

Balsall Heath Local History Society Gazette

NOVEMBER 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
2:00 p.m. followed by a speaker

All meetings will take place at 2
pm on Thursdays at The Crea-
tion Centre (old tram depot),
Moseley Rd.

27th Nov Betty Hagglund on
Mary and Martha Russell
Dec 18th

The meeting will start with the
Society's AGM with reports for the
year ending April 30th 2025. After
that there will be Quiz led by Patrick
Baird. We will also be celebrating
the season with mince pies and
there will be a raffle. Do come
along!



Believe in Balsall Heath is a transformative community arts and heritage initiative created by local organisations to celebrate the people, culture, and history of Balsall Heath.

As we mark the **750th anniversary** of the area, we invite everyone to join us in honouring its rich heritage and vibrant diversity

The project will produce beautiful bunting installations to decorate Balsall Heath High Street and heritage boards across the area/

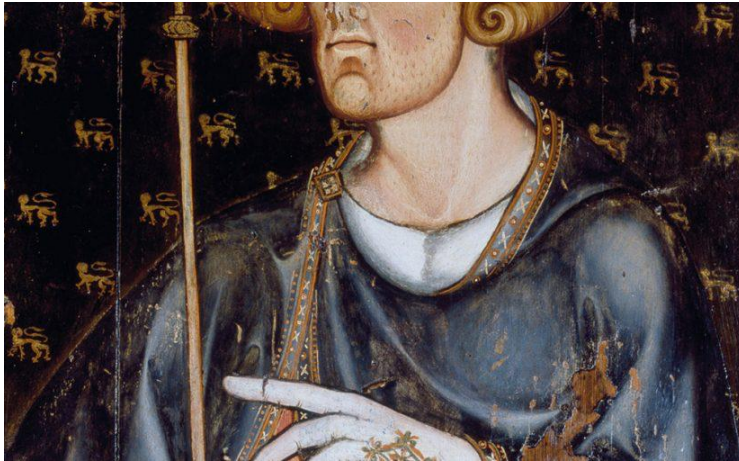
This collaborative project brings together the **The Old Print Works, The MIAH Foundation, The GAP Arts Project, Fruit & Nut Village, and the Balsall Heath Local History Society.**

The celebration falls during our '[Balsall Heath in Changing Times](#)' project, and we will be displaying remarkable photos from the 1960s through to present day, as well as a potted history of Balsall Heath going back to Edward I in 1275. Alongside our display will be Dan Burwood taking portraits of people in Balsall Heath, there will be more family activities and there will be cake!

We're looking for people prepared to take part in longer interviews and work together on our 'Balsall Heath in Changing Times' - To find out more contact marcus@balsallheathhistory.co.uk, or meet us at the

Birthday Party!

