

**Balsall Heath Local
History Society Gazette**

FEBRUARY 2025



Telephone: 07565 194822

Email:

info@balsallheathhistory.co.uk

Web:

www.balsallheathhistory.co.uk

www.thelostchildren.uk

**Facebook: Balsall Heath Local
History Society and
lostchildrenproject**

**Membership of the Society
costs £15 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 £4 for visitors.**

**Refreshments will be served at
11:00 a.m. followed by a
speaker**

Coming soon

**Monday 24th February. 11:00
a.m, Andrew Reekes talking
about George Cadbury Note
different venue.**

**Monday 24th March. 11:00 a.m,
Quiz with Patrick Baird**

Next Meeting of the Society Monday 24th February

Different Venue

**This month we will be meeting in the function room at
the Creation Climbing Centre and Skatepark (ex Tram
Depot) at 10.45 am for a talk at 11 am**

Address: 582 Moseley Rd, B12 9AA

Access: The entrance is behind the building at the front
which is currently covered in scaffolding (ex Tram Offices).

There is some car parking space available on site and a little
on Trafalgar Rd. .

**Speaker : The talk will be given by Andrew Reekes about
George Cadbury.**

**Memories of Balsall Heath
January 27th 2025**

At our meeting on Monday January 27th, instead of having a
speaker, we had a memories session. This was an
opportunity for members to talk about their own memories of
Balsall Heath and specifically about the changes which
occurred in the 1970s, 80s and 90s.

Val started off the session with a rundown of the many
changes in the area from the early 1800s to the present day.
Balsall Heath has certainly come a long way from its rural
charm at the beginning of the nineteenth century to the
vibrant, hustle and bustle of today's multi-cultural, inner city
suburb.

The rural scene changed in response to the need for housing
for the many people flocking to Birmingham for employment.
Pockets of land were sold off and houses were rapidly built.
As many houses as possible were erected in the available
space and many of the houses were built to very poor
standards.

The population of Balsall Heath rose from 10,000 in 1865 to
40,000 in 1911. Many houses were built in the inter war
years in Birmingham, including the Emily St flats in Highgate
which were built in 1936 and demolished in 1979.

Balsall Heath suffered badly during WWII. The bombers
followed the line of the railway and the River Rea. There was
much redevelopment needed after the war and the 1944 Blitz
and Blight Act identified five development areas, which did
include the Gooch St area. However, efforts were mainly
concentrated in the city centre and there were derelict sites
(bomb pecks) all over Balsall Heath for many years, even as

late as 1975.



National legislation in the 1950s gave powers to the City Council to clear and redevelop areas with poor housing. They demolished 22,000 houses across the city including a huge swathe of housing stretching from Belgrave Rd to Edward Rd. Whole communities were broken up. Despite the poor living conditions, many people were not happy to be compulsorily moved from their familiar surroundings..

The Urban Renewal Scheme from 1972 claimed to be a step forward, consulting with residents rather than imposing a top down approach and renovating some houses rather than widespread clearance. This led to a pepperpot approach of some houses being improved and some being demolished within the same block.. A host of small builders was carrying out this work. They were paid a small amount before starting the work and the balance on completion. This led to cash flow problems for the builders and meant they often started work on the next property to receive money to complete the previous job.

In 1979 envelope schemes were introduced where whole blocks of houses were renovated at the same time. This was said to be a great success. This included, for example, low brick walls being built at the front of houses and new roofs. This project ended in 1993 when budgets were cut.



*New brick walls in
Woodfield Road*

Some of the brick walls were even built outside houses due for demolition.

Members comments – Problems at the time.

- Large quantities of rubble were left after demolition.
- Everyone had to agree to roof replacement. This did not always happen
- Litter was always a problem especially fly tipping in some of the avenues off Runcorn Rd.
- Residents were unhappy with the delays in building the new Clifton Rd School.



White Street

No discussion about the changes in Balsall Heath would be complete without discussing the problem of prostitution. Many measures were taken to eradicate this blight from the area. Groups were set up to discourage the participants. Varna Rd was made a cul-de-sac to prevent motorists driving up and down the road. Eventually many of the properties were demolished and the layout of the area was completely changed. There was a suggestion of an official brothel being created, but this caused uproar amongst local residents. When prostitution was removed from the area, crime rates dropped, but the drug problem still exists.

Members other comments

One member recalled that when she bought her house in Runcorn Rd in 1961, it still didn't have electricity. It was lit by gaslight. After moving in, they soon had electricity installed.

As late as 1980, there was a house in Clifton Rd which was shared by two families. One family lived upstairs and one downstairs and neither family had a kitchen.

People remembered the massive programme in the 1970s to convert the gas supply in all houses to North Sea Gas. The emphasis now is on more energy efficient means of heating and better insulation. Mention was made of the Eco House in Tindal St, which is now Carbon neutral. The Retrofit project aims to transform more houses in the area with a view to them also becoming carbon neutral.

