

Balsall Heath Local History Society Gazette MAY 2026



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Membership Details

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.

The next Meeting of the Society will be on **Thursday May 28th at 7 pm for a 7.15 start At St Paul's Venture, Malvern Street, off Clifton Road, Balsall Heath B12 8NN**



Marcus Belben, our Project Officer will be speaking about Woodcraft.

Forthcoming Programme.

Thursday June 25th 7 pm at St Paul's Venture

Mary Bodfish on :the Soho Manufactory: The Early Years

Thursday July 9th at St Paul's Venture

A special meeting for Balsall Heath Community Festival
I can't find Brummagem... How Balsall Heath changed from the 1960s to 1990s and

Didn't We Have A Lovely Time?.....

at Balsall Heath Carnival over the years

Society Trip

Thursday, July 23rd at 2 pm.

A guided tour of The Oratory

141 Hagley Rd. B16 BUE

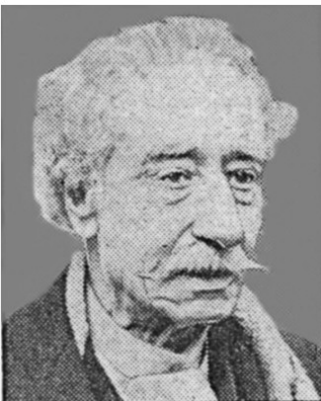
There is a charge of £10 per person, payable on the day. No need to book but please tell us if you are coming.



Lieutenant Lempriere and the Parachute Queens

At the meeting on April 30th the talk was given by Richard Albutt, who was ably assisted by his fellow members of The Birmingham History Theatre Company. The talk was entitled 'Lieutenant Lempriere and the Parachute Queens'. It was narrated by Richard and interspersed with film clips and lively songs. The film clips were produced by Haqi Ali and the songs were sung live by members of the Theatre Company.

George Lempriere was born in 1855 in London, but moved to Handsworth as a young man. From a very early age Lempriere had a fascination with flying. He spent much time watching pigeons and longing for wings of his own. He tried jumping from a wall with a cape, unsuccessfully. He tried again with an umbrella, but went to the ground more quickly than he expected. He then became interested in flying machines.



George Lempriere
known as
Lieutenant Lempriere

The famous Montgolfier brothers had started flying hot air balloons in the late 1700s. They were paper manufacturers who became fascinated by aeronautics and built parachutes as early as 1775.

Lempriere made his first balloon ascent with a professional, but soon began building balloons of his own. On one occasion he travelled for an hour and a half before he could find somewhere suitable to land. Eventually he landed in Acocks Green. On another occasion, he became ill for several days after inhaling the gas from the balloon. It did not deter him from continuing with his passion for flying balloons.



Lempriere carried out balloon and parachute exhibitions throughout Great

Britain. He regularly entertained guests at Dudley Castle. His spectacles gathered large crowds. He took photos from his flights and also took up paying guests. People would be nervous, but soon settled on seeing the glorious, panoramic views.



Lempriere gave speeches and lectures not only about his ballooning, but also political speeches. In 1897 he stood, unsuccessfully to become a councillor for the Soho ward. He had a novel way of distributing his canvassing literature. He scattered it from his hot air balloon.

By the 1890s, Lempriere was including women in his events. The women performed feats on a trapeze suspended from the balloon basket and parachuted from the balloon. Although this was a spectacular sight, it was not without disaster. Lempriere recruited several ladies, who became known as 'The Parachute Queens'. Amongst these were Cissie Kent, Kitty King, Maud Brookes and her sister Edith. Cissie was the leading parachutist and she had a fear of landing in water. She always ate a hearty, pre-flight meal. Kitty King was Lempriere's favourite parachutist. Maude Brookes made eighteen descents and some of these did not end as they should have, but she survived. Her sister Edith was not as fortunate. Edith undertook a descent at the Sheffield Wednesday football ground, but her parachute failed to open. She fell to her death in front of a crowd of horrified spectators. The Parachute Queens continued to perform until the beginning of WWI.

Lempriere's fascination with aeronautics continued through his life. He took his last balloon flight the week before his 70 th birthday. He was seen as a trail blazer in aerial entertainment. He died in 1949, a week before his 94 th birthday and was buried in Handsworth Cemetery.

The question is, what drove the Queens to do it? Excitement, escape, who knows?

More information can be found in the Local Studies & History Dept in The Library of Birmingham.

JH



From **July 3rd to 13th, 2026**, let's celebrate Balsall Heath with a community led week of wonder! We're working with local organisations – schools, charities, faith centres, to celebrate everything Balsall Heath and everyone Balsall Heathan.

What's happening?

We're coordinating over a week of fun, heritage, and innovation. While the full schedule is brewing, here is a sneak peek at what's in the works:

- 1. Heritage & Art** – We're launching the “**Believe in Balsall Heath**” street banners, unveiling our history interpretation boards with **Balsall Heath Local History Society**, hosting workshops and a local history trail.
- 2. Family & Youth** – Get ready for a massive **Family Fun Day at St Paul's** In Malvern Street, “**Second Saturday**” at the **Old Printworks**, and youth workshops at **The Gap Youth Arts Project**
- 3. Innovation & Nature** **Fruit and Nut Village** is working with Friends of the Earth. Postcode Gardeners, Friends of our wonderful Parks, Birmingham Open Spaces Forum and **Balsall Heath Retrofit** who are planning an East to West procession.
- 4. Health & Wellbeing** – Join us for community meals, a Faith Trail and specialized workshops with our partners at **Miah Foundation**, and **Anawim** as well as a full day of family sports at **Saheli**

Full details on **the Balsall Heathan website**

<https://balsallheathan.org>

PSALM. A new poem by Liz Berry



Readers of The Gazette will remember that Liz Berry's book, "The Home Child" which was published in 2023, told the story in poetry of her great aunt.

Eliza Showell was taken to Canada by the Middlemore Emigration Homes in 1908.

Now Liz has turned her eye to Balsall Heath. Her new poem, Psalm, was published recently in the Times Literary Supplement.

Psalm

(After Allen Ginsberg's "Psalm III")

Illuminate all women. Beginning with Balsall Heath, at dawn.

With the ghost of Sister Maisie bringing tea to the sex workers; with the women in red aprons laying out jigsaws in the nursery; the cleaners coming home from Corporation Street on the 50, eyes flickering shut in the heater's warmth.

Illuminate the nurses leaving for the early shift, windscreen wipers on, radio crooning; the mothers cutting toast into triangles, stepping toddlers from their wet pyjamas; the girl making love, eyes closed, still half asleep, feeling water rise through her like the cut being thawed. Illuminate the insomniacs in their kitchens in the fading dark, night nearly behind them; the college girls and their sisters, asleep in shared box rooms, phones in hand, always waiting for his message. Inshallah. The woman who begs for money at the Middleway junction, scabs on her wrists and round her mouth like poppies; the one who dozes in a tent in the bushes, the one so thin with a little star tattooed on her cheek and her eyebrows painted black.

Illuminate the women praying; the women doing yoga foreheads to the floor in child's pose; the old women who lie stiff with arthritis, remembering, as girls, how frost furred the inside of the windows, wondering how early they can ring their daughters; daughters boiling kettles and stripping bedsheets, turning on the radio to Kath, in her windowless studio:

"Good morning, Birmingham, I'm with you all the way until 6 ..."

Illuminate them all. Let the buried Rea be a blast of light.

LIZ BERRY

Liz Berry's collections of poems include Black Country, 2014, The Republic of Motherhood, 2018, and The Home Child, 2023.

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