

The Coventry Society

Heritage Conference, Drapers' Hall, Saturday 22nd October 2022.

'The Future of Coventry's Past – Part 2'

Notes of Presentations and Discussions.

Welcome by Peter Walters, Chairman of the Coventry Society.

1. A Council Perspective: Cllr. David Welsh, Cabinet Member for Housing and Communities with responsibility for Heritage.

Cllr. Welsh said that he had been a member of the Coventry Society twenty-two years ago, campaigning to save the city's heritage. He said that the city had a rich and diverse history – one of change and challenge, resilience and recovery. It was a medieval city and a bombed city – 1000 years of history in a small space. We have a fascinating story to tell.

City of Culture 2021 enabled us to tell our story anew. There was an audience of one million and over seven hundred events.

The heritage restored, alongside City of Culture, amounted to many millions of pounds of investment and combined with the redevelopment of the Upper Precinct and the Telegraph Hotel, all added to the culture of the city. For those who want to practice their vertical dance skills, there is also the Daimler Powerhouse.

Drapers' Hall was restored by a partnership led by the Historic Coventry Trust with support from Arts Council England. £5.6 million had been spent on the Guildhall and it had been restored seven hundred years after it was originally opened. New facilities at the Cathedral were the first major investment since it was built.

Charterhouse was due to be completed shortly. It was an ambitious project, carefully restored and would be the heart of the new heritage park. Coventry is recovering its heritage gems.

Strong partnership is at the heart of the city's heritage restoration and heritage framework agreement between the Historic Coventry Trust and the City Council and was a template for others. Having a positive life for buildings after restoration was essential.

These projects all contributed to the six objectives of the Heritage Action Zone including raising the profile of heritage, economic benefits and reducing the amount of heritage at risk.

Cllr. Welsh was pleased to be attending the conference and hoped that attendees would have a good day.

Questions and Answers.

He was asked about the IKEA building.

He said that a lot of negotiation was taking place at present and that a paper would go to cabinet shortly. He said it was a great opportunity for the city.

He was asked about the city's mid C20th heritage.

He pointed out the work undertaken on the former Co-op building and the Telegraph Hotel.

He was asked about the future of the 'Elephant' building.

He replied that conversations were taking place and there will be an announcement shortly.

There was a question about the city's recognition and celebration of George Elliott.

He said that we were on a journey and there needed to be discussion about how to do it. There had been some recognition of her in the City of Culture year.

Pru Poretta commented that local communities had created a banner about the story of Lady Godiva. It had been on display in the Council House but then relegated to a basement contaminated by asbestos. She said that heritage needed to be brought to life by engagement with communities and young people and this is what the Godiva Trust was doing. What was he going to do to help them?

Cllr. Welsh replied that he loved what the Godiva Sisters do, celebrating Coventry. We would work out what we could do about the tapestry. We should have a conversation about working together.

He was asked about the situation with the Priory Centre. It had been empty for more than two years. What was happening to it?

He said that it was to be leased to the Coventry University Students' Union. He expected it to be open to the public. Previous uses had not worked and a new way had to be found to make it work.

Professor Mossman from the audience, added that the University was involved in this and there would be discussions about its use

2. The Future of Coventry Buildings in the care of the Historic Coventry Trust: Anne Cranston, Director, Historic Coventry Trust.

Ms. Cranston is a recent recruit to the Historic Coventry Trust, though not new to the city as she was born here. Previously she led a £6 million project for Gloucester Cathedral.

She saw the main focus of the trust was to use the buildings in its care to make the greatest impact on the community but with the best chance of sustainability. The challenge was to adapt buildings that were designed for one purpose for modern use. For instance some buildings offered an attraction that was backed up by the building and its history, but not all twenty two buildings in the trust's care lent themselves to this approach. However, of the twenty two buildings, nineteen have already been restored and opened, raising £25 million for economic regeneration through heritage.

