

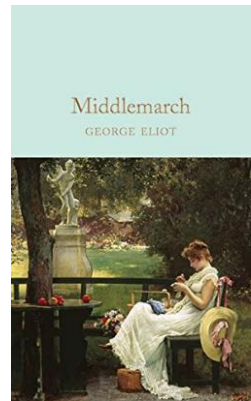
The life of times of George Eliot – the Coventry connection

WHEN broadcaster Alice Roberts was recently asked to name her favourite novel, her answer was immediate and emphatic – “*Middlemarch*”, she said, “by George Eliot”.

Professor Roberts, an eminent archaeologist, anatomist and historian, described *Middlemarch* as “a masterpiece” and said she was “blown away by the complexity of the characters and the way it challenges your prejudices”.

It’s a view shared by many others.

Middlemarch is a fictional town, often said to be based on Coventry, and the novel of that name was written by Mary Ann Evans – pen name George Eliot – in 1871. Eliot described the novel as “a study of provincial life” and it almost certainly draws its inspiration from her experiences in Coventry.



Miss Franklin's former school in Warwick Row, Coventry, where Mary Ann Evans was a pupil

Although George Eliot is frequently associated with Nuneaton – she was born nearby on the Arbury Estate and spent her childhood at Griff House – it was arguably Coventry that most influenced her life.

She was educated at several schools, including one at Warwick Row in Coventry, and as a young woman moved with her father to live at Bird Grove in Foleshill. She attended Holy Trinity Church but was also involved with a radical group of freethinkers at Rosehill in Radford, the home of Charles and Cara Bray.

How did these experiences shape her life, her thinking, and her later writing?

John Burton, the distinguished chair of the George Eliot Fellowship, will talk about Mary Ann Evans and her connection with Coventry at a meeting of Stoke Local History Group on Friday November 6th.

An “inspirational” former teacher, John Burton is the author of several books and has been chair of the George Eliot Fellowship since 2006. He and his wife Lynda are also trustees of the Bedworth Society. Earlier this year John Burton was honoured in Nuneaton and Bedworth when he was awarded the Freedom of the Borough for his work on local history and heritage.



John Burton, guest speaker

Stoke Local History Group, at Stoke Library
Friday November 6th, beginning at 10.30am.
**John Burton, chair of the George Eliot Fellowship, talks about
George Eliot: the Coventry connection**

Old Ball pub set to reopen as late-night bar and restaurant

THE historic Old Ball pub in Stoke is set to reopen after a prolonged period of closure.

In March 2025 the pub was suddenly closed and boarded up, with no reason given by Admiral Taverns, the venue's owner. But now a notice has appeared on the main entrance of the building, saying that Southern Flames Ltd has applied to Coventry City Council to open the pub as a 'Big Boys Bar and Restaurant'.

Records show that ownership of the building changed hands in April 2025 for £395,000.

Advertisements online state that the former hotel has been completely refurbished, with rented rooms and studios now available to students and professionals.

The licence application says the pub wants to open from 11am until midnight from Sunday to Thursday, and until 4am on Fridays and Saturdays. It aims to sell alcohol during those hours and provide live music and late-night food.



A new lease of life is promised at the Old Ball Hotel
Photo: John Marshall



THE Old Ball Hotel was originally called 'The Ball' and it dates back over 200 years.

It was first mentioned in newspapers in 1802 when it was advertised to let. Another advertisement in 1836 gave its location as "adjoining the racecourse" – a reference to the Stoke Races which once took place in the area between Walsgrave Road and Binley Road.

The district of Ball Hill - previously known as Stoke Knob or Stoke Hill – takes its name from the pub, which was significantly enlarged in the early 20th century when Stoke was emerging as a thriving new suburb of Coventry.

From 1911 to 1913 the licensee of the pub was Nat Robinson, a Coventry-born football goalkeeper, who played more than 300 times for Small Heath, later known as Birmingham City. He also made a few appearances for Chelsea and Coventry City before retiring from playing in 1915. He died in Coventry in 1929, aged 51. The photograph above shows Ball Hill in the 1920s.

Photograph courtesy of David Fry

Old Blue Coat School – preparing girls for a life in domestic service

In July this year *Jabet's Ash* looked at some of the Coventry buildings designed in the 19th century by architect James Murray. Here we take a closer look at one of those buildings – Blue Coat School.

It is said that old Blue Coat School, situated just off Priory Row, was founded in 1714 as charity school for girls, and its specific task was to train girls for a life in domestic service.

Benjamin Poole, the 19th century historian, tells us that “forty girls were admitted to the school, entering at the age of ten and remaining there for three to five years, during which time they were clothed, and taught reading and writing, knitting and sewing, by a mistress who resides on the premises, and where also the six eldest girls are boarded and lodged through their last year, and instructed in household work, fitting them for the duties of domestic life.”

The girls, often orphans, would make part of their own clothing, and carry out work for outsiders, with a portion of the proceeds going into the school fund. Discipline in the school was strict and girls would be expected to dress and behave in an appropriate manner. They were rigorously trained in the principles of



Painting of girls walking from Blue Coat School to Holy Trinity Church

the Church of England and regularly attended services at Holy Trinity Church, which preached an annual sermon for the school.

