

Philip Larkin, celebrated poet and native of Coventry

PHILIP Larkin is often acknowledged as the greatest English poet from the latter half of the 20th century. He was born at Poultney Road in Radford, Coventry, on August 9th, 1922, the second child and only son of Sydney Larkin, the City Treasurer, and Eva Larkin.

From the age of five, young Philip's childhood was spent at the family home in Manor Road, close to the city's railway station, and he later attended King



King Henry VIII School

Henry VIII School. He made regular contributions to the school magazine, *The Coventrian*, which he also helped to edit between 1939 and 1940.



After graduating from St John's College, Oxford, in 1943, Larkin developed a career as a librarian and worked at various libraries before taking up a post as Head Librarian at Hull University in 1955. It was here that Larkin began building his reputation as a poet of national significance.

In a talk to the history group on Friday February 6th, Sheila Woolf, chair of the Stoneleigh History Group and former head of English at Henry VIII School, will consider Larkin's relationship with Coventry.

"Some consider him the greatest poet of the 20th century, yet in his home town he remains neglected", says Sheila Woolf. "What impact did Coventry and Warwickshire have upon the young writer as he grew up in the pre-war years there? Is it true that he despised his home town? More than a century after his birth, how is he remembered?"

The meeting takes place at Stoke Library.

I Remember, I Remember by Philip Larkin

*Coming up England by a different line
For once, early in the cold new year,
We stopped, and, watching men with number-plates
Sprint down the platform to familiar gates,
'Why, Coventry!' I exclaimed. 'I was born here.'*

Above, the opening lines of a famous poem by Larkin, 1954



Members of the Coventry Society in 2022 unveil a blue plaque at Larkin's birthplace

Stoke Local History Group, Friday February 6th, at Stoke Library, beginning at 10.30am

Sheila Woolf talks about Philip Larkin and Coventry

In the October issue of *Jabet's Ash* we told the tale of a grand house in Bray's Lane, built in 1879 for Otto Striedinger and known as Hope's Harbour. The story continues here, as the house is transformed into a secondary school for girls...

From Hope's Harbour to Stoke Park School

AT a meeting of Coventry City Council in December 1917, it was agreed that the city's education committee should purchase the still magnificent house in Bray's Lane - originally known as Hope's Harbour - with the purpose of turning it into a secondary school for girls.

The price to be paid for the house was £4,750, including fixtures and fittings, with provision made for a further expenditure of £450 for the necessary alterations.

Numerous items of furniture, including handsome brass bedsteads, carpets and paintings, were sold off by auction and, shortly afterwards in October 1918, it was announced that Miss Helen Scott had been appointed as the first headmistress of the new Stoke Park Secondary School for Girls. The new school was scheduled to open in January 1919.

Since Otto Striedinger's sad demise in 1887, the house itself had been in the possession of several different owners. It was initially bought by Colonel Thomas Studly in 1891 but he moved out to Clifford Chambers, a village near Stratford-upon-Avon, in 1893, and it was then acquired by General Sir Henry Legge Newdigate, a member of the wealthy landowning Newdigate family.

Henry Legge Newdigate was a Crimean war veteran with extensive military experience. His older brother was Sir Edward Newdigate-Newdegate, who had inherited Arbury Hall, near Nuneaton, after the death of their relative Charles Newdigate-Newdegate, the former Conservative MP for North Warwickshire.



A rear view of Harefield House, the former Hope's Harbour, with its extensive garden lawns. It acquired its new name after 1895 and was destined to become the new Stoke Park School.

girls. Most school pupils were still confined to elementary schools, with a leaving age of 12 in the early 1900s, and there was little opportunity for either boys or girls to extend their education further. A few boys were able to attend Bablake or Henry VIII schools, but there was no equivalent for girls.

...Continued on next page



*An illustration of Hope's Harbour, viewed from Bray's Lane, in *The Builder* magazine, 1883.*

It was Henry Legge Newdigate who changed the name of the house at Bray's Lane from Hope's Harbour to Harefield House, after the family's ancestral seat at Harefield Place, Middlesex.

When Newdigate moved to Allesley in 1902, the house came into the ownership of George Nichols, a local councillor and master plasterer who remained in residence until 1918 when the property was sold to the council.

The council's decision to buy the house was prompted by a rising concern about the lack of secondary school places in Coventry for

It was not until an Education Act of 1902 that local authorities were given the power to build and maintain secondary schools. And one of the council's first tentative steps was to buy an old house at Barr's Hill, once the home of bicycle pioneer John Kemp Starley, and convert it into a secondary school for girls. The school opened in 1908 and at first had space for 120 pupils, rising to 250 by 1913.

But demand for places at Barr's Hill could never fully meet demand and so it was that the council looked east to "the desirable neighbourhood of Stoke", to create a second school for girls at Harefield House.

Both Stoke Park and Barr's Hill were selective schools, with entry based upon examination, and although the council offered a number of free scholarship places, some pupils were fee-paying.

Stoke Park School, named after the neighbouring residential estate, officially opened on January 20th, 1919, with a mere

87 pupils. Twenty-nine of these girls were transferred from the overcrowded Barr's Hill, three were from private schools and the remainder came from Coventry's elementary schools, including Stoke Council School, Stoke National, All Saints, Frederick Bird, Cheylesmore, Wheatley Street and South Street.

