

Birmingham Back to Backs

Clive Katz began his 'Birmingham Back to Backs' talk with brief snippets of the history of the centre of Birmingham, focusing on the Civic buildings around Victoria Square. In the 1830s a competition was held to design the Town Hall. This was won by Hanson with a classical design, but he was subsequently bankrupted by difficulties in the build.

More recently the quarry on Anglesey that supplied the stone originally was re-opened to enable renovation work to be carried out. The other municipal buildings in the area, principally the Council House, were built in the 1870s. Prior to this, a large area around the city centres was filled with back-to-back housing.

In the 1960s, the TV programme 'Cathy Come Home' was filmed in Wilson Green back to backs, however by the end of the 1960s most of Birmingham's back-to-backs had been demolished. A few remained on the corner of Hurst Street and Inge Street, these survived in a semi-derelict state as some were housing small shops. The oldest in the row dates back to 1802, the rest were built in the 1830s. They were built around a courtyard, which contained a brew house, where the washing was done, and a communal toilet block. As there was no piped water in the early days, the 'night soil' men emptied the buckets into barrels on a cart, which were taken to Soil Hill (later to become Solihull!).

When The National Trust acquired them as the only remaining example in Birmingham, they were restored using building materials carefully matched to the original. The 1802 house has been furnished and decorated as it would have been in the 1830s when it was occupied by a Jewish family of six. The water had to be drawn from a well nearby and there were no cooking facilities, but there were many hot food vendors in the immediate area (19th Century takeaways!).

The neighbouring house has been furnished and decorated as in the 1870s. By now, Joseph Chamberlain was revitalising Birmingham with gas lighting and running water, the latter provided by the reservoirs of Elan Valley. A range cooker was included in the house at this time and helped feed the Oldfield family of 10, plus 2 lodgers. Herbert Oldfield made glass eyes, working from home.

The third house was furnished as in the 1930s when it was occupied by a cobbler, who now had electric lighting and a radio. In a shop fronting Hurst Street (the front half of a back-to-back) lived a tailor from St Kitts. When he retired in 1974 and vacated the shop, he donated the remainder of his stock, including patterns and equipment, to The National Trust, which enabled them to exhibit the shop just as it had been when he left.

Clive was an amazing speaker, who brought to life much of Birmingham's history of the last 200 years.