



The Balsall Heath Local History Society 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.

CURRYING FAVOUR IN BALSALL HEATH

Matthew O'Callaghan writes a well- respected blog on UK Independent and Protected Foods. Here he writes about the Balti – Balsall Heath's much loved dish that gives its name to the Balti Triangle.

The Balti is a form of curry, using chicken, meat, fish or vegetables, fast cooked and served in a steel bowl called a balti. The dish evolved in the late 1970's in the South East of the City of Birmingham known as the 'Balti Triangle'. The balti has five characteristics which differentiate it from other curries; meat (if used) is cooked off the bone, cooking is done at high temperature in a steel bowl called a balti, vegetable oil is used instead of ghee, fresh dried spices are used rather than pre-prepared curry pastes and mixes and finally the meal is served in the bowl in which it is cooked accompanied by naan bread.



Birmingham has one of the largest overseas Pakistani communities in the world. At just over 100,000 residents, they account for around 11% of the city's population, the largest proportion of any city in Britain. Most of the residents came from the Potohar area of Pakistan administered Kashmir. More specifically they originate from the district and city of Mirpur and are known as Mirpuri's. Many were displaced from their traditional homeland by the Mangla Dam project in the early sixties and allowed to settle in the UK under an agreement between the Pakistan and British governments. The Mirpuri's settled largely in the Sparkbrook Ward an area of cheap housing close to available work in the South East of Birmingham. Almost two-thirds of the population of Sparkbrook is of Asian or Asian British origin. The Mirpuri's when they arrived in Birmingham brought with them their traditional method of cooking which they used in the restaurants they started to open in the late 1970's early 1980's. They cooked meat which was on the bone (from chicken, lamb and beef), or fish or vegetables in an earthenware pot called a 'Haandi' or in a cast iron receptacle called a 'Karahi' over a low fire. This slow method of cooking took some time. Haandi's and Karahi's are still available today though most restaurants require a minimum of 45 minutes notice for their preparation. Like most curries of the time they used also ghee and bought commercial curry powders and pastes, not having as yet established their own direct sources of spices and herbs.

These restaurants opened by these Mirpuri's in the Sparkbrook area started to become more frequented by local non-Pakistani residents. However, their owners noticed that these customers were unhappy with waiting so long for their meals. In response the chefs made three significant adaptations; firstly the meat was prepared in advance by cutting it into smaller pieces off the bone so it would cook more quickly. Secondly they experimented with cooking the food at higher temperatures so they could serve their Western customers more quickly. They soon noticed that the traditional Haandi or Karahi could not stand the higher temperatures they were using, so they introduced their third innovation. They commissioned a local steel maker, Tara Singh from Pressform in nearby Smethwick, to manufacture thin, pressed steel flat-bottomed bowls with two handles, similar to a wok, about 22cm in diameter, which they called a 'balti'. The origin of the word balti is to do with the Hindi word "balty" – "Balty, s. Hin. balti, a bucket. This is the Port. balde." "Hobson-Jobson: Being A Glossary of Anglo-Indian Colloquial Words and Phrases, and of Kindred Terms", by Col. Henry Yule and the late Arthur C. Burnell. London: John Murray, 1886, at page 40.] The term 'balti' refers to the steel or iron pot in which the food is cooked or served, taken from the word 'balti' in Hindi and Bengali for a bucket which is derived from the Portuguese word 'balde', meaning bucket/pail, taken to India by the Portuguese on their seafaring enterprises in late fifteenth century. Therefore, originally, the word 'balti' refers to a bucket, then evolving to its meaning as a cooking pot.

This explanation is plausible given the ease with which the soft sound of the 'd' and 't' are interchangeable; balde and balte. The word is commonly used at weddings on the South Asian continent where due to the large number of guests cooked meat is largely served in buckets. An alternative explanation for the word balti is given by some as deriving from the mountainous area of North Pakistan bordering Tibet called 'Baltistan' and the Tibetan Muslims who live there. Locals in Birmingham, however, believe the former explanation is more likely given the origin of those who invented the dish in Birmingham. However the convenience of cooking and serving in the same receptacle was no doubt very convenient for the nomadic tribes in the mountainous area of Pakistan and the Kashmir. Other more outlandish explanations of the word 'balti' claim that it comes from the hub caps in which Indian lorry drivers used to cook their meals, or similarly from the tin helmets of Indian soldiers in World War I used for a similar purpose.

