

Stoke Local History Group

Newsletter August 2021

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First event likely to be a walk in the park

The history group's first full meeting since the pandemic lockdown is likely to be an open-air event at Coventry's War Memorial Park.

It is provisionally scheduled for Friday 1st October (the usual first Friday of the month) and will involve a brief introduction to the history of the park, followed by a guided walk around the newly created Remembrance Tree Trail, hosted by Friends of the War Memorial Park.

The walk will offer a chance to hear some poignant stories about a small selection of people who are memorialised by trees and plaques in the park. The city's premier park first opened in July 1921 and is now 100 years old.

More details of this event will be issued once plans are finalised. Places will be limited and booking will be required.

In the meantime, plans are also forging ahead for our stall at the forthcoming **Stoke Community Fun Day**, which takes place

on **Sunday 29th August at Stoke Green Park, from 12.30 to 4.30pm.**

The history group stall will be run in conjunction with our friends at Stoke Community Library and will highlight the work of the group and the services provided at the Library.

Old photographs of Stoke will be available to view, as well as a selection of books from the Library's local history section. It is hoped that members will visit the stall to meet other members of the group in an informal outdoor setting.

Stoke Community Fun Day will feature a host of fun stalls and activities for all age groups, and will include live music from the council's Band in the Park programme, from 2.00 to 3.30pm.

It is not yet clear when history group meetings can be resumed at Stoke Library. Coventry Library Service is currently taking a cautious approach to easing restrictions and it is not yet known when large meetings, like ours, can safely be resumed. Discussions are ongoing. Watch this space.



Classic cars make debut in Coventry Concours

The ruins of the old Cathedral provided a fabulous backdrop last month for the display of some classic Coventry cars during a special event dubbed as the inaugural Coventry Concours.



The weekend event took pride of place in a slimmed-down version of MotoFest – held this year over four weekends, rather than the usual two days, to allow a less crowded schedule.

The Concours event was based on the French concept of *concours d'elegance*, a term dating back to the 17th century when French aristocrats paraded horse-drawn carriages through the parks of Paris. Over time, carriages became horseless and the gathering became a competition among vehicle owners to be judged on

the appearance of their vehicles. Other concours events take place around the world.

Coventry Concours made a striking debut with a magnificent display of cars, all with a Coventry connection. Models included iconic cars from Jaguar, Daimler, Standard, Triumph, Rootes Group and Armstrong Siddeley, all of which have played a crucial role in Coventry's motoring history.



Photos: John Marshall

Among the cars in the Cathedral ruins was an impressive 1950 Humber Super Snipe, pictured above, first introduced in 1938 and derived from a combination of the larger Hillman Pullman engine with the chassis and body of the Humber Snipe. The Super Snipe was marketed to upper-middle-class managers, professional people and government officials. During World War Two it continued in production as a British military staff car. In 1946, post-war civilian production resumed and the Super Snipe evolved through several versions, each generally larger, more

powerful and more modern, before production ended in 1957. A different Super Snipe appeared in 1958. Also pictured here is a dazzling Daimler, dating from 1940, which was rescued from wartime damage to the factory after Blitz devastation in April 1941. The car, damaged in the raid, has been wonderfully restored by post-war owners. The sporty Daimler won top prize from the judging panel - which included the familiar face of *Antiques Roadshow* regular Marc Allum, pictured above with another judge and MotoFest director James Noble. Other prizes were won by various cars, including the world-famous Jaguar E-type. □

Looking back to 1907: Canon Blyth issues appeal for new Parish Rooms in Bray's Lane



Photos: John Marshall

In the period around 1907 the emerging suburb of Stoke was on the brink of major expansion, with new streets planned, new houses to be built, and a major new factory on the horizon But even before these developments took place, there was a feeling in Stoke that social facilities for its growing population were inadequate.

Canon Blyth, the distinguished vicar of Stoke St Michael's Church, said that for many years past the parishioners of Stoke had "greatly felt the need of some buildings specially adapted for public meetings, entertainments, and other purposes".

It was said that Stoke had a thousand houses at that time and a population of 5,000 people.

