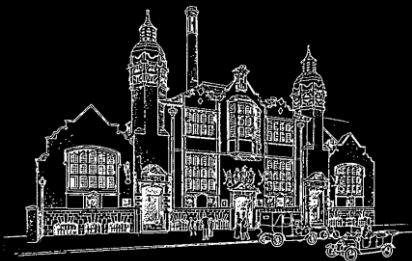


Balsall Heath Local History Society Gazette

OCTOBER 2024



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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 are: £1 for members and £3 for visitors.

From October to April inclusive, meetings will be held at St Paul's Venture, Malvern St. off Clifton Rd. B12 8NN. Refreshments will be served at 10.45 a.m. followed by a speaker

Coming soon

Monday 21st October 10:45 a.m for 11 a.m. Irene De Boo talking about Louisa Ryland

Monday 25th November 10:45 a.m for 11 a.m Phil Griffiths on The story of Coinage

Black History Month.

October is the time for a special focus on Black History so this Gazette features just a few of our local stories. We also had an article in the Gazette for October 2020 about Peter Stanford, Birmingham's first black Minister, at the Hope St Chapel in Highgate from 1887 to 1895, and the Gazette for September 2013 also contained a relevant article on Ernest Dyche. He had a photographic studio on the Moseley Rd where he took many photos of people and families newly arrived as immigrants. A photo to send home was just what was needed. Dyche was included in our booklet, "Stars of Balsall Heath".

Copies of this book and past issues of the Gazette are available on our website: www.balsallheathhistory.co.uk

Byron Jackson. Opera Singer.



Byron Jackson was born of Jamaican heritage in 1981 and was brought up by his grandmother Ivy May Jackson (1926-1996). As part of the Windrush generation, she had emigrated from Jamaica in 1961 to escape poverty and carve a better life for her family, giving birth to Byron's mother Sandra and eventually settling in

Balsall Heath in the late 1960's.

Byron attended Heath Mount Primary school (1986-93) where he discovered his love of singing, drama, history, fooling around and getting up to mischief!! One of his influential teachers was Bron Salway who roped him into the school choir and this left an indelible impression on him for the future.

Next at Kings Heath Boys' School (1993-98) he was inspired by his music teacher Amanda Doyle who encouraged and supported his ambition. After finishing his GCSE's, he became a Saturday Assistant at Balsall Heath Library which provided some financial support for his singing lessons and music studies. He remained working for the library services in various roles until 2010.

From this Byron has succeeded, with much effort and difficulty, in forging a brilliant career in opera and has

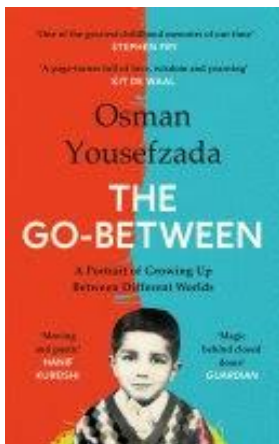
formed his own company, Persona Arts.

He describes this as :” A black-led West Midlands based arts company who stage opera, classical and choral workshops, concerts and productions to the highest possible standards”

The most recent production was *The Flying Dutchman* , performed in Birmingham in 2023, winning outstanding reviews.

Val Hart

Osman Yousefzada is an artist and designer who grew up in Balsall Heath in the 1980s , the son of Pakistani -Afghan immigrants.



His first book, "The Go Between" was published in 2022 and is the story of his childhood years in a strictly religious family where gender roles were immutably defined. He felt he was between different worlds in more ways than one. From his mother who ran her own dressmaking business at the rear of the house, he gained a love and understanding of textiles. However, the book also reflects the harsh restrictions he had to face as well as the realities of racism.

Osman began as a fashion designer but has moved on to all kinds of visual art and was the designer for *Infinity Pattern 1* which we all remember clothing Selfridges for a while. He wrote about this:.

