

Stoke Local History Group

Newsletter December 2020

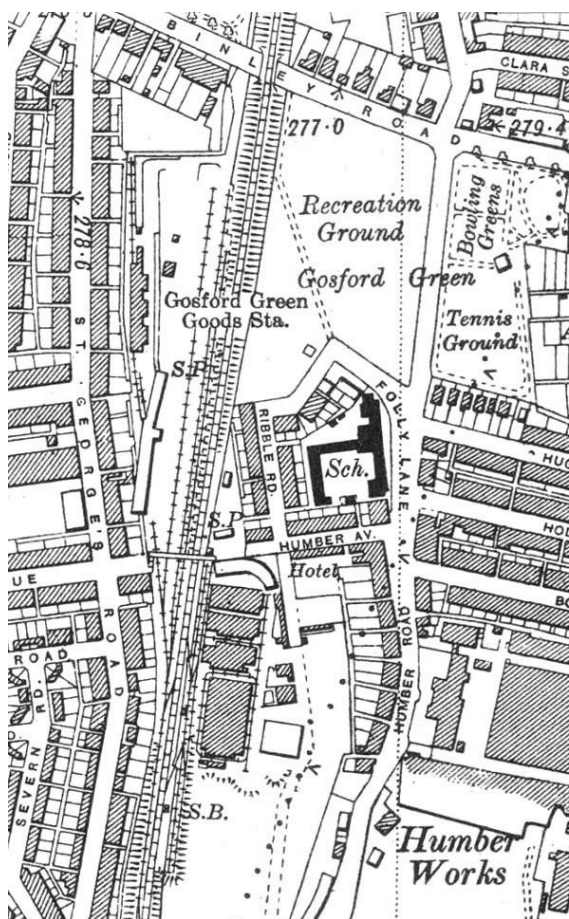


TWO heritage projects have taken great strides forward this month - with a major restoration scheme in the city centre and, closer to home, another bit of progress for the promised Gosford Loop Line walkway.

The city centre scheme, managed by Historic Coventry Trust, has seen

the gradual unveiling of old shop fronts in Hales Street and the Burges which have now been transformed by a stunning refurbishment project. Shops and buildings in this part of town are

some of the last surviving parts of pre-war Coventry and some of the streetscape dates back to medieval times.



Sixteen buildings and shops have been restored after the Trust was given a major grant by Historic England, with additional support from Coventry City Council and business owners.

Meanwhile the council has given final approval to a scheme which will see a walkway and cycle path created by Historic Coventry Trust on the disused railway line which once linked Gosford Green in Stoke to the mainline rail route.

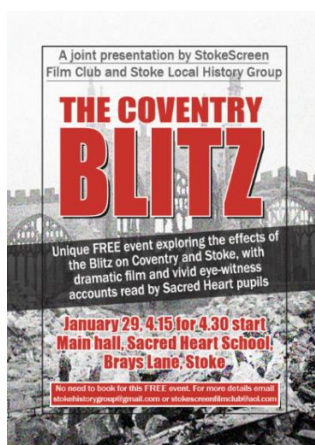
The old Gosford Loop Line first opened exclusively for goods traffic in 1914 and allowed firms to bypass congestion at Coventry's main station. Gosford Green had its own Goods Station (see map) and the line ran to Bell Green and beyond.

The line closed in 1963 and part of the route was used for the North-South road. But the remaining part was acquired in 2018 by Historic Coventry Trust which intends to create a nature walkway from Gosford Green towards Robert Stephenson's

Sherbourne viaduct. Ultimately, the path will extend in a circular route past Charterhouse, along the River Sherbourne and back to Gosford Gate. The first phase of the walkway, to be delivered by Coventry City Council, should be ready in time for City of Culture in May 2021.

** For more detail on these and other projects, check out the website of Historic Coventry Trust. Map shows Gosford Green Goods Station in 1938. Hales Street photo: John Marshall*

Stoke Local History Group – Annual Report



2020 - a year that promised so much but went abruptly into lockdown

The year started brightly enough for Stoke Local History Group when we helped to stage a highly successful event at Sacred Heart School to commemorate the 80th anniversary of the Coventry Blitz.

Organised in conjunction with the school and with friends from StokeScreen Film Club, the event attracted an audience of about 80 local people, including Lord Mayor Linda Bigham, and was chaired by local historian Peter Walters.

