



Balsall Heath
Local History Society

THE GAZETTE *February 2012*

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LUNCHTIME LECTURES

LIBRARY THEATRE

Rachel McGregor (0121 464 1619) writes with details of the Spring Season lectures.

Tuesday 13th March: An unquestionably useful job - a short history of gardening in the archives –
Rachel MacGregor

Tuesday 10th April : After the Crowds Go Home - what do we remember of football and footballers? -
Trevor Fisher

Tuesday 8th May: Children's Lives: from the eighteenth century to the present day - *Sian Roberts*

Tuesday 12th June: Harborne through time - *Beryl Beavis*

Tuesday 10th July: The early history of lawn tennis and its Birmingham connections - *Bob Holland*

REUNION

ST MARTIN'S FLATS, HIGHGATE

Lisa Karim (lisakarim@hotmail.co.uk) wrote in: *"I grew up in Highgate as did my Dad, I went to St Albans School and as an extra gcse with Mrs Bonham I started a project on St Martins flats. I don't remember the flats being there but do remember watching them being knocked down, I was 3 or 4. We got my Nan into school and interviewed her about the flats on video (I still have it 20yrs later) this started my fascination with the flats. A couple of years ago as more friends of my dads and uncles joined facebook I started a group called Old Highgateonians. We share photos and the older ones share their memories and catch up and reunite with old friends, someone said wouldn't it be nice to meet up again after all those years...."*



Pictures: Mabel Karim and friends, The front entrance to the flats, Irene Sheldon and friends on Vaughton Street.

Accordingly Lisa has now organised a **reunion for Saturday 21st July**. There will be a walk around the flats area at 1pm and then the afternoon event from **2pm at Cobs Bar in Sherlock Street**. The History Society has been invited to have a stall at this event and all are welcome to come along. They are hoping to raise money on the day for St Martin's Youth Club and the event will be publicised on the Carl Chinn show and in the Birmingham Mail.

Bert Hackett grew up in Balsall Heath and went on to become the long running (drawing?) cartoonist *Gemini* for the Birmingham Post. **Jim Fitzpatrick** caught up with him for us



Bert and his design business partner, Graham Gavin, were at *The Birmingham Post & Mail* working on letter heads and van insignia, when the editor, David Hopkinson, suggested that they might like to submit a daily cartoon for the paper. *Gemini* first appeared in

October 1966. Graham left the *Post* in 1974, and Bert took over full responsibility 5 days a week.

Albert Graham Hackett was born at No 94 Sherbourne Road Balsall Heath in 1933. His mother, Hilda Allen was from Balsall Heath, and his father Frederick, from Black Heath. In 1938 at the age of 5, he was taken to see the Pageant of Birmingham at Aston Park, this was a six day event celebrating Birmingham's centenary. The Pageant endeavoured to illustrate periods of history from prehistoric beasts, through bronze and iron ages and the historic battles of man with himself. One of the battles re-enacted was the Battle of Crecy between the English and the French. As he got off the tram with his mother at Aston Park, Bert saw an astonishing sight, a French Soldier on his bike!



Bert's impression (left) of his former home in Balsall Heath – No 94 Sherbourne Rd (the top and “posh” end Bert insists). The ‘SP’ sign on the front of the house meant that there was a stirrup pump available here. They were used by fire guards to put out incendiary bombs dropped by enemy planes to cause fires. Albert was scheduled to be evacuated from Birmingham, but a bout of Scarlet Fever meant he was unable to join the first wave of evacuees. When he was fit again, he and his friend John Mole from Belgrave Road were to leave by coach from St Paul's Road, and then by train from Snow Hill to Cardiff. As the group moved away from Balsall Heath, 7 year old Albert was determined he was not going to cry. When he got off the train in Wales he was hawked around by evacuation

officials for some one to take him in. A lady, a Mrs Hassan, was saying that she could not take any more, but he was ‘sold’ to her anyway. Her house was in Whitchurch Cardiff, not far from the docks. The docks were soon to be bombed and Albert had to be moved again, this time he found himself staying at a Lock Keepers Cottage. This also became unsafe as an unexploded bomb was found nearby. After a little time his father took him back home to Birmingham and Balsall Heath.

