



CHAIR'S MESSAGE JULY 2026

Hello everyone,

I hope you're enjoying the summer and managing to keep cool.

Many of you volunteered to help at the Balsall Common Festival Picnic in the Park, and even more of you attended and enjoyed the day. Tina O'Sullivan, the Festival Organiser, has asked me to pass on the Festival Committee's thanks for our help. Your contribution as car park attendants and field and litter patrollers was greatly appreciated and helped ensure that the event was a great success.

We have a special 20th Anniversary event coming up on Saturday 11 July: a Film Matinee at the Jubilee Centre. This

event is open to all Balsall Common u3a members, not just those in the film group, and offers an opportunity to enjoy a film in the company of fellow members, along with refreshments.

The film being shown is "Wicked Little Letters". We will also be serving popcorn and prosecco, homemade cakes, and tea or coffee. Doors open at 1.40pm for a 2.00pm start. The entrance fee is £5, and pre-booking is essential. For more details and to book your place, please visit:

<https://balsallcommon.u3asite.uk/film-matinee-booking-page/>

I look forward to seeing you at our regular monthly meetings, held at 2.00pm on the first Thursday of each month at St Peter's Church Hall.

On Thursday 2 July, our speaker will be Paul Wilkins, presenting a talk entitled "The Children of the Blitz".

Best wishes,

Juliet

NEWS

1 NEW FONT SIZE FOR THE SENTINEL

The national u3a website contains advice for local groups that produce newsletters such as The Sentinel. Amongst a number of suggestions, the easy-to-read font size recommended is number 14.

The Sentinel normally uses font D M Sans size 12 for the main text, keeping 14 for headlines. This edition has been produced using D M Sans font size 14 for the main text. I hope you find it easier to read.

2 20th ANNIVERSARY OF BALSALL COMMON u3a FILM MATINEE



As part of the 20th Anniversary celebrations of Balsall Common u3a a nostalgic Film Matinee afternoon has been arranged for Saturday 11th July in the

Jubilee Centre starting at 2:00pm.

The main feature will be the 2023 film "**Wicked Little Letters**". This film is a 2023 British period black comedy mystery film directed by Thea Sharrock, written by Jonny Sweet and starring Olivia Colman, Jessie Buckley and Timothy Spall. Based on the Littlehampton libels of the 1920s, it follows an investigation into the anonymous author of numerous crudely insulting letters sent to the residents of the seaside town of Littlehampton.



Refreshments, popcorn, prosecco, tea/coffee are included in the £5.00 ticket price payable in advance. Tickets went on sale after the announcement in the June Sentinel. There is a limit of 60 seats available if have not booked a place yet, and you wish to attend, click here for booking details [20th Anniversary Film Matinee - Balsall Common](#). First come first served. Please note only members of Balsall Common u3a are able to attend this event.

NB Message from Kim Hathrell Film Appreciation Group Coordinator -
There won't be a screening on Wednesday 8th July owing to the 20th Anniversary film show of Wicked Little Letters on Saturday 11th.



3 REQUEST TO ALL MEMBERS OF u3a BALSALL COMMON

SEPTEMBER will be our 20th anniversary.

I will be preparing a supplementary edition of The Sentinel. I would be

happy to receive a contribution from you covering topics such as what groups you are (or have been a) member and what do you find interesting about them – your thoughts on u3a – your stories about your experiences as a member – or anything you would like to add. Please send me contributions soon.



4 OUT AND ABOUT VISITS - Karen Harris and Peter Calver

Visit to Newman Brothers (Coffin Museum) Wednesday July 29th starting at 2pm

We have arranged a visit to Newman Brothers on the edge of the Jewellery Quarter in Birmingham. The museum is commonly known as the Coffin Museum. Although the products produced at these works are coffin furniture, the works are a good example of Victorian working conditions and practises Newman Brothers was established in 1882 by Alfred Newman and his brother Edwin.



Originally brass founders, they predominantly made cabinet furniture until 1894, when the company moved to the present site on Fleet Street and began to specialise in the production of coffin furniture. Newman Brothers continued to specialise in this area until, due to competition from abroad and failure to modernise, they were forced out of business and ceased trading in 1998.

