

Our February Meeting

Six Warrior Women of the English Civil Wars, 1642-51
During the English Civil War women were not meek bystanders who took no part in the conflict but actively participated in a variety of ways, challenging the orthodoxies of their day and perhaps our own preconceptions.

This talk looks briefly at six women who took part in the fighting, undertook spying missions and negotiated deals with politicians.

It also touches briefly upon cross-dressing soldiers; widows seeking compensation from Parliament and political activists.

The presentation lasts for 50 mins approximately, is fully illustrated and offers links for further reading following the event.

The Plaque on 42, Church Road for Margaret Begbie Moffat Brown

Thank you, readers, who have provided a little more information.

Margaret was Honorary Secretary for the

Moseley and District Churches Housing Association which was founded in 1966 and is now part of the Accord Group. Margaret lived in Church Road for over 60 years, dying in 1996.

The plaque was indeed out up by the Association. It was made by John Adams, whose premises were next door to the MDCHA offices at 106 Alcester Road, in Moseley village.

A Tribute to Bill Dargue

For many local historians William Dargue's online History of Birmingham is a key resource- reliable and well researched. It is very sad to now report that Bill died at New Year, 2023. Working at Heath Mount School alongside Bron Salway, he was an old friend and supporter of Balsall Heath History Society, promoting especially work with schools. He was person with huge energy and enthusiasm, it's hard to believe he has gone.

Val Hart



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[lostchildrenproject](https://www.facebook.com/lostchildrenproject)

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 are: £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 pm.

Coming soon

Thursday February 23rd 2023

Six Warrior Women of the English Civil Wars, 1642-51

See details at the top of the page

Elizabeth Grew, A Suffragette from Balsall Heath!

A life-long campaigner for women's rights.

Elizabeth was born in August 1883 and in the 1891 census she was living in Cox Street West with her parents and four siblings. Her father was listed as a House Painter and employer.



Interviewed in America in 1976 she had this to say about growing up in Balsall Heath:

"My mother had eleven children in fourteen years and I thought mother's life had been pretty hard.... I felt my mother was over-burdened, but she was very happy. Father was a very splendid man and mother was always happy. I remember when we were children, she would have the newest baby on her lap, and we would sit around the fire, and mother would sing folk songs and hymns to us and it was a lovely life."

She left school at age 13 as education beyond that age was considered unnecessary for a girl. Then she stayed at home to run the house as her mother was a semi-invalid. By 1901 the family had moved to 1 Alcester Road, a house at the junction of Edgbaston Road East and the Moseley Road.

Elizabeth at the age of 17, was working as a bookshop assistant

The issue of women's suffrage had been a hot topic in Birmingham for many years. The Chartist movement encouraged women to interest themselves in politics and eventually in 1868 the Birmingham Women's Suffrage Society was established. Birmingham had a strong record for liberal attitudes and the need for reform, but progress towards votes for women was slow. Then in 1903 a new organisation was established in Manchester- The WSPU, (Women's Social and Political Union) led by the Pankhursts. By 1908 there was a branch in Birmingham and the following year the city hit the headlines when Prime Minister Asquith's visit was disrupted by violent actions. The women arrested at this time included Hilda Burkitt of Grantham Rd, Sparkbrook, who was one of the first to be forcibly fed while on hunger strike in Winston Green prison. The WSPU appealed to younger women, including those, like Elizabeth, from less privileged backgrounds.

Elizabeth herself described how she became a Suffragette in about 1903/4 when she was attending a Literary & Social Guild at the Baptist Church in Moseley. She took part in a debate about votes for women.

EG: I sent to London and got some of their literature and I said, "Mother, I think I must be a suffragette." So the first thing I did was to convert all my family. I thought that was the best thing, then I wouldn't have any trouble at home.

QU: Did they convert easily?

EG: Yes.

QU: Your parents also?

