

The Coventry Society
Heritage Conference, The Herbert, Saturday 18 October 2025
City Heritage: Future Strategies
Notes of Presentations

1. Welcome to The Herbert – Marguerite Nugent, Cultural Director at Culture Coventry Trust

Marguerite Nugent, CV Life Cultural Director, started proceedings by welcoming participants to the conference and giving an overview of resources and current events at the Herbert Art Gallery & Museum, with particular reference to the permanent displays in the History Gallery and the current fifth Coventry Biennial, which runs until 25 January 2026.

In addition to this, she drew attention to recent developments in the Coventry Archives, such as the resources on display until February 2026 concerning the Old School Library and the forthcoming exhibition opening on 14 November devoted to the Virk Archive with its focus on the experience of those coming from abroad to live in Coventry.

<https://www.theherbert.org/visiting/galleries/history-gallery.aspx>

<https://www.theherbert.org/whats-on/1872/coventry-biennial-2025-obsessions-posessions>

<https://www.theherbert.org/whats-on/1891/coventrys-lost-library>

2. Ian Harrabin: Historic Coventry Trust update

Ian offered a fascinating insight into the recent work of the Historic Coventry Trust – an organisation that has had such an important impact on Coventry's historic built environment. He began by outlining the objectives of the trust and reminding the conference of the properties that had been completed and those still being worked upon. More detail on each project was then offered.

Charterhouse

A five year agreement with the National Trust had an immediate impact and has already greatly improved visitor numbers and exceeded NT targets. The café has proved to be a significant attraction. There has also been a benefit from spin off visits to the Cemetery. Progress has been made recreating the Pentice, a covered walkway that would have been used by the monks, but a further £150,000 has to be found to complete the work.

The Coach House is only restored as a shell with no takers to convert it to a conference centre, though currently it is in use as an exhibition venue as part of the 2025 Coventry Art Biennial.

Developments in the surrounding landscape were described, especially that along the green corridor following the course of the river Sherbourne. The important role of the John Muir Trust in this multi-million pound project to be carried out over a number of years was noted.

Drapers Hall

A commercial agreement with DH Venues to run the premises has not meant any great loss in the variety of events on offer to the wider public.

The Burges

Although superficially complete the upper floors of the lower Burges units are currently vacant. This large open area is possibly to be made available as artist studios.

De-culverting the River Sherbourne

This neglected area behind the Burgess will be transformed when complete with the river to be fully exposed and the adjacent site landscaped. Much progress has been made with planting in the river that has already begun the greening of the area. Hard landscaping is also nearing completion but work on improving the wider setting such as demolition of intrusive outbuildings has yet to be tackled. This £2.3 million pound scheme needs further financing to provide some of the café/retail space that has been planned, a grant for which has now been withdrawn with the change of government. There is a beneficial partnership with the council to make a success of the scheme. An example of this has been meetings to improve the storage of waste bins from surrounding businesses currently spoiling the appearance of the site.

Whitefriars Gate

Externally the building has been made sound but there are a lot of hidden problems internally that need tackling. Further finance is needed. Permission has been obtained to create 14 new residential units to the north side, but mainly alongside the gatehouse on either side of the street elevation. This would recreate the long term historical precedent of the gate being part of a continuous street frontage rather than its current isolated appearance. The project is awaiting further funding.

London Road Cemetery Non-Conformist Chapel

Restoration of the outside of the fire-damaged chapel is complete but a lot of work needs to be done internally to convert into studio/office space. In order to attract users, consideration needs to be given to creating safe access to the building through the cemetery, such as good lighting along access paths. Heritage Lottery funding will be needed for this second phase of the project.

