



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.

A DAY AT THE RACES

*DYKE WILKINSON in his 1923 book called **By-gone Birmingham** remembers a "character" named **Sam Melsom**...*

Balsall Heath Races

Ancient residents of Balsall Heath will remember **Sam Melsom** and his quaint old farmhouse, which, sixty years ago, stood where Brunswick Road is today. This and all the roads and lands hereabout were, on old Sam's time, fertile fields, farmed by him, and also used by him as the training ground for his small stud of race horses. Here Melsom and his jockey, Purcell, assisted by a young girl who became Mrs Purcell, trained some really useful thoroughbreds; and from these humble training stables many winners were turned out. The most famous among them all was the wonderful little mare Kitty, a thoroughbred so small she could get under the measure for Galloway Races – a great number of which she won – sometimes two in a day, and on one occasion three in the same day. Kitty was so speedy and such a marvellous jumper, she won many races on the flat, and over the country, when opposed by horses of ordinary size and fairly good quality, and she won more races during her career on the turf than any horse I ever knew or read of. Many winners, beside Kitty, hailed from these unfashionable training quarters.

The Balsall Heath race course was near Melsom's stables, over two fields extending from the railway line at Brighton Road Station to Ladypool Lane, but was so narrow that turnings were difficult and dangerous, which probably accounted for its short existence. While it lasted it was a well patronised little meeting. An episode in my own experience there, Melsom and I had good reason for remembering. It may amuse a reader but for us it was anything but amusing. Melsom had a horse engaged in a race which we considered was a gift for him. We both backed it and tipped it to all our friends. Purcell being unable to ride, Melsom was compelled to engage a jockey with a not particularly clean reputation. At the opening of the betting our horse was a strong favourite, but before many minutes it became clear to me there was a screw loose. The more public money and ours which went on our horse the worse favourite he became, and I felt certain the jockey had been squared. I found Melsom and told him so, begging him to change our jockey or else withdraw the horse before he was under the starter's orders. "I knowed there was summut rung", he said in his usual uncouth style, "'Cos th' moor I bakced on my hoss – the moor th' thieving bookies backed agen him."

Before Melsom was able to find a jockey it was too late to withdraw the horse. So I was not surprised to see our horse refusing his fences, a thing he never did when he and his jockey were of the same mind. Of course, he was well beaten and we and our friends had a bad time.

MORE ABOUT SAM MELSOM

He died on 29th August 1890 at his house in Laburnum Avenue, Brunswick Road. His estate totalled £434 2s 9d and was all left to his widow Ann.

The regular jockey, mentioned above, was Frederick Purcell from Oldbury, who, in 1881 lived with Melsom and worked as a labourer for him. By the time Dyke Wilkinson met him Melsom had had a few money problems already...

This newspaper report (*right*) from the Birmingham Journal of 5th March 1853 recounts the day that Gloucestershire police came to arrest Melsom – a gaol-breaker and forger! He had effectively spent five years on the run in Balsall Heath when they came for him. The consequences are not yet up online, but it doesn't seem they stopped his horse training business for too long.

CAPTURE OF A GAOL BREAKER AND A FORGER.—At the Public Office, yesterday, a man named Samuel Melsom was brought up on the charge of having broken out of the gaol at Stroudwater, in Gloucestershire, where he was awaiting his trial on a charge of burglary. This occurred five years ago, and since then he has been in Birmingham, carrying on the business of a horse-dealer. He was doing well, having lately commenced to build a number of houses in Bishop Street, Gooch Street, in which locality he resided. Information having lately reached the Gloucestershire authorities, one of the police came to this town on Thursday night, and Melsom was apprehended by Inspector Gloseop and Sub-Inspector Tandy.—At the same time a man named Fussell was brought up on the charge of passing forged Bank of England notes in Monmouthshire. He had been apprehended by the same officers in a similar manner. Both were remanded for the purpose of being taken before the Magistrates in whose jurisdiction the offences were committed.

POLLY HACKETT

With much sadness we have to report that Polly passed away recently. JIM FITZPATRICK interviewed her for a History Project we ran a while ago. We feature it here as a tribute to Polly.

[Polly came to Birmingham from her home town of Manchester with her Birmingham born husband Bert. It was 1964; they had travelled by train arriving at New St Station. Polly says 'I loved anything to do with railways and loved New St, with steam engines still around, it was absolutely fantastic'.