EG: They became quite good supporters. Of course, they didn't go out and work, but they approved of what I was doing. I didn't do any violent work. As a matter of fact, Mrs. Pankhurst and Christabel didn't want me to. They said I could explain it to large audiences and get them sympathetic and so I was chiefly organising and money raising.

QU: In London?

EG: Oh no. In Birmingham.

QU: You raised money among the upper classes... you spoke to them and raised money?

EW: Oh yes. and speak to everybody, you know. In England we have a very nice habit, you go out on to a street corner, and you ask a shopkeeper to lend you a soap-box or chair, and then you go outside, you stand upon the chair, and first of all there'd be a few dogs, and then some little boys, and then after about ten minutes you'd have crowd That was the way we worked it.

QU: Were you nervous the first few times?

EW: Oh, I was always nervous A good speaker has to be nervous and I remember several times I said to my mother, "Oh I don't think I can go tonight" and mother would say, "Now you've enlisted in this army and you must go. You're a soldier."

Birmingham WSPU in a procession at Stratford on Avon,



On the eve of the 1911 census the Birmingham Suffragists hosted an all-night meeting at 97, John Bright Street, home of the WSPU Committee Rooms, and where the organiser Elizabeth Grew had her office. The Census forms showed that 120 females and 10 males were registered at the address that evening.

However, it was in 1912 that she became seriously active. In February she was apparently WSPU county organiser for Staffordshire and in

October was sent to organise Barrow-in-Furness and Whitehaven. This was the year that the WSPU launched a heightened campaign of protest targeting property.

I am full of admiration for Elizabeth, as at the age of 29 she was sent to a new town in a different part of the country to rouse interest in a cause which she knew would be unpopular. She immediately began to make contacts, give talks and arrange meetings. In May 1913 a local unoccupied mansion near Barrow was burnt down by the Suffragettes and Elizabeth gleefully remarked to the press, "*I am pleased to hear about this house but sorry it was not twelve houses instead*". She clearly enjoyed the press attention.

June 1913 saw her sent to Leicester where a vigorous Anti-Government campaign was carried out by the WSPU owing to the retirement of the Liberal MP. The WSPU issued an Election Address calling on Electors to keep the Liberals out, the dominant issues being Votes for Women and torture of Suffragist prisoners The WSPU were represented by a band of able speakers and workers at both indoor and outdoor meetings, Elizabeth speaking at Leicester Market Place on the 19 and 21 June. On the 19th Elizabeth spoke along with Gladys Hazel (organiser Leicester) who in October was replaced by Elizabeth Grew.

Women Suffragette in The Market Place, *Leicester Daily Post*, 20 June 1913

"Both these ladies were given a good hearing on the whole, and there was no disturbance. Their



remarks were punctuated by jeers and ironic cheers.. ...but the crowd was in good humour, and the Suffragist [sic] orators drove off in waggonettes at the close of their propagandist efforts with a little booing that did no harm and excited no untoward incident."

Following the by-election Elizabeth returned to Barrow and carrying on her busy schedule, spoke at Ambleside, Preston, Blackburn and Barrow before returning as organiser to Leicester in October. Then in December she was called away to Plymouth to organise the welcome for Mrs. Pankhurst on her return for America in December. On Mrs. Pankhurst's arrival she was arrested and taken to Exeter Gaol and on her release Elizabeth became the chief organiser and effectively Press Officer for the suffragettes. Without doubt Elizabeth's was now a person of importance in the militant world

She returned to Leicester and was next sent to Newcastle-upon-Tyne arriving early April 1914 as the WSPU Organiser. Shortly after arriving Elizabeth was sent to Ladybank, East Fife, which was Mr. Asquith's constituency, taking a lead role in a WSPU demonstration. In June that year she also arranged the first commemorations for Emily Wilding Davison, the suffragette who received fatal injuries while attempting to stop the King's horse in the Derby. The anniversary was celebrated at Morpeth when suffragettes from the WSPU laid floral tributes on Miss Davison's grave followed by an open-air meeting when a large and orderly crowd assembled with speakers including Elizabeth.

