

Arthur Wint – Jamaica’s first great Olympian.

Today people would probably say that Jamaica’s greatest Olympic athlete was Usain Bolt, but he was only following in the giant strides of one of his predecessors. Arthur Wint was not only an athlete, but an airman, a doctor and a diplomat as well. The inspirational story of this man began on a “small island”, but he first gained Olympic success at Wembley, and it is right that we should celebrate his connection with Brent.

The first time that a team from Jamaica took part in the Olympics was at the London Games in 1948. The people of the island had raised the money by public subscription to send them, and most of their athletes reached England after a 24 day voyage on a banana boat. There was no specially-built athletes village for the competitors at these post-war “austerity Games”, and while the men were housed, along with some other Commonwealth teams, at Wembley County School in Stanley Avenue (now part of Alperton Community School), the women stayed as guests of local families. You can read more about this on the Brent Archives website [[LINK](https://www.brent.gov.uk/media/387529/Alperton%201948%20Olympic%20Village.pdf) to: <https://www.brent.gov.uk/media/387529/Alperton%201948%20Olympic%20Village.pdf>]



The Jamaican Olympic Team at Wembley County School, in July 1948, with Arthur Wint the tallest in the back row.

[Courtesy of the “Old Alpertonians”]

The Jamaican team captain, Arthur Wint, was already in England, having just finished his first year as a medical student at St Bartholomew’s Hospital. Born into a middle-class family at Plowden, Manchester County, in 1920, his life had already been interesting. At 17 he was named Jamaica’s “Boy Athlete of the Year”, and in 1938 he won the 800m gold medal at the Pan American Games in Panama. The Second World War put an end to international competitions, and when the Royal Air Force started to recruit from the British colonies, he joined up with his brothers, Lloyd and Douglas, in 1942. Along with many other Jamaicans, they were trained in Canada. He gained his “wings” in 1944, and saw active service as a Spitfire pilot. Around 500 West Indian pilots or navigators served in the RAF during the war. Wint left the RAF in 1947, having won a scholarship to train as a doctor.



Flying Officer Arthur Wint, after gaining his RAF “wings”, 1944.

[Flickr image from the internet]

Arthur Wint had continued throughout as a keen amateur athlete. Just after the war he won a 440 yards race at the White City Stadium while competing for the RAF, and won the first of several 440 and 880 yards titles at the English AAA's Championships in 1946.

At Wembley Stadium, the Jamaicans showed the world what their athletes were capable of. Wint won silver in the 800m, then went head-to-head with his team-mate Herb McKenley (who had finished 4th in the 200m) and several top Americans in the 400m final. McKenley was the favourite, having recently broken the world record, but the long-striding, 6'5", Wint overtook him in the home straight to win Jamaica's first Olympic gold medal, his time of 46.2 seconds equalling the world record. McKenley took the silver medal, and they were both hoping for gold in 4x400m relay. However, disaster struck when Wint pulled a muscle while trying to chase down the leading USA runner on the final lap.

Arthur Wint taking gold in the 400 metres final at Wembley, ahead of Herb McKenley and Mal Whitfield,.

[Source: Brent Archives – 1948 Olympic Games Official Report]



Arthur Wint promised his disappointed relay team-mates that they would have a gold medal at the next Olympic Games. At Helsinki, in 1952, that promise was delivered. In the individual events Wint won silver in the 800m for the second time (being beaten again by Mal Whitfield of the U.S.A.), while McKenley took silver medals in both the 100m and 400m. As part of the

Jamaican 4x400m relay team they then won gold, in a world record time of 3 minutes 3.9 seconds.

The 1952 Olympic 4x400m relay champions, Jamaica. L-R: Arthur Wint, George Rhodon, Herb McKenley and Les Laing.

[Image from the internet]



After qualifying as a doctor at Bart's in 1953 (and running his final race, in an athletics meeting at Wembley Stadium in the same year), Arthur Wint was awarded an MBE by the new Queen Elizabeth II in 1954.

Arthur Wint running for a AAA's representative team, early 1950's.

[Image from the internet]



In 1955, Arthur Wint went back to Jamaica. He worked as the only doctor and surgeon in Hanover Parish for many years, and in 1973 was awarded the Jamaican Order of Distinction for his service to charities, schools and business. He returned to England in 1974 for four years,



as his country's High Commissioner in London (at the same time acting as Jamaica's ambassador to Denmark and Sweden).

Arthur Wint visiting a housing estate in Brixton, while Jamaican High Commissioner in the 1970's.

[Image from the internet]

Arthur Wint returned to Jamaica in 1978, working as the Senior Medical Officer and Surgeon at Linstead Hospital until 1985. He died at Linstead in 1992, aged 72, leaving a wife and three daughters. There is a road in Jamaica's capital, Kingston, named after him, and Arthur Wint Drive (appropriately) runs past a hospital on its way to the country's National Stadium.



A street sign for Arthur Wint Drive in Kingston, Jamaica.

[Image from the internet]

Other Jamaican athletes, both men and women, have run at that stadium and gone on to become world famous, but the man they called the "Gentle Giant" was their country's first great Olympian. Although Arthur Wint only spent a few weeks living and competing in Wembley in 1948, he has left a lasting memory.

**Philip Grant,
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November 2017.**