Ideas for the longer term (*"...unlikely to happen anytime soon..."*)

Bailey Lane Reconstruction

Ideas for the space between Drapers Hall and The Yard Bar have been put forward before but Ian outlined the idea of building a reconstruction of a multi-bay, three-storey Tudor style building along the line of Bailey Lane. He backed this up with contemporary drawings of buildings near the site. *[in what sense contemporary?]*

Whitefriars Monastery

Tackling this project would be challenging for a number of reasons, not least the £9 million potential costs. A business case could have been made if Coventry University had been interested in using the building but their current financial position makes that unlikely. Other issues are: lack of defensible space leading to potential anti-social behaviour issues (NB this dimension was a real concern with a number of Ian's projects in the city and clearly causes him some dispiriting moments); long term revenue provision; and, staffing and time involved in seeing the project through. Despite this some architectural sketches were put forward as possible ways of using the site.

Spon Street

The unused potential of this Coventry heritage street came up a number of times during the conference so it was interesting to hear Ian also feels it could be a useful focus for a future project. However, the need to present any developments in terms of what might attract Heritage Lottery funding would be essential.

Ian signed off with an optimistic aside of how the council had been broadly supportive throughout the work of the HCT and especially the input of Cllr Jim O'Boyle, though he also expressed his frustration with the problems created at many city centre sites by what seems to be an increasing amount of anti-social behaviour.

[Link to Presentation.](#)

3. Heritage Strategy – Marcus Lynch, Development Manager of Coventry Culture & Creative Economy

Marcus gave an update on the development of a Heritage Strategy for Coventry; a topic at the heart of the conference.

It has been a long and interrupted journey, starting in 2020 and it is hoped to have it completed in the next couple of years. It will be a reference point for the council, its partners and stakeholders in ensuring that heritage issues are taken into account when developing policies and subsequent decision making. Consultations will be conducted with all interested parties in Coventry in ensuring all viewpoints are taken into account in the final strategy.

The Heritage Strategy should reflect four key themes:

- Understanding Coventry's Heritage;
- Protecting and sustaining Coventry's Heritage;
- Engaging Heritage and the community, and
- Promoting Coventry's heritage.

The final document should prove to be invaluable to all who are interested in and campaign on behalf of Coventry Heritage. [Link to Presentation.](#)

4. IKEA Development – Charlotte Booth, Strategic Programme Manager - Head of Capital and Governance

The Council was already engaged in conversation with two major national cultural institutions, the Arts Council and the British Council, together with the Culture Coventry Trust for a purpose-built, city centre building when IKEA announced closure in 2020. The Council took the opportunity to acquire the building in 2021.

Of the seven floors, Coventry University have leased the top two. The bottom three are under current development. Two floors will be required for the above partners. It is hoped that the ground floor will become a local cultural space.

The appointed builders ISG went into administration in September 2024 and were replaced by Graham Construction, with targets to complete the project by summer 2026, to be followed by the hand over to partners to fit out, with a view to opening in 2027.

£5 million 'levelling up' funding has been secured starting with the ground floor where the car park was in poor repair, requiring removal. In addition, the external car park decks will be removed. It is planned to relocate the 'stored vehicle' collection owned by the Transport Museum to the first floor with the possible further relocation over three floors. Part of the ground floor will be allocated partly to commercial space creating an active streetscape. The final distribution of space over the first two floors has still to be finalised.

The present cladding on the outside of the building will be painted black.

The multi-use building needs an informative name to reflect its different uses, with decisions confirmed to create a facility which will be of major cultural value to the City and its surroundings.

We wish it well. [Link to Presentation.](#)

5. Opportunity knocks for Spon Street? – Tim Brown, Deputy Chair of Coventry Society

In keeping with the theme of the event, Tim Brown who is Vice-Chairman of Coventry Society, put forward a passionate case for tackling the neglect of the Spon Street area. He reminded the audience that the Spon Street Conservation Area also includes Lower Holyhead Road and Hill Street.

There are numerous day-to-day challenges such as maintaining the fabric of the buildings, sorting out issues over bin collections and tackling car parking issues at peak times. The Council has recently invested in improving three of the buildings in Spon Street and is now looking for tenants. But it has run out of money to renovate a further property.