Shortly before the First World War she led a deputation of militant suffragettes to visit the Bishop of Durham to discuss the question of forcible feeding in prisons and the provisions of the 'Cat-and-Mouse' Act, but all WSPU activity ceased when war was declared in August.

During the First World War she was the organiser of Nuneaton Girls War Club and also ran a club for George Cadbury Junior at Northfield. In 1916 she returned to Newcastle working at Swan Hunter and Wigham Richardson's Ltd. Shipyard where she was the Women's Welfare Officer.

Following the war, she returned to Birmingham where she was the organising secretary of the Women's Industrial League, with Lady Rhondda as President. During the war, women had taken on many jobs previously done by men but thousands lost their jobs when ex-soldiers returned. The aim of the League was to secure equal opportunities for the employment of women, particularly in trade and industry.

In January 1924 Elizabeth departed for America and in 1927 married Charles F. Bacon, Glove Manufacturer of Toledo, Ohio. Her major contribution in America was working with Mary Sanger and the controversial birth control movement, largely because Elizabeth had come from a large family at a time of no birth control.

This amazing woman never ceased to work for women's rights and eventually, at the age of 99, died in Santa Barbara California in 1982.

Val Hart

Credits. Many thanks to Dr P. Schofield, who is researching the life of Elizabeth Grew. The photo of the Leicester meeting is from the East Midlands Oral History archive.

June's Story

June Pitts' story is told by her son, Barry Walmsley Pitts.



At the age of 90, my mother's memory is not what it was. Fortunately for us, mom loved telling stories of her early years growing up in Balsall Heath. I'll try and recount them for you here. If you grew up in Birmingham these may well inspire some memories of your own.

Photo: June celebrates her 90th Birthday. June 2022
(Name after the month of her birth).

Mom's full name is June Mary Pitts (nee Mills). She was born on 25 June 1932 and was brought up at number 1/29 Longmore St, Balsall Heath. Her mother, Beatrice Louise Mills died when my mom was only two. Her father was never around, and she was brought up by her maternal grandmother, Florence Allen Mills (maiden name was Shuker).

Grand Ma Florence was one of 13 children, which included three stepsisters as her mother remarried following the death of her first husband. The family moved to Birmingham and in Florence's Baptism records they were shown to be living at No 3 Sherbourne Terrace, Sherbourne Rd, Balsall Heath. Her father William was a bricklayer, who had likely moved to Birmingham for work around the 1890s. Florence went on to marry a William of her own, William Thomas Mills known as Billy Mills, who originated from Uttoxeter in Staffordshire.



Flo and Billy had 10 children, among them Nellie, Beatrice, and William (see photo). Billy suffered a disabling head injury in the First World War and subsequently died from this in 1929 leaving Florence a widow with 7 children (3 not surviving infancy).

Photo by Gale's Studio Branch 54 Market Street Manchester (Postcard) Circa 1914/15.

Left to Right Nellie, Florence (Grand Ma), William, and Beatrice (Mom's mother aged 2).

My mom, June, was born into an established and large family with lots of uncles and aunts. Two of her uncles Bertram (Bertie) and Gordon were only 6 and 4 when she was born, and she always refers to them as her brothers.

Times were tough and mom had a very hard upbringing. Despite this or because of it, mom speaks fondly of some

of her childhood. During the day she was allowed some freedom to play in and around the streets near her house, but only after she'd finished her chores.

Photo: In the yard at 1 back of 29 (1/29) Longmore St.

From left to right. Bertram (Bertie), his mother Florence, Bertie's wife Doreen, and their daughter Marilyn. The small boy is thought to be another of Florence's grandchildren.