Being led by a vision of what could be was important, such as the project for the Palmer Lane development. This means seeing buildings in their broader context rather than as standalone features in the streetscape. Her organisation is a heritage

development trust rather than a simple buildings preservation trust.
Ms. Cranston gave an outline report on some of the key projects of the trust.

1. The Burges and Hales Street.
The streetscape has now been successfully improved and importantly, from a sustainability point of view, is producing regular rental income. It was not about creating a chocolate box appearance but working in partnership with shopkeepers to enhance often failing businesses, to promote a positive economic environment.
2. Priory Row/City Gates (Cook Street & Swanswell).
Now 65-75% occupation rate but as the new Telegraph Hotel is 95% that shows a target to aim for.
3. Drapers' Hall.
It has already made an impact as a cultural hub with innovative cultural offers and a commercial partnership with Dhillon' Brewery.
4. Anglican Chapel, London Road Cemetery. An example of a successful project, like others that are developing and already developed by the trust, that rely on partnership funding. It already boasts a series of successful activities that have been hosted there.

These examples have indicated that the Trust is more important than buildings. It continues to be involved in active volunteer programmes with participants supporting various projects from historic research to gardening and care for the ecology of the land in the ownership of the Trust. The latter is much to the fore with the recent multi-million pound River Sherbourne project that cuts through the Charterhouse Heritage Park. As already stated, many of the buildings are also linked to ongoing cultural programmes.

She reinforced her earlier stated aims by stressing that the Trust is committed to its buildings paying their way, contributing to the local economy and 'placemaking' buildings in their care. They will not preserve buildings in aspic, but ensure they are fit for the twentieth century.

Future projects can be divided into those where the funding is in place and work has already started or work is imminent, such as the Non-Conformist Chapel in the London Road Cemetery and Whitefriars' Gate. Both offer opportunities for imaginative office space, though the latter could also offer accommodation. The charterhouse development has been more challenging than expected but will be opening in Spring 2023. This leaves the immensely challenging (not to say almost impossible) task of repurposing the Whitefriars' building and Priory Centre.

She concluded by noting how she felt the Coventry Society could aid the Trust by continuing to advocate on its behalf and provide volunteers for its work.

Questions and answers.

Was there a benchmark organisation that the Historic Coventry Trust could measure itself against?

She concluded that there were none.

The issue of affordable venues where Arts groups could meet was raised.
While sympathising, she felt that the Trust had to set financially viable rates.

3. A. Coventry University and Coventry's Heritage: Professor Judith Mossman, Pro-Vice Chancellor for Arts and Humanities, Coventry University.

Professor Mossman began by commenting on a query that had arisen earlier concerning the Priory Centre. This was to become the responsibility of the Coventry University Students' Union and she assured the audience that discussions were underway to ensure a viable future for the centre. She stressed that the University wanted a partnership with the city and the visitors who came to visit the city. She compared Coventry with Nottingham where she had worked previously. She was surprised at just how many groups and organisations there were in Coventry representing its interests, historical, cultural and environmental. She had not experienced this sort of engagement in Nottingham.

She then commented on one of the most famous images of Lady Godiva in the city's collection and how aspects of the picture echoed ancient times linking Coventry's past to its present. She also acknowledged Coventry's modernist architecture, one the University hoped to build on.

The City of Culture Year had enabled various projects to be undertaken. They wanted to make a good case for a research partnership between the public and the academic world. She highlighted the one set up by Sabine Coady-Shaebitz of the University's Architectural Faculty, looking at modern buildings. It was an engagement programme based on the premise of Art, Architecture and place-making in the creation of contemporary Coventry. Its aim was to make a difference with public understanding and appreciation of good architecture and place-making through a series of public events with a careful evaluation and integration of Coventry's 20th Century, and particularly, post-war heritage.

She then referred to eleven other smaller projects in which the University had engaged. These were 'Windrush strikes back', 'Performing forgiveness from Coventry to Nanjing', 'George Elliott and Coventry', 'Belonging to Coventry', 'Seeds of Future Past', 'Industrial history', 'History of Coventry's newspapers', 'Revealing the River Sherbournes', 'Trial of Lady Godiva', 'Coventry Wikipedia of Culture' and 'Black Arts movement'.

