



Balsall Heath  
Local History Society

# The GAZETTE

MAY 2015

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

**Tel:** 0121 464 1890 **Email:** [chris.sutton@stpaulstrust.org.uk](mailto:chris.sutton@stpaulstrust.org.uk)

**Web:** [balsallheathhistory.co.uk](http://balsallheathhistory.co.uk) & [www.digitalbalsallheath.org.uk](http://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. 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 LAMPS LIGHT UP THE STAGE!



The Birmingham History Theatre Group performances of "When The Lamps Went Out" went down very well indeed! The play, concerning a family's life in Balsall Heath during WW1, played to three houses, receiving enthusiastic feedback and even queries asking when it would be put on again. This is under discussion so watch this space.

The play is set to form part a WW1 pack for local schools. This will include some key scenes from the play as video clips along with script and relevant outline material.

**(Photographs: Jake Stewart)**



# THE BOY FROM SPEEDWELL ROAD

Balsall Heath film producer Victor Saville - by William McCabe



Victor Saville was born Victor Salberg on the 25<sup>th</sup> September 1897. His parents had recently moved to Birmingham from Poland. He lived at 13 Speedwell Road, overlooking Calthorpe Park, along with his parents, two brothers and older sister and a maid. Balsall Heath was no longer an affluent neighbourhood by the time Victor went to school at Camp Hill. In an interview he said of those days, *"When I was a boy I went to King Edward's School in Birmingham and, with my brother, went through the most poverty-stricken district to the school: children naked, women ill-clad, terrible poverty"*. He did well at school and began to study for a career in Law before World War 1 changed everything.

He enlisted in the London Irish Rifles two weeks before his 17<sup>th</sup> birthday. He fought and was seriously injured at the battle of Loos which left him with a metal plate in his skull. Invalided out in 1916, his injuries meant he could no longer continue in Law so he went to work for Sol Levy (a friend of his father) selling films to cinemas. He worked hard; at one point he would be selling D. W. Griffith epics like *"Birth of a Nation"* or *"Intolerance"* in the daytime then taking the train to Coventry to run the Star Cinema in the evening.

Name	Corps	Rank	Regt. No.
SALBERG	18 <sup>TH</sup> LOND. R.	PG	2128
Victor			

  

Medal	Roll	Page	Remarks
VICTORY	TP/18/101B	9	Des 392 XVI 14 8/16 Returned (1743 KR) 7956/Adc.
BRITISH	do	do	
15 STAR	TP/35	41	
M.B. Unit TP/936			
Theatre of War first served in (17) France			
Date of entry there 9.3.15			
Victor's medal index card for the war			

In 1917 he moved to London to work for Pathé newsreels. The experience led him to a partnership with Michael Balcon and Oscar Deutsch (both from Birmingham) in films. This was not the most successful of associations. In 1921 their distribution company was being wound up. With the remainder of the money, the three bought a meal and placed a £40 bet on the result of four football matches. The bet came in and their company (Victory Motion Pictures) was back in action.

In the early 20s Victor moved into film production, first with Gaumont, then Gainsborough (a company he shared with Michael Balcon) and finally with his own company. His first attempt at production was on the 1923 film *"Woman to Woman"*. This was also the first film for Alfred Hitchcock and, although they would never work on the same film again, they remained firm friends for life. Hitchcock said as much in delivering the eulogy at Victor's funeral. Victor was also a director. He had started with a couple of films in 1919 and would direct 28 more between 1927 and 1938 while also acting as producer on some of them and over half a dozen more. He made a star of the likes of Jessie Matthews, Rex Harrison and Vivien Leigh. In 1936 he said, *"If I could borrow Clarke Gable, I would, in two films, make Vivien Leigh as big a box-office name as Myrna Loy"* – oddly prophetic considering her big breakthrough picture in America.

At the outbreak of World War 2 Victor moved to America in the belief that he could do more for the war effort in Hollywood than he could at home. His first film there was *"The Mortal Storm"* an anti-Nazi film made in 1940 – before the U.S.A. entered the war. This film caused Goebbels to ban all MGM films from German territory. He continued to work in Hollywood after the war making films with a more American flavour. This included an excursion into the world of film noir. He bought the rights to, and produced, the first four of Mickey Spillane's successful Mike Hammer, even directing one of them. Among his other films are *"Goodbye, Mr Chips"* (which won Robert Donat an Oscar), *"Evergreen"* (Jessie Matthews' best film), and *"Kim"*. He was not afraid to deal with controversial subjects as evidenced by a string of socially critical films (*"The Good Companions"*, *"South Riding"*) or anti-Nazi films at a time of appeasement (*"Dark Journey"*, *"The Mortal Storm"*) yet he also made more populist fare. Victor retired from making films in the early 1960s and died in 1979. He had two children, one of whom married the film producer John Woolf.

## TRIP TO CANNON HILL

Thursday 25<sup>th</sup> June 7:30

Visit and talk at Cannon Hill Park with Allan Watkins (Ranger)

## NEXT MEETING

Thursday 30<sup>th</sup> July 7:30

The Venture, Malvern Street (by the farm)

David Hughes: From Variety to Verdi by Patrick Baird and before it

Members' Evening: AGM

The annual review of the year is here. A year that saw Balsall Heath's first blue plaque installed, for local worthy, John Bowen.

Following the official business we have our Chairman Patrick Baird talking about the legendary local singer David Hughes.