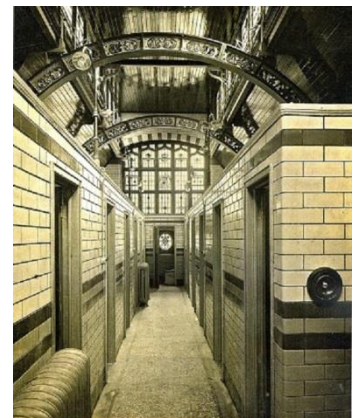
From an early age June's chores involved fetching and carrying, leading the grate, cleaning, and looking after the chickens, ducks, cats, and dogs.

Through this, she became very resourceful and developed a love of animals which was noticed by others. Therefore, if anyone needed an animal taken to the vet's mom was called on. One of the more unusual pets taken there by her was a small monkey, which caused mayhem in the vets when mom lifted the basket lid to prove that she did indeed have a monkey, and it escaped!

June's home was at the back of a barbers shop (number 29) on Longmore St, and accessing her home was via a wide entry to the side. After the Second World War, the gentleman who ran the barbers never came back. It remained empty for some time until eventually being taken into use by the family.

There was no bathroom in the house, so mom went with her Aunt Gladys once a week to the slipper baths on Moseley Rd. Mom said they used to queue there and then go into a booth with a bath. The attendant had a special key for the hot water and would fill the bath to the right temperature and then leave you. Mom remembers sliding down the bath and getting into trouble for splashing water all over the floor only getting out when the water was too cold, and you couldn't top it up with any more hot water.

The house backed onto the river Rea and lots of fun was had by



swinging across the river on a rope swing. The river occasionally flooded, and one time it washed animals down it from a nearby abattoir. On returning from evacuation in 1944 mom saw the river had been put in a culvert and behind a very high wall spoiling the fun. Mom talked about joining the River Street gang and how they often had fights with the Longmore Street gang that Bertie and Gordon were in. I think mom joined the River street gang to spite her uncles. She recalls all sorts of street games such as skipping in pairs, marbles, hopscotch, leapfrog, and endless ball games. She frequented many of the shops in her area running errands for her grandma.

She recalls going to Wrensons, Pinnicks, and Muddimans, and cashing her uncle's army cheque at Ambler's funeral directors, who had a place opposite where she lived. She fetched chips from Floyds a couple of doors down and remembers another popular chippie owned by a German couple. This chippie had a queue outside it when they returned after their internment during the war. Grand Ma would take her to the Wallace pub where she would get to go in the Off licence for



pop. Mom also had the heavy job of getting coke for the fires from the coal merchants and having to use the ration card to get it. One day the wheel came off the pram she used to cart it and had a hell of a job getting it back home.

Photo:

Far left Florence Mills, with two of her friends enjoying a glass of stout at a relative's 60th birthday celebration.

Mom went to Mary St school and had some tough experiences there. One time at age 4 mom was made to sit under the teacher's desk, for biting a girl following a squabble. The teacher said if you act like a dog then you must be treated like one. She spent the rest of the day there.

Another time she was made to say thank you in assembly for her second-hand clothes donated by the police benevolent society, despite them not coming via the school but a friend of the family. It felt like punishment for being poor. At age 7 she left the school with other children to be evacuated. She was sent to Dursley in Gloucestershire, initially staying with a Mr and Mrs Bentley, mom had a lovely time with them. Taking her on day trips on a train, something she'd never experienced before.

Tragically, Mr Bentley died and June was moved to a nearby home called Cam House. She did try and run away from here but was hampered by being followed by other small children all wanting to go home too. The game was up when she asked for a drink of water for them from a nearby house and they were rumbled as runaways. Mom is ever grateful for a teacher at Cam House who noticed mom's very poor eyesight and had her eyes tested. As a result, mom was fitted with glasses and could now see properly and read the blackboard for the first time.

Now back home in Longmore Street, she was noticing the changes to Balsall Heath, mostly due to the bombing it had suffered. She heard sad stories of families no longer there and of businesses that had been bombed out. However, as kids these bomb sites provided the perfect playground for cowboys and Indians, making dens and hide and seek. She now went to Highgate school for girls, but never talked much about her time there. As mom got older she frequented the picture houses with her favourite ones being the Triangle just down the road and the posh Luxor. She remembers the matinee shows being packed with noisy children and many a time groups of them being

chucked out for misbehaving. When they came out of the Triangle they flooded out as a pack onto the tramlines, which were only a few feet from the exit. Mom said it was a miracle no one was ever killed.

