

Stoke Local History Group

Newsletter March 2021

Plans to demolish the former Empire building in Far Gosford Street and replace it with a huge new student residence have been withdrawn by developers. It is not yet known whether revised plans will be submitted.

The former cinema site, once home to the

Crown and later the Paris Cinema (see history group newsletter, September 2020) was most recently used by music venue the Empire which has now moved to Hertford Street.



*The proposed student residence at Far Gosford Street and Vecqueray Street.
Image: Beauford Group*

Developers proposed the demolition of the existing building and its replacement with retail space on the Far Gosford Street frontage and accommodation for 100 students at the rear. It was envisaged that the residential complex would be built in a series of blocks - stepping up to four storeys, five storeys and then seven storeys. The entrance for students was to be located on Vecqueray Street. The plan was withdrawn after several objections during the consultation process, including concerns from Historic England, the Coventry Society and the council's own Conservation team.



*The Empire building in Far Gosford Street now stands empty.
Photograph: John Marshall*

Historic England raised concerns on heritage grounds that the proposals did not preserve or enhance the character of the Conservation Area, claiming there was a serious lack of analysis on the impact. The council's Urban Design & Landscape department said the staggered height of the complex could restrict development of neighbouring buildings. And the Conservation team said the plan could result in a significant change of character to the Conservation Area, with no convincing

justification for the loss of the Empire building. "The proposed building would overbear and overshadow the area," the Conservation team said. □

'Shall we take the tram to Stoke?'



Service 8 from Stoke to Earlsdon, via the city centre, pictured on Binley Road during the 1930s. The Bull's Head pub would have been on the right.

A look at the rise and fall of Coventry's trams

On November 15th 1940, the morning after the Blitz, we are told that a foreman set out to explore any damage to the principal tram routes out of town, including Binley Road.

What he found was a scene of utter devastation: power cables had been ripped out, trams had been left abandoned, craters littered the routes and tram lines were sometimes standing twenty to thirty feet in the air. Bits of tram line had been blown sky high and some were found in the gardens of neighbouring properties. One lady even claimed that a piece of tram line had smashed through the roof of her house and landed on her son's bed, a claim verified by the foreman who found that a piece of rail about twelve feet long had landed across the bed. Other bits of rail were recovered from a school yard, at least a quarter of a mile from the nearest track.

The damage in Stoke was confirmed by Ivy Archer, a Stoke Park schoolgirl, who later recalled the awful scene as she walked towards her home. "A high explosive bomb had fallen on the Binley Road," she said. "It had bent the tram lines so they were standing up in the air, at right angles to the road."

The trams in Coventry were initially suspended but within three months it was decided that damage to the system was sadly beyond repair. Lines formally closed in February 1941, never to open again.

Up to that point, the Binley Road tram had been a familiar feature in Stoke. Trams to the district first started in July 1899 when the tram system was extended eastwards, with a terminus outside the original Bull's Head pub - at that time on the outer fringes of the city, with only countryside beyond.



At the tram terminus opposite the old Bull's Head, Binley Road, near Bray's Lane, c1912

There were actually two routes to Stoke, both opening at roughly the same time. One route went via Victoria Street and Payne's Lane, the other via Ford Street and Far Gosford Street.



A tram passes Gosford Green, circa 1912

The very first trams in Coventry began operating in 1884 and were steam-powered. They were run by the Coventry & District Tramways Company and consisted of open-top trailers towed by steam tram locomotives. The single route, from Coventry Station to Bedworth, was never wholly successful and was often beset

with problems, not least of which was the tricky climb out of town up Bishop Street. The service was suspended in 1893 and Coventry was without a tram service for two years.

But in 1895 a new company, the Coventry Electric Tramways Co., took over the route and began to electrify the line. The new electrified service began in December 1895 and took passengers to Foleshill, where the first depot was located. The electrified service was soon extended to Bedworth and by 1899 new routes were built to Bell Green and Stoke, with an additional depot at Priestley's Bridge on Stoney Stanton Road. Further extensions in 1905 took the service to Earlsdon and Allesley Old Road.

In January 1912 the whole service was formally taken over by Coventry Corporation. And shortly afterwards, in 1913, the Coventry Corporation Act gave the authority new powers to operate motor buses - an ominous sign as the new municipal bus service would ultimately lead to the downfall of the trams. But any such developments were inevitably delayed by the outbreak of World War One.



An unfamiliar sight in 1915: women of Coventry answer the call

The city's first fleet of buses, an impressive range of Maudsley double-deckers, some of which served Ball Hill and Upper Stoke,

were first placed in service in March 1914. But several months later, when war broke out, they were requisitioned by the army and the service was abruptly withdrawn.

Meanwhile the main wartime problem faced by trams was a lack of manpower as many young men went gingerly off to war. The gap was increasingly filled by women who became tram conductresses for the first time. Pictures in the *Coventry Herald* in June 1915 showed women working on the trams with the headline 'Women of Coventry responding to their country's call'.

Although buses resumed after the war, a significant investment was made in the tramways with major improvements to the tracks and new tramcars added to the fleet. And by 1930 a new extension was made to the Stoke route, with the line now extending to Uxbridge Avenue to cope with demand for passenger transport to the hugely expanded GEC works at Copsewood.

But signs were not good for the long-term future of trams. In the face of competition from buses, which were more flexible and easier to run, the tram system eventually began to wind down. In common with other cities, some tram services in Coventry were withdrawn as early as 1932 and by the late 1930s many trams had been replaced with buses.



*This late 1930s tram to Uxbridge Avenue in Stoke is passing the clubhouse of the Triumph sportsground on the right - later to make way for new housing at Momus Boulevard.
Below: trams passing Stoke Green in 1931.*

In 1936 the route to Gosford Green via Ford Street was converted to bus operation. In the following year the service from Broadgate to Earlsdon was removed, meaning that trams from Stoke via Payne's Lane now terminated at Broadgate. And on 12 August 1939 the final pre-war conversion took place when the trams to Uxbridge Avenue in Stoke were also discontinued.



Strange as it may seem, it was the outbreak of World War Two that offered a brief but unexpected lifeline to Coventry's trams. Diesel and petrol fuel for buses suddenly became a scarce resource so trams offered a viable alternative. It was therefore decided

to abandon the replacement scheme and even to reinstate some services that had recently been withdrawn, like the route to Binley Road in Stoke. But, as we saw at the outset, the reprieve of the tram system was destined to be short-lived. The damage done to the tramways during heavy bombing turned out to be a final straw. □

John Marshall

Information for this article has been drawn from a variety of sources but particularly helpful were Peter Waller's book *Lost Tramways of England: Coventry* (2018) and the online site *Coventry Tramways*. The foreman's account of bomb damage to the track can be found in Norman Longmate's *Air Raid: The Bombing of Coventry* (1976) Photos courtesy of David Fry and contributors to *historicc Coventry.co.uk*.