The freshness and taste of the food soon caught on with the locals plus there was the added bonus that Balti restaurants, known locally as 'Balti Houses', were unlicensed allowing people to bring their own drinks. They were very informal with the food served often on glass-topped tables without tablecloths. High temperature cooking on an open flame using the balti bowl led to further developments. Ghee or clarified butter was replaced by vegetable oils as these oils have higher smoke points (usually above 250 C) than ghee (190 – 240 C). Ghee also solidifies when cool, which looks unpleasant at the bottom of a balti dish about to be scraped out using naan bread. Western customers also preferred the vegetable oil to the ghee as it gave a cleaner, fresher taste and was healthier. Another variant in the Balti from other traditional curry dishes was the use of original spices and herbs rather than the already prepared ghee and curry pastes and powders used in restaurants outside the Balti Triangle.

Given that steel cools very quickly, the meal was served and eaten direct from the balti bowl at the table rather than served onto a plate and risk cooling. It also meant that all the flavours were retained in the bowl. This leads to another important aspect of eating a balti which is the absence of cutlery; pieces of naan bread are torn off by hand and used to scoop up the hot curry sauce from the pot and also to wipe clean the bowl at the end. Rice is never served with a balti, rice being used as a starter in Kashmiri cuisine rather than with the main course. Traditional balti meals include balti murgh (chicken), balti gosht (lamb), fish balti and vegetable balti. Beef balti has been introduced as a variant of lamb Balti. The process of preparing a balti is to add chopped onions to heated vegetable oil in a balti bowl. Ginger and garlic puree are added with a small amount of restaurant sauce.

The restaurant sauce is prepared in advance and is unique to each Balti House. It will include a base of onions, garlic, ginger, turmeric, salt and garam masala. Other ingredients, cardamom, cassia bark, cloves, etc may be added according to the tradition of the chef. The sauce is cooked slowly over a lengthy period of time to ensure a smooth liquid consistency. Prepared generic commercial curry pastes and powders are not used or permitted. This is to ensure the taste of the balti retains its integrity with all the individual spices contributing separately to the flavour rather than being overpowered by a generic 'curry' taste. Off the bone meat fish or vegetables are added to the restaurant sauce in the balti and fast cooked over a high flame. Dried spices such as fenugreek, turmeric, cumin, and a garam masala mix may be added during the later stages with other spices the restaurant chef chooses. Some of the restaurants also use tomatoes and or tomato paste. On the point of serving, fresh coriander is sprinkled on top and the dish served at the table. Giant naan breads, made for sharing, accompany the meal. These are oven-baked leavened flatbreads made out of flour, salt and yeast with a small quantity of yoghurt. Side dishes and starters usually include onion bhajis, samosas, poppadums and creamy dips.

The first recorded reference to the balti was in the Curry Club's 'Curry Magazine' Edition 29, winter 1984 which answered a reader's query about the definition of Balti. Books on curries prior to then such as the classic "The Complete Book of Curries" by Harvey Day published in 1970 make no reference to the balti. Since then there have been numerous references to the Birmingham Balti including the 'Balti Curry Cookbook' by Pat Chapman and the Essential Street Balti guide. There are over 2,600 references on Google to the "Birmingham Balti". Of significance is that 'Balti' is not mentioned in books on Indian or Pakistani cuisine. A recent book of curries from around the world split by country only mentions the Balti in the section on British food. In it Roopa Gulati writes "Having more in common with Birmingham than Pakistan, balti's are the star attraction for curry aficionados." (Page 332 Dorling Kindersley Publishing 2006, various contributors).

The Balti Triangle is recognised by Birmingham City Council as a unique area and promoted as a tourist destination. Leaflets promoting and defining the area have been published. With the spread of the balti to other parts of the country and indeed abroad, the original concept of the Balti has been lost in regional variations using methods and ingredients far different from those in the original Birmingham Balti. It is for this reason that the Balti Houses or restaurants in this area formed themselves into the Birmingham Balti Association in 1998. They are now seeking European Protected Names status; TSG – Traditional Speciality Guaranteed to preserve this unique food, developed between the traditions of South Asian and British cuisine.