“Their outer dress is uniform, and extremely simple,” wrote Poole, “consisting of a dark blue worsted frock, with short sleeves; white apron, plain white tippet, and straw bonnet, and a comfortable warm cloak for winter.” The school itself occupied part of the site of Coventry’s first cathedral, St Mary’s, the only cathedral to be demolished during Henry VIII’s Dissolution of the Monasteries. And this unique location, as we shall see, was crucial to Blue Coat School’s architectural development.



Old Blue Coat School today.

Photo John Marshall

The original cathedral was vast and was part of the old Benedictine Priory, first established in the 11th century and richly endowed by Leofric and Godiva. Part of the west wall and foundations of the cathedral can still be seen today, and the original building would have stretched the entire length of Priory Row, right up to the site of the current 1960s’ cathedral.

Although most of the old cathedral was demolished in the 1540s, two towers at the west end of the building survived into the 17th century. It was here in the 1650s that the vicar of Holy Trinity, Rev John

Bryan, took out a 99-year lease on the north-west tower and built a house around it called the Tower House. Here he stayed until his death in 1675.

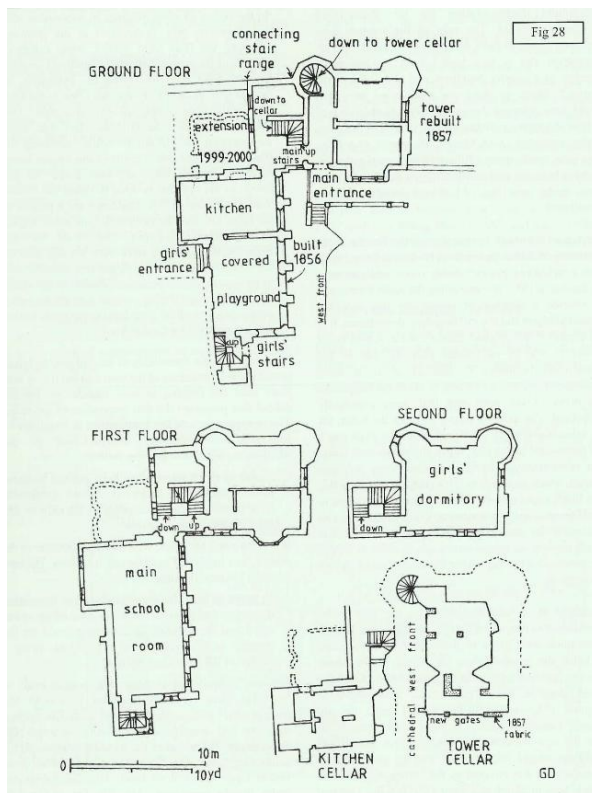


Diagram showing the ground and upper floors of Blue Coat School. Illustration by George Demidowicz.

The precise location of the first Blue Coat School is uncertain but by 1780 it appears that the school had acquired ownership of the Tower House and adjoining buildings. This eventually led to the 'Great Rebuilding' of 1856-57, with James Murray appointed as the architect. His task was to demolish the existing buildings, build a new schoolhouse and reconstruct the adjoining Tower House. Before the work began, Murray also restored and extended the cottages on Priory Row.

Once completed, the project meant, in effect, that Blue Coat School consisted of two separate buildings, linked together to form a consistent whole, and designed by Murray in the style of a French château. The first building, completed in 1856, contained a covered playground and kitchen on the ground floor, with the main schoolroom above. The adjoining Tower House, rebuilt in 1857, provided accommodation for the matron and a dormitory for the girls (see diagram, left).

It was during the demolition phase of this work that the west wall and foundations of the old cathedral were discovered, and the new buildings were

designed to retain the view of the medieval ruins. Today, the ancient foundations of the Tower House can still be seen at the lower level, close to the present-day Nando's restaurant, with the former schoolhouse still perched atop the cathedral's old west wall.

By the early 20th century Blue Coat School was increasingly overshadowed by the new provisions of state-funded Board Schools, and girls began to attend those schools.

In his *History of Blue Coat School*, George Demidowicz tells us that pupil numbers dropped from 40 or 50 in the 1850s to only about 16 during the inter-war years, when the school operated more as a care home for orphans. The remaining girls were evacuated at the outbreak of war, and the school closed in January 1940, never to reopen.

For the next fifty years the building was occupied by a succession of organisations, including Coventry City Transport, which used the premises as a canteen and lost property office, and later the Samaritans and Alcoholics Anonymous. It was not until the late 1990s that the Phoenix Initiative allowed the building to be restored and handed over to Holy Trinity, which now uses the building as its Church Centre, known as Trinity House. □ **JM**

References: *Coventry: Its History and Antiquities* (1870) by Benjamin Poole;
A History of Blue Coat School and Lych Gate Cottages (2000) by George Demidowicz.



The rear part of the Tower House, with the lowest level showing its medieval foundations. Photo: John Marshall