She then turned to a larger project, the setting up of Coventry Digital under the auspices of Dr. Ben Kyneswood. This consisted of a large selection of pictures to form a photographic archive of Coventry past and present. The photographs had been digitised and a new database created. The Coventry Sketchbook Project now formed part of the Coventry Digital base. Embedded images from the site had been used by the Historic Forum and the Cathedral. The latter had used photographs of Hillfields for its event 'Ghost in the Ruins'. Two other projects connected to the site were mentioned, The Square Mile Project and J. J. Ward.

The site now consisted of a very large collection including all the Coventry Evening Telegraph photographs. It was perhaps an unusual method of preserving the past but this resource could be used in different ways.

She then cited other undertakings by the University, such as Heritage Walks with

knowledgeable and experienced guides. It was intended to repeat these walks which highlighted the preservation projects on the Old Grammar School, St. Mary's Hall and the Swanswell City Gates and walls. She stressed that in pursuit of these various activities, partnerships would be established

Questions and Answers.

She was asked about student involvement.

She replied that the students would be involved in all the projects. She added that there was a Coventry Education Project which was trying to engender greater involvement, education was important. The University would be happy to help with other projects.

Anne Cranston commented.

Historic Coventry Trust had as one of its aims to work with children and wanted to encourage partnership with young people and their heritage.

Judith Mossman responded.

The University worked in schools with Coventry Digital and the City of Culture Trust. The University was also working in collaboration with Warwick University on aspects of the Lunt Roman Fort.

A questioner asked about the difficulties of communicating with the University. Its resources were enormous but people did not know what they were or who to contact.

Professor Mossman replied that if the questioner contacted her, she would ensure the query would be sent to the appropriate person/department.

Brian Stote commented.

The Coventry Society was trying to involve others in the city and had tried to set up a project with primary schools. Only two schools had responded. It would be good to get all schools to be involved in some aspect.

Pru Poretta added.

She agreed that more collaboration was needed which is why the Godiva Sisters took workshops to Warwick University to involve them for the future because most children were not really involved even though there was scope within K.S. 1/2/3/4 for local topics.

Professor Mossman was asked about post-war listed buildings such as the Swimming Baths.

There had been conversations about the Sports' Centre, though the University did not own them. Discussions had ceased before the pandemic had not yet re-started but the University was keenly interested.

B. Coventry Modern Architecture: Sabine Coady-Shaebitz, Coventry University Dept. Of Architecture.

She commented on the Coventry Modern Architecture Project. The idea was to increase awareness of the architecture in Coventry. The project itself was now

finished but for her, not so as a publication would ensue.

She had looked at the Bauhaus tradition and the impressions of that tradition. Just before lockdown there had been a Dresden exhibition. She had hosted visitors from Germany who had been looking at the Cathedral but not just architecturally, also its cultural heritage.

She posed the question, 'What if we never demolished another building?' The loss of so much 20th Century architecture in Coventry would be sad. However, German architects were impressed by the mix of architecture in Coventry.

Collaboration of students from Coventry University and Germany was centred on Whitefriars Monastery.

In 2024 there would be an international Heritage Conference coming to Coventry and they would like to involve other organisations in this.

Following lunch, the Chair of the Coventry Society spoke about the work of the Society in aiding the enhancement of Coventry's built environment. He then introduced the speakers for the afternoon session.

4. Westwood Heath Local History group: Jill Kashi.

Ms. Kashi spoke about the history of group. It formed as a sub-group of the local residents' association. The area has only been within Coventry's boundaries since 1927 and was previously part of Stoneleigh Parish. The Westwood Heath Group have worked closely with Stoneleigh History Group to learn the fascinating story of the area. They have been collecting the written and oral history of the area, together with photographs and have recently been donated 1,300 poems about the area. They now have a website and a Facebook page.

