

John Middlemore in Conversation

with "Baccy Charlie"

From the 1879 Annual Report of the Middlemore Homes.

Last March a boy named Charles was brought to our Home by our Children's Beadle. He entered the room without shyness or fear, and very deliberately took stock of its contents. I was so much interested in him that I took notes of our conversation.

JM: How old are you?

Charles: Don't know

JM: Shall I tell you?

CH: Ah!

JM: Eight I should think

CH: No I am't, I'm a-going in seven. You speak too quick.

You take the words out of my mouth.

In reply to more questions:

CH: I used to live in Bordesley Street. I like it because I had such a lot of pals. I used to catch sparrows in the churchyard, near the betting ground. I fought a kid in the church and the bobby wanted to catch me.

He then, at my request, sang a song called "Poor Joe," in a very loud voice. He used to sing in beer shops for half-pence. At first he refused to sing, saying that he didn't like to sing in such a place.

He went on:

CH: I smoke, they call me "baccy Charlie". I used to smoke every day, and I'd smoke now if I could collar hold of it. He said that his mother had run away from his father "with a man as big as the ceiling" and that a "bobby had run him round the double knock in Allison Street but couldn't collar him"

CH: My brother is called "legs and wings" because he always gets away from the bobbies. He used to steal cocks and hens and the bobbies couldn't catch him for twelve months. He used to chuck them down the cellar to me.

JM: Did you ever sleep out at night?

CH: Of course, I went on the roost. I'm the Bordesley Street Terror. I am. I went on the roost with my pals.

JM: Did you ever swim in the canal?

CH: Swim? Ah! I swam in the Fazeley Street cut. The lads shoved me in and nearly drowned me. I was flashing myself a-thinking I could swim. At last Charley Hyde learnt me to swim.

Val Hart

Balsall Heath Local History Society Gazette

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Membership of the Society costs £12 a year. Membership runs from January to December each year and application forms are available on the website. Fees at meetings will continue unchanged: £1 for members and £3 for visitors.

Meetings are held at St Paul's Venture, Malvern Street at 7:30 p.m. Refreshments will be served from 7 pm to 7:20 p.m.

Coming soon

Thursday March 31st. "The History of the Birmingham Hippodrome" presented by David & Pam Humphries

Thursday April 28th. "Who's for the Game. Four men from Birmingham Sports Clubs who died in WW1." presented by Doug Smith..

Reminder about Society Membership for 2022.

Thanks to all who have renewed their membership. This is just a reminder that the membership year runs from January to December and cost £12. Forms to fill in can be downloaded from the website or contact us ; info@balsallheathhistory.co.uk.

Watercress!

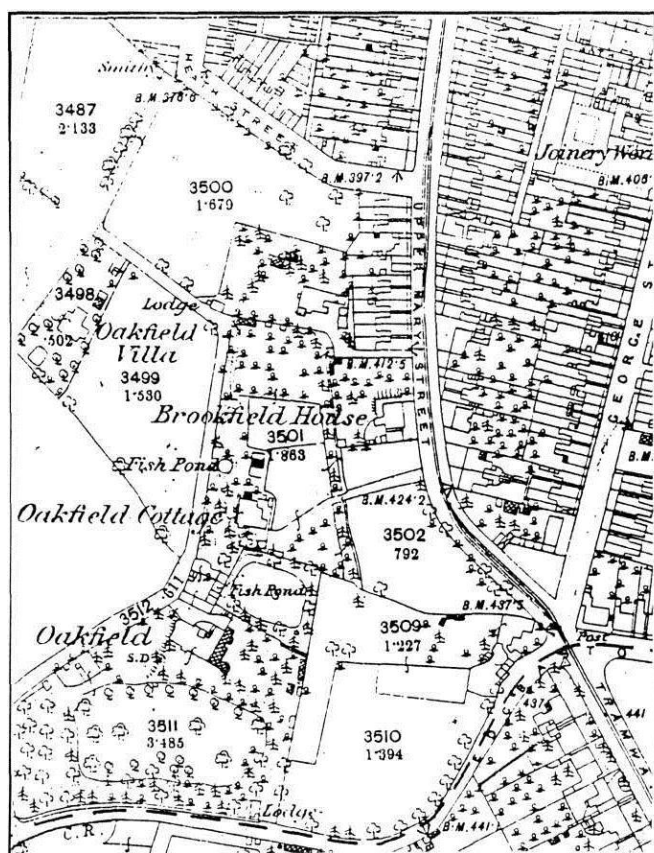
Following last month's article about John Dix, a member of the Society remembers Dorrie Lopacka in the 1980s telling us about watercress. She said she used to pick it from the River Rea!

