



*The Balsall Heath Local History Society was founded in 1979 with the aim of promoting interest in our local history. We feel pride in our area and value its strengths – past and present. To meet our aims we work with local schools and community groups organising exhibitions and events. We have also produced several publications. We are a registered charity and rely on grants and donations to achieve our aims. For more information on our work, or to volunteer and help please contact us.*

## HISTORY BROUGHT TO LIFE!

**JUNE: BIRMINGHAM LIVES HISTORY FAIR**



**JULY: BALSALL HEATH CARNIVAL**



Jenny Lloyd (who took the above pictures) reports that: *“Birmingham Lives was a very successful event, with quite a few enquiries.”* The annual **Balsall Heath Carnival** saw us in the procession as ever, along with the fabulous Nippies Tea Tent. Says Jenny: *“The weather was perfect. We were able to have the display in the same area as the tea room and it was much lighter (than last year). We completely sold out of cakes and many people commented on how nice they were. Diane, Margaret and Bron did a brilliant job as nippies and Bron’s flower arrangements for the tables were delightful.”* The return of **“Memory Lane”** on 21<sup>st</sup> June was another success with two audiences delighted by this entertaining history of Ladypool Road in words and song. Recently (20<sup>th</sup> July) came this amazing **Army of Swimmers** protest, captured here by Ian Edwards, at Moseley Road Baths.

**JUNE: MEMORY LANE**



**JULY: AN ARMY OF SWIMMERS**

### SECOND WORLD WAR SCHOOLDAYS AT THE OLD CLIFTON SCHOOL

The weekend of 13<sup>th</sup> / 14<sup>th</sup> September is the annual Heritage Open Days Weekend and we are taking part! Here is your opportunity to visit the World War Two schoolroom. It is the day before evacuation so the children will be preparing. They need to practice their handwriting on a postcard to be sent home and be told what they need to bring the next day. Classes will be held on Saturday and Sunday. There will also be an exhibition relating to the Second World War. Rationing is in force so only appropriate refreshments will be served. The event is suitable for children, families and other adults. **Opening Times: Saturday 13 September and Sunday 14 September: 1100-1600; Class session at 1100 & 1400. Address: St Pauls, Clifton Rd, Balsall Heath, West Midlands, B13 9TD**

# BALSALL HEATH BETWEEN THE WARS

## **Bernard Jackson**

was interviewed for the Society by Lynne Bevan some years ago. Here is the first part of it (with some new research notes in brackets) as our tribute to Bernard, who passed away in May.

## **Sames Piano Factory**

They still made pianos upstairs and they used to have to carry them down, upright pianos, down two or three flights of stairs. The factory was on Ombersley Road. You just turn Moseley Road corner and you see a railway bridge and just above it you see the top of the factory and they had the name of the pianos on top of it.



They used to call Ombersley Road mugs' road because it was built with mugs' money paid into bookies – bookies built it! My grandfather was an illegal bookie. They got the results of the races the same day. When I was a kid it was still illegal and there was the bookie's runner and all that. You could put a threepenny bet on and you could collect at half past five/ six o'clock. They hadn't used to mind you paying out but they objected to you taking the bets. The man who took the bets used to wear shin pads. The army used to have steel lined leggings and they had a similar thing, because you couldn't kick the metal legs and pinch the money. He would stand at the bottom of an entry taking the money and he'd put it in a bag. You couldn't put a bet in after the bag was sealed. He would be standing there and three or four of you would come past and kick his shins. The first thing he does is drop his bag because you've kicked his shins – pinch the bag and away they went. So if he had the steel leggings on they could kick that as much as they liked. It sounds daft but these are some of the things that did happen.

In them days the bookie always used to have a man to take the bets that he knew was going to be pinched, and you went to court and was fined so many shillings, but it was the bookie that paid it. But, he also give you some money for doing it; he didn't have his own man done regular. In Sherbourne Road there used to be Bonnie and he used to run the book from the front of his house; the runners would be at the top of the road and they would give him the tic tac. The police would let him know they were going to pinch him every now and then, and that was the way it went.