However, Tim argued that what is needed is a vision and a strategy for the area. There are opportunities including:

- Making links with the refurbishment of the adjacent IKEA building

- Taking advantage of the growth in the number of homes in and around the city centre such as City Centre South and the Spon End Regeneration project
- Ensuring that investment zones in the city centre identified by the Council and the West Midlands Combined Authority (such as City Centre North) bring benefits to the Spon Street Conservation Area.

But there are dangers! Will, for example, these big so-called flagship schemes neglect Spon Street and its surrounds?

Tim concluded with an offer that Coventry Society wants to work with other like-minded organisations and individuals to develop a vision that does justice to the Spon Street area, which is currently one of our neglected heritage assets.

6. Mike Bevan, Archives Manager, Coventry Archives- Update & Shaniece Martin, Archives Assistant, Coventry Archives - Stories That Made Us

Mike introduced himself as a relatively recent arrival to the post of Archives Manager at Coventry Archives. He outlined the work of the Archives and its value to the community as well as specific services it was able to offer:

- Access to the archives at the Herbert throughout the year via appointment
- Temporary exhibitions on Coventry's History (Currently on 'Coventry's Lost Library' in the History Gallery)
- Special holdings on topics such as the Coventry car industry, medieval history and family history
- Various research options that can be carried out by archives staff for a fee such as the history of your house if more than 75 years old and motor registration certificates for Coventry cars
- Talks and workshops through the year

Shaniece then outlined an exhibition she had been recently working on called 'Stories that Made Us' that explores the life of a South Asian Family in Coventry during the 1960s to the present century. It relates to the Virk family who left their archive (the Virk Collection) to the Herbert in 2005. Active in politics and a wide range of cultural activities, the family's Archive gives a rich insight into the lives of a South Asian Family arriving in the city in 1968. The exhibition opens on 14 November 2025 and lasts until 25 May 2026.

[Link to Presentation](#)

7. Caroline Brogan, Coventry Irish Society – Irish Coventry Heritage

Caroline Brogan of the Coventry Irish Society gave an overview of the place of the Irish community in Coventry and the role of the Society.

By way of demonstrating the importance of the community, Caroline drew attention to the decision of the Irish President to visit Coventry in 2014, where approximately 2.5% of the population are of Irish descent. More recently, the Irish Minister of State for International Development and Diaspora chose to come to Coventry during his first international visit in February 2025.

Looking at aspects of the historical events which drew so many people to relocate from Ireland to Coventry, Caroline mentioned the well-known effects of the famine during the nineteenth century as well as in the following century the employment prospects associated with the reconstruction after the Second World War and also the motor industries.

Such links resulted in the official twinning of Cork with Coventry in 1958, the sixtieth anniversary of which was marked by a visit to Coventry by the Lord Mayor of Cork in 2018. On the related theme of peace and reconciliation, Caroline emphasised the importance of the recent unveiling of the plaque to Mo Mowlam arranged jointly by Coundon Court School and the Coventry Society, in recognition of her achievements concerning the Good Friday Agreement.

Founded in 1993, the Coventry Irish Society itself is keen to improve the quality of life for city residents of Irish heritage and offers a range of support services, facilities and events, including a community library and an allotment, as well as becoming involved in issues such as support to the survivors of mother and baby homes. Other activities include for example Irish dancing and sports, in which regard Caroline drew attention to the success of Coventry University's Ladies Gaelic Football team which has just won the British University Championship for the second time.

[Link to Presentation.](#)

8. Ray Wilson, Kenilworth Road Trees Project – Restoration of the Kenilworth Road Avenue

Ray Wilson, a member of the South Earlsdon Neighbour Association (SENA), gave the conference an account of his work over more than a decade to clear woodland on either side of the city's Kenilworth Road, revealing a nineteenth century avenue of trees that had been long hidden from view.

Kenilworth Road, he said, is widely recognised as one of the most beautiful entrances to a city in the country, but the woods that had replaced the original more open landscape of Styvechale Common had become clogged with invasive shrubs.

Since 2011, he and a team of volunteers have been removing swathes of holly and laurel, both plants that are toxic to other living creatures and allow nothing to grow beneath them. In doing so, they

have 're-discovered' an avenue of trees, mainly oak and beech, that had been planted around 150 years earlier by local landowners, namely the Gregory family.

