

Balsall Heath Library officially opened in 1896.



In 1891 the Corporation of Birmingham proposed the annexation of Balsall Heath so it would become part of the City and this was agreed by a residents' vote. As an inducement to the district, the Corporation offered to provide a Free Library and Public Baths.

The site.

There was some difficulty finding a suitable site for Balsall Heath Library but eventually, the Libraries Committee joined with the Baths and Parks Committee, and jointly purchased 670 square yards of land for Library and Public Baths from Mr John Bowen and Mr Aaron Jones. This was sufficient land for both the Library and the Baths.

The architects were Cossins and Peacock, and the cheapest tender for building, £4750, was accepted from Mr R. Fenwick of 40 William Edward Street, Birmingham. The memorial stone was laid on 18 May 1895 by the Lord Mayor.

At the opening on 18 April, speeches were given by the Lord Mayor, Sir James Smith; Councillor Charles Green; J. Powell Williams, M. P.; Councillor Baker; Mr Howard Shakespeare Pearson and Mr John Thackray Bunce, and the occasion was well attended by members of the public

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History Society and
lostchildrenproject**

Membership of the Society costs £12 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 £3 for visitors.

Meetings are held at St Paul's Venture, Malvern Street at 7:30 pm. Refreshments will be served from 7 p.m to 7:15 p.m. Coming soon

**Thursday 30th May 7pm for 7.30pm. Keith Clenton talking about Birmingham city centre
Thursday 27th June 7pm for 7.30pm Andrew Reekes talking about George Cadbury**

The Rules and Regulations of Free Libraries published in 1898, states: "*Being in the Libraries in a state of intoxication, using the same for idling, sleeping, eating or conversation or for transaction of any business other than reading the books or papers are specific breaches of this regulation*". Silence was the rule at all times and there were also separate tables for "Ladies" and "Boys"



A printed catalogue of the books at Balsall Heath was produced and could be purchased for 4 pence. The different categories of books were: Theology, Moral Philosophy etc.: Biography; Law; Politics, Political Economy; Arts; Sciences; Natural History; Music; Poetry; Drama; Fiction; Miscellaneous; Magazines, Reviews; Juvenile Literature.



The first Librarian appointed in October 1895, a Mr Shuttleworth, left within a month to go to Rotherhithe and the post was re-advertised. A Mr Mould was then appointed, previously a librarian at Harborne, aged 23 and a half, with 8 years of service and a good exam result. His starting salary was 30 shillings a week.

The first cleaner appointed in February 1896 resigned within a month on health grounds, and the second, Mr Whittle, appointed in March 1896, also resigned within a month. He already held the job of caretaker at the Wesleyan Chapel, Moseley Road, and the Chapel authorities would not give permission for him to hold another post.

A previous candidate, Mrs Annie Smith was therefore appointed at 15 shillings a week, to find all her own materials and necessary assistance. This was 5 shillings less than the sum offered to Mr Whittle.

Val Hart

Balsall Heath Library. Committee and Visitors Book 1896 to 1964.

A few months ago it was announced that Balsall Heath Library was to close for refurbishment together with the next door Baths. The library staff kindly offered some unwanted materials to the Balsall Heath Local History Society. Amongst these was an intriguing volume "Birmingham Free Libraries Committee and Visitors Book" covering from April, 1896 to January, 1964.

A glance through it shows that is the record of visits made to Balsall Heath Library by the official inspector of Libraries who was employed by the local authority to go around all libraries at least once a month reporting their work and checking for any problems whether personal or building wise. The entry usually gave the date and time of the visit, the numbers of people in the building at the time ("Readers") and any other useful information. This small amount of information offers a generous insight into the success or not of the library service in Balsall Heath.

A glimpse of the Library in 1896, the year it opened.

The first entry is dated April 29th, 1896 and reads as follows:

"April 29th. Visited at 5.45pm. Found all quiet and orderly. Children in vestibule disorderly and noisy" - what else is new?-signed R. Wheeler Haines.

From July of that year the number of readers in the library at the time of the visit is also included.

It has to be noted that when these lists were first published the library didn't work in the way it does now. Browsing for books was not done. Books were housed in stacks and catalogues listing the stock were available from which the reader would choose which title he/she required. The assistant would then fetch the book from the stack.

The amount of information given is quite astounding, and includes the numbers of readers present at any one time - anything from 32 to 108, male ratio to female, usually much higher, for instance, as noted on

April 21, 1897 - *"Rain coming in at one corner and running down wall. Readers 95 male. 13 female"*

and 28th September 1904: *"Visited 8.45pm. 108 readers including 2 ladies."* Typical!





Children

Although welcomed by the library staff, children are usually described as being noisy or disorderly. However one entry, same date as above, shows that they ought to use the service more: *"...pleased to find local schoolmasters taking interest in encouraging boys to be borrowers - should like to see schoolmistresses take a similar course. Suggest free copies of catalogues to be sent to each master and mistress so they may recommend literature to their children."*

Opening Hours

Compared to today opening hours were indeed long - official visits to the library occurred any time between 10.00am and 9.10pm which suggests that these may have been from 9.00am to 10.00pm including Saturdays:

"December 9th, 1905. Visited 8.15pm. All in order. Being Saturday night busy at counter but no undue pressure. Issue at 6' o'clock 600."

Staffing Issues 1915 -1917

A number of problems were found for a number of years before this: *"December 23rd, 1915. Visited at 4pm. Mr James, Mr Norris and juniors present. Work very much in arrears owing to illness of librarian and shortage of staff. It should be placed on record that the librarian (Mr James) has attended to his duties for some time past when he really is unfit to do so; owing to shortage of staff he has declined to ask for relief"..*

and by August 21st, 1917:

"... visited at 11.15. Mr James and three others present. The condition of the library is not satisfactory. The books on the shelves are crowded, untidy, dirty. The number of books awaiting repair is unreasonable. Many books on the shelves are out of date and might be with advantage be removed.."