There address is 13-15 Fleet Street, Jewellery Quarter, Birmingham, B3 1JP a 10 –15 minute walk from New St rail station. Cost £11.00 per person. If you wish to join this visit please email [the Out and About Group Coordinators](#) and specify how many tickets you require. We will request payment early in July

5 Walking Cricket – Ian Morrey

Summer is back - and so is the Walking Cricket Group! After last year's enforced rest, the square at the Hornets' sports ground on Lavender Hall Lane has been reinstated and we're back in action. A sedate, walking action of course, but it looks and feels like a proper game of cricket so why not come and join us for the afternoon on 16th July and 18th August. We start at 2.00pm and finish around 4.00pm with a cup of tea in the clubhouse.

I hope to arrange a session in the nets at The Lant a week or so before each game so that we can all ease ourselves back in gently.

More information on the Walking Cricket page on the u3a website Groups area.

If you're interested and you'd like to find out more drop me an e-mail at the group co-ordinator. Check https://balsallcommon.u3asite.uk/u3a_groups/walking-cricket/



I look forward to hearing from members. You can submit contributions on almost any subject. Please submit all contributions to The Sentinel via the contact page on the website

[Contact Us - Balsall Common](#)

MEMBERS' CONTRIBUTIONS

This is a true account of the nightmare experiences of two Balsall Common residents late on a Christmas night in 1938 as reported in The Chronicle and Advertiser, Saturday January 14th 1939.

THE PHANTOM COACH AT BALSALL COMMON

Motorists' Weird Experience

Woman says "I was terrified"

The Phantom Coach – the mysterious vehicle which met with disaster centuries ago with the loss of many lives has been seen in the Berkswell district, it is claimed, by two Balsall Common people – a man and his wife - returning home late one night and while the man was considerably alarmed his wife - as she declared to our representative - was terrified. An old legend says that years ago a crowded coach travelling in the Berkswell district at Christmas fell into a deep pit and the vehicle and its occupants were never seen again.

The two people who had the weird experience of seeing this midnight spectacle are Mr & Mrs A Turner of Station Road, Balsall Common.

Mr Turner, who is a newsagent, said that he and his wife were returning along the Coventry Road to Balsall Common late one Christmas night when the incident happened. As will be recollected there was a considerable quantity of snow about and conditions were very bad.

Dim Lights

"We had had a merry Christmas night", said Mr Turner "and I saw the lights as we were coming home".

"The lights were rather dim were reflected in my driving mirror and at first, I thought how unusual, it was for a car to catch us up having regard to the state of the road. As we were coming under the railway bridge near Berkswell Station my wife said "there's a car behind". I looked round and saw two lights behind, they were dim and resembled the lights of an old-fashioned horse break."

"My wife was sitting in the back of the car with the baby and she got the wind up as the thing seemed to be coming into the back of us. I thought I had better slow down to let it overtake me but when I did so nothing happened. We looked round and could

not see any lights at all but when we got to the top of the hill near the shop corner, just before we reached our home, we saw the lights again. When we eventually stopped the car outside our house there were no lights to be seen."

"If I had been on my own and seen it," Mr Turner commented, significantly, "people would have said I was 'lit up' but my wife and I saw it."



Picture by Freepik

Wife's Story

Mrs Turner corroborated her husband's story and said "it was on the Sunday, Christmas Day night. We were returning home between midnight and 1 am. I was sitting in the back of the car with the baby. He is five months old and was fast asleep in the carry cot. You know the ford under the bridge by the station?, Well it was there I saw the lights bobbing about in the mirror. Then my husband said "there is a car at the back", I turned round but saw no car there. My husband did not say any more but was rather quiet. Just past the Railway Inn, I turned round and said you are right there is a car. I turned round again to look at it and it was still following us. Approaching the top of the hill I looked round again and could not see it but a little further on I turned round and said it's here again."