The population of Balsall Heath has changed considerably over the years. At one time there was a large Irish community, particularly in the area to the west of Moseley Rd around Mary St and Edward Rd. In the 1960s, many moved out and newer migrants moved in. The earlier immigrants included those from the Caribbean islands and from Asia. In the mid 1970s there was an influx of

Ugandan Asians. Continued immigration has led to a huge mix of residents, but on the whole, they all get on and it has led to Balsall Heath being the lively suburb which it is today.



JH

The Harry Gem Project : celebrating a Pioneer of Lawn Tennis

We have been contacted by this charity as Harry Gem at one time lived in Balsall Heath. Their aims are:



- To celebrate and publicise the life of Thomas Henry Gem (1819 – 1881)
- To publicise his role, together with his friend JBLA Perera, as a lawn tennis pioneer here in Birmingham and the creator of the world's first lawn tennis club in Leamington Spa in 1874
- To produce and publish the history of Edgbaston Archery & Lawn Tennis Society, the oldest lawn tennis club in the world, where Harry Gem was a member in the 1860s

So who was Harry Gem? This is an extract from their published booklet:

“Thomas Henry Gem, or Harry as he was more generally known, was a man of many parts. He was a lawyer, the Clerk to the Birmingham Magistrates and an officer in the Birmingham Volunteer Rifles. He was an all-round sportsman - rackets player, runner, swimmer, cricketer and founder of at least one cricket club. He sketched, he was a writer, a dramatist and an actor. He was also responsible for the foundation of the Birmingham Unionist Club. But it was his involvement in racquet sports, particularly his role as a lawn tennis pioneer, which is of prime interest to us.

He and his Spanish merchant friend, Augurio Perera,(1822 -1905) met, we think, at Birmingham's Bath Street Rackets Club, where Gem was Honorary Secretary and Perera a rackets player of some note.

Eventually the two men set out to devise an outdoor racquet game, one which would not require the expense and upkeep of a building for an indoor game like rackets. Their first attempts can be

dated back to as early as 1859, in the garden of Perera's home in Ampton Road, Edgbaston, a mile or so to the west of Birmingham's city centre.

By the early 1870s, both men had decided to move to Leamington Spa, Warwickshire. It was there that they set up the world's first lawn tennis club in 1874. Their club used courts laid down in the grounds of the Manor House Hotel and survived until April 1898."

"Harry Gem died, aged 62, in November 1881, a few months after a fall from his horse, at an encampment in Sutton Coldfield with the Birmingham Rifle Volunteers. It is thought that the fall was caused by a heart attack. The funeral was conducted with full military honours. His coffin was taken on a gun carriage from Birmingham's Livery Street, now Snow Hill Station, to its final resting place in Warstone Lane Cemetery. The procession of family and civic dignitary mourners was escorted by some 500 soldiers. The streets were lined by thousands of people."

The grave was badly neglected but following a year-long fundraising campaign by The Harry Gem Project, the restoration work was completed in November 2018.



Above: This is a line drawing facsimile (1970s) of Gem's original painting depicting play on a court in the grounds of the Manor House Hotel, Royal Leamington Spa. On the left Gem moves towards the net as his partner Perera prepares to hit the ball. Opposing them are Dr Tomkins near the net and Dr Haynes far right. The original painting was presented in 1957 to the Manor House Hotel by Miss Violet Haynes, daughter of Dr Frederic Haynes. Sadly, after a few years, it was lost.



Gem's wide sporting interest led him, in the 1860s, to join the Edgbaston Archery Society, which survives now as the Edgbaston Archery & Lawn Tennis Society, and is acknowledged as the oldest surviving lawn tennis club in the world

So where did Harry Gem live in Balsall Heath?

Harry was born in Handsworth and trained to follow in his father's footsteps as a Solicitor, taking his Articles in 1836. By 1851 his parents had moved to Erdington and he was still living with them at the age of 32.



However, in 1852 he married Ellen Mary Wilcox and by 1854 he was living in a house with land on the Moseley Road. This was at one of two houses called Trafalgar Cottages, situated on the junction of Moseley Road and Trafalgar Road, on the site of the later Tram Depot, now repurposed as Creation Climbing Centre and Skate Park.

1857 silhouette of Ellen, Harry's wife.

The house may have been called a cottage but it was a substantial house, Harry and Ellen are listed there in the 1861 census together with a housemaid and a domestic cook. The later map below shows the cottage also had a good garden.

1888 Ordnance Survey map



Harry was still at Trafalgar Cottage in 1864 but by 1867 he had moved his family home to Congreve St in central Birmingham so it seems he lived in Balsall Heath for about ten years.

A notable Balsall Heathan to celebrate.

Val Hart

Other Events

March 19th: **"Faith and philosophy are air, but events are brass."** ~ Herman Melville – **The Birmingham Brass Industry 1850 – 1950** by Jan Pick

Kings Heath Local History Society's regular meeting at the community centre on Heathfield Road from 7:15 to 8:45. Tickets are £3.

The Balsall Heath Local History Society is Registered Charity No. 1101945
The Old Print Works, 498-506 Moseley Road, Balsall Heath, Birmingham B12 9AH