They were pleased to have had help from David Fry and Albert Smith in collecting old photographs and Ian Harrop had taken recent photographs of all these scenes so that they were able to display then and now photographs of the area. They were also fortunate to receive a 1960's research project about the area that was destined for a skip.

In 2028 they participated in commemorations of the First World War – bringing people together. They also have a collaboration with the Greek Orthodox Church, which occupies the former Westwood School which was opened for Heritage Open days, complete with some of the teachers who had been there 50 years ago.

Research has expanded to include the people who farmed the land that is now occupied by Warwick University.

Stoneleigh History Group: Sheila Woolfe.

Following on from the Westwood Heath report, Ms. Woolf spoke about the Stoneleigh History Group which had been in existence for 27 years. In that period they have produced a timeline for the village and researched its history, its housing and the people who lived there. They had carried out research about the people who had died in the First World War as well as survivors.

They had taken a keen interest in Sir Henry Parkes who was brought up from the age of two in a farmhouse in the parish. Previously known, confusingly, as Tocil Farm, the

building, now known as Gibbet Hill Farmhouse, is owned by Warwick University and used as their Estates Office.

In 2015 the bi-centenary of Sir Henry Parkes, the Society applied to have a blue plaque installed on the building but was told that the University planned to demolish it and had applied for and been issued with a Certificate of Indemnity against listing. This year the Indemnity Certificate expired and the Society applied to have the building listed. They put together a petition and letters of support inter alia the Coventry Society, family members etc. The University applied to have the Certificate of Indemnity extended. Unfortunately, the application for listing was rejected, because the building was deemed not only to be of sufficient architectural interest but also because Sir Henry Parkes was not of sufficient historical importance. An appeal has been made against this decision and the outcome is awaited.

5. Hillfields History Project: Kauser Hussein.

Ms. Hussein is particularly interested in South Asian migration to the U.K. and 2nd/3rd generation experiences of education, employment and communities.

Her Hidden Histories project stems from a call during the city of Culture year to celebrate South Eastern Asian heritage and she thought about this from her own perspective as a second generation Asian migrant, the child of the 1960's first generation who settled in this country. She felt the need to investigate the history of Asian migration and was able to do so by interviewing the older generation to collect their stories.

She asked the following questions:

- How would you describe your identity/ethnicity?
- What were your experiences of growing up in Coventry, having migrated?
- What were your experiences of education and employment?
- What were your experiences of racial tension?

She described some of the experiences which the interviewees related, mainly concerning their difficulties in finding employment and in assimilating into a new culture.

She gave a brief history of the early development of Hillfields, particularly in terms of the industries which flourished there and contributed to the prosperity of the city and also recovery after the destruction of the Second World War bombing with the construction of the tower blocks and later some modern estates.

From the interview responses, she gained a picture of self-organised support systems to provide social support and access to language learning, a pattern replicated amongst the newly arrived migrant groups of today.

Her aim is to look at developing these histories and stories into a walking tour of the area, with dramatic monologues performed at each point of interest, helping the younger generations to develop a greater understanding of their cultural heritage.

By drawing on these hidden histories, she would like to raise awareness of the diverse communities that existed in Hillfields and lived in unity together to build and shape a space in which they could make a home. By sharing these untold stories, the negative perception of the area could be positively re-introduced and realised as a key part of Coventry and its status as City of Culture and diversity.

6. Stoke Local History Group: John Marshall.

Mr. Marshall explained how the group started as the unintended result of a project at Stoke Library, where he worked as a librarian. The development of the group offers a possible exemplar to others who may be thinking of setting up their own area group. 2013 was the centenary of the opening of the Carnegie Branch Libraries in Coventry of which Stoke Library was one. This was celebrated with an exhibition relating to the history of the library. A few years later, in 2016, a community project to restore the historic clock at Stoke Green was supported by the library with an exhibition of old photographs of the Stoke area. Soon afterwards Mr Marshall retired from the library service but was asked to create a permanent historic resource for the area in the form of an A3 size book of old photographs.

