



Balsall Heath  
Local History Society

# THE GAZETTE JULY 2013

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*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.*



Photo: Phil McMullen

## A Bug's Life In Balsall Heath

The sun shone on the Carnival this year (6<sup>th</sup> July) with thankfully no repeat of last summer's washout. As usual we took our place in the procession which this year had a theme of bugs, insects and butterflies. Our Edwardian butterfly and insect collectors looked just the part though the nets were a bit small for the somewhat scary giant gold caterpillar!

As well as a Diamond Balsall Heath display tent we also had a very popular "Nippys' Tea Tent" (*below*) which provided tea, juice and cakes with proper tables and chairs. All very civilised and a little bit of respite for anyone wanting time out.



Photo: Jenny Lloyd

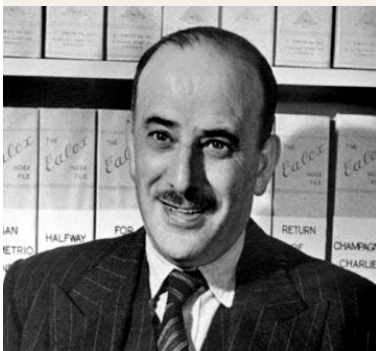
### Next Meeting:

**Thursday 26th September 7:30**

The Venture (on Malvern Street by the farm)

**Projecting Britain** by Chris Sutton

Our next meeting is in September when I will be talking about how Birmingham born **Sir Michael Balcon** (*below*) transformed **Ealing Studios** into producing films such as "*The Lavender Hill Mob*" that reflected the British "character". More next newsletter on which films I will be discussing, this is going to be a great night for anyone who is nostalgic about British cinema. Balsall Heath had several fine cinemas which would have shown these films, such as The Moseley Picture House (*below right*) on the Moseley Road.





*Beatrice with her damaged helmet*

## **COURAGE UNDER FIRE - The blitz in St Paul's Road**

During the long heavy air raid on Tuesday 19<sup>th</sup> November 1940 Mrs Beatrice Withers, an ARP Warden in her fifties, went to a nearby ARP station to request that an ambulance be sent to St Paul's Road to take a sick woman to hospital. She was worried about a young woman in the road who had recently had a baby. She told friends she was afraid the young woman might be developing blood poisoning, and while the "screamers" were coming down she tried to keep an eye on the house. "Screamers" were high explosive bombs with a whistle attached to the fins, designed to add another element of terror to air attacks.

It was about nine o'clock when Mrs Withers saw 14 year old Dennis Sharpe watching the gunfire and the glow from the city outside his home at 21 St Paul's Road. *"Go in the house", she said, "You'll be safer down in the cellar"*. His father Mr Alfred Sharpe (52), his stepmother Edith Sharpe (45, nee Carey and Miffing) and their seven combined children were all sheltering in the house that night. Edith Miffing had lost her husband Frederick Carey in 1926 and married Alfred Sharpe who himself had children from his marriage in 1913 to Florence Brown. Many times the large family had spent nights in public shelters, but this night they stayed in the cellar. Mrs Sharpe had a cold and only that day there had been a public health message that people with heavy colds and other infections should not go into public shelters. Several members of the Sharpe family were not at home. Eleven year old May was still staying at Princess Alice Orphanage in New Oscott because there wasn't room for her in St Paul's Road; other siblings were away in the forces. Jesse, who was 18, had been at the Princess Alice with May, but was now back home with the family. Another brother in the house was John Sharpe (21). Also in the cellar were three of Edith's children by Frederick Carey: Frederick Carey (24), Joyce Carey (21) and Raymond Carey (17).

Some of the houses in St Paul's Road were empty that night as some people had gone away to stay with friends and relatives who lived further out of the city. At number 24, Miss Edith Abel, a 30 year old member of staff at Britannic Assurance Company, and her sister Laura were having cups of tea on their cellar steps. Both were there because their Anderson shelter which had been bone dry until the end of October was now full of water and useless. The cellar was their alternative shelter.



*Moseley Road at the top of St Paul's Road the following morning*

Just after nine o'clock came a sudden explosion. Beatrice was in the road waiting for, and to direct, the ambulance. The bomb dropped a few yards away sending shrapnel flying in all directions. One fragment hit her on the head, tearing a piece out of her helmet, cutting above her left eye. The pain and shock knocked her into unconsciousness. The blast swept both the Abel sisters, at 24, into their cellar as the steps disintegrated under the blast impact. Outside, shortly after, Beatrice got up, bleeding profusely, but managing to blow her whistle for assistance. A bomb had landed in the Sharpe's back garden and had wrecked 10 houses in the road.

