



Balsall Heath
Local History Society

The GAZETTE

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CHRIS SUTTON: St. Paul's Trust, Hertford St, Balsall Heath, B12 8NJ.

Tel: 0121 464 1890 **Email:** chris.sutton@stpaulstrust.org.uk

Web: balsallheathhistory.co.uk & www.digitalbalsallheath.org.uk

Facebook: Balsall Heath Local History Society

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.

INSIDE THE SCHOOL OF ART



The former School of Art on Moseley Road has just undergone the first phase of public consultation to establish what the local community would like to see developed within the building. The community needs that have been expressed strongly are: provision of co-working spaces for a wide range of businesses; provision of flexible spaces for use by a wide range of learning and arts organisations and provision of a gallery and small local museum.

These are very broad themes and the task ahead for the owners, led by Project Organiser Carl Franklin, is to describe in more detail how they can best deliver their objectives and attract the necessary funding.

The building is one of the best regarded in Balsall Heath and has seen countless pupils go through the doors when it was the School Of Art. The History Society has sent a letter of support to Carl for the proposed local museum gallery.

LIVING WITH WAR

This month saw me complete the script for our Heritage Lottery funded play about Balsall Heath and WW1. It seemed quite a daunting task at first so for inspiration I dug into my own family's roots in Balsall Heath. So in the script, as in life, we have Bill Francis coming to Balsall Heath from Leamington and setting up home in Runcorn Road with his wife and children.

In life he was a Cooper at Dare's Brewery but this didn't give me many ways of connecting the family to the war in an "un-forced" way. With a lack of telephones, no television and no wireless either it was going to be difficult to bring the war into their lives for the purposes of a play. Looking through a Trade Directory for a research query I saw a newsagent's shop listed and got my solution. The Francis family became newsagents in the script and are thus at the heart of daily news. Add in a postman delivering letters, shop customers and neighbours and suddenly there was a thriving community able to react to and discuss the war in a (hopefully) believable way for the audience.

The original idea was to only cover the first part of the war, but quickly it became clear the whole war had to be covered – or else you had to leave out issues such as suffragettes, rationing, the Somme, the Zeppelin raids etc. The plot will weave in genuine local people of the time alongside one or two created characters. I think it does justice to the period and should be a thought provoking play with plenty of humour, pathos and drama.

We have had our first read through and players will be assigned to characters. A rehearsal schedule and production dates are to be worked out. More on this production will follow in further newsletters.

NEXT MEETING

Thursday 26th February 7:30

The Venture

(Malvern Street by the farm)

The last public execution in Birmingham City Centre

by Kay Hunter

Kay Hunter visits to talk about the circumstances surrounding the trial and conviction of Phillip Matsell in 1806. He was the last man to be publicly hanged in Birmingham. His ghost is said to haunt the spot where he met his end, near Snow Hill Station.

A plaque commemorating the event of his death was put up by the Civic Society.

Mary Street junction with George Street,
1957



HIDDEN LIVES REVEALED

A recent email enquiry came in asking why young Ezra Owen, aged 7, was listed as an “inmate” at 356- 360 Moseley Road on the 1911 census. The buildings in question are shown below; 354, directly behind the tree on the left is the former Dyche photographic studios. There people came to have a picture made to mark a special occasion or to send to family abroad. Those entering the doors of 356 – 360 spent a lot more time inside...



The buildings were St. Mark's and St. Benet's Home and Hostel for boys, with a Miss Annie Wright as the Superintendent. Assisting her were Thomas Freeman who was the gardener and his wife Catherine, who was the matron. Under matron was Olive Aslett who, like all of the management team, was not from Birmingham. The home appears to be part of the Waifs and Strays Society – later the Children's Society – which flourished from 1881-1918. The Society cared for poor and disadvantaged children across England and Wales - in urban conurbations and rural villages.

The 1911 census has a total of nineteen boys listed as “inmates” with one older boy, William Jelfs (19 from Birmingham) being a house-boy. He is detailed as being “feeble-minded” and one would imagine he had previously been one of the “inmates” who had been kept on in a servile position. The aim was to provide a good home and education followed by training for employment with local businesses. This is clearly obvious with the older boys – one is a shop assistant, one a cabinet maker and another a dental mechanic! The oldest boy, Stanley Mills (17) is doing very well for himself working as a Clerk at an accountants.

One interesting point about the 19 plus Jelfs is their birthplaces. Only eight are what could be called local – six from Birmingham, one from Pershore and little Ezra Owen from Warwick. Of the remainder ten are from London, one from Canterbury and poor Charles Cook (15) is not listed where he is from – though he is noted as being a “cripple”. The number of boys from London is strongly suggestive that the home moved from there. They did have homes all over the country so it seems odd to move a staff and boys wholesale to Birmingham, as opposed to setting up a new home with no “inmates”. This though seems to be how it happened. It still does not explain how a seven year old boy finds himself in a home in Balsall Heath away from his home in Warwick. Hopefully his life, like the other boys, took a turn for the better.