

Stoke Local History Group

Newsletter January 2021



Christchurch spire: the frontage now boasts a picnic area, a fountain and a children's playground. Photo: John Marshall

Christchurch spire gains new lease of life

The vacant space at the base of Christchurch spire is to be filled with a daytime café and an evening bar, bringing fresh life back to the site in time for City of Culture.

Dhillons Brewery, which is based near the Ricoh Arena, has taken a 20-year lease on the space and aims to create an all-day continental style café within this historic city centre landmark.

Christchurch spire is one of Coventry's famous 'three spires' but is sometimes neglected because it might seem to lack the gravitas of Coventry Cathedral spire or nearby Holy Trinity. But Christchurch tower has a fascinating history, having survived not just once but on two separate occasions when the church below has been destroyed.

The tower and spire once stood at the centre of Greyfriars Church and Monastery, built in around 1358 from stone given by the Black Prince from his quarries in the Great Park at Cheylesmore. A settlement of Franciscan

monks (Grey Friars) had occupied the site since the 13th century.

The church and monastery were destroyed by Henry VIII in 1538 as part of the Dissolution of the Monasteries. It is not clear why the steeple was allowed to remain, though it was surrounded by a burial ground containing the remains of many notable people. It is said that an orchard encircled the spire for many years and at one time pigs were kept in the space below the tower.

By the early 19th century, in response to Coventry's growing population, a new church was built below the old spire. The new church, known as Christchurch, was designed by famed Victorian architect Thomas Rickman and the foundation stone was laid in March 1830.

Christchurch was built in the same style as the 14th century tower and it celebrated its centenary in 1932. But on the fateful night of April 10th, 1941, the church was completely destroyed by enemy bombing during World War Two. Once again, the tower and spire survived. □



Coventry's magnificent War Memorial Park celebrates its 100th birthday on July 9th this year.

The city council is organising a three-day Centenary weekend in July which aims to celebrate the life of the park in the past, present and future. And a voluntary group of enthusiasts, Friends of the War Memorial Park, aims to create a new social history Park Bench Tour, where visitors can hear the human stories behind each memorial bench. The group will also stage a weekend 'Party in the Park'.



The group says it will restore or replace some of the plaques and plinths that sit beside trees to memorialise those who died during wartime. Other ideas for the Centenary are currently being sought.

The creation of the War Memorial Park began in 1920 when the city council decided that Coventry's war memorial should take the form of a park. A public subscription was launched which raised

£31,500 - sufficient to purchase 120 acres of land together with the manorial rights over about 60 acres of Styvechale Common. The park opened in July 1921 as a tribute to the 2,587 Coventrians who died fighting during the First World War. Those who died in the Second World War and other conflicts are also now remembered in the park.

The Friends of the War Memorial Park website (www.fwmpcoventry.org.uk) has further details of the centenary plans if you wish to be involved.

Photos: John Marshall

Gosford Loop Line

Last month's newsletter stated that the Gosford Loop Line was completed in 1914 and closed in 1963. Just for the record, it's probably worth adding some words of clarification. The Humber Road railway junction closed in 1963, thus ending the loop as originally conceived. But the remaining line continued to operate as, in effect, a long siding from Three Spires junction. For this reason, trains would still have been visible on the line during the 1970s, mainly serving as a link to Chrysler's Scottish Linwood plant. The line closed completely in 1981. The Gosford Loop Line was originally completed in stages from 1914 to circa 1916. We hope to have a meeting about the history of the line, and plans for the new walkway, when meetings are allowed.

Elm Bank transformation almost complete

In January 2019, members of Stoke Local History Group were given a guided tour around the slightly dilapidated remains of Elm Bank, the former home of Triumph founder Siegfried Bettmann, before a major restoration project promised to transform the old house into an exclusive apartments complex.

Two years on, and the work is almost complete. The finishing touches are still being carried out but many of the apartments are finished and three have already been sold. The old wrought-iron gates, made for Bettmann by workers at Triumph, appear to have been restored and are now back in place at the front of the building.

