

Roll up! Roll up! – for a film show 'Old Coventry on Film'

THE next meeting of Stoke Local History Group will feature what promises to be an amazing film show by Dean Nelson, an avid collector of old Coventry films and photographs.

Dean, who frequently presents film shows to groups around the city, says he's been showing films since 2009 and now has a massive collection. "I have several hundred film clips and over 20,000 photographs in my collection," he told us. He edits these images together to create film shows.

His previous film shows have featured some early film footage of the Godiva

Procession and some black and white film of Coventry City FC during the Jimmy Hill era.

But the precise content of his film show at Stoke remains to be seen. It promises to be a magical mystery tour through his collection, with all sorts of film clips of Coventry, before and after the war.



Bring some popcorn and enjoy the show! It takes place at Stoke Library on Friday April 17th, beginning at 10.30am. All welcome.

● Please note that the date of this meeting is not the usual first Friday of the month. The date has been moved to avoid a clash with the Easter holidays. It's worth making a note in your diary. A reminder will be sent out nearer the time.

Early summer, outdoor events

OUR April meeting will be the final session of our current series of talks and events at Stoke Library. As usual, several outdoor events will be arranged during the early months of summer, from May to July, and full details will appear in future newsletters. Dates of the summer events will vary each month and have yet to be finalised. We'll be back at Stoke Library in October for a new series of talks.

Stoke Local History Group, at Stoke Library, Friday April 17th, beginning at 10.30am

Dean Nelson presents

'Old Coventry on Film, 1920 to 1990'



Chace Hotel will 'return to its former glory'



Exciting signs of progress: restoration begins
Photo: John Marshall

WORK has begun on restoring the historic Chace Hotel - with the new owners promising to return the building to its former glory.

As *Jabet's Ash* reported in November last year, the empty hotel on London Road in Coventry was sold at auction for a reported asking price of £1.7 million. The new owners were later revealed to be OpticRealm, which said it would now spend around £4 million on the restoration project.

Once completed, the Chace will join a portfolio of hotels known as Distinct Hotels, which includes the recently renovated Brownsover Hall Hotel in Rugby.

The original Chace dates back to the end of the 19th century and was first designed as an opulent country residence for Charles Webb Iliffe, the prominent and long-serving coroner for Coventry and North Warwickshire. It became a hotel in 1930.

The hotel closed in 2021, with later plans to turn the building into a care home abandoned because of the cost. The building has stood empty for the past five years but was Grade II listed by English Heritage in 2023. Readers can follow the progress of the restoration by checking the hotel's enthusiastic new website,

which also invites local people to share their memories of the old hotel. See [Home | The Chace Hotel](#) □

Larkin's old school and the 'forgotten air raids' of 1941

FOR a brief period in April 1941 Philip Larkin - at that time a student at Oxford - was back home at his parents' house in Manor Road, Coventry, shortly after some intense air raids had caused more damage to an already beleaguered city.

The heaviest raids of that month were on April 8th and 10th, barely five months after Coventry had been torn apart by the notorious overnight raid of November 14th, 1940.

Writing to his friend Norman Iles, Larkin described the April air raids as "bloody" and said they were just as bad as the first one in November. "Our house escaped," he commented wryly, but "all around it are wrecked houses, craters, and unexploded bombs."

He could easily have added that his old school, King Henry VIII, was also severely damaged during the April raids. Nearly all school buildings were either burnt out or levelled by incendiary bombs or high explosive ordnance; the gymnasium, woodwork shop and chemistry laboratory were completely wrecked, and valuable records and artefacts were destroyed.

Similar damage was suffered at other key points in the city, including the Coventry and Warwickshire Hospital (where 42 patients and staff were killed) and Christ Church in the city centre, where only the spire would eventually survive. In total, about 450 people lost their lives and many homes were destroyed.

These April attacks have come to be called Coventry's "forgotten air raids" because they always seem to be overshadowed in the collective memory by the massive air raids of November 14th, 1940. Next month marks the 85th anniversary of the April raids. □



Fighting fire at King Henry VIII School

As a follow-up to the history group's last meeting, **Jabet's Ash** looks at changing attitudes towards women workers during the turbulent years of wartime factory production

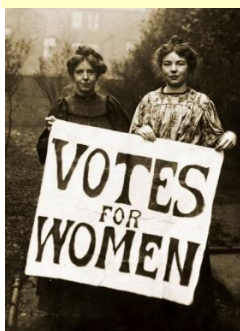
Women workers in Coventry during the First World War

OUR most recent history group meeting at Stoke Library heard local historian David Fry talking about Charles Hathaway, the pioneering Works Manager at Triumph during the years leading up to the First World War.