She loved going to the cinema and when able, sneaking into films that were above her age by dressing up in her aunt's clothes.

On leaving school mom got a job at a place making seaside buckets and spades and other similar things out of pressed steel/tin. I think the name of the factory was something like 'Hall & Lane' Mom progressed from minor shop floor work to operating a number of the big presses. This was piecework and as she was very quick and bright earned some good money for a woman of her age. She used this money to buy herself new clothes something she'd had very little of and also a new bike, her pride, and joy. She became a keen cyclist. She cycled all over including trips to the Lickey Hills, enjoying the freedom it gave her. Cycling is where my dad, Dennis Pitts, comes in as he was a keen cyclist too and known locally for making his and his brothers' bikes out of old parts he'd scavenged. They often raced on the old cinder track going home with scraped knees.



Photo: Cinder track in Balsall Heath Rd. Panther Speed Cycle club rider Newby in action.

One of mom's friends introduced dad to mom, but at their first meeting, mom accused him of nicking her bike, which had recently been stolen. Dad was innocent and was obviously not too concerned about the accusation as shortly after that he saw mom at the dance hall on Moseley Rd and asked her out.

They got married in 1954 and went on to have five children of their own (Barry, Karen, Hayley, Liane, and Lisa Jane).

Photo: Dennis and June's wedding day in 1954. L to R Stella, Dennis's mom, her friend Jess, the just wed couple Dennis & June, best man Tom, and Dennis's sisters Stella & Sheila.



Dad's full name was Dennis Walter Pitts, and he was born in 1931 in Birmingham. I believe he was living at 17 Stanhope Street in Balsall Heath at some point in 1939 although he was evacuated with his brother for some of this time to Coalville in Leicestershire. His ancestors come from Great Barrington in the Cotswolds and can be traced back to the 11700s all from the same village.



Photo: Myself, Barry (June's eldest) aged 12 months, likely taken in our Longmore St backyard.

Mom and dad left Birmingham in 1964 moving as part of a City Council overspill scheme to an estate in Rugeley a small town between Stafford and Lichfield.

The estate was partly funded by the Birmingham City council to help with their housing crisis at the time. My Dad passed in 2016 leaving a big hole in the family and my mom still lives in the family home in Rugeley.

Our thanks to Barry for writing his mom's story of a young life growing up in Balsall Heath.

It is very much appreciated. J.F.

Bron Salway's Funeral

The funeral on Jan 19th was a memorable occasion, attended by well over 100 people. A highlight was the solo Ave Maria sung by Byron Jackson, the celebrated opera singer.

Bron always took great pride in Byron's achievements as she was the one who roped him into the school choir at Heath Mount primary school and, indeed she wrote up his story for our booklet, "Stars of Balsall Heath".

The History Society was named as the charity for people to donate to, in memory of Bron. At the funeral, nearly £700 was given and more is still arriving. We are aiming to set up a particular project in her memory.

Other Events

12 objects which will change what you think about the British Empire and World War Two

By Ian Binnie, M.A.

Monday 13th February 2023, 1.00pm

Birmingham and Midland Institute, 9 Margaret Street, Birmingham B3 3BS

Ian is a retired history teacher and amateur local historian. He will give a thought provoking and entertaining presentation on World War Two. As well as referring to some of the well-known military campaigns, Ian will also touch on the social, political and economic issues which affected Britain and the Empire. He will challenge many accepted views and put forward some controversial theories of his own.

Ian will also demonstrate how unique resources from the **Birmingham People's History Archive** illustrate these challenging and controversial viewpoints.

Come prepared to discuss and argue with Ian – make your views heard!