There are some 50 restaurants in the Balti Triangle. A typical restaurant will use 2,000kg of onions and 300kg of chicken in a week. The Balti Triangle comprises chiefly of the Sparkbrook Ward but also having small parts of the neighbouring wards of Sparkhill, Balsall Heath and Moseley. The Northern apex of the Balti Triangle is the junction of the A41 and the A453 at Camp Hill Roundabout. The Eastern boundary of the triangle is the A41 continuing South as the A34 (Stratford Road). The Western boundary is the A453 (variously called Highgate Middleway, Hayden Road and Moseley Road as it goes South. Restaurants on both sides of the road are included in the area. The Southern boundary is just North of the B4217 Wake Green Road – College Road, restaurants on the B4217 itself are not included.

With thanks to Andy Munroe, secretary of the Birmingham Balti Association.

THE ORIGIN OF THE BALTI

In addition to Matthew's account we know that the Balti was referred to in The Heathan back in 1977. We also know that Mohammed Ajaib (right), of Al Faisal's restaurant, has always claimed to have cooked the first Balti back in 1977. Having cooked at home for family and friends he opened a restaurant and developed the Balti as a dish that would prove popular for Western tastes and give him an edge over other restaurants.

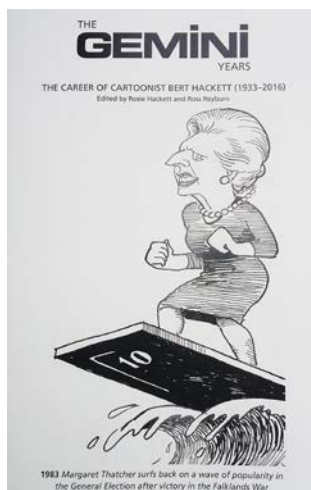


THE GEMINI YEARS

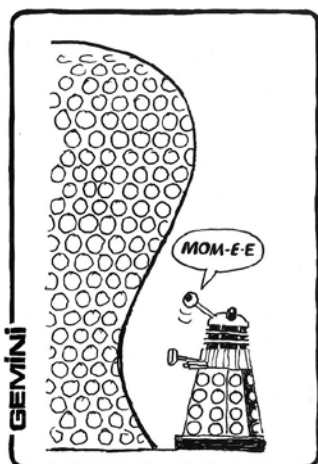
Bert Hackett, who passed away earlier this year, is remembered in a new book "The Gemini Years" and an exhibition at the Midland Arts Centre, Cannon Hill Park.

Bert was for 42 years the cartoonist "Gemini" for the Birmingham Post.

His brilliant satirical cartoons remain as fresh and apt today as ever. The Society has several copies of the book available at £5.00 each. It contains a biography of Bert along with a selection of some of his best work. The book was carefully and lovingly put together by his daughter Rosie Hackett along with Ross Reyburn. The exhibition at the MAC is tremendous and well worth seeing. It is on currently and runs until 4th September.



We'll toss for it - your expense account or mine



NEXT MEETING

Thursday 27th September 7:30

The Venture

(Malvern Street by the farm)

Death In The Archives

by Liz Palmer

Liz has over 9 years experience working as Library & Archives Assistant in 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.

Her genealogy services can be found online at greenhillgenealogy.com.

HERITAGE OPEN DAYS WEEKEND RETURNS!

FIRST WORLD WAR SCHOOLDAYS AT THE OLD CLIFTON BOARD SCHOOL

Saturday 10th September from 11am till 4pm.
Old Clifton School, Clifton Road, Balsall Heath, B12 8NJ

The annual Heritage Open Days Weekend returns in September. This has become a much looked forward to event each year for the Society when we able to put on displays and events at our home in Balsall Heath.

We have a chance to visit the Old Clifton School, and the First World War schoolroom, with activities including: writing with pen and ink; chanting tables and air raid practice in case of Zeppelin attack.

Taster classes will be held with a teacher at 11.30am and 2.30pm and are limited to 30 pupils. Places will be allocated on arrival. Class discipline will be strictly adhered to. There will be interactive displays and demonstrations throughout the day relating to Clifton School in particular and the First World War in Balsall Heath. This event is not suitable for children under the age of 5.