

# Stoke Local History Group

COVENTRY

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editor John Marshall

## Work begins on old rail line walkway

**WORK** has finally begun on a project to create a new countryside walkway and cycling route on a section of disused railway track in Stoke.

Phase one of the scheme got underway last month and will initially see the creation of a walkway from Gosford Green to Gosford Park School and Humber Avenue, using part of the old Coventry Loop Line. This phase of the walkway was originally scheduled to be completed in May 2021, in time for City of Culture, but the start was delayed.

The Loop Line walkway will eventually run from Gosford Green to Charterhouse Heritage Park, and will join an envisaged circular route stretching back along the River Sherbourne to Gosford Gate.

The initial work on the rail line has been funded by a grant from West Midlands Combined Authority and is being delivered by Coventry City Council in partnership with Historic Coventry Trust. The walkway will connect with the new Binley Road cycleway and the first phase is expected to take approximately eight weeks to complete.



The Coventry Loop Line was originally a freight-only line, first opened in 1914 and designed to bypass Coventry Station. It originally had a goods station at Gosford Green and

also at Bell Green. As freight and coal traffic declined, the mainline junction at Humber Road was closed in 1963 and the branch line shut completely in 1981.

The track was removed in 1982 and much of the former rail line became a new urban highway, now known as Jimmy Hill Way. But the southern part of the line escaped development. Natural re-wilding on this part of the route has created urban woodland, now protected by tree preservation orders. It is this part of the track that now belongs to Historic Coventry Trust, which acquired the land in August 2018.

Planning permission for all phases of the Loop Line walkway has been granted, and funding has been awarded from Severn Trent Community Fund towards the construction cost of the remaining phases. It is hoped that all phases will be completed in 2023.



*Work has now started on the old railway embankment, creating a new nature walkway on the disused rail track.*

*Photos: John Marshall*

### Summer Break and future plans

AS usual, Stoke Local History Group will take a summer break in August and September. This will enable members of the group to take holidays without missing meetings and will also enable the room at Stoke Library to be fully used by children on school holidays. This means that our next meeting will take place at Stoke Library on Friday 7<sup>th</sup> October, when Phil Tutchings will talk about the history of the Coventry Loop Line.



*Part of Lady Herbert's Garden, pictured last summer, showing almshouses built in 1937*

*Photos: John Marshall*

**FOLLOWING a successful trial last year, Historic Coventry Trust has announced a new series of afternoon teas at the recently restored Lady Herbert's Garden.**

Lady Herbert's Garden, says the Trust, has recently undergone a transformation thanks to extensive new planting by Coventry City Council and Historic Coventry Trust.

"Hidden in plain sight in Coventry's city centre, the historic garden is now looking lovelier than ever," the Trust says. "To mark this new chapter and celebrate the garden's heritage, we are hosting a series of summer events in the garden in collaboration with Esquires Coffee. On select Sunday afternoons we will be dishing out traditional afternoon teas on the main lawn, accompanied by a spot of live music. What better way to spend a summer's Sunday!"

**Future afternoon teas will take place on July 31<sup>st</sup> and August 28<sup>th</sup> and advance booking is essential. See the Trust's website for details ('What's On').**

- "The garden was developed in the 1930s by Sir Alfred Herbert, a local industrialist and philanthropist famous for his many charitable acts in Coventry," says the Trust. "Sir Alfred designed the garden for his wife Florence, aka 'Lady Herbert', to be a 'haven of peace and floral beauty' in the busy city centre. A big supporter of local heritage, Sir Alfred also sought to make visible and highlight the surviving section of medieval city wall and two gatehouses.

"Sadly, Florence died just one day before the official plans were approved to build the garden, so she never saw the project completed. However, Sir Alfred made sure that she would always be remembered by using her initials 'FH' on all the original gates and railings as well as atop Swanswell Gate. Next time you're in the garden, see if you can spot them!"



**APOLOGIES for the cancellation of our planned meeting about the River Sherbourne on July 8<sup>th</sup>.** This was caused by the unfortunate hospitalisation of our guest speaker, Colin Walker. We wish him a speedy recovery. Alternative plans were scuppered by the intervention of Covid. Another opportunity to consider the River Sherbourne will take place in November when our guest speaker will be Charlotte Ridpath of Warwickshire Wildlife Trust, who will talk about exciting plans to revitalise the river with the multi-million pound Sherbourne Valley Project.

# From horse pond to paddling pool and children's playground

**NOTHING** more clearly symbolises the transformation of Stoke from a rural parish to a city suburb than these photographs of the old horse pond and paddling pool at Stoke Green.

The first picture (right) shows the rural pond, mainly used by passing horses and carts, in an age before motor cars had begun to dominate our roads. It was taken in about 1912 and shows the track marks made by horse-drawn traps and carts.