This was followed in early February by a meeting at Stoke Library at which I joined guest speaker John Kelly to offer a chilling reminder of the enormous damage done during the Blitz to homes and factories in Stoke. John Kelly was able to draw on his personal experience as a child at the Biggin Hall Hotel - which also inspired his novel.



Reflecting on the impact of the Blitz on Stoke: John Kelly (left) and John Marshall
Photos: Charles Barker

In March came a change of tone when Eleanor Nesbitt offered an insight into various literary figures who have mentioned Coventry in their work or who had a Coventry connection.

In an illustrated talk, Eleanor conjured up an image from Shakespeare's *Richard II* when she recalled that famous duel at Gosford Green which ultimately led to the overthrow of the King. She also cited the significant influence of Coventry on the writings of George Eliot, and inevitably mentioned the poet Philip Larkin and more recent writers such as Graham Joyce. The meeting also reflected on the numerous visits to Coventry in later life by novelist EM Forster.



Coventry's literary connections: Eleanor Nesbitt

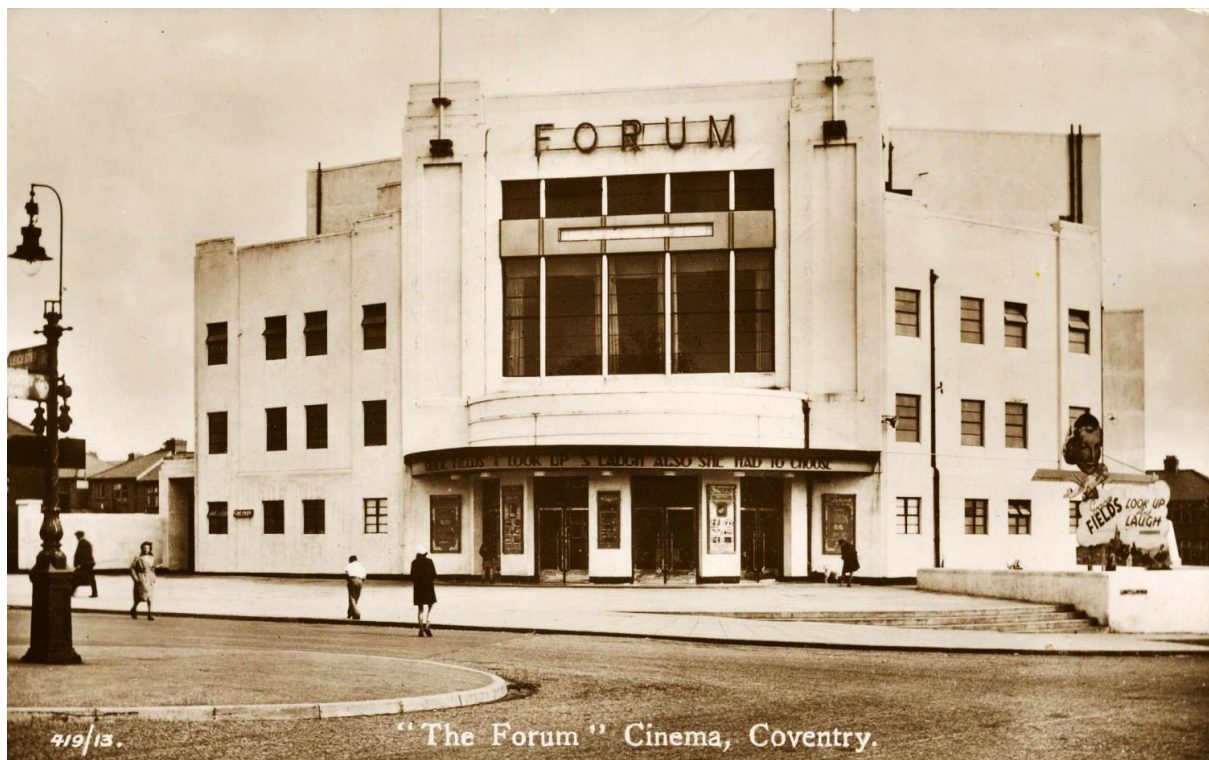
Sadly, Eleanor's talk in early March turned out to be our final event of the year. In mid-March we announced that the dangers posed by coronavirus had forced us to suspend future meetings. And shortly afterwards the Government announced the first national lockdown.

Since then I have attempted to keep things ticking over with regular mailings and this has evolved into monthly newsletters. We can only hope that next year will see a turning of the tide.

In line with current pandemic guidelines, this year's AGM - usually a brief formality - will be held at Stoke Library as soon as it is safe to do so.