Beatrice had to fight her way in through the debris, with the assistance of Senior Warden Mr Poole, as the house had been hit hard by the same explosion that had knocked her out. Together they got inside and managed to evacuate the sick woman, her baby and four older children away to a shelter. Beatrice didn't stop long at the shelter, she didn't even get her cut eye patched up. Instead she went straight back to St Paul's Road and assisted in the rescue of other people who had been trapped.



PC Derek Taylor had been one of the first on the scene and escorted the Abel sisters out of number 24. Meanwhile Beatrice Withers with a growing number of rescue workers and police began to search the other wrecked houses. Progress at the Sharpe home at number 21 was agonisingly slow. Rescue workers took hours to cut, hack and dig through splintered wood and rubble. Slowly they found some of the family still alive and some who had been killed outright. Under Edith Sharpe's body was her four year old daughter Marjorie, alive and unhurt, Edith lasted a few minutes after she was found before she died. Her Carey children - Frederick, Joyce and Raymond - were all found dead in the rubble as were Dennis and John Sharpe. Husband Alfred was taken to Hollymoor Emergency Hospital where he lasted until 15<sup>th</sup> December before succumbing to his wounds. Daughter Jesse has been taken to the Queen Elizabeth Hospital but she died on the following day, 20<sup>th</sup> November.

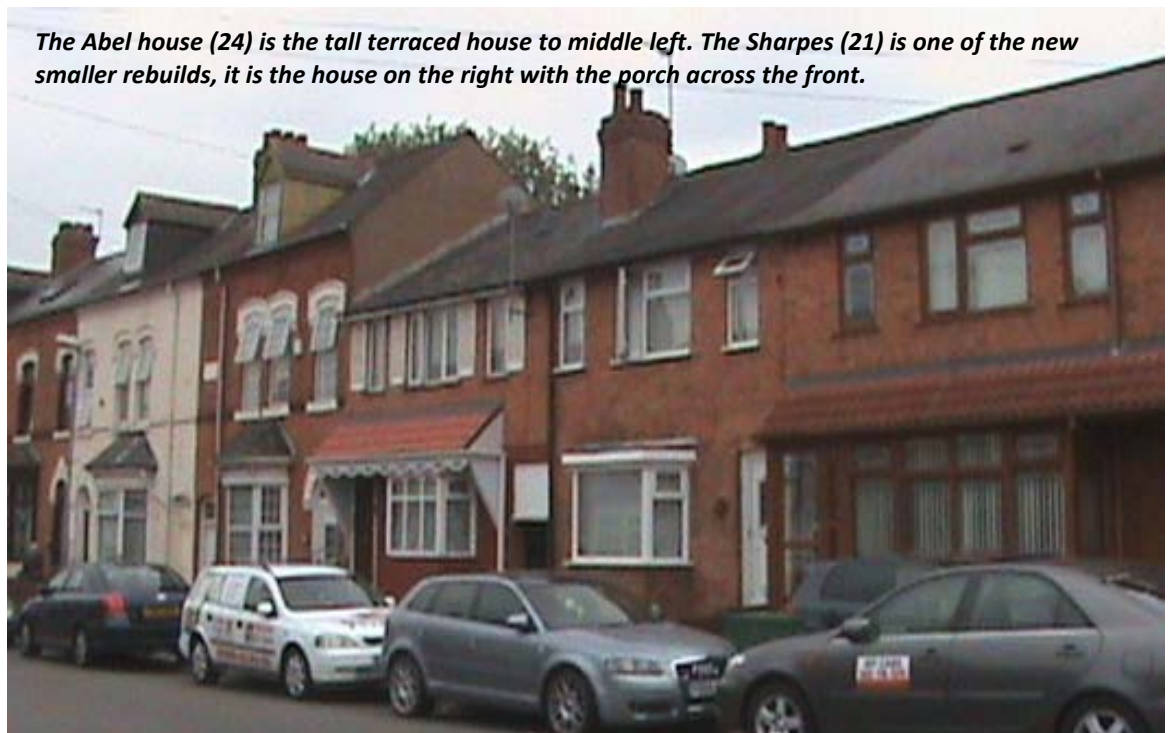
Beatrice Withers was awarded the British Empire Medal (BEM) on 14<sup>th</sup> February for carrying out her duties while injured and while enemy planes were still overhead bombing. Reports later stated that nine people were killed that night in the immediate vicinity while many more were injured.

