



Balsall Heath  
Local History Society

## THE GAZETTE *March 2012*

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### GEORGE'S TITANIC TWIST OF FATE



One hundred years ago, at 11:40pm on Sunday 14<sup>th</sup> April 1912, Frederick Fleet rang the crow's nest bell three times, lifted the phone and rang the bridge. "Iceberg right ahead" he reported, and about thirty seconds later the drama that has intrigued the world ever since commenced – The passenger liner RMS Titanic began to take on water and sink. Amongst those on board was George Gumery from Balsall Heath. George was born on 20<sup>th</sup> December 1887, at 23 Princess Road, near Pershore Road. His father was also named George and he worked in the confectionery business as a sugar boiler worker. His mother was Harriet, known as "Hetty" Gumery, (nee Sherry). By 1893 the family had moved to 13 St John's Road, which was renamed Runcorn Road in 1898.

George appears to have been an only child which was unusual but was possibly due to his mother's ill health; she died in 1899. His father never re-married but his wife's unmarried sister, Elizabeth, lived with them and presumably took over the role of the lady of the

house. Young George went to Tindal Street Boys School and was a leading light in the formation of the Old Boys' Association. He also attended Sunday School at Moseley Road Congregational Church.

The next tragedy came with the equally early death of his father in 1909. George stopped in Balsall Heath for a time but remained single. He applied for work with the White Star Line and by April 1912 he was in lodgings with other White Star workers at 24 Canute Road in Southampton. He signed on as a steward with the St Louis but fate struck again. A coal strike had caused major shortages and to ensure Titanic sailed as scheduled on 10<sup>th</sup> April coal was transferred from other ships, including the St Louis. Also transferring, due to crew shortages, were several stewards, including George Gumery, who signed on to join the ship on 9<sup>th</sup> April. Next morning, at 6am, he started work for £3.15.0 per month.

He was one of four mess stewards in the Engineers' Mess on Deck E. All were probably off duty when the collision occurred and sadly only one survived the disaster. George is amongst those whose bodies were never identified or recovered. Back in Britain news of the disaster was greeted with front page headlines and memorial services across the country. One was held at St Paul's in Balsall Heath, and special mention was made of George Gumery at the service.





Also on board Titanic was William Edward Hipkins (*left*) (born 1<sup>st</sup> January 1857 in Birmingham). He had become the manager of James Watt & Co. (late Boulton & Watt) engineers at the Soho Foundry, and managing director of W. T. Avery Limited (weighing machinists & engineers). He was a director of Birmingham Small Arms and was also a Life Governor of the University of Birmingham. In 1912 Hipkins resided at two addresses, 16 Augustus Road, Edgbaston, where he lived generally and 50 Albert Hall Mansions, London which he used as his London base for business and travel. Hipkins travelled as a first class passenger (ticket number 680, £50) and occupied cabin C-39. He died in the disaster, his body, if recovered, was never identified. His wife had died in 1910.

The Centenary is being marked in Birmingham with a superb exhibition at William Hipkins' old company – Averys. The exhibition has been put together by Averys curator and noted Titanic historian Andrew Lound. It is on till 29<sup>th</sup> April but may be extended due to the large numbers who are turning up. This is one exhibition you really must see if you have even the slightest interest in Titanic.

## Titanic Exhibition: Opening Hours and Booking Information

1<sup>st</sup> FEBRUARY — 29<sup>th</sup> APRIL 2012

Avery Historical Museum, Soho Foundry, Foundry Lane, Smethwick, West Midlands B66 2LP

### Opening hours:

Entrance by advance booking only (except for open days at weekend)

### Contact:

**Andrew Lound, Museum Curator**, on **0121 568 1667** or **07740 772097**.

Mon-Thur 2:00pm — 5.30pm

Friday 10am — 5.30pm

Weekends by special appointment (there are open day Saturdays)

### Entrance fee £4



Free car parking available on site. Visitors must report to security. Under 16 year olds must be accompanied by an adult. For group visits why not visit the Avery Historical Museum in the morning, have lunch locally, and then see the Titanic Exhibition in the afternoon.

## BALSALL HEATH

**PROPOSED FREE CHURCH OF ENGLAND** — An adjourned meeting of persons desiring the establishment of a Free Church of England at Balsall Heath was held on Wednesday in the Wesleyan school-room, Vincent Street. The Rev. T. Dodd of the Free Church, Worcester presided. There were between twenty and thirty persons present — nearly all strangers to Balsall Heath. In consequence of the non-attendance of the inhabitants of Balsall Heath, the meeting was adjourned for a week without any decision being arrived at.

*(The Worcestershire Chronicle September 11 1867)*

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## SPARKBROOK LADY IS MADE OF THE WRIGHT STUFF



We all have family history anecdotes and a recent enquiry from **Dave Samman** is certainly one of the best I have heard in a while. According to family legend his grandmother, Elsie (left), played the role of Lady Godiva in a procession through Sparkbrook sometime in the early part of last century! Elsie was apparently involved in amateur dramatics and although this was probably not the biggest role she played it must have been the most “challenging”!

Elsie Amy Wright was born at Alma Street in Aston in 1885. She married Henry Samman in 1909 at St Margaret’s Church. Samman was employed at Luker’s Grocery/ Bakery on Woodbridge Road, Moseley. The couple lived then at 147 Highgate Road but sadly the marriage was not a long one as Elsie died on 29<sup>th</sup> August 1922.

Although it is possible she played Lady Godiva after her marriage we tend to think it more likely she played her before it. The other point of interest is *where* she played her. It could be that the story of her playing the role in Sparkbrook has become confused with her living there.



*Henry Samman (foreground) with the delivery vans outside Lukers*

It is possible she might have played Lady Godiva somewhere else – Birmingham maybe, or even Coventry itself? Coventry certainly has a tradition of pageants with a Lady Godiva presence. There have also been plays written with the character of Lady Godiva. If you have any thoughts or information on this then please let me know.



From Saturday 28<sup>th</sup> April till the following Saturday we will be having an exhibition at Balsall Heath Library showing our collection of photographs of Moseley Road. This will be a revised version of the boards we have used at various events over the years. The exhibition ties in with a new BBC



programme, "Britain's First Photo Album", where John Sergeant visits locations used by the photographer Francis Frith in Victorian Times. The BBC is promoting any events with a historical photo theme during the programme's run. There are many other events happening across the country which are linking with this series and they, along with us, are listed online at [www.bbc.co.uk/thingstodo](http://www.bbc.co.uk/thingstodo). More on this exhibition at next month's meeting. The above image is from a scarce postcard courtesy of another recent visitor **Tony Turner**; the immediate right foreground is the junction with Runcorn Road.

Some sunshine recently. Here are locals enjoying the sun in 1970. Location not known, but reported to be Balsall Heath



#### NEXT MEETING: 26<sup>TH</sup> APRIL A LADY OF LETTERS

Audrey Duggan visits to talk about Catherine Hutton, the subject of her new book. Catherine Hutton (11<sup>th</sup> February 1756 – 13<sup>th</sup> March 1846) was the Birmingham born daughter of the historian William Hutton. She was a prolific letter writer and novelist and her writings give a vivid picture of life in Birmingham in her day. She writes of schooldays, dancing, and the magnificent Balls she attended, of entertaining and being entertained. She was a friend of Joseph Priestley and her account of the Priestley Riots describes how it felt to fall victim to the rioters. Her account of her 'tours' across North Wales, made her a highly popular travel writer. Her interests brought her into contact with people such as Napoleon III, Sir Walter Scott and Charles Dickens. Of herself she once said I, "*never was for one moment unemployed when it was possible to be doing something.*"