In 2018, at his suggestion, the library offered the opportunity for individuals to show whether they would be interested in forming a local history group. John took on the responsibility. The first meeting was in July 2018 and apart from the Covid period, they have met most months since at the Stoke Library. There have been many different activities, one of which was creating heritage walks in the area. These have been offered to members of the public on various occasions such as part of the annual Heritage Open Days activities. A regular monthly newsletter on developments and local research keeps members in touch.

John concluded by advising any individual who was interested in establishing a group in their area of Coventry, should contact their local library as a potential venue and focus for publicity, in the manner of the Stoke experience

7. Farm Buildings in Coventry: Mark Cook.

An exhibition of the traces of farming in Coventry had been held in the City Arcade. Mr. Cook related the city's connection to farming to pre-industrial Coventry. He pointed out names such as Bull Yard and Hen Lane which evidenced the connection. He had traced many farms by looking at old maps (of which there were a few on-line) and plotting their locations on a modern Google map. He noted there were 64 such farm sites.

He followed this by linking agricultural farming with named places and sites and how they fitted into the Coventry food cycle. He showed before and after pictures of locations, depicting farms in their working days contrasted with modern settings. In some cases buildings were still in existence though long divorced from their rural heritage. There were 43 listed farmhouse/agricultural buildings but in some cases they no longer existed, having been demolished and replaced. He highlighted one on the Foleshill Road, another on Henley Road (the building is still there) and the original bridge at Henley Mill, now replaced by a concrete structure.

Other examples included the Corporation Stables at Naul's Mill, now the home of Britannia Tyres, Brandon Park in Warwickshire and the Cocked Hat Pub originally Binley Farm.

He showed a proposed development from the 1940's based on one in Peckham,

containing a health centre and farm which was rejected as too urban. A similar but less ambitious development was carried out later by the council.

8. Spencer Park Group: Peter Elias.

The Friends of Spencer Park was formed after Council involvement ceased in 2015. They have formed a Board of Trustees and a management committee. Spencer Park is a bit of a Cinderella as it is overshadowed by its near neighbour, the War Memorial Park. A group of about 15 members have put considerable effort into finding funds to restore the park. They have managed to reopen the tennis courts, planted trees and shrubs, held events and raised money to install a playground for younger children.

There were concerns about the state of the Edwardian pavilion as there was no council help to prevent it falling further into decay. They were able to get it reopened in 2019. It raised the question as to whether it should be seen as a community asset or a heritage site. Between 2018 and 2020 they asked users for their views on what should happen and decided that it should be a community building with a café, toilets and a space for meetings. A committee was formed to develop and implement a plan for refurbishment as a community space with a café. They tested demand by having a takeaway café.

They considered how to generate funds with a need for legal fees and project management expertise and have received some help from the council. A chronology of progress since January 2021 to the present date was given. In October 2022 they were seeking bids from contractors for a pavilion café.

Their goal is to have a place to meet in bad weather, one that can house community groups, hold parties and enable exercise classes. They have a business plan to meet annual costs and produce a surplus. They need volunteers to assist with the running of projects. Much will depend on funding and the crucial question as to whether their case is strong enough.

9. Canals and Rivers Trust: Nick Cleaver.

Mr. Cleaver explained the role of the Canal and Rivers Trust which was established in 2012, taking over from British Waterways. Initially the organisation's focus had been keeping the canals working, but it soon became clear that in many areas community engagement would be of value in safeguarding the canal environment. This was especially the case where a canal came through an urban area.

The 'five and a half miles', as Nick referred to the Coventry Canal from the Canal Basin to Hawksbury Junction, was a good example of where the need for community engagement was identified. He was appointed as a community engagement specialist in 2016 and began work on the Coventry 'five and a half' in 2018. Two of the main tasks were to reduce the litter and vandalism. This had become worse since 2008 when Coventry Council funding cuts had led to a significant reduction in support for the canal.