Hathaway, who lived in Stoke Park and was a close neighbour of his boss Siegfried Bettmann, was a clever engineer who took out numerous patents for improvements to cycles and motor bikes at Triumph. He was once described as a "genius" and was undoubtedly one of the main reasons for Triumph's early success.

But the "one blot" on his reputation, said David Fry, was his attitude towards women workers, who were barred from the Triumph Works. During Hathaway's time at Triumph, the company even published an advertisement which proudly boasted that "no female labour" was involved in the manufacture of the company's products.

The advertisement, which seems outrageous and extraordinary to modern eyes, claimed that "the male mechanic in the Workshop has proved himself infinitely superior to the female – capable of doing better, more exact, more reliable work." A mixed labour force, said the ad, "lowers the standard of the work produced" and it boasted that "Triumph cycles are made in a factory where no female labour whatever is employed." It added that "female labour and best work do not go together" and it insisted therefore that buyers should "let your machine be a Triumph, The Best Bicycle British Workmanship can produce, and made by skilled male mechanics only".



Charles Hathaway's attitude was clearly deeply entrenched and reflected the cultural norms of the period. There was even a moral component to his view which seemed to assume, like a Victorian cliché, that a mixed labour force was inherently lax and undesirable. But those attitudes were increasingly being challenged, and the Triumph advertisements – particularly prevalent in newspapers around 1906 – began to seem increasingly out of tune with a rising movement for social change in the immediate pre-war years.

The women's suffrage movement had begun in the late 19th century and by 1903 Emmeline Pankhurst had founded the Women's Social and Political Union which engaged in militant action to extend the franchise. And although this movement was concerned primarily with voting rights, it clearly had implications for wider social equality.

Ironically, perhaps, the Triumph bicycle (along with other brands) played a role in this wider movement as Edwardian ladies formed suffragette bicycle clubs to embrace the new freedoms offered by the machine. Bicycles had first become fashionable for some upper-class women during the late Victorian period and became increasingly popular with other women as time went by, often creating a moral panic about changing gender roles.

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But the real driver of change during this period was clearly the First World War.

With thousands of young men forced to leave the workplace and enlist in the forces, female labour became indispensable to keep the factories going - supplying vital equipment for the war effort. In her book on the history of women's lives in Coventry, Cathy Hunt notes that nationally, around 800,000 women moved into factory work during the war.

This movement of women into factory production was particularly evident in Coventry, says Hunt, which was transformed into one of the country's most important munitions centres - with many engineering firms



Cycling suffragettes, circa 1910

swiftly converting production to military equipment. Women flocked to Coventry from all over the country to work in the city's factories, often living in cheap boarding houses or hostels.

The work was often dangerous - particularly in the munitions factories - and explosions sometimes occurred. Moreover, the chemical used in the shells, TNT, was toxic and caused the skin of the women to turn yellow - hence the nickname 'Canary Girls'.

And it was not just factories that employed women workers. Suddenly women were driving delivery vans or working as conductors on the city's trams. They were delivering letters for the Post Office or acting as telegraph messenger girls. Women began working for the fire brigade or driving ambulances. Even the Coventry police force recruited a few women officers - though strictly limited to the duration of the war.

At Triumph, too, the old rules enforced by Hathaway were quietly set aside.

Charles Hathaway himself did not live to see the full impact of these changes. As David Fry explained in his talk, in July 1915



Female workers arranging and packing fuse heads in the Coventry Ordnance Works during World War One

Hathaway was in poor health but struggled out of his sick bed to meet King George V who was visiting Coventry to see for himself the wartime factories.

Later that evening Hathaway became seriously ill and was taken to hospital where he died the next morning.

In his biography of Triumph founder Siegfried Bettmann, Gordon Maycock observed that it is doubtful whether Charles Hathaway "would have withstood the climacteric changes that were soon to burst upon the industrial scene" during the First World War. This question remains open, but we do know that the lives of women, particularly in cities like Coventry, were profoundly and sometimes irreversibly changed by the experience of wartime work.

After the war, in 1918, an Act of Parliament finally gave the vote to women but only for those over the age of 30 who met certain property qualifications. It took another ten years before women gained equal voting rights with men, and many struggles lay ahead in the quest for equality in the workplace. □ JM



'Women of Coventry answer their country's call'; said the Coventry Herald in June 1915 when these women became the first tram conductresses

References: Cathy Hunt, *A History of Women's Lives in Coventry* (2018); Gordon Maycock, *The Triumph of Siegfried Bettmann* (2000)