

Graham Partlett wrote from California and kindly sent some thoughts about his years in Balsall Heath for our HLF project...

I was born in December 1935 at Banks Road, Small Heath, Birmingham. The first memory I have is living at 2 back- of- 6 Oldfield Road, Sparkbrook, Balsall Heath, Birmingham. This address seems odd, but this was a row of terraced houses at right angles to the road with the house on Oldfield Road as number 6. The remaining houses in the terrace were numbered 1 to 8 at the back of number 6. The house had a very small garden at the front leading to an alleyway to Oldfield Road and at the rear there was a paved yard to the wall of the next house. On the ground floor there was a living room and also a small kitchen, that had a sink and a gas heated copper boiler. There was only cold running water in the house and no hot water, except for that provided by the open boiler. Also there was no electricity in the house and the lighting downstairs was provided by gas lamps. The mantles in the gas lamps were very fragile and broke easily and to replace them we had to go to Peacocks store on Ladypool Road near Highgate Road. Upstairs the only lighting came from candles. Heating downstairs was supplied by an open fireplace with coal or coke as the fuel. The first and second floors each had one bedroom. The house had no bathroom and the toilet was across the yard at the back of the house in a brick building. In this building there was also an area for washing clothes, towels and sheets, which was equipped with a mangle for squeezing the water out of the washed items. For baths we filled a zinc bath tub with water from the gas boiler.

The conditions in which we lived were primitive, but the community was exceptional. No-one in the area would have thought about locking doors. We knew everyone in the neighbourhood and people rarely moved, so that we were a closely knit community, brought closer by the war. An important member of our community was the local policeman, who was called a 'Bobby' in those days. His beat, which he walked, included our area and he knew everyone on his beat and often stopped to talk to us when we were playing in the street. Number 1 was occupied by Mrs. Smith, her eldest daughter Elsie and her son Albert who was 42 and unmarried. Albert worked at the Co-Operative milk dairy in Cherrywood Road looking after the horses and later I would attend a school located close to the Co-Op dairy. We lived at number 2 and at number 3 were Mr. and Mrs. Ward with their son Brian and a daughter. Mrs. Ward was also a daughter of Mrs. Smith and further down the terrace at number 6 lived the youngest daughter of Mrs. Smith with her children.

My father had been recalled to join the Royal Horse Artillery when the Second World war started in 1939 and we saw very little of him during the war years, when he served in North Africa and then in Europe. Occasionally father would come home on leave bringing with him a tin of army issue boiled sweets, which were very welcome in food rationed Britain. Since we saw so little of our father during the war years, he became a stranger to my brother Billy and I. Mother was at home, but to supplement father's army pay, she worked in a local British Restaurant. At that time we had some good neighbours, who kept an eye on my brother and I when mother was at work. This problem was reduced when we were attending Clifton Road Elementary School.

On one occasion we were lucky that the house remained standing, but this had nothing to do with the air raids. I found some matches and was playing with them by the window that looked out onto the small front garden. The window had light lace type curtains and I managed to set these alight and the flames quickly spread upwards. It was fortunate that some men were working close to the house and they were able to extinguish the flames fairly quickly with a small hose pipe. As a result of their actions only the curtains, some wallpaper and the radio were burnt. I, of course, had run off and gone into hiding and I could hear my brother Billy and Brian calling to me as they searched to find me. Eventually feeling cold and hungry I went home to face my fate. Mother soon warmed my backside with her hand and lectured me on the dangers of playing with matches. Following my spanking I was sent to bed, but it was not long before mother brought me some food and drink.