Developer Ramesh Parmar told us that original materials had been retained and refurbished wherever possible, and a new-build set of apartments adjoining the house have used reclaimed old bricks to complement the overall design. A frieze inside the house, which once decorated Bettmann's billiard room, has also been retained.

The house in North Avenue – originally a substantial Victorian villa - was built in the 1870s and was one of the first houses to be completed in the new Stoke Park estate. It was first occupied by Bettmann and his wife Annie in 1905. Apparently the large house required two or more indoor servants, plus a gardener, and Siegfried also employed a chauffeur.

German-born Bettmann first came to England in the early 1880s, working in London for several years. Here he met fellow German Maurice Schulte and the pair moved to Coventry where they formed the Triumph cycle company. By 1894 they had created the vast Triumph works in Priory Street which, from 1902, also produced high quality motor bikes.

Bettmann became a British citizen and was very active in civic life, becoming the Mayor of Coventry in 1913 – a position he felt obliged to relinquish when the First World War broke out.

Elm Bank was always a lively centre of political and social life in Coventry. It was here that Bettmann entertained Andrew Carnegie, the wealthy Scottish-American industrialist, who visited Coventry in 1914 to tour the libraries he had paid to be built, including Stoke Library. Another visitor was Ramsay MacDonald, the first Labour Prime Minister, who was a guest at Elm Bank in 1925.

Siegfried Bettmann lived at Elm Bank until his death in 1951, aged 88. In the following year, the building was bought by Coventry Education Committee to provide extra classroom space for the nearby school, Churchfield High School. It later became a Teachers Centre and eventually provided space for various council departments, including the Education Psychology Service. □



Elm Bank today.

Photo: John Marshall

Frank Whittle – born in Coventry, brought up in Leamington Spa

Local lad Frank Whittle, inventor of the jet engine, is rightly celebrated as a famous native of Coventry. But much of his childhood was spent in nearby Leamington Spa.

Whittle was born in Newcombe Road, Earlsdon, Coventry, in 1907. He was the eldest child of Moses and Sara Whittle who had moved to Coventry from the cotton mills of Lancashire. Moses worked for Alfred Herbert Ltd – the giant producer of machine tools - and it was this parental influence that inspired a life-long passion for engineering in the young boy Frank. The story is told that his interest in powered flight was first sparked when playing with childhood friends at Hearsall Common, near his home in Earlsdon. A plane landed for running repairs to its engine and as it took off again, the updraft blew off his cap. From that moment on, the young Whittle was obsessed by the idea of flight.

A plaque on the Common commemorates that moment and declares that it was here that Whittle, jet pioneer, “first felt the power of flight”.



A blue plaque on this house in Victoria Road, Leamington Spa, tells passers-by that Frank Whittle once lived here. It is near Victoria Park and a short distance from the old town library.

Photo: John Marshall

Young Frank moved with his parents to Leamington in 1916, aged nine, when his father bought a small engineering firm in Clinton Street called the Leamington Vale & Piston Company. The firm was basically a one-man band and young Frank spent many hours in his father’s workshop for tuppence an hour making slots in vale stems. He seems to have had an innate understanding of all things mechanical. Frank Whittle attended Milverton Primary School in Rugby Road before winning a scholarship to what became known as Leamington College for Boys. It is said that he wasn’t particularly academic at school but he spent hours in the old town library in Avenue Road, where he read books about astronomy and engineering. It was here that he first studied books on the theory of flight and practical flying. At the age of 16, Whittle joined the RAF as an apprentice and later became a pilot. He studied at the RAF College, Cranwell, and at Cambridge University (1934-37). He conceived the idea of trying to develop a replacement for the conventional internal combustion aero-engine and began research into jet propulsion before 1930, while still a student. After a long fight against official inertia his engine was first flown successfully in a Gloster E28 aircraft in May 1941. He was knighted in 1948.

□ *This brief article was prompted by a recent solo walk around Leamington. Information has been drawn from several sources but the most useful local material came from the Leamington History Group.*