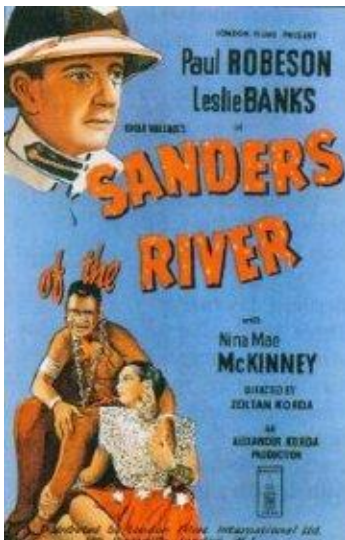
Bert soon became familiar with the trials of wartime Birmingham, like rationing, and the blackouts. He says: *‘You can't convey easily what blackouts were like. It was inky black, at times you could not see your own hand in front of your face. I remember passing through the entry that led to our back door and garden, and crashing straight into a courting couple in the blackness’*. There was some excitement to be found by a young boy in those war years; playing out in the blackout, by torch, was fun. *‘We boys dressed ourselves in black clothes, and pretended we were invisible. We finished off bombed buildings (as we thought of it) with fire works. We made ‘depth charges’ by tying a stone to a banger, lighting it, and then at the precise moment, throwing it into deep water where it would sink and explode’*.





Bert remembers being caught outside when a daytime siren went off: *"I heard the familiar sound of aircraft engines, and looking up I saw a Spitfire chasing an enemy plane across the sky over Edgbaston"*. But the misery of war did come home to Bert; he remembers standing with his mother at a bus stop. The pavement was running with water from a leaking hosepipe, *'I turned to my Mother and asked, Mum how long is the war going to last?'*. While the war ground on, the boy Hackett, was not without other entertainment. There were a choice of a dozen cinemas or more within walking distance or a short bus ride. Turning left out of Sherbourne Rd on to the Moseley Rd would bring you very quickly to the Moseley Picture House. On then across Belgrave Rd, continuing towards Highgate, and just beyond Leopold street, was the Alhambra Cinema. Turning the other way out of Sherbourne would have taken you to the Imperial Picture Palace at the corner of Clifton Road, less than a mile away. Apart from the

entertainment value of the movies, Bert says that in winter, *'We often went to the pictures simply to keep warm'*. Bert entered a national drawing competition run by ABC minors from the Alhambra Cinema. Sometime later he was approached by a reporter from the *Evening Despatch*, who came to interview Bert because he had won the competition's first prize of a bicycle. His prize was presented to him by a well known radio and film actor of the time, John Clarke, who had played *William* in the radio series of *Just William*. Ten year old Bert was unable to ride the cycle straight away as he was still recovering from being knocked down by a fire engine en-route from Highgate Square Fire Station. He had been standing near the junction of Leopold St and Moseley Rd; the fire engine had cut the corner and hit Albert leaving him with pelvic injuries.



Bert and his friends used the Sherbourne Road School grounds to play. *'To us boys the school seemed vast, with loads of room to have adventures'*. *"We went exploring in the Jungle and did deep sea diving, our imagination had no boundaries"*. Eventually they were banned from the school grounds because of the noise they made. Later in life Bert went along to a youth club run at the school, accessed by the gate in Orchard Rd. During a bombing raid, some of the houses opposite Orchard Road were damaged and had to be cleared.

This led to a emergency water supply pool being built on the space. This consisted of a circular wall three to four feet in height. The imagination of the young boys that lived near it had been fired by the Hollywood film *Sanders of the River*.



The plot involves a colonial District Officer played by Leslie Banks, who tries to rule his province fairly, helped by tribesman Bosambo, played by Paul Robeson. The motion picture is very atmospheric with spears, shields, canoes, and a great river. Also lots of African singing and chanting, especially from Paul Robeson. This would have been heady stuff for the boys of Balsall Heath and it came out in their role play. The EWS pool became an African river. Off with one boot or wellington, and one sock, a stick for an oar, and you could row and sing.