“The black spots are meditative, and each of the shapes is about eight feet tall so they really consume you. When you contrast that with a shocking pink, and another [pink] that’s kind of pastel it’s trippy and trance-like, you can imagine the pattern wanting to go beyond outer space, and I love how you can see it from all different locations across Birmingham. With the print, I created a happier narrative, a story of endless possibilities, social mobility, and a dialogue between the global south and the global north.”



Val Hart

George Saunders. Tailor

George came to the UK in 1958 as one of thousands who answered the call sent out by the British Government to help fill the labour shortage that the country suffered after the Second World War.

Benefiting from the British Nationality Act 1948 which gave them the right of abode, people came from across the Commonwealth from places like India, Pakistan and the Caribbean. Many had already served Britain during the war and had come with the hopes of resuming their wartime positions or making a better life for themselves in the 'motherland'

But very little was done to prepare the new arrivals or indeed the rest of the British population. Racism, prejudice and violence were rife, and George suffered it first-hand. He struggled to find work in Birmingham and was turned away from interviews despite demonstrating his skill as a tailor, which he had learned from his father in the Caribbean.

At first, George found work in a biscuit factory before returning to the profession he loved – working first at Philip Colliers tailors, then setting up his own business in Balsall Heath. Eventually, George moved his shop to Court 15, Hurst Street, in 1974, now part of The Back to Backs museum.

George built up his reputation by word of mouth, and with his son's help, George made, mended and altered suits, trousers and jackets – using only the best quality cloth. Between 1974 and 2001, he made clothes for Birmingham celebrities like Pat Roach as well as Libyan school children, and was awarded a prestigious order from the Queen's Guards for his work. (Extract from Back to Backs website)



I looked at the Kelly's Directories and found that George's tailor's shop was at 118 Balsall Heath Road which was at that time a busy shopping centre. The Wallace Pub was on the opposite corner from George's shop which stood between the river Rea and Clevedon Road.

Today, an empty green space.

Val Hart

Hussien Saeed.

Hussien is currently running The Mix Café at the Old Print Works but he has a long established connection with coffee.

He remembers helping on his grandfather's coffee plantation as a child and went on to found Gold and Black, an import business for ethical, organic coffee beans.

Hussien is also a community champion who has initiated monthly Tea and Talk Forums, bringing together local people and inspiring the fruitful exchange of ideas and cultural heritage.



From the Gold and Black website, he says : *“Coffee can be different things to different people. A morning routine, an afternoon boost, a chance to socialise with friends. But for me, coffee is all of that and more; after all, it’s been with me my entire life.*

When I was a child, my family made a living working on coffee farms across Sudan. In fact, one of my earliest memories is of my family gathered together, roasting fresh coffee beans around an open fire as each of us savoured the incredible smell.

As I grew up and studied, I worked on coffee farms myself, learning the entire process. I also established relationships with reputable farmers across Sudan and Ethiopia, & learnt about the important role the coffee farming community has in the industry.

I arrived in the UK in 2013 seeking asylum from Sudan, leaving behind my career as a University lecturer. Yet again, coffee returned to my life, as after overcoming many challenges I began volunteering as a Barista with the St Martin’s Youth Centre, Birmingham. It was here that I realised that while coffee is available everywhere in the UK, it never tasted as good as the coffee from home. The perfect cup starts with the beans, so I started thinking about how I could use my experience, knowledge and connections to share the coffee I love with the UK. And so, Gold and Black was born.

Our strong relationships with farms guarantees that our coffee is not only the freshest possible , it’s also ethically sourced, grown with the sustainability of the planet in mind, and at a fair price for everyone working hard to grow coffee beans.”

Val Hart

Tea and Talk Forum at the Mix Café, at the Old Print Works Oct 4th



This was a really wonderful occasion. I was invited by Hussien Saaed, who runs the café, to talk about my new book, “Balsall Heath, a History”. About 25 people came along from very diverse backgrounds. The discussion quickly developed around the theme of the changed demography of Balsall Heath and moved on to consider current issues, with valuable input about the Retrofit programme, led by John Christophers and Jo Hindley.

