



## Balsall Heath Local History Society

## THE GAZETTE

APRIL 2020

Tel: 07565 194822 Email:

info@balsallheathhistory.co.uk

Web: balsallheathhistory.co.uk

Facebook: Balsall Heath Local History Society

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/balsallheathlhs>

## The Tannery at Balsall Heath 1741-1833

It is hard to imagine what Balsall Heath was like in the first half of the eighteenth century. It was mainly countryside with a few large houses but there was a muddy track across the heath which became more important as the small town of Birmingham started to grow rapidly during the eighteenth century.



In 1741 there was certainly a flourishing tannery here which included a tan house, tan vats, tan yard and outbuildings, all fenced together, as well as ponds and pools. It stood where Lime Grove is today. The tannery bell dated 1749 has survived and is in St Cyprian's Church, Hay Mills.

By 1788 the tannery was in the hands of Avery Edwards as a tanned hide was stolen from his tan yard at that time and he offered a 5 guinea reward. He died in 1792 and was buried at Moseley. A newspaper at the time described him as "a very opulent tanner". He bequeathed the tannery to his nephew Henry Homer who married Betty Cox.

The Homers were a family of some repute. John Homer (1713-1769) was a man of considerable wealth with property in central London and was physician to George the Third when he was Prince of Wales. His only child is said to have been accidentally poisoned by his nurse, so as he died childless he left much of his fortune to his nephew Henry Homer (Sr) in Balsall Heath.

A wonderful watercolour picture dated 1799 by Samuel Wright of "Mr Homer's House" is in Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery.



Henry Homer died in 1802 and there is a memorial in Moseley Church on the wall.

Soon after his death, the property was put up for auction and described as

*"A large and commodious tan yard with dwelling house and upwards of 70 acres of rich inclosed arable, meadow and pasture land in the highest state of cultivation"* also, tan yard, store rooms, drying rooms, bark barn, bark mills, gardens. tan house meadow, lawn in front of house fronting the turnpike road"

The tannery was continued at Balsall Heath by two of the sons, Henry Homer (Jr) and Avery Edwards Homer. However, in 1801 Henry Homer had married Nancy Chambers of Yardley and this probably spurred him to establish a tannery there from 1802. Then in 1808 a major step was taken, when the two brothers dissolved their partnership, with the Balsall Heath Tannery continuing until 1833 when auction notices advertised:

"The very costly and well known tanning establishment of Mr Avery Homer" and "the commodious and substantial house, garden, gig house, stables and offices....with an

important frontage to the high road from Birmingham to Moseley.... The situation is inferior to none in the kingdom for the purchase of hides, bark etc. and for the never failing supply of water”

Avery’s house contents were also advertised for sale: *“the genteel Household Furniture and Effects of Mr. Avery Homer, Tanner (who is relinquishing the trade and declining housekeeping) consisting of lofty four-post bedsteads, with dimity hangings, wool and other mattresses, goose and mixed feather beds, large Witney blankets and counterpanes, bed and table linen, neat dressing tables, wash-handstands and chairs match, handsome mahogany chests of drawers, swing, pier, and chimney glasses, Venetian, Kidderminster, and Brussels carpets...”*

Avery finally demolished the place in 1835 when a large quantity of building materials were auctioned off. He died a few years later in 1841.

This was a good time to sell up. The Edwards estate on the other side of the Moseley Road was being sold off as building plots for housing and the whole area was changing- new roads, and construction of the railway from 1837. The future value of the tannery now lay in its land. In 1836 the site was acquired by John Parker and later sold to Richard Tarleton.

Henry Homer (Jr) continued with the tannery at Yardley and on his death in 1851 the business passed to his son in law William Madeley and from him to his nephew George Muscott. I have recently been contacted by a descendant of the Muscott family who is interested in the history of the tannery. He is planning to write a booklet so watch this space.

Val Hart

## Pandemic

The Spanish Flu pandemic of 1918-19 killed more people than died in World War 1.

World War I claimed an estimated 16 million lives. The influenza epidemic that swept the world in 1918 killed an estimated 50 million people. One fifth of the world's population was attacked by this deadly virus. Within months, it had killed more people than any other illness in recorded history.

Birmingham was hit hard. On July 23rd 1918 The Birmingham Gazette reported that there had been 125 deaths the previous week and 96 the week before

that. Many schools were closed. The paper also commented on overworked doctors. *“One doctor reached his surgery this morning for his half hour session to find 178 patients waiting.”* Obviously not a lot of social distancing there!

This is a playground rhyme from 1918:

I had a little bird  
Its name was Enza  
I opened the window  
And Influenza.

Val Hart

## News

Since it’s unlikely that we’ll be having another meeting in the near future, here are a couple of websites that have audio or video from or about Birmingham history.

<https://historywm.com/podcasts>

has a selection of audio podcasts on local history. Of particular relevance at the moment is an account of the Spanish Flu.

<https://historywm.com/podcasts/spanish-flu-comes-to-birmingham>

<https://www.britishpathe.com/search/query/birmingham> has a selection of video clips from the Pathe news library.

<https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/about/news/digital-downloads/>

The National Archives has announced that, while their Centre at Kew is closed their digital archive will be available for free downloads. There are conditions.