## **Where There's Muck**

Another thing was horse muck in the summer. If it was left on the road it would get flattened and dried. Now if you needed money you would scrape it up, it was no use to you for gardens like that, so you had to freshen it. You got a bucket full and you'd take it up the entry and two of you would tiddle in it. It got moist and it smelt like it should. These were tricks we used to do and we got a penny for a bucket of horse manure. You could sell it to a keen gardener but it had got to be somebody with a job. You didn't go to any of your neighbours who hadn't got any garden or money. There was the old saying of having rhubarb with horse muck on it, well that's where it came from. These people having it for their gardens. You had to walk around the streets for days on end sometimes trying to sell it. Sometimes you'd get a barrowful to sell because, don't forget, there were a lot of horses around in them days.

## **Daily, Except On Sunday**

At the age of 12 you always got a job - newspapers. The price you got for delivering newspapers was 2/6 a week. That meant Monday morning, Monday evening – the same all the way through, and the only day you didn't deliver was Sunday. The amount of papers you delivered could be 50, each delivery. You had to sort out your own papers and if you were late turning up for your papers you lost your job. You'd only got to be late once. Also you'd got to get somebody to cover for you if you were going somewhere else. You also had to pass a medical. You had a badge to say you had passed your medical at a Corporation place in town.

## **Work, Handouts and the Pawn Shop**

Them days (*the 1920's*) if you were unemployed, you went to Waverley Road Labour Exchange and you turned up three or four days a week. You was not sent money or anything, you did not get your money if you did not sign on – and Saturday morning was included. You'd be signing on at 9 o'clock in the morning, and you might have been in the queue at half past 8, but the queue would stretch out of the Labour Exchange and down the road and you had to wait your turn to go to the counter and sign on. The things they asked you was have you done any work, why haven't you done any work, have you done this, where have you been and all the rest of it. There was a means test as well on it, they come round to your house for that. My father was away (in the Worcestershire Regiment in the war) and come back and got married. He was discharged in 1919 and there was no work. He went down to the Labour Exchange to get some money and they turned round and they came to the house and told mother she could sell the furniture to get money. You was told get rid of that and that and that and they decided if they would give you any money. Also you had to go everywhere to find a job. If anywhere had any vacancies they would put a notice up outside and it would go round the grapevine that such and such had got vacancies. They would all converge there and in some ways they could knock a price down on a job. They could say, "*Oh I 'll get rid of him, I'm paying him 10 bob a week, I can get 9 bob for the next bloke*". People would take the job because it was the only way they could work. The children went to welfare. There was police handouts and you could always tell in the class who'd got them, in about October/ November. The lad used to get a jersey, a pair of corduroy trousers, a shirt, two pair of socks and boots and that was the Birmingham Police and Birmingham Mail Fund. Before that came in nobody cared a damn and a lot of kids wore no shoes at all. I myself in the 30's wore a pair of pumps and they used to be bought about May/ June and you went to Peacock's to get them. The cheapest ones were at Peacock's and it would be a red sole and a white upper. That used to have to last me from then till November or something like that. The bottoms wore out and you put cardboard in because you only had one pair of shoes. If you went on the Birmingham Mail or Police, this is what you got. You could always tell the kids who got it because the corduroy smelt and when you got into the class you knew one of the kids had got his new corduroy trousers on. They was like a piece of cardboard, very stiff and hard. The police boots had studs all the way round, also they had a big arrow put on them so you couldn't pawn them, because a lot of things was pawned. There were a lot of pawn shops around – there was one in Mary Street, that was *Machins (Elsie Frances Machin at 56 Mary Street)*. Then there was one in Balsall Heath Road, one in Cox Street, two in Sherbourne Road, one in Highgate Road (*John Ogden at 58*), one on Moseley Road, one at top of Belgrave Road (*A.E. Yardley at 362*)– that was a jewellers, a more expensive one. You fetched the old man's suit out on Saturday afternoon so's he could go the pub on the night and Sunday and then it was took back on Monday morning and they allowed you money on it. But if you was putting in the sheets or blankets off the bed – that's if they had sheets as a lot of them hadn't and slept on overcoats – it went in on Tuesday because they washed them on Monday, they had to go in clean. The old man's shirt couldn't go in earlier either as it was dirty so that had to go in after washing as well.