Local historians David Fry and Albert Smith have explained that *"...many a horse and trap would take a diversion through its waters on a hot summer's day. While the horse had its fill of water*



*the wooden wheels would swell to tighten on their metal rims. This was very important because the rims might otherwise have fallen off if the wood had contracted too much with the dryness of the day."* (*The Coventry We Have Lost*, Vol 1, Smith and Fry, 1991)



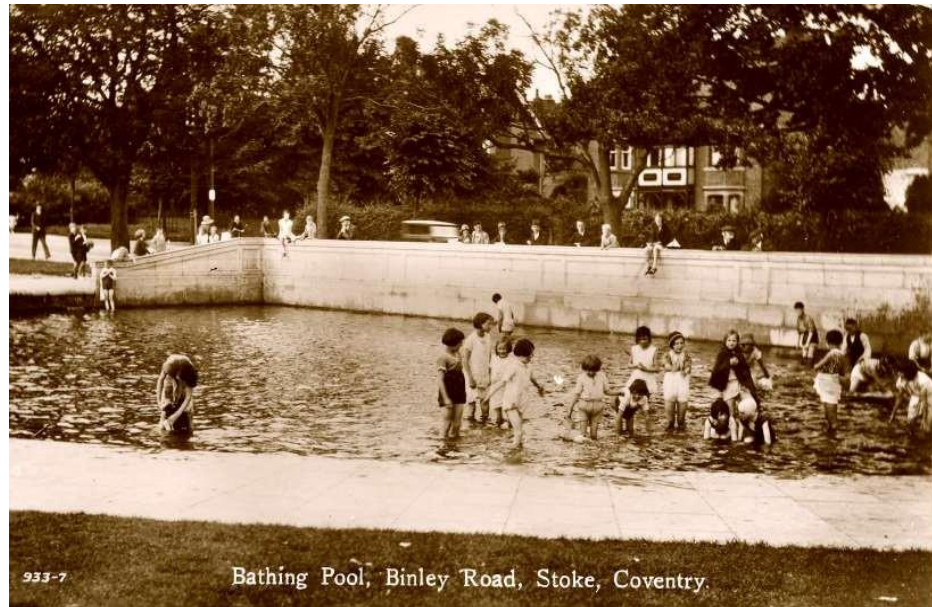
Within little more than a decade, this part of Stoke had become increasingly urbanised and this is reflected in the second picture of the horse pond (above), taken in 1925. By this time, the old pond had become a slightly more cultivated feature of a neat suburban park, and a magnet for local children.

This process of suburbanisation then reached a peak when the old horse pond was finally transformed into a proper paddling pool – with a concrete base and perimeter rim, together with a stone wall. The paddling pool

is pictured here in 1939 (right) and clearly illustrates the area's transformation. By this time, the population of Stoke had risen to around 19,000 – in stark contrast to the mere 500 residents who occupied the parish in 1800 or the 1,500 inhabitants of 1861.

The paddling pool became a popular feature of Stoke Green for several decades and is fondly remembered by many

older residents, as well as those from other areas of Coventry who recall walking to Stoke during their summer holidays for a paddle in the pool.



Bathing Pool, Binley Road, Stoke, Coventry.

Concerns about health and safety became heightened in later years and by the 1980s there was particular alarm about the dangers of broken glass. The pool was therefore drained and eventually grassed over.



The area remained in this state for a number of years but was transformed again in 2012 when a new play area was created on the site, mainly through the efforts of local residents. It was opened in February 2012 and named 'The Dr Dave Tick Tock Play Area', after the nearby Joseph Levi Clock and local resident Dr Dave Spencer, a former Coventry City and West Midlands county councillor, who played a major role in getting the play area established. □

*Old photographs courtesy of David Fry and Rob Orland. Words, John Marshall*

● *The old horse pond recalls a period before the rise of the motor car as the dominant form of road transport in Britain. By the end of 1895, it was estimated there were 14 or 15 cars on Britain's roads – a figure that by 1900 had risen to approximately 700-800 cars. The million mark for private cars was reached in Britain in 1930, with 10 million in 1967. (Source: National Motor Museum). The figure now for all road vehicles is over 40 million.*

COVENTRY Library Service has unveiled a unique Story Bench at Tile Hill Library. The hand-carved bench, designed and created by craftsman Simon O'Rourke, was commissioned by the Library Service and tells some very brief stories about Coventry's history and folklore. Anyone sitting on the bench will hear a variety of stories, all written and recorded by local people. Stoke Local History Group contributed one of the stories - about the famous duel at Gosford Green in 1398 – which was read on our behalf by local historian and author Peter Walters. Other stories tell tales about Lady Godiva and George Eliot, and one story records a surprising anecdote about how an iron lung was invented in Coventry to combat polio. The Story Bench is located in the inner courtyard at Tile Hill Library. A booklet accompanies the bench and contains a number of questions for children to explore. □



*The hand-carved story bench at Tile Hill.*

*Photo: Jaspal Ram*