Balsall Heath’s Neighbourhood Plan was also up for discussion. It is now 10 years old and in need of a review. I

explained that in the 19th century the Local Board of Health decided all development issues, but they were all people who lived and worked locally. Currently we have to rely on our local Councillors. Everyone felt we needed more ways for people to have their say. This forum is an important means of sharing ideas and opinions.

Val Hart

Zawiya Mosque, Edward Rd, Birmingham's First Mosque

This article was prompted by comments for Abdullah at the Tea and Talk on Oct 4th

The Mosque was established in 1942 by Shaikh Mohammad Qassim al'Alawi. As a boy he looked after sheep in Yemen, but in 1925 he joined the British merchant navy and eventually made his home here.

In 1941 Shaikh Muhammad moved to Balsall Heath. By this time Birmingham possessed a small Yemeni community, chiefly men who had been sailors but had settled in the UK. Many had married local women but there were few opportunities for Yemenis to practise their Muslim religion.

In 1942 Shaikh Muhammad established the city's first Zawiya or centre for prayer in Edward Road and became the leader of the community for nearly sixty years.

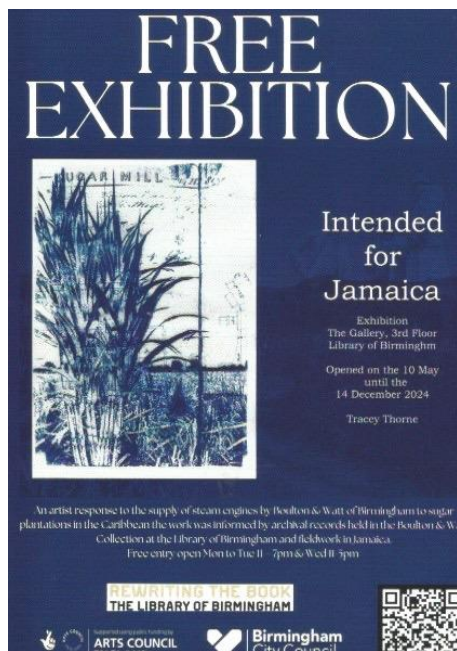
He died in 1999 in Birmingham at the age of ninety and such was his importance that the brother of the President of Yemen attended the funeral.

The Zawiya was Birmingham's first mosque, some decades before The Central Mosque in Belgrave Road which opened in 1975.

Val Hart



Tracey Thorne , Artist



Tracey is a documentary photographer and photographic artist, who lives and works in Birmingham, UK. She was born in Cornwall, but lived in Balsall Heath for ten years which is when I first met her. In recent years Tracey has built a substantial body of work internationally, in Jamaica, where she resided and worked for a significant period..

An artistic response to the supply of steam engines by Boulton and Watt of Birmingham to sugar plantations in the Caribbean.

The exhibition includes:

original archive items from the Boulton and Watt Collection

artist works made by local artist Tracey Thorne

additional exhibits, including an image by artist Vanley Burke

The Exhibition is on the third floor of the Library and very well worth a visit.

Val Hart

Second Saturday at the Old Print Works Nov 9th

Balsall Heath Second Saturday is a monthly mini-festival celebrating making, creativity, community, local culture and the arts

The Society will be putting up a display about Balsall Heath history from the recent exhibition. So this is another chance to see it.

An Apology

Last month I reported that the Library was due to re-open in spring of 2026. Since then I have heard that the contractors employed to do the work on the library & baths are bankrupt and a new contractor and, possibly, more funds will have to be found before work continues. Those involved in the project think this can be done but not in the same time frame. They have also told me that when the first phase is complete the existing pool will again be available for swimming.

William McCabe