

Balsall Heath Local History Society Gazette

OCTOBER 2025



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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.

30th Oct Mary Bodfish, speak-
ing about James Keir,
27th Nov Betty Hagglund on
Mary and Martha Russell
Dec 18th A Quiz afternoon ,
hosted by Patrick Baird.

Balsall Heath in Changing Times. 1960s to 1990s

We are delighted to announce that we have appointed a
Project Officer ,Marcus Belben, who is a widely known
and respected champion of Birmingham's heritage.
Focusing on areas including Balsall Heath, Highgate,
Moseley, and Kings Heath.



Marcus has been working with People's Heritage Co-
operative, Friction Arts and with other Highgate
organisations as Chair of 'Home in Highgate' to develop
the cultural opportunities local people want. In addition
Marcus campaigns for Public Libraries and engaging
young people in heritage using local archives to map
historical changes. He has been the School Archivist at
Paganel Primary School, the first and only repository
archive in a state primary school.

For the new Balsall heath project Marcus will take the
lead on the oral history aspects and expects to usually be
in our office base on Tuesdays.

His email is; marcus@balsallheathhistory.co.uk

and phone number. 07784 302 283

VH

SEPTEMBER 25TH 2025 – TALK BY DAVID VAUX & PAUL JAQUES – THE WARWICKSHIRE & BIRMINGHAM HOME GUARD 1940 - 1944

On September 25th 2025 David Vaux, supported by Paul Jaques talked to us about The Warwickshire and Birmingham Home Guard. The talk was illustrated with slides, display boards and artefacts.

Around the time of the evacuation of Dunkirk, England was at great risk of invasion. On May 14th 1940, the War Minister, Anthony Eden announced that a new force would be established called "The Local Defence Volunteers (LDV)". There was no uniform and no equipment, just an armband and a passbook.

In July 1940, Winston Churchill referred to the LDV as The Home Guard and later that month, that name was adopted. The units were split into zones on a county basis. Warwickshire was split into three zones, Coventry, Birmingham (both of which at that time were in the county of Warwickshire) and the rest of Warwickshire.



They used the facilities of the Warwickshire Regiment and also adopted their badge.

The Home Guard carried out many duties, which included guarding factories, manning anti-aircraft batteries and even bomb disposal. The initial volunteers were largely WWI veterans, who were now too old to serve in the regular forces. There were also some younger men, who at seventeen years of age were too young to join the army. The volunteers were expected to work in their normal job in the daytime and carry out their Home Guard duties at night. Much of the Home Guard training took place in Birmingham. Many of the large factories, such as the Austin at Longbridge, Dunlop and Cannings had their own units. All units were numbered and the factory units had an 'F' in front of their number.

Warwickshire was one of the first units to recognise that women could play a part in the Home Guard. It is recorded that in October 1944 the Battalion had a unit known as the Women's Auxiliary 34th Battalion.

After June 6th 1944 and the D Day landings, the threat of invasion dropped and in October 1944, the Home Guard was wound down and in December 1944 it was stood down.

In his talk, David made reference to the popular television programme 'Dad's Army'. In this programme the set up was portrayed as a comedy, but in reality they became a very efficient and necessary force.

After the Home Guard was disbanded what was given to those who served? The men were given a scroll showing their dates served and the women were given a smaller scroll.



They could also be awarded a Defence Medal, but had to serve three years or die in service. The medals were unnamed.



The Warwickshire Home Guard had an outstanding record and won more gallantry awards than any other unit.

In the final part of his talk, David told us the stories of some of the outstanding Home Guard members from this area. These are just two of the names mentioned.

Section Commander George Inwood – On the night of the 15th/16th October 1940, he carried out a rescue in Bishop St where a family were trapped in the gas filled cellar. After rescuing some of the family, he went back in to try to rescue more, but unfortunately he was overcome by the fumes and died. He was awarded the George Cross posthumously. He is buried at Yardley Cemetery.

Volunteer A. W. Bailey – belonged to the Factory Home Guard at BSA (Birmingham Small Arms). On the night of 19th November 1940 the BSA suffered a direct hit leaving many people trapped inside. Bailey went in several times rescuing many people until he was overcome with exhaustion. He was awarded the George Medal.

At the end of the talk, members had the opportunity to ask questions and to view the display boards and artefacts more closely.



Events

- **Sat Nov 8th Second Saturday at the Old Print Works** We will be running a stall and collecting memories. Do come and talk to us.
- **Thursday 13 November 2025, 7.00pm-8.30pm [Online]**
John Pigott Smith, Surveyor (1798-1861): A Man of Many Parts & Birmingham's Answer to Sir Joseph Bazalgette. Talk by John Townley. Book by Eventbrite
As Surveyor for Birmingham council Pigott Smith made his mark on the growing town and his reputation as the driving force behind improvements to Birmingham's roads and sewers.
- **Sat 8th Nov at the Old Print Works**
Who Killed Oswald Grey – A community conversation
Join us at The GAP for an interactive Community Conversation with writer Jon Berry exploring forgotten local history, capital punishment and racial injustices within the British legal system through the real-life story of Oswald Augustus Grey.
Oswald came to England from Jamaica aged 18 in 1960, and lived on Cannon Hill Road in Balsall Heath. Two years later he became the last man to be hanged in Birmingham and the last Black man to be executed in Britain. This is a tale of hasty injustice and deep-seated prejudice that is as relevant today as it was 60 years ago.
Through audio, images and storytelling, local writer Jon Berry will take us on a journey through Oswald's life and untimely death, as carefully researched for his latest book *Who Killed Oswald Grey? Race, the law, and the last Black man hanged in Britain*
Interactive elements will include reviewing evidence sheets to make your case, reading excerpts from a theatre script that dramatises Oswald's trial, and community conversations around the importance of this story today
These presentations, discussions and activities will take place between 4 - 6pm, with open unstructured space to chat and connect between 6 - 7pm.
All welcome. Whilst this is a heavy topic, we intend to create this event as a warm and gentle space for reflection that centres on building connections, solidarity and knowledge within the community
Light refreshments will be provided
Book at https://www.eventbrite.com/e/community-conversation-who-killed-oswald-grey-tickets-1870766335469?aff=erelexpmit&keep_tld=1

In Memory of Peter Salway

Many people made contributions to the Society in memory of Peter. The total was over £360.

We have now planted a white Camellia, next the red one we planted for Bron. They are by the front entrance to St Paul's Venture, where the Society has met for many years. There will also be a plaque on the wall.

We are still considering how to spend the remaining funds.

Val Hart

