

Balsall Heath Local History Society Gazette

JULY 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 2:00 p.m. followed by a speaker
Coming soon

2 pm. July 24th , 2025

A Society Trip to The West Midlands Fire Service Museum

Ettington Road, off Witton Road, Aston . B6 6ED



Visit the oldest fire station in Birmingham, with a guided tour of the museum. It tells the story of the history of firefighting with lots of early equipment and appliances on display as well as equipment, and artefacts used throughout their own fifty-year existence. Several themed rooms are open to visitors. The tour is likely to take two & a half hours

We will meet outside at 1.45 pm Limited parking is available in the rear yard accessed from Prestbury Road, Aston, B6 6EE. Look for the green gates.
There will be a charge, payable on the day, of £5, half of which will be donated to the Museum. The trip is open to non members.

Future Meetings

This trip is instead of a meeting in July and there will be no meeting in August. The next meeting after that will be held on **Thursday September 25th at 2 pm at The Creation Centre (old Tram Depot)**. This is the first of our autumn meetings which are scheduled for daytime. Please note a change of meeting time which we hope will be more convenient

MOSELEY ROAD METHODIST CHURCH – Part 2

Part 1 of the story of Moseley Rd Methodist Church appeared in the April issue of the Gazette. Part 2 takes the story up to 1932.

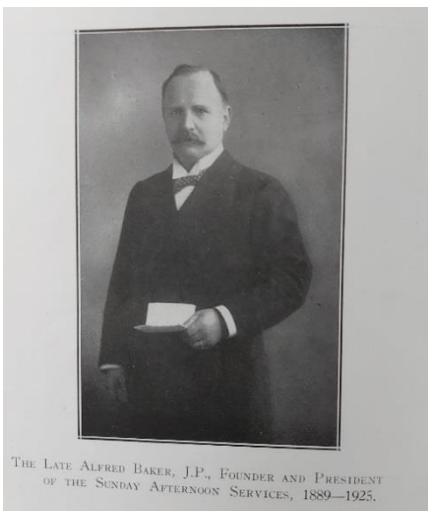
In the year after the Dedictory Service, which was held on November 27th 1872, it was necessary to try to raise funds to pay the final £2000 of the cost of building. Within the first year a three day Bazaar was arranged. This ambitious and costly event took place at the Town Hall. Amongst the expenses was a bill for £84 for the engagement of the band of the Coldstream Guards, but an

amount of £935 17s 8d was raised. Gradually, by the efforts of the congregation and a sum of £822 received from the Cherry Street Chapel Trust, the debt was cleared.



A large and efficient Sunday School took place on this site.

Church members were encouraged to adopt progressive methods to attract more people to their doors. In 1889, Mr Alfred Baker, J.P. instituted the Sunday Afternoon Services for the People. This was a bright musical service, which attracted people who might not otherwise have attended. From this grew other valuable work among the young women of the district. This work was led by Sister Janie, who established a successful Girls' Club and this led to a week day social welfare effort.



The Wesley Institute was erected, adjoining the Church and this housed clubs, classes and other agencies dealing with the young life of the neighbourhood. The Moseley Road Methodist Church was clearly a very active Church providing much needed support in the community.

292 men connected with this Church served with H.M. forces in World War I and forty five of those lost their lives.

The work of the Church continued with enthusiasm and on November 25th 1922 the Golden Jubilee was celebrated. A very well attended public tea and reception was held at Lime Grove Schools and Moseley and Balsall Heath Institute.



The Sunday School building in Lime Grove

The Church fostered daughter churches at Sparkhill, Kings Heath, Hall Green, Hazelwell, Shirley, Billesley and Earlswood as well as maintaining missions at Knutsford St and Mary St. In 1931, a new minister, Rev. G.H. Taylor initiated 'The Forward Movement'. Through this movement he wanted to reach the lives and homes of the people, particularly non churchgoers and build on the good work carried out by the Church in previous years. In 1932, the Church celebrated its Diamond Anniversary. As mentioned in the article in the April issue of the Gazette, a booklet was produced to mark the occasion. It is from this booklet that the above information was obtained. It was apparent that there was great hope for the future. This was the final paragraph from the booklet:-

'Great as the past of Moseley Rd Church has been, there is a radiant prospect ahead of many years still of promise and of high endeavour, outrivalling anything that has gone before.'

JH

A Women's History of Balsall Heath and Highgate to 1914

This was the subject of the talk I gave at the History Society meeting on 26th June. Women's history is not easy to find. Public roles were not open to them and women's rights were very restricted. What rights did women have?

The Custody of Infants Act of 1839 permitted a mother to petition the courts for custody of her children up to the age of seven, and for access in respect of older children, but the mother had to be deemed innocent of adultery.

The Married Women's Property Acts of 1870 and 1882 allowed married women to be the legal owners of the money they earned and to inherit property. Before then, any money made by a woman instantly became the property of her husband once she was married.