In the course of their work, Ray revealed, they filled more than 300 black bags of rubbish in the first few weeks and discovered, over time, five safes, a kitchen sink, one set of swimming pool steps and even the remains of a blue Nissan car. They also came across some 30 golf balls, a baffling find in dense undergrowth but finally explained as 'trophies' taken from nearby Hearsall Golf Club by foxes.

The team has also found evidence of eleven stone quarries, notably the well-known Devil's Dungeon, close to Beechwood Avenue, and has established a network of paths and open areas, making the woods much more accessible to walkers and picnickers. The work, which continues, was warmly applauded by the conference audience.

9. Sara Farey, Coventry City Council, Archaeological and Records Officer – Historic Environment Record

Sara came to the city to take on her important heritage role in January of this year and one of her first tasks was to update the Historic Environment Record (HER). Although this is invaluable to historians it is also an essential part of the planning process, hence Sara has a foot in both camps.

The HER is a map of all archaeological sites and finds, historic buildings and historic landscapes. It works on multiple digital layers according to date and source. It is especially valuable to the local historian as it includes mapping from many centuries (e.g. enclosure and tithe maps). For the city planners it allows any new planning application to be set against what is known about the site and judgements can be made about any preliminary site checks that need to be carried out. Each historic source has its own record card kept on the database.

The value of the HER in understanding Coventry's heritage is great and all the individual site records are available online. Unfortunately, at present, the especially useful and more detailed layered historical mapping data can only be viewed by appointment at the planning office. It is hoped that at some time in the future it will be situated in a more readily available space.

[Link to Presentation.](#)

10. Kevin Watson, Police Museum – The Future

A former police officer himself in Coventry, Kevin Watson presented a talk about the Police Museum, which is housed in the Old Council House.

In 1957, the first police museum was set up in the cold war nuclear bunker basement beneath the Little Park Street police station. Initially, the museum was largely for the benefit of new recruits to the police force but increasingly members of the public – as long as they were adults – were allowed to visit the facility.

The museum proved popular with the public and following refurbishment in 1988 it opened more frequently, even allowing evening visits. Subsequently, because of possible plans to close the Police Station, the museum was reopened as part of the City of Culture celebrations in a former shop on Hertford Street in 2021, moving again in September 2024 to a room in the Old Council House, where currently it is open on Thursdays and Fridays staffed by former police officers on a voluntary basis.

Since moving to its new location, the museum has had approximately 1,500 visitors, proving particularly popular during Heritage Opening Days. The museum gives visitors the chance to learn more about changing police equipment and uniforms as well as notable crime stories; however, Kevin Watson was keen to emphasise that the museum should be seen as dealing not just with the history of the police but also the wider social history of the city, also offering visitors the chance to encounter former police officers in a new context which might help to promote better understanding of a force which polices by consent.

In closing, Kevin mentioned his interest in the longer-term possibility of relocating the museum to the site of the former police station off St Mary's Lane, which would offer a truly authentic location and allow the possibility of weekend opening also.

11. Niamh Carton, National Trust – Charterhouse

The National Trust has a five year initial commitment to running the Charterhouse, which is owned by Historic Trust Coventry. Its initial target was 18,000 visitors per annum, but since opening 21 May this year, it has already had 26,000 with encouraging feedback including individuals travelling from far afield. The Farmer's Fayre cafe is attracting customers in its own right as well as the property in its own right. Some supporting finance still comes from the National Lottery in addition to further funding from the Trust.

The NT has a new 2025-2035 'access' project to broaden its clientele with Coventry Charterhouse, in particular by means of forming partnerships with local groups e.g. The Spire Family Hub and their 'build a boat' half term workshop. Another important development is the Green Corridor Plan with the John Muir Trust, in cooperation with Warwickshire Wildlife Trust on the Sherbourne Valley Project.

It adds up to an interesting, exciting future prospect.

[Link to Presentation.](#)