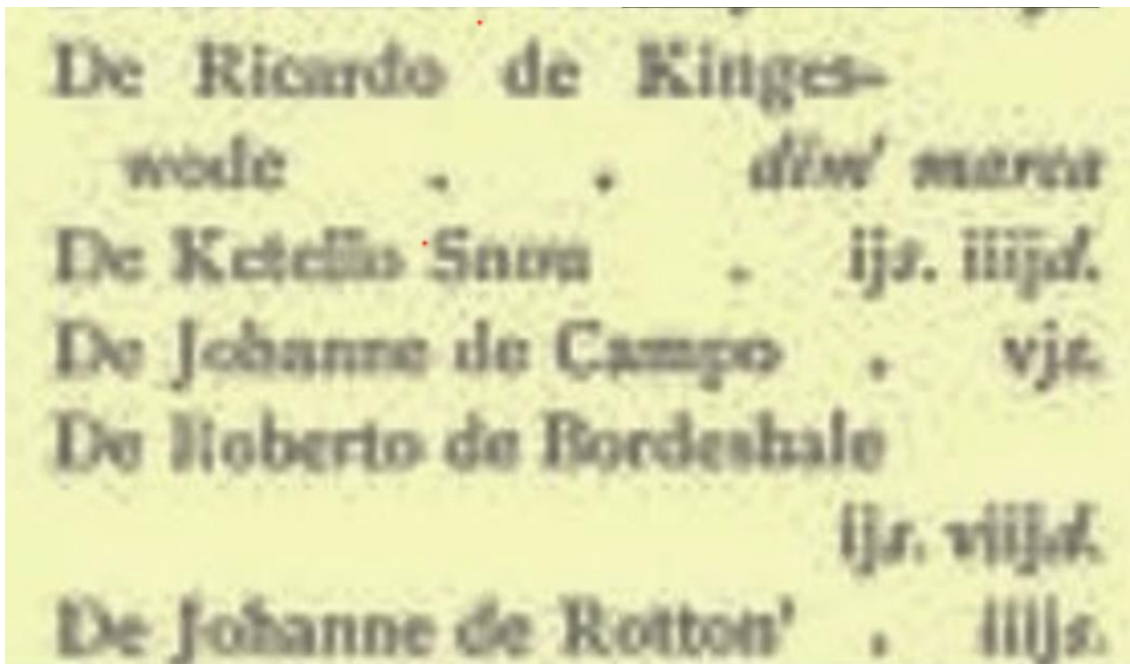
Why we're celebrating 750 years of history.



Balsall Heath is 750 years old, and the evidence takes us right back to everyone's favourite monarch, Edward I, 'Longshanks' or 'Hammer of the Scots'.

The Earliest Record: 1275

The earliest documented mention, found in **The Survey of English Place Names**, a collection held by the University of Nottingham. The original spelling was **Bordeshale** (Later contracted to the familiar 'Balsall'). This places the area's first official record early in King Edward I's reign



Copy of the written document, the Lay Subsidy Roll, which lists 'Roberto de Bordeshale, living in the Royal Manor of Bromsgrove and Norton in Worcester'

Bromsgrove and King's Norton were Royal manors held 'in ancient demesne' by the king. The names "Bordeslea" and "Bordeshale" both seem derived from Old English, meaning "Bord's clearing" and "Bord's heath" respectively, suggesting a shared personal name 'Bord' in their origins.

What Happened in 1275?

The official documentation was a direct result of the King's efforts to modernize and tax people, passing laws to bring order and better admin. A key piece of legislation was the first Statute of Westminster.

The Statute of WESTMINSTER, the First,
Made at *Westminster 25 die Aprilis, Anno 3 ED-*
WARD I. and Anno Dom. 1275.

— **T**HESE be the Acts of King
EDWARD, Son to King
HENRY, made at Westminster
at his first Parliament general af-
ter his Coronation, on the Mon-
day of Easter Utas, the third
Year of his Reign, by his Council,
and by the Assent of Archbishops.