For the upper classes, women were expected to live in the domestic sphere, marry and have children. However, single and widowed women had the right to own property in their own name and there are some local examples.



Mary Simcox of Stratford House was widowed in 1837 when her husband John Simcox, "The Honest Lawyer" died. She inherited the Simcox Estate of about 20 acres and enjoyed a happy widowhood until her death in 1854

The Misses Emma and Ellen Lawrence



John Towers Lawrence was a significant figure in Birmingham and lived at The Priory which stood between Edgbaston Lane and Cromer Road. When he died his daughters inherited a considerable sum. They donated the land for the building of the Moseley and Balsall Heath Institute, opposite the Priory.

Women in Education. Starting a small school was a good option for women from the middle classes. No qualifications were needed. In the 1830s there were two Quaker schools at Camp Hill in Highgate which was at that time a fashionable neighbourhood.

First, **Alpha Cottage**, run by the Misses Phipson, was attended by some of the Southall family who lived nearby. The second was **The Friends' School**, a boarding school which drew children from all over the country as well as those of important Birmingham Quaker families- Cadbury, Shorthouse and Lloyds.

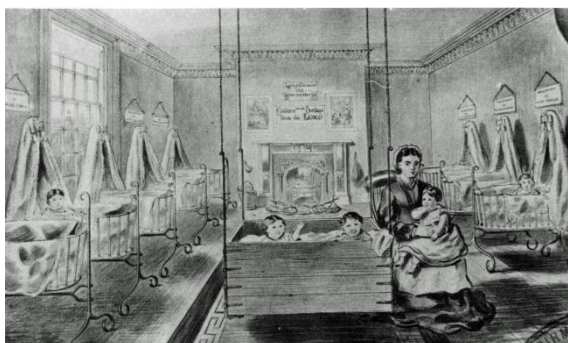


This was run by a couple, William and Hannah Lean from 1832 to 1843

Meanwhile Mrs French had also opened a Boarding School for young gentlemen on the Moseley Road opposite the toll house at the end of Edgbaston Lane. She ran it successfully for about 20 years. There are two other success stories for women in education: Eliza Sharman's Boarding School described in the Gazette for March 2022 and Mrs Laurens, Headmistress of St Pauls' School in Vincent Street, in the Gazette for May 2025. Available on the website.

The 1870 Education Act resulted in schools set up by Local Boards for the education of both boys and girls. From early in the 19th century Teaching Colleges trained both men and women to become Certificated Teachers. However, Board Schools required women to resign their posts if they married. Girls could start as Pupil Teachers from age 14 and train on the job for five years.

Society of Friends' Montpelier Street Creche, Orphanage & Laundry. 1875



"To meet those cases of infant neglect due to the unavoidable absence from the homes of mothers compelled by the necessity of earning a livelihood, to leave her little ones."

This was an unexpected result of the Education Act. The older children who had been doing child care for their siblings were now being educated. instead..

The Creche also provided for 16 orphaned girls, as trainee Laundresses & a Public Laundry.

Some women also managed, from the 1880s, to find responsible work in nursing, libraries and charitable institutions. Matrons were employed at The Children's Emigration Homes in Highgate, for example, and often accompanied children on their journey to Canada. Balsall Heath Library opened in 1896. The first Librarians appointed were men but they also needed a Cleaner. A Mr Whittle was appointed. but he already held the post of Caretaker at the Moseley Road Church opposite and the authorities there refused permission. So Annie Smith was appointed instead at 15 shillings a week- five shillings less than Mr Whittle had been offered.

Shops. Undoubtedly there were many women who ran small shops themselves or supported their husbands in running shops. An example of a woman running her own shop was Margaret Watson, Florist in 1902, described in the Gazette for December, 2022



Women also worked as shop Assistants. This was Masons Shop in Ladypool Road in 1901.

Factory work was also an option both for unskilled workers as well as women able to take on clerical posts. Highgate was full of factories. In 1878 women were banned from working more than 56 hours a week in any factory.



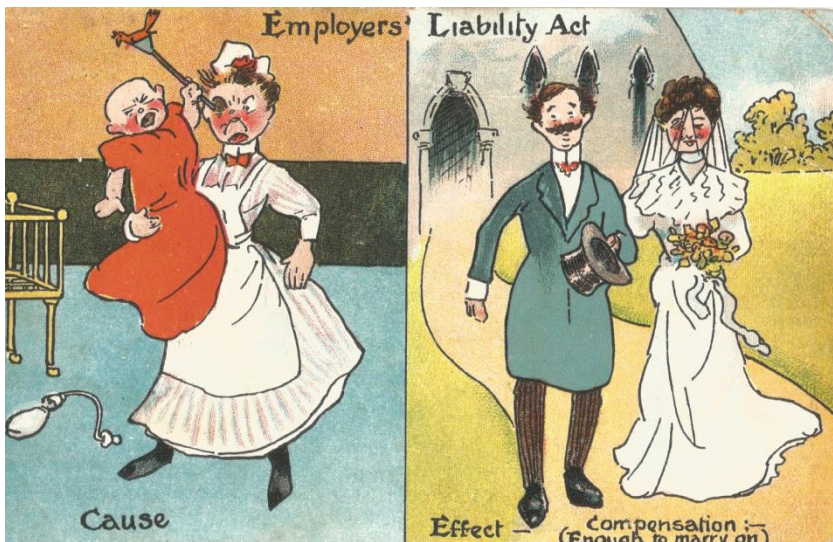
Women at work. Ephraim Phillips
Bissell Street. C 1912



