

Over the past year the Coventry Society has had to adapt, very rapidly, to new ways of working. Covid requirements have resulted in all meetings being held online. These meetings included committee meetings, general meetings, meetings with City Councillors and Council officers and one of our Members of Parliament together with other groups and organisations with which we regularly liaise.

We were also forced to cancel our usual program of visits. We more than compensated for this by arranging a set of wide ranging and fascinating talks presented, online, by experts who really added to our knowledge and understanding of the impressive heritage of our City and the contributions made to the arts, engineering, architecture, innovation and literature.

The list of contributors included:

- James Rose, the Charterhouse Mural
- Chris Patrick, Conserving Birmingham’s heritage.
- Dan Taylor, Government changes to the planning system in England.
- Paul Henderson and Paul Nolan, Life and works of Frederick Lanchester.
- Dr. Mark Webb, Drapers Hall.
- Sebastian Hicks, The Coventry University MA architecture course.
- James Knight, Computer simulation of old Coventry rebuilt.
- Dr. Cathy Hunt, the Centenary of Women Councillors in Coventry City Council.
- Trish Willets, the Bid (Business Improvement District).
- Matt Willemson, Designs for the Coventry Retail market.
- Peter Walters and Trevor Cornfoot, Celebrating the history of the War Memorial Park.
- Dr. Geraldine Hammersley, Murphy and King, Coventry Silversmiths.
- Chenine Bhatena, City of Culture 2021

As the Covid epidemic took hold of the city, the committee published a discussion paper encouraging the development of a new vision for the city that took account of the changes that the epidemic would bring about. Trevor Cornfoot and other committee members took this paper to various public discussion forums. The paper was well received, but it would be fair to say that we haven’t yet seen the public agencies come to terms with the changes that we are all going to have to face.

Our Social media is now reaching many more people regularly reaching over 7500 people per month. This is thanks to John Payne and Nicola Norman who are continually posting relevant news. Nicola also added to our credibility with a much younger demographic by turning over our social media to a group of young Coventry people for Civic Day in 2020. This also gained us valuable positive media coverage. Additionally, our membership has increased during the lock down. This can be attributed to our social media offering and also to the impressive program of talks during the year

Unfortunately, our committee has lost two valuable members this year - Les Fawcett who kept a diligent eye on planning proposals and John Purcell who feels that he can contribute more by concentrating upon the heritage group. I thank them both for their significant contributions to the Society.

Our invaluable Treasurer Colin Walker is still wishing to stand down but has continued to support the committee until a replacement is found.

We are now looking for a treasurer and to welcome new active members to our committee. We are also looking to nominate our next Chair.

For the first time one of our Members of Parliament has met with The Society. We asked for a meeting and Zarah Sultana MP was pleased to attend. The main topic was the absence of affordable housing as part of the City Centre south proposed development plans. She was most receptive to our comments and, I am sure, found us a valuable and reliable source of information, expertise and feedback.

We also raised the subject of Student accommodation and reinforced our feelings that we have no antipathy towards students but we are finding it difficult to discover how much more accommodation is required for the future in addition to the 15,000 units already built. We are finding a lack of transparency from Coventry University we asked for her help.

We have held meetings with David Butler, head of Planning Policy and Environment, Chris Styles, Head of Conservation and Design for Coventry City Council and after a three year wait, the new Conservation Officer, Charlotte Stranks. We were keen to raise a number of issues which had been on hold since the last Conservation Officer left to join Birmingham City as their Head of Conservation. However as all three had only recently joined the City Council, very few answers were forthcoming.

We have had a number of meetings with Tim Weatherhill to find ways of supporting the tree planting initiatives within the City.

We have responded to three important consultations during the year. In October we published a detailed response to the Government's proposals to seriously weaken the planning system in England. In February we commented on the Council's Urban Forestry Strategy and this last month we responded to a Council consultation on the draft Statement of Community Involvement. We feel that the council's plans for future consultation lack ambition.

We have published our views about City Centre South and with the help of Nicola and Civic Voice we have published a consultation survey to obtain wider public views on the City Centre South proposed development. We are awaiting its completion and will publish the results as soon as we have them.

We have maintained our monitoring of planning issues and requests and regularly publish the most important or controversial of these and bring them to the attention of our members and to the wider public in a simplified as way as possible including links directly to the plans involved. This is a valuable service produced by the Coventry Society.

We have expressed concerns and opinions on a number of issues during the year. The virus has significantly and possibly permanently changed the shopping habits of the population. It has speeded up the already growing trend towards on line shopping, so we have to also change our vision of the City Centre. Debenhams is closed, Ikea has gone BHS is still empty and with the possibility of student numbers also dropping we could also be faced with empty student accommodation blocks in the City Centre too. It is therefore important that the City Centre South development, the largest development since the 1950s, is subjected to proper consultation and scrutiny, with 1500 dwellings proposed this is more residential than retail and entertainment. We have always campaigned for more residential in the Centre but the current plan does not include provision for affordable housing either for sale or rent. Some of the buildings are much taller than those in the area and we have a number of important and valuable artworks that are not properly accounted for in their current plans.

We are concerned that a Grade Two listing has seemed to offer no protection from inappropriate additions requiring damage to St Mary's Guild Hall and the virtual destruction of the Architects building and courtyard also developments attempting to encroach upon Conservation Areas such as that which requires the demolition of the former Paris cinema.

Increasingly, we are being asked to give our opinion on projects within the City, most recently being invited to attend meetings regarding the design and finished appearance of the Station.

Our Blue plaque scheme is a valuable resource as it is a reminder that Coventry had, and still has, many talented and famous citizens and that they are all 'one of us'. They are a useful guide to the City heritage for students and other visitors to Coventry. We have a number of requests and suggestions for new plaques which will be considered as soon as Covid and our budget permit.

The care of our public art continues to be of concern. It cannot be the case that decisions regarding display are left up to developers. As far as twentieth century public art is concerned The Twentieth Century Society has the advantage of being a statutory consultee and I have been liaising with them regarding the artworks which will be involved in the City Centre South project. Nevertheless, art which is kept in a warehouse is no longer public art and we are continually seeking answers to when many of our 'stored' artworks can be displayed again.

Vince Hammersley

April 2021