Bert explains the presence of the Policeman: *'This was the local bobby, a comical figure to us lads at the time. I remember that he had no hair under that helmet, and he was always moving us on'*.

When the war was won, Bert heeded Winston Churchill's call to 'go out and celebrate victory', by getting some yellow paint from his dad and painting a large 'V' on Orchard Rd.



This is Orchard Road circa 1967. Where the boy Hackett painted his 'V' sign. The former 'Off Licence' of the 40's. Bert remembers was owned and run by a Mrs Cartland. The archway which can be seen beyond the shop led to the Hackett's backgarden.

When the end of the war came, the blackout also ended, and the streetlights came on. *'It was almost blinding – like the Sun had come out'* says Bert. Bert was delighted too by the Victory tram decorated and lit-up to celebrate victory.

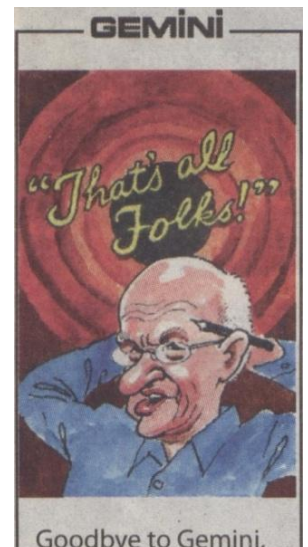
He had gone to several schools as a boy, including Dennis Rd school, which he left in 1948. He had been a member of the Scouts group in Vincent Street and confirms that their HQ there was previously a Pub. He also joined the Sea Cadets, and the Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve (RNVR).

This led to him joining the Royal Navy for his National Service. He was taken aboard a Battleship and then a Submarine while the two ships took part in exercises off the Isle of Wight. The Battleship, HMS Duke of York, displaced 37000 tons, carried 10 14" guns and could make 29 knots. When Bert was aboard her in the late 40's, Duke of York was probably serving as Flagship for the Home Fleet.

Bert wasn't to leave his parents house until 1954 (21yrs old), when he took a job in Manchester as an editorial artist. His qualification for that job came from attending a full time course at the Art College, Margaret St, Birmingham. Bert was not too hopeful of getting a place there, but sat the 3 day entry exam anyway. However there followed a letter to Bert's father from the college principal asking him to bring his son along to the school for an interview with some samples of his work. The head had seen something in Bert's work and wanted to see more. He was impressed enough to offer him a place. That moment can be said to be the lynch-pin on which young Bert's career was launched.

Bert says, *'The 3 and a half years I spent at the College of Art were some of the best of my life. We worked hard, often working into the evening, also some weekends, working on projects we students needed to get finished. I also got cultural education; with many visits to the theatre, at the Hippodrome in Hurst St, I saw the famous comedy double, Laurel & Hardy, and the American actor and singer Danny Kaye'. Bert continues, 'I loved the theatre, ever since another never forgotten experience in the same year of the Pageant (1938), I was taken to see Arthur Askey in Jack and Jill at the Prince of Wales Theatre, Broad Street.*

Apart from Art College and theatre, Bert followed motor racing, as he wasn't too interested in football, and when it came to girls, he didn't have to look far, *'the best girls were at the School of Art'* he says. He also had jobs at a men's outfitters setting up window displays, and at a silk screen printing firm. After serving his time in the Navy and returning to Civvy Street he took up his job in Manchester.



Bert came back to Birmingham 10 years later with his bride, Polly, and set up a Graphic Design business in York Road, Kings Heath. Their work took them to the *Birmingham Post and Mail* which led on to Albert Graham Hackett becoming the cartoonist *Gemini*.

NEXT MEETING: 29TH MARCH

ART OF GLASS

Don Embury visits us for fascinating stories about calligraphy and hand etching on glass.