



BHLHS was founded in 1979 with the aim of promoting interest in our local history. 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.

THE FRONT LINE IN BALSALL HEATH

Recently two former Heathans popped in to reminisce about old times. HARRY DEVEY is a sprightly 90, while his friend TED WISEMAN is a youthful 80. We chatted about the war years, this issue we feature Harry, with Ted's story next time.

Harry Devey was born in 1926 at his family's house/ decorators business – W.B. Devey - at 105 Clifton Road; the house (built in 1860) is still there today – right opposite the school. A day that everyone who was around at the time remembers vividly is Sunday 3rd September 1939 – the day Neville Chamberlain announced that the country was now at war. Harry remembers the day well, "It was a beautiful day. I was listening to the radio for Chamberlain's announcement. I was 13 and had a good idea what he would say. I knew because there was Abyssinia, the Spanish Civil War and the march into the Rhineland - so I knew war was coming. I regret, he said, we have no reply from Hitler, this country is at war with Germany. After the speech all the schools closed. I was not evacuated as my mother said we would all die together, if at all. After a period of time teachers came round and started classes in houses for those who hadn't gone away. Opposite our house was a science laboratory and a Mr Lewis took classes in general education there".

Harry in his old classroom at Clifton.



His old family home as it is today.



Harry was born into a politically aware family, with both his parents being active in the pre-war anti-Fascist movement. "They knew people in the International Brigade (who fought against General Franco's Fascists) and collected food to take to Spain. The food was taken to Spain on a cargo ship and because Franco blockaded Spain it was hard to get anything in! Now Potato Jones, he took potatoes and other food and avoided the blockade".

His father, William, was a Socialist - a member of the Independent Labour Party who met the Labour leader, James Keir Hardie. William had served in the First World War. "Dad was at Passchendaele and was a stretcher bearer. Despite international law they carried pistols to shoot men who they could not get out and were too ill to move. He told me he couldn't count how many he had had to shoot, including his own officer who begged him to shoot". William served as a fire watcher in the Second World War, and after a quiet start things soon got very busy indeed... "During the raids I never heard anyone crying or screaming. We just got on with it. I had started work in the family business and we were doing a job in Oxford Road. A warning sounded but it didn't always follow with a raid. My father said come out and have a look at this. There was a Dornier 215 coming over, all sedately, and I could see the crosses on the wings. On Swanshurst Park corner there was an aircraft battery that opened up on the Dornier. They missed it by miles and my father said if that's the best they can do we might as well run up the white flag now! During the raids an officer went round with a loudhailer telling people to open their windows so as to avoid blow out of glass".

Death Of "Potato" Jones, 92

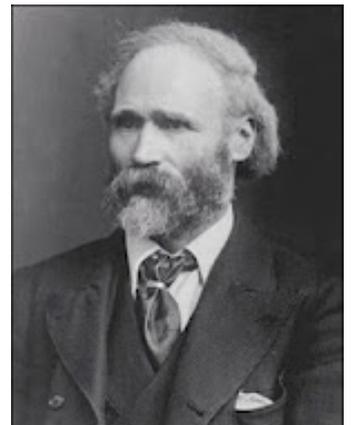
LONDON, Aug. 8 (A.A.P. - Reuter). — Captain David John Jones, known as "Potato" Jones for his exploits during the Spanish Civil War, died in Swansea, Wales, today, aged 92.

Captain Jones went to sea when he was 14 and had retired before the Spanish War began.

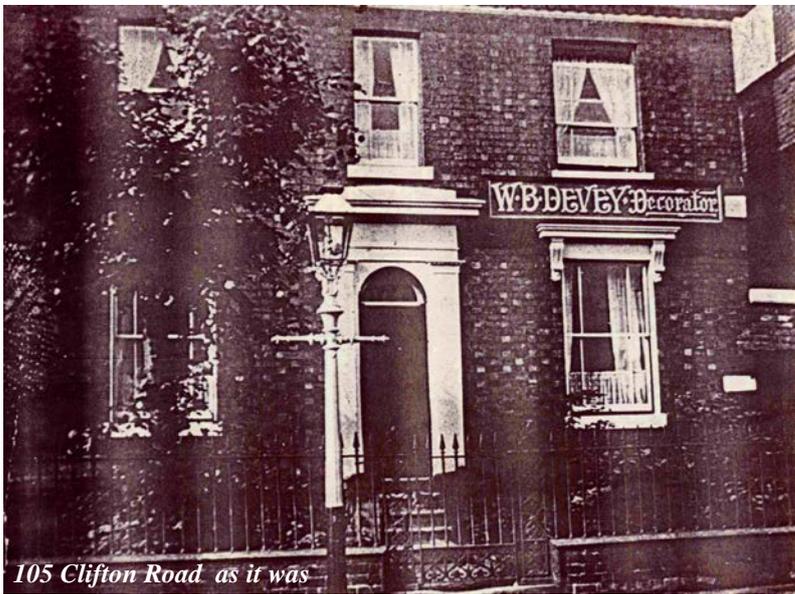
But he returned to sea at the age of 67, and became famous by running the Franco blockade to deliver a cargo of 1,000 tons of potatoes to the Spanish Loyalists.

