

Balsall Heath Local History Society Gazette

MAY 2025



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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 7:00 p.m. followed by a speaker Coming soon

**Thursday 29th May 7:00 p.m,
Birmingham New Street a talk
by Mike Byrne**

May Meeting

This month we go back to evening meetings again. The doors open at 7 p.m and the meeting starts at 7:30.

This month's speaker will be Mike Byrne on Birmingham New Street.

Outing In July

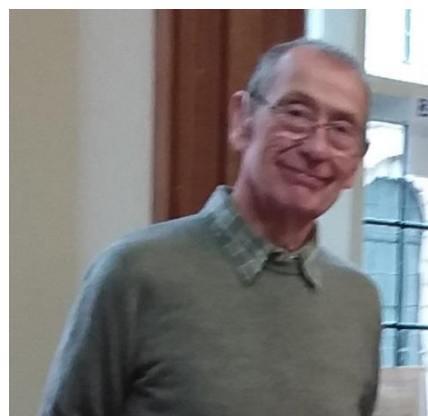
For July we have arranged a trip out instead of a meeting.

Thursday July 24th Visit to The Fire Station Museum in Aston. Time to be confirmed. This will cost £5 , half of which will be donated to the Museum. More details in Next Gazette.

In Memoriam: Peter Salway

It is with great sadness that we report the death of Peter Salway, who was a stalwart member of the Local History Society for over 20 years.

He helped at every event we held, and gave his expertise in producing flyers, notices, posters, & information sheets of all kinds. He also contributed to our publications, especially "Tales Out of School." We also remember Peter's unfailing support for Bron.



Val Hart

Most of all though, we remember his wit and sense of humour which stayed with him to the end. We all miss you, Peter.

In Memory of Father Dominic of St John and St Martins Church



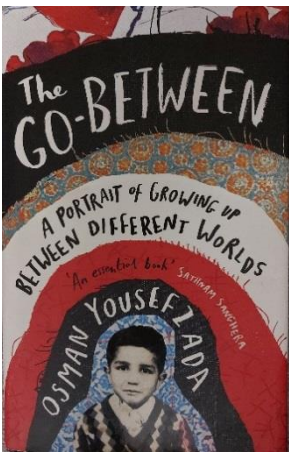
Sadly Father Dominic passed away in March this year at the age of 92. He was parish priest of the Roman Catholic Church in George Street for 22 years, preaching both at the church there and at St Martins, until the two parishes were combined. He retired in 2019.

I told him a about the two groups: Churches together and Interfaith. He was interested and then took me by surprise by asking me to represent the parish on both groups. That's delegation for you! Each time I attended he asked me what was discussed

.May he rest in peace.

Dawn McGhie

OSMAN YOUSEFZADA – THE GO-BETWEEN. APRIL 24TH 2025



The meeting which took place on April 24th was extremely well attended. The speaker was Osman Yousefzada, who came to talk about his book The Go-Between, a portrait of growing up between different worlds. The interest in his book accounted for the increase in attendance.

Rather than a formal talk, the meeting took the form of an interview. Val Hart was the interviewer and Osman the interviewee. This was followed by questions from the audience.

Osman started with a short reading from his book, which was written through his eyes as a child. It seems Osman was fascinated by Mrs

Thatcher's hair.

"How was her hair so perfect? I decided she must have set it in her Carmen rollers every morning, back combed it to add the lift and sprayed it into shape before she was ready to face the world. Her hair was her armour! Her hair never seemed to move even when she got in and out of cars."



Val began the interview by asking Osman about his background. Osman explained how his Pakistani father came to England ten years before his mother, who was of Afghan heritage. Both were from rural areas and neither of them could read and write. Osman was born in England.

In the book, Osman describes how the family only lived on one floor of the house. Val asked him to explain more about this. Osman said that the upper floor of the house was rented out to lodgers and the family did indeed live on one floor. The women lived in the backroom and the men lived in the front room. The women never answered the front door and never went to the shops, but they did go to the houses of other women. There were some bad things about this

patriarchal society, but some good things, particularly the community support. They were trying to make a life in a very different world to the world they had left behind.

Osman said that some readers have raised queries about the streets he mentions. Although he talks of streets in Balsall Heath, he does not use the names of the actual streets where he or other people lived. For instance he gives his address as Willows Road, but at some point mentions a railway line at the back of their house, when, of course, there is no railway line in Willows Road.

Val then asked about the position of the girls in his family as in the book it is stated that the girls were taken out of school at the age of ten or eleven. Osman said this was the case. His sisters were not allowed to go to secondary school. They were taught how to cook, clean and sew and were expected to marry when they were eighteen. Both sisters, though, caught up with their education later in life and both have successful careers.

Osman was asked several questions. He was asked about honour and he explained that it is about saving face. In his culture, how someone sees you is important. If, for instance a daughter runs away from home, it shows lack of control.

What were the reactions of his family to the book? The reaction of the family was not great. His mother thought writing a book was a stupid idea, but she died before it came out.

When asked about his father, Osman confirmed that his father was abusive to his mother and he was a strict father. He did, however put food on the table and they were never hungry.

Asked about his own education, Osman said he scraped through his GCSEs and obtained his A levels at Matthew Boulton college. He was not allowed to draw at home, but he went to Art School in London. He studied Art and Design and then studied anthropology at SOAS. He also received an MPhil from Cambridge University. He is now an internationally acclaimed artist. His black-pink pattern was selected as an installation at the Selfridge store in Birmingham.