Old-fashioned Lamps

"Then it suddenly dawned on me that it was not a car because there were two lanterns, you now, those old-fashioned kind of coach lanterns like bull's eyes. They were like that but one was lighter than the other, both the lights were higher than the top of our car and as I looked at it, it put the wind up me, I thought the thing was going to crash right on to us. I then turned round quite expecting it to go into the back of the car."

Pitch Black Night

"I was terrified", she continued, "the two lights came up suddenly as though they were going to touch me. I could not see the coach; although it was a moon-lit night. When we got home, we got out of the car but could not see any lights at all. I am sorry we did not draw up at the time to see what it was."

Asked if she thought the experience was due to a natural phenomenon caused by luminous gases which are sometime to be seen in cold weather, Mrs Turner said that she did not think this as the explanation. *"The lanterns were too obvious for me to think anything else. Had I not seen it myself I should not have believed it at all."*

The Old Legend

"I had not heard the story of the phantom coach until I mentioned the experience to my step-mother. She said it must have been the phantom coach and I said "what phantom coach"? Then she told me there is a story about a phantom coach that disappeared into a pit in the neighbourhood and nothing was seen of it or its passengers again. "

Editor's note: Who was the phantom front seat passenger in Mr Turner's car?

Story Based On Fact



The licensee of the Phantom Coach Hotel, Canley, Coventry, Mr E V Thorn, who was asked why his hotel was called by its present name said there was a local story years ago that the hamlet there used to be an important coaching station.

It was reported that on one occasion the coach came in as usual and filled up with passengers. It started off all right but was never seen or heard of again. *"Since then,"* remarked Mr

Thorn, *"people have said they have seen the old coach going along the old road in the district. I had an old char woman here who well remembered her grandmother telling her the story of the phantom coach, although the story may have become somewhat distorted there seems to have been some foundation for it."*

HAMPTON, BALSALL AND BERKSWELL – THE BERMUDA TRIANGLE OF RAIL

Will Heard

I do not admit to being technical, so it comes as no surprise that the greatest technical idea I ever had exploded into the dust that was the origin of the idea.

The technical amongst you will be aware that flour dust, for example, can be as explosive as gunpowder given the right conditions. Flour is explosive because it is made of carbohydrates which are highly combustible. While a solid pile of flour barely burns due to lack of oxygen, flour dust dispersed in air exposes a massive surface area to oxygen. When ignited, these particles burn instantly, creating a rapid chain reaction explosion. The key is the ignition. Floating dust is inert until it gets lit and when it gets lit the explosion can be as devastating as Krakatoa.

As with flour so with coal. Coal is a solid lump of carbon. You have difficulty lighting it with a match. You need some igniter concentrated on a particular spot to get it going.



MALLARD Tha fastest steam train that ever lived – 126 m.p.h.

Bearing this in mind, my idea sprang from the thrill that most small boys experience when the express from London to goodness knows where steams through his local station seemingly at 100 m.p.h. like a juggernaut on fire. Sadly, however, in my youth, steam was rapidly becoming no more.

My trainspotting adventures often took me to Derby station where I was able to witness lines of steam trains parked in the sidings ready for scrapping. Steam was giving way to diesel. Diesel engines were more efficient than steam engines but they were just boring.

So, in my innocence, and in my later youth, after a few bouts of punishment learning physics at secondary school, I hit upon this fantastic idea to save the steam engine from diesel's grip. Instead of lumps of coal shoved into a big boiler to power the steam engine, why not pre-crush the coal and inject the dust powder at great speed (thus mixing it with oxygen) through some form of glorified spark plug just like in a petrol engine. Surely that would increase a steam engine's efficiency to that of a diesel engine and ensure steam's longevity.

What I didn't know at the time is that diesel engines don't have spark plugs. Instead, they compress air so much that it becomes hot enough to ignite the fuel that is injected into it. But what's the difference – let's ignite the highly powdered coal dust and create explosions in a controlled environment just like petrol does in a petrol engine.

(Incidentally, please don't write to me and suggest using flour instead of coal dust. My repost would be "use your loaf!" if we did that, we wouldn't have enough for bread!)