Val Hart

Oakfield House, Balsall Heath

Oakfield House was built in the early nineteenth century by Thomas Cooke, a successful Birmingham brassfounder. His wife died in 1826 and two years later he decided to sell up. The house was a substantial residence:

“spacious entrance hall and staircase, drawing, dining , breakfast and other rooms, nine airy bedrooms, closets, 2 kitchens, larders, cellars, stabling for 3 horses, piggery, pump, garden with cold baths and fish stews(ponds). With it went 20 acres of rich turf land including a plantation “thickly studded with full grown majestic oaks” as well as a farm cottage with sheds for 12 cows.



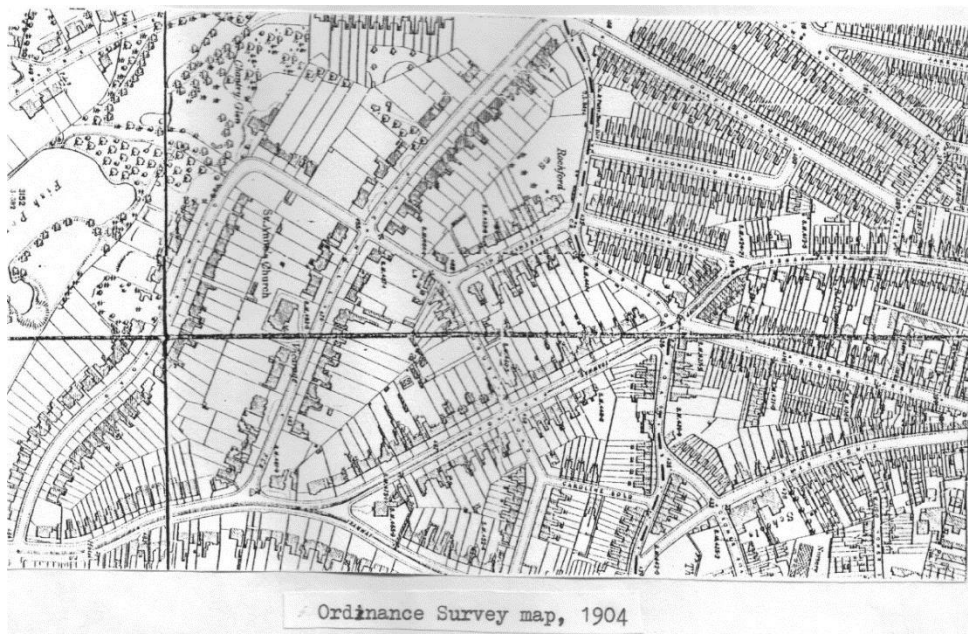
1888 Ordnance Survey Map

The estate was divided up and more than half of it was bought by three men- Mr Wilson, Mr Gilbert, a solicitor, and John Towers Lawrence, who was notable local figure. Each of them, *“proceeded to make his respective lot a picturesque country retirement”* as the newspaper described it. Thomas Cooke also erected a new villa for himself and then put up the remaining land for sale in 1831 with a rave review. *“The neighbourhood holds the highest rank in the scale of respectability and the prospects of the surrounding country are of great extent and beauty”*.

Thomas Cooke died in 1838, age of 77 and was buried in Moseley together with his wife and daughter.

Later Development

The Edwards Estate, adjoining the Oakfield lands, was sold up from 1833 but some of the large houses were still there in 1888. Oakfield House stood at the junction of Mary St and George St, on Edgbaston Lane.



By 1904 the roads we know today had been laid out and built upon.

Oakfield House School & Mrs Sharman

In 1841 Oakfield House was home to a boarding school run by Eliza Sharman. She was from a shoemaking family in Wellingborough and had moved to Balsall Heath by 1834, for reasons unknown. At the time of the 1841 census she was living at the school with 3 of her children and 23 boarders while her husband seems to be living apart from her. However, when he died in 1845 he was recorded at "of Oakfield House" and was buried locally in Moseley.

In 1851 she had 22 boarders, and in 1861, 16 boarders. By 1871, age 77, she had retired but was still living there. She died in 1876. The school outlived her and was still there in 1881, in the hands of Eliza Johnson, who had been working with Mrs Sharman from the 1850s. By 1891 the school had gone.

It's interesting to note that three of Eliza's unmarried sisters had moved from Northamptonshire to live nearby in Edgbaston Lane by 1861 and that a fourth sister, Marian Messiter, also came to live in Balsall Heath by 1881, presumably to be near Malim, Eliza's son, who was a well respected surgeon living on the Bristol Road. We were contacted recently by one of Eliza's descendants who was seeking family history.

Val Hart

A Moment in Time

Regular readers of the Gazette will have seen this picture before. Its main subject is the Eagle pub as it once stood on the corner of Belgrave Road and Longmore Street. In fact, we featured this photo as our 'Photo Pick' just back in December. So why feature it again now? Well, we have a whole new way of looking at it. A back to the future way, we can be there with that boy waiting to cross Belgrave Road. The close up of him shows us that he has spotted the camera man and he is looking directly at us.