Osman talked about changes in Balsall Heath. During World War II large parts of Balsall Heath were bombed causing people to move out of the area. Later clearance of some of the worst parts, particularly in the west led to more people moving away from the area. There had been a large Irish Catholic community, but as they left, their place was taken by immigrants from the Caribbean, from Pakistan and from other parts of Asia. In the 1970s, many Ugandan Asians also came to Balsall Heath. The nature of Balsall Heath had changed completely and Osman was caught between two very different cultures. He found there were clashes because of religion and just their way of being. On one occasion he was appearing in a Nativity play at school and then going to the Mosque afterwards.

It was most interesting to learn more about Osman's book and his way of life while growing up. Those who had not already read the book left the meeting keen to purchase it and read it.

JH

St Paul's Schools, Vincent Street and the Laurens



St Paul's Church was opened on the Moseley Road in 1853 with seating for over 1,000, and was extended in 1856.

The parish established Sunday Schools but also were quick to set about providing full time education. Schools were established in 1857 in Vincent Street, and in Ladypool Road in 1862. This article is about the Schools in Vincent Street.

St Paul's Church

The school buildings were designed in the Tudor style, and the Girls School had a bell turret on the top. They were declared open on Jan 1st, 1857 when the Committee provided "an ample supply of tea and cake to which upwards of 400 of the Sunday School children sat down."

There were 3 schools; Infants, with a classroom measuring 50 feet by 24 feet, Girls and Boys with classrooms each measuring 80 feet by 18 feet. Astonishingly this provided a total of 657 pupil places! Next to the school was also a Teachers' house for the Headmaster and Headmistress.



Parents were expected to pay 3d per week until 1893. The school leaving age set by the government was age 10 until 1880, rising to age 11 in 1893 and age 12 in 1899.

Schools were inspected annually with a "payment by results" system, so Government grants were related to the pupils' achievements in Reading, Writing and Arithmetic. This lasted almost to the end of the 19th century.

Thomas and Elizabeth Laurens.

This married couple were appointed to the Schools in October 1869 and stayed until 1894, a period of 25 years. They had been married in Swindon in March that year. Elizabeth was born in Swindon but Thomas was born in Jersey. It is likely that they both attended the teacher training college in Swindon to gain Teaching Certificates.

They faced many difficulties over the years, and had continual problems with staffing. There were no other qualified staff. Instead they had Pupil Teachers, who were ex pupils of the school who started as Pupil Teachers at about age 14 and then continued for five years of in-house training,

eventually becoming Uncertificated Teachers. To become a certificated teacher they needed to go to a college for two years.



Tindal School



Clifton Road School

Meanwhile the Laurens had to face the threat posed by the new Board Schools which began to open in the late 1870s: Mary Street in 1876, Clifton Road in 1878 and Tindal School in 1880, with more to follow.

These were like palaces compared to the Vincent Street buildings, with multiple classrooms, light, ventilation and large playgrounds.

Mrs Laurens, a working mother

It is surprising to find that Elizabeth Laurens was not just Headmistress of the Girls School but also took time off to have children. In January 1870, only four months after her appointment, she had six weeks off, recorded in the Log Book as "illness", but the St Paul's Church records show that she had a baby son, Frederick, in January. She returned to teaching at the beginning of March.

However, more children followed. In February 1871 she had twin daughters, and in 1874, 1881 and 1884 another three daughters so she was mother to six children, although it seems that one of the twins died young, less than a year old.

So what happened to the school while Elizabeth was having children? In 1871 she had her mother living with them and one of her sisters became the Teacher in Charge on a temporary basis. After the twins were born she took time off from January to May. Her husband took over both schools for a while and then a temporary teacher stepped in for 3 months. In spite of her repeated absences, the Girls School had good Inspector's Reports and in 1891 one commented, "This is a singularly good School. I have not yet inspected any school more bright and cheerful than this."

Employment of married teachers

Elizabeth's career as a working mother is even more interesting if set in the historical context. The new Board Schools did not allow married women to be employed as teachers, regardless of whether they had children or not. This rule persisted until 1944. The Church Schools continued to employ married couples to run their schools throughout this period, so there is this astonishing discrepancy.

Goodbye to The Laurens

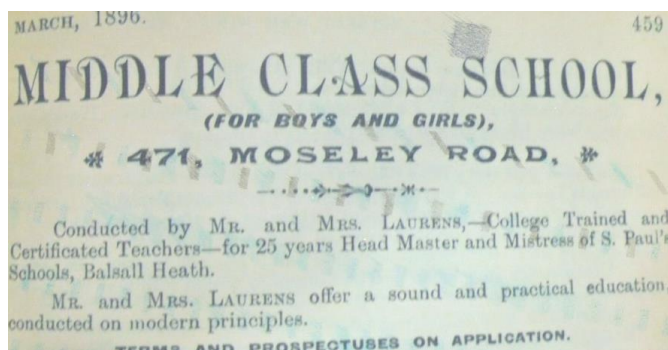
In October, 1894 both Thomas and Elizabeth resigned their positions and the Schools were then combined as a Mixed School with only one Head Teacher. The Inspector's Report for the Girls School that year commented, "I regret that the Head Teacher, who for many years has conducted this school with intelligence and considerable success, should at length have felt compelled to resign."

St Paul's Parish Magazine lamented their leaving and a meeting discussed how to acknowledge the Laurens' 25 years. A cheque for over £24 was presented to them and a Testimonial which

included : "This amount has been collected from a few friends and old pupils who desire to show their appreciation of your long and faithful service."

The Laurens' Private School

However, Thomas and Elizabeth did not give up on education. They quickly opened their own Private School near the top of Vincent Street, at 471 Moseley Road and stayed there until 1903 when they moved further up the road towards Moseley.



In 1911, at ages 68 and 65, they were still running the school at 58 Alcester Road assisted by their daughter Evelyn and another teacher who boarded with them. The school closed in 1912 and Thomas died the following year. Elizabeth outlived him, dying in 1926.

Val Hart

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