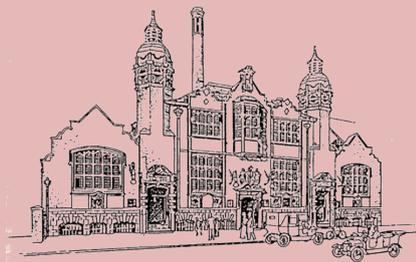


Balsall Heath Local History Society Gazette

FEBRUARY 2026



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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.

Next Meeting Thursday Feb 26th at 2 pm at the Creation Centre (ex Tram Depot) on the Moseley Road.

Gill Binnie talking about the history of some

prominent women of Moseley Refreshments will be served at 2:00 p.m.followed by a speaker

Coming soon; Thursday March 26th at 2 pm : Andrew Reekes on "The General Strike of 1926",

Events: March 14th. Second Saturday at the Old Print Works. 12 to 4 pm The Society will be running a stall.

A Reminder about Society Membership for 2026

Membership runs annually from January to December. At the AGM in September it was decided that the fee will stay at £15 for 2026. Gift Aid can be added to this if you sign up for it. Payment can be made either at meetings or online via our website

Existing members should have received a Membership reminder by email and there is no need to fill in forms if we already have your details.

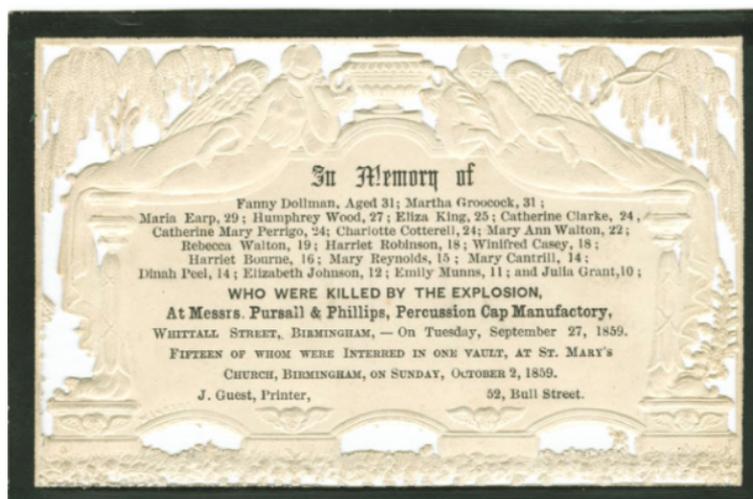
New Members: Application forms can be downloaded from our website:

www.balsallheathhistory.co.uk.

JANUARY 27TH 2026 – TALK BY LIZ PALMER – THE WHITTALL ST EXPLOSION

On January 27th 2026 Liz Palmer gave a very enlightening talk about an explosion in Whittall St. This explosion happened on September 27th 1859.

Whittall St is off Steelhouse Lane, near the old General Hospital now The Children's Hospital. It was the location of Pursall Phillips & Son, percussion cap manufacturers. Liz became interested in this tragic event after finding a memorial card in the Library of Birmingham. The card listed the names of many of those who were killed in the explosion. She was inspired to find out more about the tragedy.



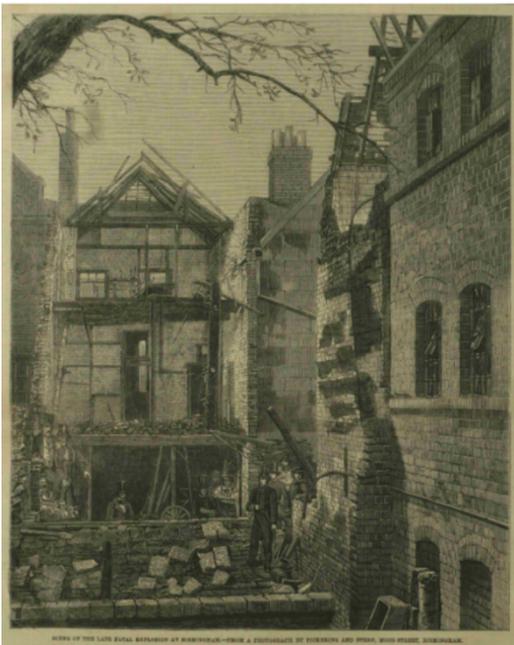
Memorial Card



Percussion Caps

Percussion caps were invented in the early 1800s. They are small brass or copper tubes filled with a fulminate of mercury, chlorate of potash, sulphur and charcoal which ignited by concussion within the firearm. Percussion caps were manufactured in London and Birmingham and in 1863 there were employing 665 people (excluding those at Woolwich Arsenal). Of these, 566 were females and 150 were children. Pursall Phillips were one of six manufacturers in Birmingham. The factory was a three story terraced house with a frontage of fourteen feet, which went back about forty feet. The third floor was where the work on the percussion caps took place. There was a mixing room for the explosives and a priming room where the caps were filled. These jobs required a delicate touch and nimble fingers. Not only was it a very dangerous job, but the factory was poorly ventilated and overcrowded.