Anyway, I found out later that a technical mind far greater than mine had already had this idea and rejected it for the daft idea it was. His name was Rudolph Diesel. Enough said!!

So, what's all this got to do with the Bermuda Triangle of Rail that is Balsall's (et al) notorious heritage? Nothing, I just wanted to get the coal dust off my chest.

HAMPTON IN ARDEN – The triangle is born



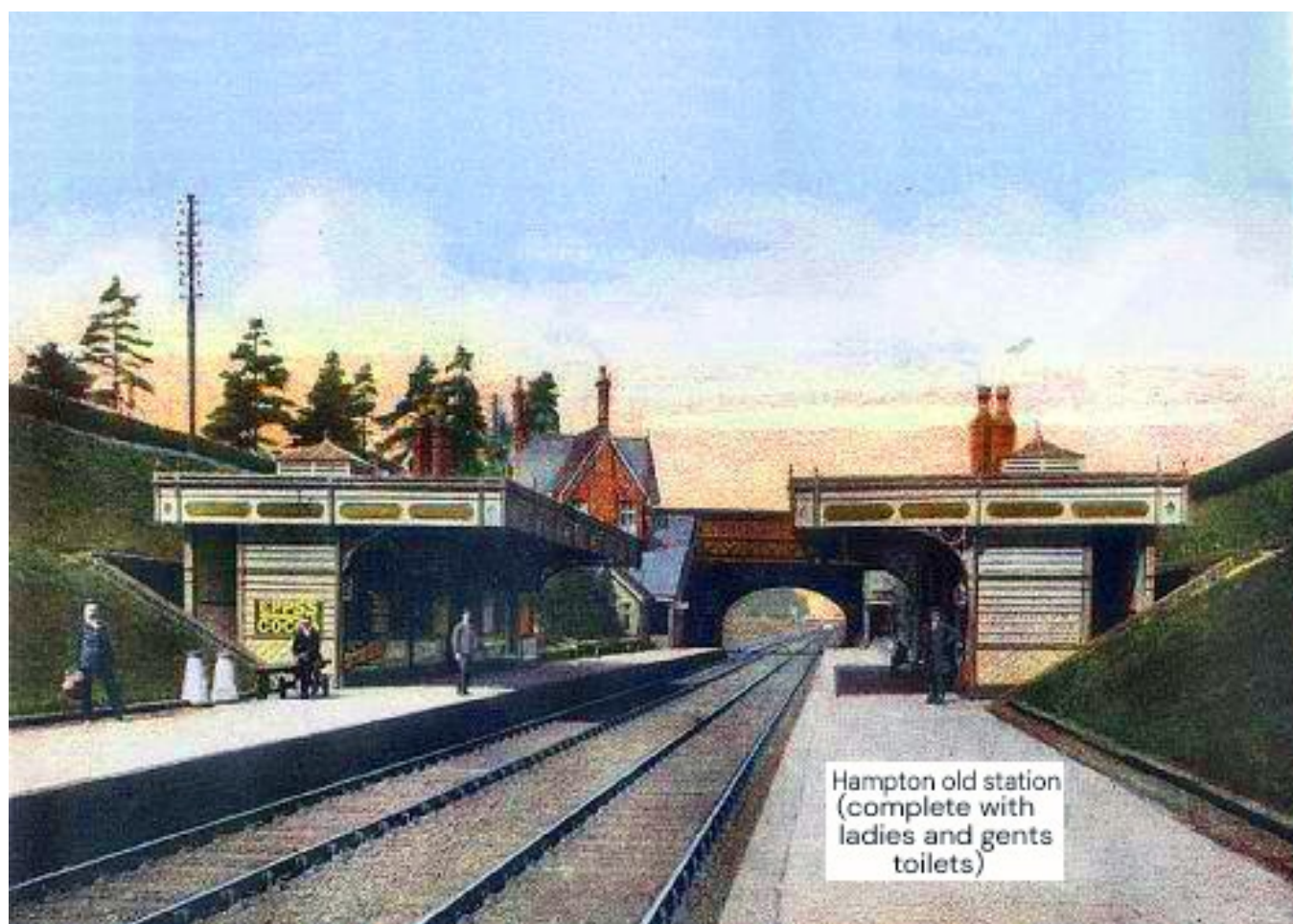
Sir Frederick Peel

I used to live in Hampton and travel daily by train to Birmingham. I often wondered why the platforms at Hampton are so long. Indeed, they are so long that half of their length is now barriered off and consigned to ravenous weeds and the jaws of icy nights.