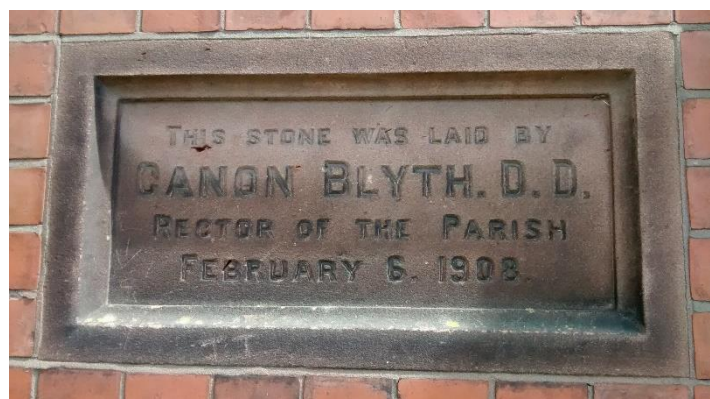
What was needed, said Canon Blyth, was a new building for multiple uses.

Thus began the appeal for a new building in Bray's Lane, to be called the Parish Rooms.

An appeal was launched and several prominent local citizens were first in line with donations.

The appeal pointed out that existing facilities for meetings were poor. "Up to the present the only accommodation afforded to the Stoke Church Sunday School has been at the National School, but although even the kitchen is utilised for a Young Men's Bible Class, the buildings are far too small, and the superintendent has been compelled to refuse admission to many children."

"For children and their teachers", the appeal continued, and "for others who are desirous of entering the Sunday school, for the working men and their wives, for the young men and young



women of the parish, it is most desirable that some such building as that proposed should be erected, and that as soon as possible.”

The precise requirements for the new building were specified in great detail.

It was said that the building should include a large hall, with a raised platform at the end, five classrooms, a reading room, a club room, and a larger room over the last two mentioned, suitable for a billiard room.

Exact measurements were given for the proposed rooms and it was added that, at the rear of the building, provision should be made for a kitchen, store rooms and lavatories.

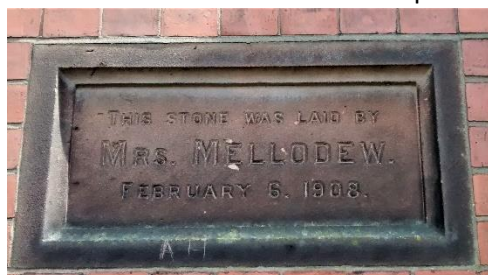
The cost of the building, apart from the site, was estimated at £1,500.

Early donations were given by various individuals including Mrs Mellowdew and her daughters, who lived at Copsewood Grange, and Joshua Perkins, the owner of Britannia Mills and a resident of Stoke Cottage, a large house in Clay Lane (transformed much later as a home for Stoke Ex-Servicemen’s Club).

The appeal was evidently successful, as the foundation stones for the building were put in place in February 1908, with one stone being laid by

Canon Blyth and the other by Mrs Mellowdew, who apparently donated the land.

Despite tales of hectic activity in the parish, it’s true to say that in 1908, when the Parish Rooms first opened, the long-established Bray’s Lane was still a quiet country lane, with very few houses. But all this changed between 1909 and 1915 when most of the current houses were built. As a result, the Parish Rooms became a real focal point for the growing local community.



Additional pressure came in 1919 when a new girls’ grammar school, Stoke Park, opened its doors in Bray’s Lane at a large old house called Harefield, formerly known as Hope’s Harbour. The new school sought to tackle the shortage of places for girls in Coventry’s secondary education system. But the Bray’s Lane school was never quite large enough, and some activities would inevitably spill over to the Parish Rooms, where some school classes were held. The school’s first Speech Day, in February 1922, also took place at the Parish Rooms.

Like many church halls, the Parish Rooms were often known as “The Institute”, denoting not just a social but also an educational function. St Margaret’s Church Hall on Ball Hill, built in 1910-11, had the same term applied.

In much later years, the Parish Rooms became widely known as home to the Sylvia Bird Dance School, which still operates from the same premises today, though the building is now owned by Dev Barrett who runs his Karate and Kickboxing Club from the building. □



The Parish Rooms (or Institute) can be seen here on the right, in a built-up Bray’s Lane in 1914, a scene still recognisable today
Photo courtesy David Fry