At the time of the explosion, Pursall Phillips had a big order to fulfil and had more staff present than usual. That week there were between seventy and seventy five workers including five or six girls who were taken on on the day of the explosion.



The Factory after the explosion. The back was blown out.

On September 28th 1859, The Birmingham Daily Post published a timeline of the explosion.

Timeline

- 10-45 Initial explosion – no warning. The building collapsed and neighbours rushed to help.
- 11-00 Secondary explosion which led to a fire.
- 11-15 Fire Brigade arrived
- 1-30pm The first body was recovered

It took two to three days to recover all the bodies. A marquee was erected for all the bodies to be laid out. Relatives and friends had to identify their loved ones. Some were unrecognised and could only be identified by scraps of material or jewellery. Nineteen people were killed, all but one were women and children. Many more employees were injured and were treated at The General Hospital.

A fund was set up at The Woodman Inn in aid of the sufferers. All of the funerals were paid for from this fund. The fund raised £2800 and was wound up in April 1860. The surplus of £790 was split between The General Hospital and The Queen's Hospital.



The funerals of many of the deceased took place on October 2nd 1859 at St Mary's Church, which was also in Whittall St and some were buried in the Catholic Cemetery. Between forty and fifty thousand people lined the route on the day of the funerals. St Mary's Church was later demolished and the bodies were exhumed and buried elsewhere.

Liz told stories of some of the deceased and survivors and went on to talk about the Inquest. The Inquest began on September 30th 1859 and took place at The Grand Turk Inn in Ludgate Hill. It involved sixty witnesses and lasted for four weeks. Many questions were raised, the main one being who was responsible. Hours of technical evidence was given and Mr Pursall described the process in more detail. He stated that he had seen nothing that he thought in the least dangerous. All the explosives stored on the premises were listed. Most of the evidence pointed to the explosion having happened in the third floor priming room. The verdict of the Inquest was Accidental Death as exactly what caused the ignition of the powder could not be established. The use of young children in the priming room was condemned (the youngest child who was killed was ten year old Julia Grant).

In the aftermath of this tragedy, changes were made to legislation concerning explosives factories. Some of the changes were, for instance, the limiting of the amount of fulminating mercury which could be stored in an unlicensed place. Also, it was stated that there should be a safe distance between the mixing place and other workshops.

In 1861 Mr Pursall applied for a licence to erect a percussion cap factory in the hamlet of Witton. In 1862 an employee, George Kynoch took over the company. Despite the changes in legislation, a further explosion occurred in Graham Street in 1862. On November 17th 1870 there was an explosion at Kynoch's. Eight people were killed and twenty were injured. In the same year, there was an explosion at Ludlow & Co in which seventeen people were killed instantly and a further thirty four people died later.

The subtitle of this talk was 'An Accident Waiting to Happen', which seems very appropriate considering the dangerous processes which were taking place.

JH

Changing Times: What's Next for Balsall Heath?

The “Changing Times” project is in full swing! We want to share how we’re exploring the rich heritage of Balsall Heath and look towards the future. Inspired by thousands of historic photographs and the voices of our residents, check out what we’ve been up to and what’s coming next.



The wedding of Prince Charles to Lady Diana Spencer as re-created by Clifton Primary School. Prince Charles is Raymond Douglas and Lady Diana is Donna Titley. July 1981, part of Balsall Heath Carnival

Preserving the Past, One Story at a Time

Our incredible core group of volunteers has already clocked over 200 hours of work. A massive part of this effort involves cataloguing thousands of incredible photographs, capturing Balsall Heath from 1970s to 1990s.

We’ve also been busy behind the microphone – 17 interviews so far. We are currently transcribing and editing these sessions. **If you’re interested in being interviewed or interviewing, please get in touch!**

Community Connections & Reminiscence

We’ve been running reminiscence sessions at St. John and St. Martin’s Church Hall, led by Dawn and Marcus. As part of this work we’ll be creating a showcase exhibition in the Hall in March, date to be confirmed.

Putting Balsall Heath on the Map

Following the success of the 750th Birthday event, we are making Second Saturdays our monthly home. Coome along and map your special places.

The Physical Map: A 6ft x 4ft banner map for people to add their stories. It will help us identify where people want new heritage boards to be placed.

The Digital Map: An online version where images, interviews, and stories can be pinned to specific locations. Coming soon



Asian Fashion show in Balsall Heath in the 1980s

Looking Ahead: Celebrating in Art and Festival

- **Local artist Muhmood Tahir is making sketches** based on Mick Turner's photos, bringing his vision, and interpretation of Mick's valuable insight into Balsall heath.
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- **Collaboration with ANAWIM** as they celebrate their 40th anniversary, we are partnering to support their exhibition and online story, including interviews with their founders.
-
- **Come and see us at the Print Works' Second Saturday on March 14th**

Balsall Heath has a story to tell, and we're making sure it's heard.

MB

Balsall Heath Community Festival

Plans are afoot for this to happen in July this year with events being mounted by various agencies. Our Society is aiming to have 5 Interpretation Boards around the area by this date and we hope to organise a trail between them.

More news on all this next month.

VH

The Balsall Heath Local History Society is Registered Charity No. 1101945
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