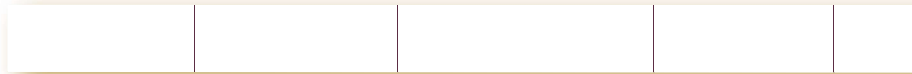




The website of the Black Country Society



**Established in 1967 to Support, Record, Preserve and Celebrate the distinct
Character and Nature of the West Midlands area known since the mid nineteenth century as 'The Black Country'**



Black Country Annual History Day 2019

Venue: Large Lecture Theatre, Arts Building, University of Birmingham

The event is organised in partnership with the Centre for West Midlands History, University of Birmingham.

This fourteenth Black Country History Day was very well attended, with over 150 participants eager to hear which objects Dr Malcolm Dick, the Director of the Centre for West Midlands History at the University of Birmingham, had included in the forthcoming book, 'The Black Country - a History in 100 Objects', which he has edited, along with David J Eveleigh and Dr Janet Sullivan. Malcolm, however, was keeping us guessing for a little while longer, his talk rather focusing on broad themes such as how the name Black Country emerged over a number of centuries and how the area has been viewed in both a positive and negative light. Images such as Turner's famous view of Dudley Castle have definitely been included and there will be a focus on nineteenth century heavy industry – chains, anchors, brewing and glass but arts and culture have also found a place - from the work of James Woodhouse, the cobbler poet, through that of Francis Brett Young in the nineteenth to twentieth century and up to the present day. Close questioning from the audience at the end of his presentation revealed that leisure and sporting activities were included and that transport had not been neglected, the region being important in the manufacture of cars, buses and for the aviation industry. However, finding an image for some aspects of Black Country heritage, such as its dialect, had proved difficult but had been achieved.

The second speaker, Dr Cathy Hunt, the author of the recently published, 'Righting the Wrong: Mary Macarthur 1880-1921 - the Working Woman's Champion', focused on Mary's national importance as 'The Working Girl's Friend', as well as her local involvement in the Cradley Heath chairmakers' strike. Women industrial workers across the country were seriously underpaid at the beginning of the twentieth century and experienced very poor working conditions. It was assumed they were not the breadwinners in the family but thousands were widows or had dependents and their needs were often ignored by existing unions. Although Mary herself came from a middle-class background, her father having a successful drapery business in Glasgow where she grew up, she quickly became involved in fighting to improve the lot of unskilled workers, such as shop assistants and women box workers, after leaving school at 16. Having been a journalist herself, Mary was skilled at gaining publicity for her causes and this was particularly evident during the successful chairmakers' strike in 1910. Cathy's illustrations of Mary addressing the women and the older women, slung with the chains they had made, were particularly striking on the large screens. Poignantly, Mary died of ovarian cancer at the age of 40, having been predeceased by her husband, thus leaving her four-year-old daughter an orphan.



Dr Cathy Hunt, Steve Field, Dr Malcolm Dick OBE, Judith Watkin, Rebecca Wilton

In the afternoon session, Steve Field, RBSA, resident artist and public art adviser to Dudley Borough, gave the audience a flavour of his long career working in various mediums to celebrate the Black Country's industry, heroes and mythology, often working with the community on collaborative projects. Many and varied were the commissions he had undertaken; from working with the children of Gig Mill primary school in Stourbridge, to celebrate their sixtieth anniversary, where the whole school had stuck tiles on a mosaic; to producing a stainless steel horse 50 feet long and 25 feet high, Sleipnir, Odin's horse from Norse mythology, to illustrate the Viking past of Wednesbury. The Black Country heroes he had commemorated included Joe Darby, the spring jumper, Dorothy Round, the Wimbledon Champion in 1934 and 1937 and Duncan Edwards, all of whom had statues, whilst the peace campaigner, Bert Bissell, had been remembered in a stained-glass window. A bronze of World War 2 hero and spy, Frank Foley, by Andrew de Comyn, had been a recent project, unveiled by the Duke of Cambridge, whilst future projects include a memorial for Abraham Darby in Woodsetton and for the Round Oak steelworks in Brierley Hill. Steve has particularly enjoyed his opportunities to work with local fabricators of all kinds.

The final speaker, Rebecca Wilton, a costumed demonstrator at the Black Country Living Museum, had researched the life of nailmistress Eliza Tinsley, 1813-1882, for her dissertation as part of the MA in West Midlands History at the University of Birmingham. Born at the Fleece, a coaching inn in Wolverhampton, Eliza was an orphan by the age of 16, with three younger brothers to help look after. She married Thomas Tinsley, the son of a nail factor, in Sedgley in 1839 and Rebecca charted the rise of the family through their census entries. Thomas died in 1851, at which point Eliza took over his nail business which she then ran very successfully until her death in 1882, the 1861 census showing her as an employer of 3,000, rising to 4,000 by 1871. Rebecca felt she exhibited the same business behaviours as male owners, making shrewd investments, engaging professional advisors and providing philanthropy, particularly in the Sedgley area. Although Eliza didn't hand over her business to her sons it still exists, bearing her name.

Judith Watkin



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