Lengs Brush Factory. Sherburne Rd c.1914

Domestic Service According to the 1911 census, domestic service was the largest employer of women and girls with 28% of all employed women in England and Wales engaged in this. Most of the larger houses in Balsall Heath had live-in servants and many were very young girls. A servant's life was very hard with long hours, much physical effort and very little time off. What rights did they have?

The Employers' Liability Act 1880, enacted in the United Kingdom, expanded the ability of employees to sue their employers for injuries sustained due to negligence. Then the **1911 National Insurance Act** aimed to create a national system of insurance to protect working people, It extended insurance benefits to Domestic Servants, in the area of sickness and unemployment.



Comic postcard 1908

At the bottom end of society were the working class women who had a more than full time job running a house with no electricity and no indoor plumbing. Domestic chores meant a great deal of washing and cleaning. Coal dust was everywhere. Washing meant scrubbing by hand in a large tub often in a shared brewhouse. but yet some of these women also took in washing as a means of earning some money . Or else they took in lodgers, which would also have increased their domestic workload.

Single mothers were in the worst position. If a husband died or deserted her, the woman had to seek employment but could not then also look after her children. In this situation many women took to prostitution. Emma Toft, for example, was deserted and became a prostitute, supporting two children. When she died of consumption in 1906 her children were admitted into the Middlemore Homes and taken to Canada.

Unmarried women who had babies were also strongly condemned. In 1867 a Refuge for Fallen Women was set up in Tindal Street by William Garner, a Town Missionary, and his wife Jemima.

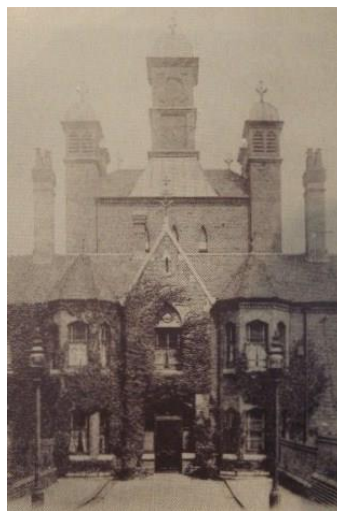
In 1871 they had 15 "inmates" aged 16 to 25, who were being trained for domestic service. They had come from all over the Midlands. They were probably single women, mothers of illegitimate babies, who had been taken from them. When William died in 1885 Jemima continued on her own. In 1891 she was 66, still with 9 inmates, now training to be laundresses.



Older women had few choices. Old age pensions did not start until 1909. Many older women moved in with adult children and a few lucky ones found charitable provision. For example, Lench's Trust Almshouses in Conybere Street, Highgate, opened in 1880 to provide both a home and a pension for 48 women

For destitute older women the Kings Norton Workhouse at Selly Oak was the last resort. It was unpleasant and overcrowded though it did have its own Infirmary which in later years became Selly Oak Hospital.

The Workhouse was both dreaded and feared. Entrance into its walls carried a burden of shame.



Votes for Women

During the 19th century there was increasing demand for women to have a vote but it was the founding of the Womens Social and Political Union in 1903 which was a game changer.

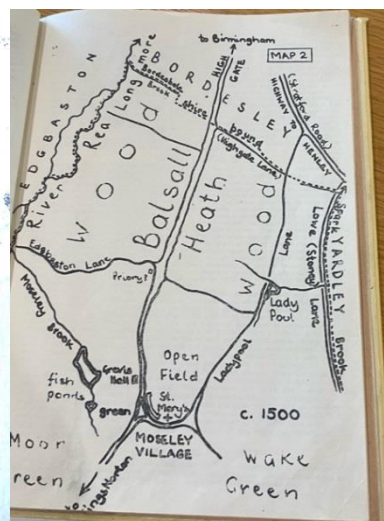
Our very own Suffragette was Elizabeth Grew who lived in Balsall Heath. She joined the WSPU in its early days and became a Regional Organiser, addressing huge crowds all over the country. Her story was in the Gazette for January, 2023.

The Great War which started in 1914 was the time when women's roles changed but even so, the right to vote took some time to achieve with Acts in 1918 and 1928.

Val Hart

Bordeshale Brook

This small stream ran into the river Rea in Highgate and marked the boundary between Kings Norton parish which was in Worcestershire and Aston parish which was in Warwickshire. It is marked on a map of The Gooch Estate in 1796.



It was also marked on a sketch map done by John Morris Jones in "Bygone Birmingham"

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