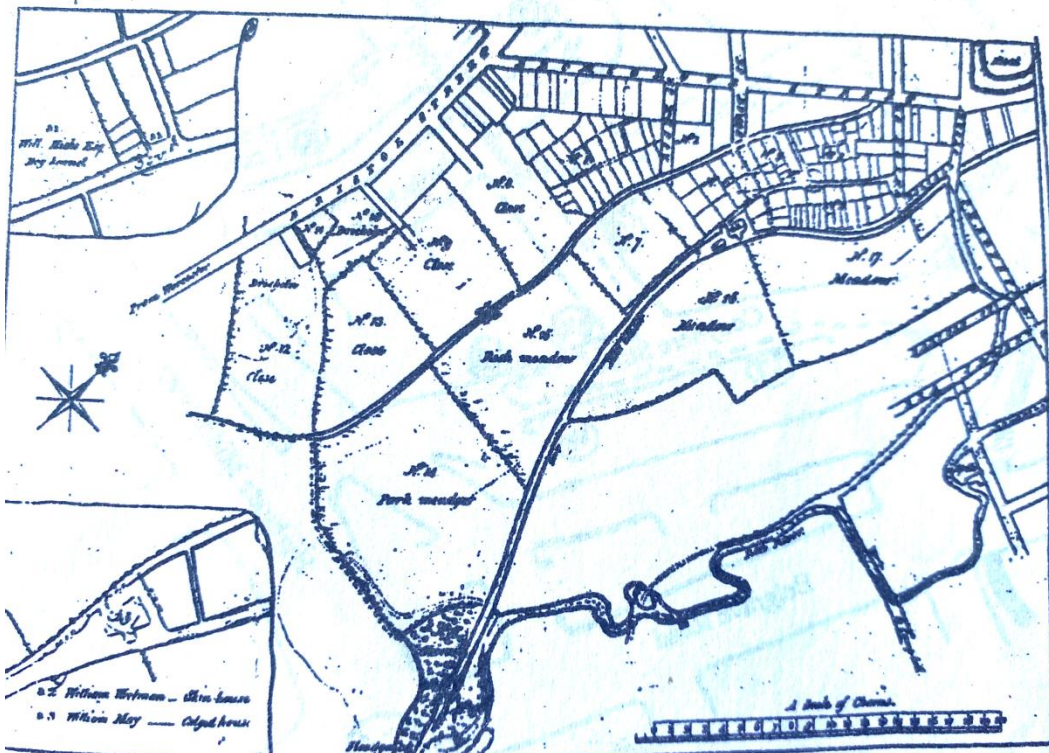
Cotton MS. Claudius, D. 2.
CES sont les establissementz
le Roi EDWARD, fitz le
Roi HENRY, faitz a Westm' a
son prim' parlement general
apres son coronement, lendi-
maine de la Clause de Pask', lan
de son regne tierce, par son
conseil. & par lassentement

This law included new rules for taxes and land ownership. Before 1275 boundaries and ownership could be proven with simple oral evidence, but the new laws demanded that everything be formally recorded. A drive for better governance and tax collection that “Bordeshale” was officially put on the map!

Defining the Boundary

Long before it became an inner-city suburb, the area now known as Balsall Heath was defined by natural boundaries. The boundary of the historic Kings Norton manor was marked by the Bodesehale Brook. This brook ran roughly parallel to the present-day Belgrave Road before flowing into the River Rea.

This ancient line was so significant it was still used centuries later. In 1796, the brook was clearly marked on a Gooch estate map as the dividing line between Kings Norton parish in Worcestershire and Aston parish in Warwickshire:



Gooch estate sketch map from 1796 in John Morris-Jones in “Bygone Balsall Heath’ 1979

What was Balsall Heath like in 1275?

While the area was officially recorded, it wasn't a town. Life in 1275 Balsall Heath was rooted in the landscape:

A watermill was certainly operating nearby, near what is now Cannon Hill Park, with records dating back even earlier to 1231. Farms likely dotted the fertile land along the Rea Valley.

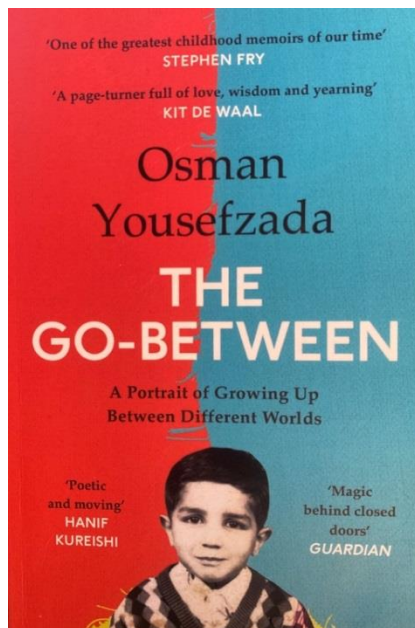
The Heath, the higher ground was dominated by open heathland, which lay along the ancient ridgeway track—the same route that eventually developed into the Moseley Road.

So, when we celebrate 750 years, we're celebrating its official birth, connecting our modern community back to the medieval landscape of Bordesdale!