To answer this question let me take you up to Hampton Manor in Hampton in Arden which now features high quality dining and a hotel, but in the 19th century housed quite auspicious residents which Google describes thus:

*In the 19th century, the broader Manor of Hampton was purchased by **Sir Robert Peel** (the former Prime Minister). His son, **Sir Frederick Peel**, later shaped much of the local architecture by hiring famous architect W. Eden Nesfield to build the Manor House, clock tower, and various high-status parish cottages, setting an architectural benchmark for future developments like the modern Grange.*

Forget Sir Robert Peel. It's Sir Frederick we are interested in.



Hampton in Arden Station about 1884

If you ask Google why the platforms at Hampton in Arden are so long you will be given a perfectly reasonable explanation but you will have asked the wrong question. Google's answer is that the station needed long platforms because mainline trains travelling between London and Birmingham stopped there until Birmingham International was built.

But Hampton in Arden station was built originally in 1837, when the line opened, and then repositioned to its current location and platforms in 1884. Why would a rail company want to stop its prestige mainline expresses at rural Hampton in Arden when they had just stopped at Coventry and had a straight run at say 30 to 40 m.p.h. into central Birmingham doing the 17 miles in 20 to 30 minutes?

After all, Hampton is miles from Coventry and Birmingham and its inhabitants numbered 1,678 in the census of 1881. Doesn't sound like an obvious place for a main line rail station.

Might the answer lay in the blooming obvious? Sir Frederick Peel – he of Hampton Manor - held one of the most important public posts in the land at the time. He was president of the Railway and Canal Commission from its inception in 1873 until he stepped down to be a normal commissioner in 1888. He remained in that post until his death in 1906.

Might it be possible that Sir Frederick's often (presumed) journeys to and from London were made so much more comfortable by the fact that with a few deft scratches of his quill and a signature here and there he had secured his own personal

boarding and alighting point just a quick pony and trap ride from Hampton Manor? I know I would.

I leave you to ponder this conundrum.

THE AXE MAN COMETH – The triangle tightens its grip



Doctor Richard Beeching
The Axe Man of Berkswell

I will not dwell on the reason why Berkswell station is in Balsall Common. I do not want to reignite the great re-naming wars of earlier years when the perfectly reasonable suggestion by Balsall residents to re-name the station “Balsall and Berkswell” got suffocated in the coal dust of ages.

I do not want to remind you that Berchewelle (probably derived from Bercul’s well) is mentioned in the Domesday Book in 1086 when it had a population of 8 villagers, 3 smallholders and 4 slaves and was worth £2 per annum to the local lord. At that time Balsall Common wasn’t even a speck of soot in William the Conqueror’s eye.

But I **do want to** remind you that one of the most notorious railway barons of the 20th. century lived at Tower House, Spencers Lane, Berkswell; namely Doctor Richard Beeching.

No doubt Dr. Beeching did that very same journey to and from London just as Sir Frederick Peel did but this time it was to axe the very rail system that Sir Frederick had so assiduously helped to create, those many years before.

Doctor Beeching (not to be confused with one or two other notorious doctors of the 20th century) was responsible for a government report that recommended the destruction of approximately 2,300 stations plus 5,000 miles of railway line for closure. This amounted to 55% of stations, 30% of route miles, and the loss of 67,700 British Rail jobs.

My jaundiced view springs from the perspective of one small boy of 70 years ago who ate, slept and dreamed of steam trains; a boy who thrilled at the prospect of getting soot in his eye as he leant out of the open sash window daring himself to keep leaning out at the danger of beheading as another behemoth approached on the opposite line probably with a closing speed of 100 plus m.p.h. He did not lose his head but he did lose his school cap which was ceremoniously returned to him at Monday’s school assembly – name taped inside (thanks Mum) and emblazoned with the school’s emblem on the front.