Today there is clear evidence of what happened on both sides of the road with the new post war houses occupying the sites of those that were demolished. Superficially they fit the look of the terraces but they are all much shorter and the brickwork is different. The house numbers are consecutive in St Paul's Road, not odd on one

side and even on the other.

Several houses running up to number 23 are post-war replacements but the Abel's house (24) is original and was salvaged despite the blast damage. There are dozens more roads like this across Birmingham and a good place to check for possible air raid damage is

on the website:- <http://www.swanshurst.org/barra/default.asp?section=aboutbarra> or just type Swanshurst and BARRA into google as the above is a long address to type correctly. Here there are some handy search facilities, including the ability to search by address.



*The Abel house (24) is the tall terraced house to middle left. The Sharpes (21) is one of the new smaller rebuilds, it is the house on the right with the porch across the front.*

#### BEHIND YOU!

On **Saturday 13<sup>th</sup> July** the Theatre Group appeared at Smethwick Pump House and Galton Bridge in an adapted reprise of last year's successful canal walks. It was a blisteringly hot afternoon but everyone gave it their all and it was well received by those who came along. The picture (*right*) shows the rather alarming ghost of James Brindley coming up behind Thomas Telford – better known to you as Polly Hackett and Patrick Baird.

The next production from the Theatre Group will be a Ladypool Road Trail in late September. More news in the next issue.



*Photo: Jacqui Blundell*

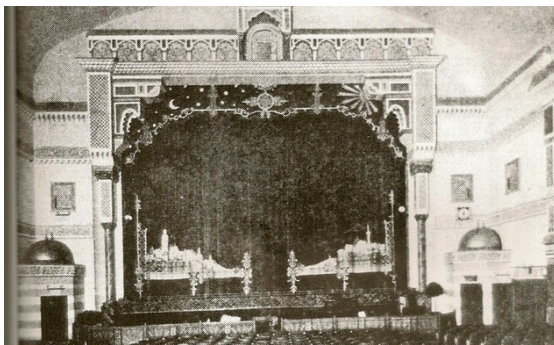
## DIAMOND BALSALL HEATH – Memories inspired by objects

### THE CINEMA POSTER

#### The last film at the Alhambra

The Alhambra on Moseley Road (near Montpellier Street and Highgate Road) was one of the first of the so-called “English Atmospheric” style cinemas and was an interesting mix of styles. It was built by the architects Satchwell & Roberts, who built several Midlands cinemas.

The foyer, with its mosaic floor, was Egyptian, the cafe considered Algerian whilst the auditorium was based on the Moorish Palace at Granada in Spain!



Bronze lanterns with intricate patterns provided the lighting whilst a large plaster sun dominated the plain barrel vaulted ceiling. The side walls were arched with beautiful stencilled scenes. The rectangular proscenium was flanked by marble columns in a Moorish style (with a domed ‘temple’ either side serving as an exit) and very richly draped.

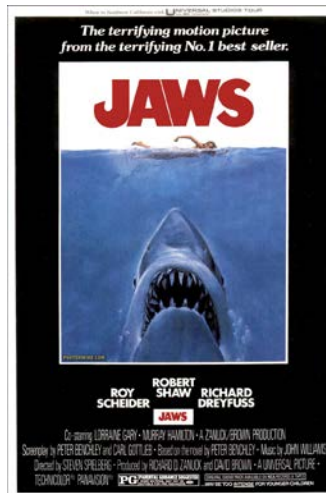
The cinema opened on 26th December 1928, the first film was Matheson Long in “The Scarlet Pimpernel”. The cinema had a 50 feet wide proscenium and there was an orchestra of eight musicians in the orchestra pit. It was taken over by Associated British Cinemas (ABC) from 1st April 1930, and the spectacular décor, over the years, was largely painted over.

The cinema closed its doors on 31st August 1968 with “The Fall of the Roman Empire”. However it did re-open for several years, operating as an Asian cinema screening Bollywood films. When demolition was proposed, in 1974, there was sadly little opposition.



#### Alhambra Memories

*“Oh how I remember our Saturday morning matinee. I think it cost 6d to get in. There was a man outside selling big lollipops out of a brown suit case. After watching Gene Autry, Roy Rogers and Flash Gordon we would go home and act out our own cowboy film. Happy days from 1945/1955 then I had to grow up”. - Janet Potter*



#### Always Jaws

*“The cinema poster, advertising forthcoming or current films would be displayed outside and in the foyers. The poster that I most remember was for “Jaws” (1975). This had such an impact with the shark’s open mouth and the swimmer, unknowing, above it! That summer I remember everyone who went in the sea had Jaws in the back of their mind”. – Chris Sutton*