MB & VH

Memory Sticks. A Reflection by Joe Holyoak, Architect and Urban Designer.

In April I went to a talk about his childhood that Osman Yousefzada gave to the Balsall Heath Local History Society.



The book is called *The Go-Between*, which term he uses to describe himself, in two senses.

Firstly, the child as intermediary between the segregated males and females in the Islamic immigrant community. (In his family's own terraced byelaw house, the front room as female territory, the back room as male territory).

Secondly, as a teenager, transitioning between the repressive Islamic culture and that of the more liberal host community, as he grows up and goes to university.

In his book Yousefzada changes the names of streets in Balsall Heath, probably unnecessarily, in an effort to protect peoples' privacy, which makes reading it a bit confusing if you are familiar with the local geography, however, there are enough recognisable local landmarks to make the narrative comprehensible.

One of them is the young Osman's favourite corner shop, F. Allen's on Ladypool Road. He gives a detailed description of Ann, the widowed Mrs Allen, whose manner behind the counter "filled with cream cakes and iced buns", he describes as "serious" (grumpy, in fact, according to an acquaintance of mine who also remembers her)



Ann Allen and her corner shop are long gone, and the premises have been unoccupied for some time. After Allen's it used to be OAK's grocery shop (OAK being the initial letters of the names of the three young Pakistani men who ran it). Its fascia then advertised Irn Bru: OAK's name was on the fabric canopy below the fascia.

The canopy survives, flapping forlornly in the wind, but the Irn Bru fascia over the empty shop has been removed, revealing Mrs Allen's previous fascia. F. ALLEN it says in relief capital letters, SWEETS, TOBACCO, GROCERIES, PROVISIONS in smaller capitals, between the big projecting Edwardian scrolls. It's a striking record of something obsolete, disappeared and returned to public view, like a sunken ship brought back to the surface, covered in barnacles.



Our townscape continually changes, and the speed of change is increasing. It was never static, but in pre-industrial times you might expect the appearance of one's town or village at the end of your life to be not very different to what it was when you were a child. That is certainly no longer the case, as familiar landmarks disappear almost every month, and are replaced by new ones. But memory is a powerful ally. It is not a compensation for the loss of places, but it is a powerful device that helps to stick the pieces together, and establish a continuity. How often have we looked at a new development and asked "Can you remember what used to be there before?"

Some time ago I had an idea which would be constructive, and could be implemented with no great difficulty or expense. There would be a condition added to a planning approval for the replacement of an existing building by a new one, requiring the attachment to the new building of a photograph of the previous one, and a few lines of information about it. A street could become a document of its own history. I didn't publicise the idea, but now that I have, perhaps someone might pick it up and make it happen.

This is an abridged version of Joe's article, recently published in "Urban Design".

OCTOBER 30TH 2025 – TALK BY MARY BODFISH – JAMES KEIR 1735 - 1820

On October 30th Mary Bodfish came to the meeting again to give another interesting and informative talk. This time her talk was about James Keir, one of the lesser known members of the Lunar Society.



James Keir was born in 1735. He was the youngest of eighteen children born to John and Magdaline Keir nee Lind. Of those eighteen children only seven survived until adulthood and James outlived them all.

James attended the Royal High School, Edinburgh and went on to study medicine at the University of Edinburgh. It was there that James met Erasmus Darwin. Darwin qualified as a doctor, but James abandoned his studies and took up a military position in the 61st Regiment of Foot. While in the army, James contracted Yellow Fever and was very ill. Because of his medical training he knew that he needed to take antimony. He requested and obtained a supply of this and recovered. After this he continued studying biology and chemistry. Meanwhile Darwin set up a practice in Lichfield where James visited him.



Erasmus Darwin's House in Lichfield

In 1768 James left the army and started to spend time in London meeting friends. He was, however, drawn back to his circle of friends at Darwin's and they became the Lunar Society. Some of the other members were Matthew Boulton, James Watt and Joseph Priestley with Boulton becoming the leader of the Society. The meetings were held monthly and started with a dinner for the men, their wives and families. After dinner, just the men were left discussing their inventions and seeking help from each other.