However, by November 22nd *"...Mr James and others on duty. Examined collection of books suggested for removal. It is a pleasure to report a very great improvement in the condition of the library and considerable progress with work that which was so badly in need..."*

A Move to Open Access 1922

By the early 1920's the idea of choosing your own books by browsing along the shelves - "Open Access"- was coming into effect. On September 30th, 1922 an entry in the book shows that Balsall

Heath Library was about to be converted: "... visited 11.00am with proposed alterations for open access..." and October 9th: "... alterations in progress" and November 28th: "... alterations practically completed and open access in operation" but at the same time "...public shelves in very unsatisfactory condition and obviously neglected by the staff

1926

But there is one mystery: "...May 11th 1926. Miss Timms and two juniors present. All in excellent order : in view of the comparatively heavy losses, the staff must realise the need of constant supervision"

What has happened? What "heavy losses"?

From November, 1926 until the last entry in January, 1964 no information is given only the date, time of visit and signature of official.

This is all in all a most interesting insight into the history and development of a beloved facility in Balsall Heath,

Patrick Baird

Birmingham City Council is proposing cuts to the library service with likely closure of some community libraries. Balsall Heath looks as though it will survive but please respond to the Consultation which is open until July 17th.

The consultation is accessible as a (long) form at <https://www.birminghambeheard.org.uk/adults-communities/lc24/>

The council are also holding public and online meetings with details at https://www.birmingham.gov.uk/info/50306/commissioners_intervention_and_improvement/2903/consultations_to_help_us_reshape/2

PLACE NAMES OF WARWICKSHIRE & WORCESTERSHIRE

On April 25th Richard Churchley gave us a very interesting talk about place names. This is just a brief summary of that talk.

The origin of place names is not an exact science, but most names come from Saxon times.

Balsall Heath & Moseley

The talk, appropriately started with Balsall Heath, which was part of the parish of Kings Norton in Worcestershire. In 1891 it became part of Birmingham in the county of Warwickshire. Balsall Heath was first recorded as Bordeshall. Hall or Halle meant a corner of land, so Bord's corner of land. Heath was added later. There are other Balsalls in Warwickshire e.g. Balsall Common, but that Balsall belonged to a different leader, Baille, so this was Bailleshall.

The meaning of Moseley's name was discussed. It had been stated that Moseley meant a clearing where mice had been. One member felt this was unlikely and that Moseley came from Moss – a wet, poorly drained, boggy land used for pasture..

Links to the Past

Many place names are found predominantly in certain parts of the country. Examples of this are Combe, as in Ilfracombe in Devon. Places ending, "by" are commonly found in the North East, an area invaded by the Vikings. There are some exceptions to this, Rugby, Formby and Tenby. Thorpe is another place name ending found in Viking areas e.g. Mablethorpe in Lincolnshire. Princethorpe in Warwickshire is an exception to this.

County names in the Midlands end in shire from the Saxon word, share. Shire was then added to the county town to give the full name of the county. Counties in other parts of the country were formed in different ways. Cumberland meant the people who spoke Welsh. Northumberland meant the land north of the Humber. County Durham is the only county which has County first. Suffolk and Norfolk simply mean South and North folk.

Location Hints

Many places have an initial element which indicates their location e.g. Norton, Sutton, Aston and Weston, which indicate North, South, East and West. These places then need an additional part to distinguish one from another. Aston for instance was known as Aston juxta Birmingham (Aston next to Birmingham). Other common elements to a place name are Middle, Upper, Over or Nether. Words relating to trees or animals are often used as in Beoley, a clearing where bees were found, (ley means a clearing). Elmley, a clearing where an elm stood. Haseley, a clearing where a hazel tree stood.

Saxon Heritage

Richard then went through an A – Z of Saxon words, from which the final element of some place names is derived. A few examples of this are:-Cirice – church, as in Alvechurch, Aelfgyd’s church; Don, dun – hill or down, as in Elmdon and Claverdon; Tun, ton – farm or settlement, as in Kineton, Coughton and Harvington.

Redditch and Headless Cross

Richard mentioned a false explanation for these names as relating to a stream of blood, hence the red ditch. During question time at the end of the talk, the real meaning was discussed. The red ditch relates to a very sandy stream by Bordesley Abbey, which appeared to be red (as someone with ginger/sandy coloured hair would be called a redhead) and Headless Cross was the heath clearing at a crossroads, nothing to do with anyone losing their head.

For more information about place names, Richard recommended the University of Nottingham website, Key to English Place Names <http://kepn.nottingham.ac.uk>

JH

Dates for your Diary

Saturday 13th July 2024 10:00 – 4:00

Midland Ancestors Heritage Event – Local & Family History Fair, The Main Hall, King Edward VI High School for Girls, Edgbaston Park Road Bham B15 2UB

Weds July 17th at 8 pm “A Worker’s Paradise” at the Blue Orange Theatre, a new play to celebrate Cadbury’s 200th Anniversary by the Birmingham History Theatre Company, with songs by Peter Churchill.

7,10 & 13 July. The Flying Dutchman presented by Persona Arts at The Bradshaw Hall, Royal Birmingham Conservatoire,, Birmingham, B4 7XR

The performances are dedicated to the memory of Bron Salway, former teacher and supporter of Byron and a trustee of the history society

For more info: <https://www.personaarts.org.uk/opera-masterclass-susan-bullock>