THE ROYAL VILLAGE OF BALSALL COMMON – The triangle is complete.

Alright, this isn't about Balsall Common at all but, you've guessed it, the Domesday village of Berkswell again.

But surely us Balsall Commoners (including me even though my back garden fence forms part of the boundary of the ancient parish of Berkswell) are entitled to bask in some of Berkswell's reflected glory. For the highest royalty of the land has graced us with its presence on more than one occasion over the years.

Duke of Edinburgh Stays for a Night at Berkswell

OF all the inhabitants of Berkswell only a few members of the Berkswell railway station staff were aware on Wednesday that for the night they had in their midst a most distinguished guest, in the person of the Duke of Edinburgh. In a special train, the Duke of Edinburgh and his staff arrived at Berkswell at 9 p.m., stayed for the night in a railway siding and left at 9 a.m. yesterday to visit the British Industries Fair at Castle Bromwich.

ONCE BEFORE

Within the memory of the present staff at Berkswell Station there has been only one previous occasion when Berks-

well sidings has been used for a Royal train. This was several years ago when King George VI and Queen Elizabeth visited Coventry and other places of interest in Warwickshire.

The Duke of Edinburgh arrived at the British Industries Fair at Castle Bromwich at 9.40 a.m. yesterday. Although his visit was only semi-official, he spent nearly two and a half hours inspecting the various exhibits.

On Wednesday the Duke had visited the £27,000,000 steel plant development at Shotton, just over the Welsh border in Flintshire.

The expansion of the Shotton plant is of special importance to the Midlands. Nearly 40 per cent. of the steel sheets used by the motor industry are rolled there and a fleet of lorries brings them daily to Coventry and Birmingham.

The Chronicle and Advertiser
May 2nd. 1953

No! They weren't train spotting but sleeping soundly in the royal sidings that you once could see through the carpark railings as a spur off the mainline.

Allegedly this royal refuge was created in 1969 when Beeching's axe fell on the line between Berkswell station and Kenilworth but since King George VI, Queen Elizabeth, the Duke of Edinburgh and Winston Churchill are alleged to have quartered overnight in the siding I suggest there was another siding as a spur off the Kenilworth line since two out of the four luminaries weren't actually alive in 1969!

HS2. Abandon hope all ye who enter here.

I leave you with our current claim to railway fame.

A recent HS2 newsletter states that "at the site of the old 'Royal Berkswell Sidings' HS2 will be creating a new temporary rail sidings to support the next phase of the construction of HS2, Rail Systems. The sidings will be used to deliver materials by rail. The sidings will comprise of two low-speed track sections connected to the West Coast Mainline. The site will also continue to have a small office for staff and storage

areas for construction materials. A small crane will be introduced for unloading materials.”

How our once mighty Royal sidings have fallen.

One day, not very soon, we will be woken by the rumble of so-called Hi-Speed trains (whose proposed maximum speed has already been cut even before the line is complete). There'll probably be a lot more freight on the current line adding to the nightly rumble and no small boy train spotter will be able to get near to the HS2 trains which won't have any numbers to bag, anyway.

It'll frighten the sheep and put the cows off milking and spook the horses. No rambler or other random villager will want to wander in HS2's elysian fields without a pair of earmuffs to dull the senses.



Berkswell Station ushers in the new rail age

The Bermuda Triangle that is Hampton, Balsall and Berkswell will live in infamy as railway's golden age finally disappears in the incendiary dust as it settles on the balancing ponds and ancient brooks of England's once green and pleasant land; not even with a bang, just a whimper.

I bet Sir Frederick didn't have to grapple with such problems after a hard day's work commissioning new rail lines whilst relaxing in his first-class carriage with a stiff whisky, checking off the train times in his 946-page Bradshaw's Railway Guide and looking forward to alighting at his personally appointed station in the rural idyll that was once Hampton in Arden. Where is Arden now? Give me steam any day.

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