The pawn shop could please their selves what they took and if you was a regular customer they would perhaps let you have a halfpenny extra. See all your sheets come to threepence perhaps and they would argue a bit and it would be "*Alright missus I'll give you threepence halfpenny then, but you won't get it again and don't tell anyone you got it*". You would take the wedding rings, there was a lot of brass rings used them days as well, but most people got married with a gold ring. A wedding ring was pawned and a husband usually didn't know about it. Dresses was pawned on Tuesday morning so really your big day was Monday or Tuesday. They got things back out on Saturday afternoon, mainly the suits and dresses. A lot of it went back and forth a lot of times and there was arguments about it. The old man's suit was a regular thing and so was the old lady's coat. I've got a postcard to Doveys and on the back it says "*Sorry Miss Dovey I haven't got back but please don't sell me dog irons*". They were the irons put in front of the fire shovel, poker, brush. "*I'll be back by Thursday*" she wrote. Why she expected her not to sell them I don't know. Dovey's (*35 Sherbourne Road*) was two spinsters that run that place. They originally was a big family, their father had it in 1900, and they had quite a bit of property as well. He would pawn a room, not the poorer districts here – we are talking about Edgbaston Road. Say you were stuck for money you could pawn a room for a certain period, he would give them money for the room and all the furniture in it. He'd go round and take an inventory of it and say he might allow them a £100 ( a lot of money) on it for possibly a six month run – but that room would be sealed and out of use, because it was his. We used to sit with his daughters (*Florence and Jane*) and they told us this. What he did once was, he had this big room and the people had gone over to America on business and they were due back. The room was his property on the Thursday and they sent a telegram to him saying "*Can't get back till Friday to pay the money*" and he told his daughters "*I haven't seen it*" and he went and emptied that room before they got back. He took his horse and cart round, took everything out, stripped it. Things I saw in her (*Miss Dovey's*) house was beautiful cut glass, and it was all in pawn. They had silver services to drink tea out of that they had through pawn.



## BEING BERNARD



(photo: Ian Edwards)

I first met Bernard Jackson at a rehearsal for “Sweet Freedom”. This was a successful and popular play put on by the History Society in May 2008. Waiting to do my first ever lines in any kind of production it was hard not to be nervous. Bernard was sat patiently to my left waiting to go on and do his bit. I wondered what he was going to do and how he was feeling, he didn’t seem to be bothered at all. He got up and gave a wonderfully observed and pitched performance of a working man visiting his sick brother, totally in character. Afterwards I asked him how he did it and had he got any tips? “What you have to do”, he said, “is think about who you are supposed to be and believe it, because if you don’t then nobody else will”. No matter what and where we performed he was always a big hit with the audience, who simply loved him and the reality he brought to every part he played.. He was quite a comic too and could get a laugh simply by looking at the audience. It is fair to say he was not one to stick closely to a script as he brought a part to life. This though made any scenes played with him quite thrilling and I will always treasure memories of acting with him.

We travelled together often to theatre group and history society events. On those journeys I got to know him a little better as he spoke about his years growing up in Balsall Heath. Taxi drivers loved him because every journey was a guided tour of its historical past – whether they asked him about it or not!

He was a real character; a long serving member of the History Society who took a great pride in telling people “how it was”, always with great presence and charm. We shall always remember him.



**(Left)** Bernard with Polly and Chris in Sweet Freedom. **(Centre)** Bernard “on duty” with Pat and Albert at the annual Birmingham Lives History Fair. **(Right)** Bernard as a jockey on the Ladypool Road Trail.



## BLUE PLAQUE NEWS

A “mock up” of the blue plaque for Balsall Heath’s John Bowen arrived and I took it down to the site of his former yard on George Street – accompanied by Anthony Collins, who is Bowen’s great grandson and documenter of Bowen’s life and works. The actual plaque is to be unveiled on **22nd September**.

## NEXT MEETING

**Thursday 25<sup>th</sup> September 7:30**

The Venture

(Malvern Street by the farm)

**Moseley’s John Avins by Janet Berry**

Janet Berry visits from the Moseley History Society for a talk on one of the major philanthropists from the village. Avins’ house still stands on Church Road.