Polly had been brought up in the neighbourhood of Gorton, Manchester, where many families had someone employed by the local Locomotive manufacturer, Beyer, Peacock and Company. 'These were special days' says Polly, 'Whenever a new engine was to leave the factory, the whole community turned out to see it launched into the world'.

'We had been travelling to Brum to see Bert's parents ever since we married two years previously, and each time we arrived we had a habit of going to a special shop in Corporation St to buy Kunzle Cakes for Bert's mum'.



Bert's parents, Fred & Hilda, lived in Balsall Heath, at No 94 Sherbourne Road, but were re-housed in the early 60's due to Hilda's ill health. They moved to a nice new home near Harbourne golf course.

Prior to coming to Birmingham Polly had been told that it was 'a terrible place', but from that very first day, Polly's experience was at odds with that description. She immediately noticed the difference in the landscape of the two cities; Manchester was flat and Birmingham, in contrast, was undulating and with a surprising number of trees. Except for brief visits back home, Polly was to make her life and work in Birmingham. She began that work on permanent nights at the Ear, Nose, and Throat hospital in Edmund Street off Colmore Row, the Row was a thoroughfare where she found herself in awe of the incredibly high rise buildings.



Polly tells Bernard Jackson how it is in "Sweet Freedom"

But it was the work being carried out at the hospital that really impressed. In Polly's own words, 'The specialists were incredibly brilliant, the NHS works because of all the people who work there, for example, at the time the hospital had a Jamaican lady who came in very early each morning and cleaned just about everything including the staircases, and by breakfast time the hospital was gleaming ready for another day'.



- The Ear, Nose and Throat Hospital in Edmund Street. Polly worked here as Night Sister until 1970.

Prior to coming to Birmingham Polly had trained as a nursery nurse, and she was among the first to respond to the publication of the Plowden Report of 1967, which recommended nursery education for children once they were three years old).

She put out an appeal for volunteers to launch a nursery school and just three people responded. She became a leader at one of the first nursery schools to be established in Birmingham the venue was the Saracen's Head a former Public house at Kings Norton.

Polly also led an Saturday morning play-school at the MAC' theatre Cannon Hill Park, many mothers whom brought their children to the playschool were very poor and could barely afford the 50 pence fee.

The government didn't pay towards playgroups. Polly organised a march to protest and demand 'A Fair Deal for the under 5's', and was interviewed by Central Television about the protest.

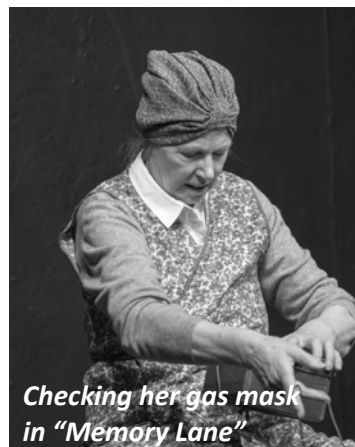
Polly also trained as a health visitor, and was prominent in 'Healthy Eating' campaigns. She worked with Asian women on this subject within their local Mosque. She also went on to organise a Refuge Centre in a derelict house in Brighton Road for women suffering domestic abuse. Polly retired at 65 and promptly set to work at Age Concern, for whom she was a tireless campaigner for older people's services and rights. She also worked for the older peoples' visiting service – OPNOCS.

On top of all this she found time to perform with the Birmingham History Theatre Group. She will be remembered for her captivating performances in productions such as "Sweet Freedom", "Eclipsed", "Life's Rich Pageant" and "Memory Lane". She also appeared in many of the street and canal historical trails. She was always a hit with the audiences and very much enjoyed her roles.

I asked Polly to sum up her Balsall Heath experience. She replied :- "Balsall Heath people are extremely friendly and generous". She was a truly unique and special person.



Polly as Gwen Lally in "Life's Rich Pageant"



Checking her gas mask in "Memory Lane"

NEXT MEETING

Thursday 23rd February 7:30

The Venture

(Malvern Street by the farm)

Moseley Bog Through Time

by Mike Byrne

Mike Byrne with a talk on the historic landmark which influenced Tolkien. The bog dates back to the Bronze Age.

EVERY PICTURE TELLS A STORY

Jackie Vaughan saw our newsletter on our website and was surprised to see herself! "The newsletter featured Janet Mendelsohn's work. On one photo it shows a little girl of approx. 8 years of age as seen in the first attachment of this email. In the second attachment you will find a colour photo of the same little girl.



That girl is me, both photos taken around the same period c.1968 at the rear of Clevedon Road".



...and starting the dancing for a family Christmas in "When The Lamps Went Out"