John Marshall

Forum Cinema – art deco triumph at Poets’ Corner



Situated a few yards east of Stoke Church, the Forum Cinema was probably the crowning glory of the newly emerging Poets’ Corner estate when it first opened its doors in November 1934.

Designed by in-house architect TD Griffiths for the local Philpot circuit, the art deco cinema has been described as “a large suburban super-cinema” and had seating for 1,640 people. (*) The opening ceremony was attended by Gene Gerrard, a popular film star of the period, and the first screening featured Richard Tauber in the film *Blossom Time*.

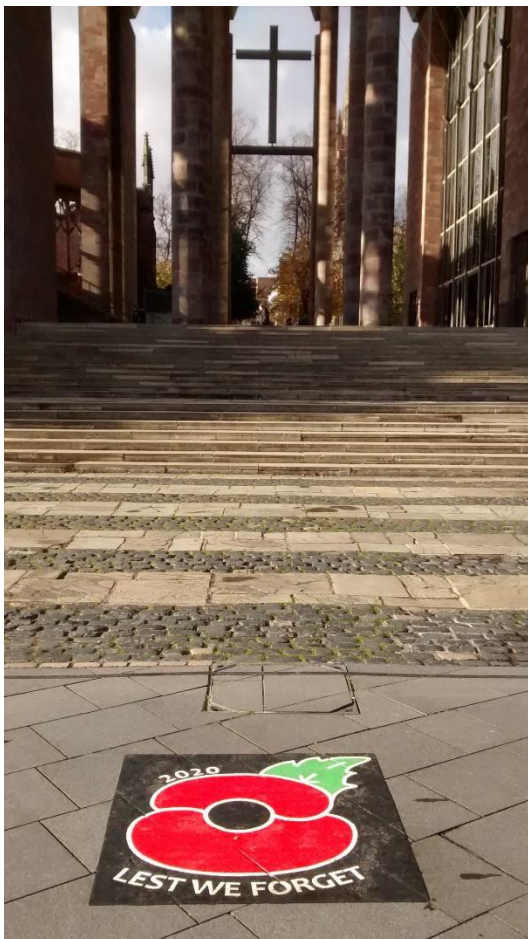
Poets’ Corner itself had been created after 1929 when Wyken House and associated land was sold for housing development. It was part of a major second phase of urbanisation in the district, following the earlier Edwardian phase when formerly rural Stoke first sprang into being as a new suburb of Coventry.

The cinema aimed to serve this rapidly expanding community and was known for its state-of-the-art equipment and a grand Conacher organ, played from 1936-38 by organist Lew Harris (right).

Although not damaged during the Blitz, the Forum was forced to close on November 14th 1940 when the cinema lost power during heavy bombing. Electric power was restored by early December and the Forum reopened with a screening of Jack Benny in *Buck Benny Rides Again*.

Later photographs of the Forum show a noticeable decline in its once-gleaming exterior, and on 26th May 1962 the cinema closed its doors for the final time. Demolition was completed in August 1962. The Conacher organ was sold to Northampton Grammar School and, after many years in storage, is currently being refurbished in Melton Mowbray. (*) See *Cinema Treasures* website – Photos courtesy of David Fry





Photos: John Marshall

There were no public ceremonies last month to mark Remembrance Day. Nor did we have special events to commemorate the 80th anniversary of the Coventry Blitz. But poppies and wreaths still found their way to key locations in the city, including the mass grave at London Road Cemetery (pictured above).

The mass grave site at London Road was created in November 1940 – just days after the most notorious all-night bombing raid on Coventry. The authorities, deeply traumatised by the number of deaths, decided not to release bodies for private burial but to make arrangements for a mass grave or “civic funeral”. It was felt that a mass funeral would be more fitting and less painful than a long-drawn-out series of individual burials. This also eased the immediate practical burden for families as the council agreed to pay the costs and handle all the formalities. It also discreetly resolved the difficulty of identification in cases where this seemed uncertain.

The first civic funeral took place on Wednesday 20th November 1940, at a time when bodies were still being recovered from the debris of the raids. It was instantly clear that a second ceremony would be required.

A small team of troops used a mechanical digger to produce two deep and long trenches, into which coffins were laid in rows overnight with Union Jacks draped over. The Bishop of Coventry led the first service, with hundreds of mourners forming a solemn procession to the graves. A total of 172 people were buried that day, with another 250 at a similar service on the following Saturday. □