Ex-pupil Mrs Elizabeth Pharaon (known to friends in her younger days as Doris Gill) much later recalled what the school was like in its early days: "The house, Harefield, was so beautiful, with a curving drive, edged with trees and shrubs from the five-barred black gateway to the impressive front entrance – only to be used by staff. We went in by a door further along the drive and had our own cloakroom, where we were required to change into indoor shoes.



An early image of the school grounds at Barr's Hill



'The greatest joy was the garden': a drawing of the early Stoke Park School: Illustration courtesy of Rob Orland/ Historic Coventry

"The greatest joy was the garden, still as the previous owner had left it. On the Stoke Park side of the house was a long lawn, surrounded on three sides by tall trees and shrubs. I think there was a stone wall outside that. It was completely secluded from the street. The house had long windows and the room looking onto that lawn was also longer than it was wide – presumably the drawing room.

"Perhaps the most exciting place was the 'Fairy Glen', which lay between the two lawns. This was a real Dell with winding paths descending to the bottom. It was dark and eerie, maybe therein lay its attraction to us. We were taken there in the summer to read and recite poetry and to act and read Shakespeare plays."

Mrs Pharaon remembered that the school was on two floors with the laboratory upstairs, and in the pinnacled tower at the front of the school were two rooms used exclusively by the sixth form.

"The headmistress was Miss Helen Scott, tall, dark and slim, impressive and a strict disciplinarian. None of the mistresses were married, several came from clergy families. I can only assume that the strict etiquette of the time prevented them meeting members of the opposite sex."

The school uniform consisted of a long-sleeved white blouse with a navy bow, heavily pleated navy tunics, black woollen stockings and black shoes. Navy raincoats were worn outdoors, together with a navy felt hat encircled by a red and gold hat band – the hat being replaced by a cream boater in summer.

...Continued on next page

Another ex-pupil, Miss Nellie Harris, remembered that the school had few facilities when it first opened in 1919. "For the first term," she recalled, "the school had little in the way of furniture and some of the girls had to sit on the floor. The classrooms on the ground floor were entered by the back door and were very cold in the winter."

Lessons consisted of the three Rs in the first term, with the addition of geometry and French, whilst algebra was added in term two and Latin in term three. By the end of the first year, pupil numbers had increased and more activities were added to the curriculum, including tennis and hockey which were played at the Coventry and North Warwickshire cricket ground on Binley Road.

In the spring of 1920, a hut was added to the main house, with two more shortly afterwards, creating accommodation for almost 200 pupils. But space was always at a premium and the Parish Rooms in Bray's Lane were often used for additional classroom space.



Pictured in Bray's Lane in 1947, some of the last girls to attend the original Stoke Park School before the move to Dane Road. Photo courtesy of Rob Orland/Historic Coventry. The photograph was supplied by ex-pupil Muriel Wells, who appears in the front row, right.

At a Speech Day in 1923, Alderman Fred Lee said the education committee was very proud of Stoke Park School, and not long afterwards, in 1926, a new wing was opened. This extension contained a gymnasium, a chemistry and physics laboratory, a domestic science classroom, a library, five extra classrooms and a kitchen for school meals. These facilities allowed the school to increase the number of pupils to 300.

But despite these improvements, the school found it increasingly difficult to accommodate its expanding numbers. In 1937, the then headmistress, Miss Winifred Michell, complained bitterly in her annual report about

overcrowding - made worse by the influx of new workers into the city's new 'shadow factories'.

"We have 370 girls here, separated in three buildings, including a hut," she wrote. "For this number there are only twelve wash basins, only four of which have hot water. We shall have to give up attempting to be clean and be content to go dirty."

In response, Deputy Mayor Alderman Payne promised that an enlargement of the school, or the building of a new one, would be given the earliest consideration.

But the Second World War intervened, and it was not until 1947 that the girls of Stoke Park could move into a new, purpose-built school, in Dane Road. Once there, it continued to operate as a girls' grammar school and it remained so until 1975 when both Stoke Park and Barr's Hill became part of the city's co-educational, comprehensive system. □ JM

● Another article in this series will appear in a future edition of *Jabet's Ash*, describing what happened next to the old house in Bray's Lane. Memories and quotations from former pupils of the early Stoke Park School are taken from an invaluable booklet, *The House in the Park: the story of Stoke Park School*, produced in the 1990s by members of the Stoke Park History Group.

A MARBLE foundation stone laid by Dame Ellen Terry in 1906 at Coventry's old Empire Theatre has been donated to Coventry University and will feature in an exhibition, showcasing rare items from the University's Ellen Terry Collection. The great Victorian actress was born in Market Street, Coventry, in 1847, and returned to the city in 1906 to lay the foundation stone. When the Empire closed in the 1970s, the stone was rescued by Alderman Harry Weston and has been displayed for decades in a wall at the Criterion Theatre in Earlsdon. Now the Criterion has donated the stone to the University and it will appear in an exhibition at the University from February 27th.

