a quiet person?

Leoner: She had her own group, didn't she? She was head of one of the growth groups, as they called them. She was also a deacon. She was a deacon and became an elder later on. But she was quite articulate and quite outspoken on things.

Thelma: Yeah, she got something to say, she went on to say it. Yeah.

Gale: Okay, and so you mentioned her as being one of the most influential Black church members. When you think about the life of the church, are there particular programmes or initiatives that you would think that were particularly influential that helped bring about change or helped people in the life of the church or community, particularly, yeah, the Black church members might have been involved in. What, any programmes, initiatives, events, anything you think that was really powerful?

Thelma: Well, we always have like a gospel concert, that brings in. When we started it, I think, went round, and then it spread to all the other Baptist churches…
Ends at 24.56.

Starts at 27.47.
Gale: ...when you think back to the different ministers at the church over the years, which one would you say was most influential for you?

Thelma: John. John Mallard.

Gale: Why?

Thelma: Because he was a person, if he might be up there preaching and as soon as everybody say Amen and you're gonna go through that door. Nobody ever go through that door without he coming to say hello or something you know…

Ends at: 28.15.