And we are looking at him. We know who he is, where he is going and where he is coming from. We know of his mother and father and his brother. We know he had a successful career and where he is now. And that he will be making a visit next month to Kings Heath in order to celebrate his mom's 90th birthday.

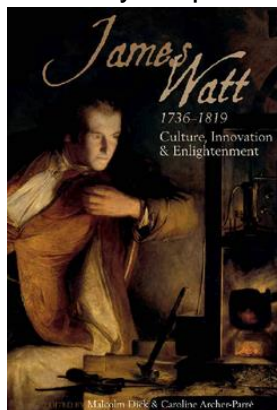
While he waits for that green traffic light to change to red and stop the traffic, we can tell you all. He is Stephen Murphy; he is on his way home from school. That school is Mary St as we mostly knew it, by now though it has been renamed Belgrave. He will have exited the school by way of Mary St, turned left into Balsall Heath Rd and then right at the Wallace Pub into Longmore and on to Belgrave. When he crosses the road it's a short walk up Gooch St to home at No 10 Conybere St, opposite the Triangle Cinema.



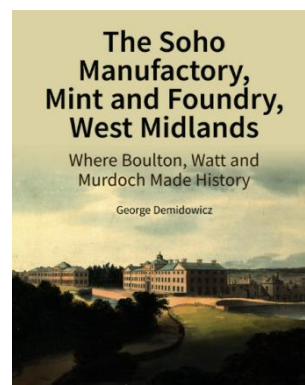
He has a younger brother Mark, mom and dad are Eric and Beryl Murphy. She was named after George Formby's wife, Beryl. Mom was a classroom assistant at Mary St. There is so much more we've learned about this boy staring back at us, like he went to Moseley school of art and presently lives in Northern Ireland. There is so much more to tell, but we'll leave that for another time travel away-day. Tell you what, let get into that 1960's Ford Zephyr, and take a wild trip around our favourite haunts of Balsall Heath. J.F.

Other Events

Launch of New Books on the Soho Manufactory Sites and James Watt
Main Lecture Theatre, Floor 1, Arts Building, University of Birmingham, Edgbaston
B15 2TT
Saturday 9 April 2022 from 1.30pm



George Demidowicz has worked for many years on the archaeology and history of the three Soho manufacturing sites associated where Matthew Boulton, James Watt and William Murdoch pioneered industrial innovation and production in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. His findings are now published in a splendidly illustrated and well-researched hard-back publication by English Heritage and Liverpool University Press, *The Soho Manufactory, Mint and Foundry: Where Boulton, Watt and Murdoch Made History*. The event is an opportunity to hear



about this new book which illuminates the heritage of Birmingham and the Black Country and purchase it at a reduced rate of £28.

The second part of the afternoon launches another book which was published at the start of lockdown by Liverpool University Press. *James Watt, 1736– 1819: Culture, Innovation and Enlightenment*, edited by Malcolm Dick and Caroline Archer-Parré, contains essays by leading scholars which focus on his contributions to science and technology, his intellectual world, family life, links with the slave trade and the massive Watt archives at the Library of Birmingham. The paperback can be purchased at the reduced price of £18.

You can register for this event via [Eventbrite](#)

There will be displays by various heritage organisations and publishers at the event.

The final curtain call

It's February 1914 and it looks like murder

A play showing at the Red Lion, Vicarage Road, Kings Heath at 7:30 pm on Friday 1st April and Saturday 2nd April. Tickets £6.50 or £5 to those in period costume.



Dyche Exhibition

from 18 March to 18 June at the Library of Birmingham.

Portraits of people from Commonwealth nations who settled in Birmingham are to go on display in a new exhibition. It has been created from the Dyche Collection, with photos taken by Ernest Dyche and his son Malcolm, who had two studios in the city one of which was on the Moseley Road in Balsall Heath.

The images were acquired by Birmingham Central Library in 1990 and will form the exhibition, which is funded by The National Lottery Heritage Fund.

Little is known about many of those featured in the photos, and exhibition organisers are appealing for the stories behind the portraits.

Sampad, the charity, which focuses on South Asian and British Asian arts and heritage, has compiled the exhibition, which documents migration to Birmingham after the end of World War Two. Over the last 14 months, archivists have searched through more than 10,000 photographs stored in boxes. A digital version of the archive will be made available in the future.

Balsall Heath Local History Society has written about the Dyche Studio on the Moseley road in our publication, "Stars of Balsall Heath" and in previous Gazette articles. (Sept 2103; Nov 2018; July2020; and Sept 2020.)

Val Hart

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