The award of 'City of Culture' for 2021 had brought new sources of funding and Mr. Cleaver worked with the City of Culture team alongside community groups and the City Council to improve the canal as a cultural and leisure resource. The physical

fabric was improved, especially the tow paths and signage, thanks to grants from various bodies. The council also set up a Canal Advisory Group that continues to co-ordinate support for canal initiatives.

Mr. Cleaver has been working with communities along the canal, reaching out to various groups and schools to find ways of raising awareness of the benefits the canal can offer. As a result community groups now actively patrol the canal, keeping it clear of litter. Also they are becoming involved with other initiatives such as the renovation of the Peace Garden and the restoration of the old Weighbridge Office to use as an information centre, both at the Canal Basin, as well as producing a Coventry Canal map and guide to be available on-line. All of this has resulted in the award of a Green Flag [a scheme run by Keep Britain Tidy] that recognises spaces that boast the highest possible environmental standards, are beautifully maintained and play an important role in the local community. Furthermore the events offered in the City of Culture year brought an increase since 2019 of 65% in all traffic using the 'five and a half' miles [e.g. pedestrians, cycles, boats etc.].

He concluded by stressing the challenges faced in balancing the heritage aspect of canal care with making it a usable space. This is often highlighted when participating in community engagement where consultation with communities can give rise to demands that may be unrealistic in dealing with conflicting interests.

10. Orchards in Coventry: Tim Claye.

Tim Claye spoke about the beauty and value of orchards. In older times rich people had parks and poorer people had orchards. He invited attendees to come to a wassailing event at the walled garden at Allesley Park on 7th January 2023, the old 12th Night. Tim listed twelve orchards in and around Coventry.

- Peace Orchard, Tamworth Road – in need of some TLC.
- A secret orchard not far from Allesley.
- Charterhouse.
- Stoneleigh Common Orchard.
- Longford Park – planted into brick – not a good idea.
- Charlecote Park – one of the worst ones ever.
- Snow Hill [NT] – excellent.
- Coughton Court [NT] – excellent.
- *[Can you put in the other 3 Tim?]*

11. Stoney Road Gardens: Charlotte Stranks.

Ms. Stranks gave an overview of the history of the allotments from the time the land was part of the Cheylesmore Manor Estate Park of 436 acres to its passing through private hands when it became private gardens and paddocks until acquired by the City Council in 1935. The Coventry and District Allotment Society and the Garden Society are located at Park Gardens [otherwise known as Stoney Road Allotments]. There are three other surviving 'gardens' of this type in the country, mainly located in the Midlands, but the Coventry Allotments have the most listed buildings [Grade 2*] of any of them. These buildings are located on plots 9, 13, 25, 39 and 47. Two buildings, although not listed, on plots 24 and 26 are of interest. The City Council is working closely with Historic England and the Allotments Society to find a way of

securing the future of the gardens with funding to restore the buildings, some of which are in a considerable state of disrepair and are on the 'at risk' register. This follows on from initial talks between Graham Tait and Historic England prior to the pandemic.

12. Sherbourne Valley Project: Charlotte Ridpath, Warwickshire Wildlife Trust.

She announced that the Trust had secured funding for a £3m project in the Sherbourne Valley. It will be the biggest project ever undertaken by the Trust. The idea is to restore much of the river and reconnect it with people and the surrounding valley. The river will be improved for wildlife but also made more accessible along its length. The Trust will involve local communities and schools and encourage them to take ownership and care of the river. To this end they will be provided with information and learning opportunities.

The Trust is also working in partnership with Citizen Housing, Historic Coventry Trust and Coventry University. To deliver the information sessions, workshops and one-off opportunities, the team will be expanded to seven members of staff, two trainees and opportunities for volunteering.

Due to time pressures it was not possible to hold a final question and answer session. The Chairman thanked participants and members for their attendance and hope they had gained from the experience.

Mention should also be made of the 7 organisations that displayed materials as they generated a great deal of interest.