By the end of the Civil War "Potato" Jones operated a fleet of five vessels and carried refugees from Spain to France.

Sydney Morning Herald 9th August 1962



James Keir Hardie – first Labour MP and party leader.



NEXT MEETING

Thursday 27th October 7:30

The Venture

(Malvern Street by the farm)

Death In The Archives

by Liz Palmer

Liz had over 9 years' experience working as Library & Archives Assistant at Archives and Heritage at the Library of Birmingham. She has been doing freelance work as a genealogist since January 2014, whilst still at the Library of Birmingham. When the opportunity arose to take Voluntary Redundancy at the end of July 2015 she took it to allow her more time to spend on genealogical and heritage pursuits.

The Devey business had a contract to repair houses in their area that had suffered damage, but even in wartime bureaucracy sometimes reared its head. *"After a bombing whole streets had no windows. There were depots and we had to collect the material to cover the windows. We collected material to fix up a house in Durham Road. A fellow stopped us and told us we were out of our area (off our patch), so they took off all the material we had put on and replaced it with their material".*

Harry can smile about it now but one night his father found himself facing a bomb alone – without a ladder to go back down! *"One night the raids started and it got so intense we moved into the cellar. This was risky as there was a water main over the top of the cellar and we might have drowned. I know that some people drowned in Clifton Road. There was a hammering on the door, so I opened it and a party of ARP rushed in. They shouted at us to get out the house as it was on fire. The family all trooped up and my mother had her usual little bag of documents. We were met by a second party of ARP who rushed in and met the other party. Now my sister had our dog on a long length of rope, which in the confusion wrapped itself around everyone causing chaos. Anyway, we get into the garden and there was an incendiary bomb on the factory roof to the right. My father said to me, "Give me a sandbag", and he climbed up the ladder to extinguish the bomb. While he was on the roof another incendiary bomb was found and they needed a ladder. So they took this spare ladder (so they thought) and left my father alone on the roof with a sandbag and an incendiary bomb! Fortunately for him he did manage to extinguish it".*

The raids hit Balsall Heath with devastating effect. *"One day after a raid you couldn't walk across the road for fire-hoses. The blokes were exhausted, black and ringing wet. It was the frontline it really was. White Street was wiped out, just didn't exist anymore – just rubble. The Wire factory on Hertford Street went too, bombed; a crater there you could have dropped half a dozen buses in".* Harry remembers what might have been the worst night of the Birmingham air raids - the night BSA was hit. *"The BSA raid was bad because of the bullets etc they made there. Churchill was concerned and asked how long it would take to get production back".* He still reckons lost production concerns were what decided to concrete in many of the bodies who they couldn't recover quickly.

Mention of the infamous Carlton Cinema incident brought back memories too. *"I had a friend in Runcorn Road and his sister had a fiancée on leave from the RAF. He was in the Carlton Cinema the night it was hit. He got out but went back in to help other people and was killed when the balcony collapsed".*

Harry got his call-up papers in 1944, after D-Day. *"I enlisted with the Royal Army Ordnance Corps; I saw no end to the war. I was going off to Burma and I thought I would not survive. You could be three feet from a Japanese and not know he was there, and if you did see him he might pull a grenade. I made it through though ready for demob - which was chaos. You had a demob number set in stone and when your number came up - you were out! But they didn't allow for the fact that there were so many in each batch and they could be all over the world. I applied to leave early and my MP, Percy Shurmer, said, "Don't worry you have the word of Percy Shurmer you will be out in a fortnight. That never happened of course and I finally got out in 1948 after being sent to, and blown up in, Palestine. Luckily I was under the door when a bomb blew the wall on top of me".*

He returned to the family decorating business after the war. *"There were so many painters and decorators in the area. We were one of the last to remain here".* We finished our chat with a trip to see his old school room at Clifton and a very poignant visit to his former home at 105 Clifton Road. Harry is joining the Society, and looking forward to further sharing his memories.