After living in London, James moved to Derby and later moved to Stourbridge when he became interested in glass making. On October 10th 1771 he married Susanna Harvey at St Philip's

Church in Birmingham. James and Susanna's first child, James Francis Keir was born on July 16th 1775, but died before he was even eighteen months old. He was buried at Old Swinford. The Keirs then relocated to Smethwick Grove near to Matthew Boulton's Soho Manufactory. In 1780 James and Susanna's second child, Amelia was born.

After giving up his glass business and taking charge of the Soho manufactory, there had been talk of James entering into a partnership with Matthew Boulton, but this did not happen.



James went on to establish a chemical works at Tipton, which became a soap manufactory. This led to James making his fortune.

When Joseph Priestley came to Birmingham in 1780, James assisted him with his chemical experiments, investigating the properties of gases.

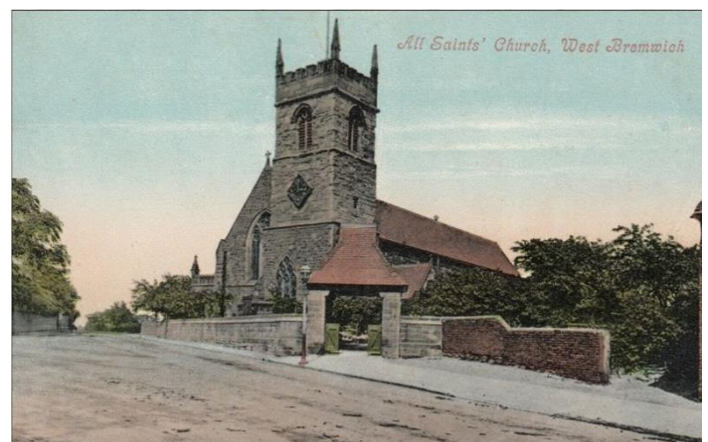
In 1785 James Keir was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of London and later in the 1780s he communicated to the Royal Society about his work with Priestley.

James Keir's next venture was to establish a colliery in Tividale on the borders of Tipton and Dudley. He was interested in the geological aspects of sinking a pit and wrote papers on the matter which he forwarded to the Geological Society.

James Keir moved to West Bromwich.

In 1801 James and Susanna's daughter, Amelia married Jean Louis Moilliet in West Bromwich. Their first child was born in 1802 and was also called Amelia.

James Keir's wife Susanna died less than a month after the birth of her first grandchild and she was buried at All Saints Church in West Bromwich. James was grief stricken and wore her ring around his neck for the rest of his life. He found comfort in his adored grandchildren. James suffered from rheumatism and possibly dementia. He died on October 11th 1820 and was buried alongside his wife at All Saints Church.



James Keir was a man of many interests. He was a chemist, an engineer a geologist, inventor and industrialist. He was also a valued member of the Lunar Society, but despite all of this, his grave remains unmarked. James had specified that he did not want a memorial stone.

JH

It's all a Game

The BBC reports this week that Marcia Lewis has been in town to hand over various papers and board games belonging to her father Anthony Pratt to the Birmingham Library and Art Gallery. For those that don't recognise the name, he has featured in previous issues and exhibitions as the inventor of Cluedo and is featured in our book "Stars of Balsall Heath" (available through our website).



(Marcia Lewis with one of the original versions of Cluedo at Birmingham Library this week)

The article reports that the Art Gallery hopes to display "some of the material in the future as part of a collection about amazing inventions."

It also seems that Mr Pratt was not the only one inventing board games around. "their neighbour in Kings Heath called Geoffrey Bull, had invented the game Buccaneer about a decade earlier."

From <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cdrz8vpj4e5o>

WAM

SEASON'S GREETINGS
TO ALL OUR READERS

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