

# Stoke Local History Group

Newsletter April 2021

A remarkable transformation is taking place at Coventry's impressive London Road Cemetery, with the restoration of several important buildings and features in this historic burial ground and park.



*Work in progress this month at the Norman-style Anglican Chapel*

*Photos: John Marshall*

A statement issued last month by Coventry City Council said the project

is now complete, but a recent visit confirmed that work is still taking place. The improvement works have been made possible by a grant of £1.7 million from the National Lottery Heritage Fund, together with a grant award from the Wolfson Foundation.

The council said: "The work has seen repairs to the Anglican Chapel, removing and replacing damaged stones, cleaning and repairing the weathervane and iconic rose window, and new lighting and heating installed.



*Viewed from inside the cemetery, the old carriageway entrance from London Road has been reopened and restored. The tunnel was bricked up in c1939 and the area used as an air raid shelter.*

"New metal gates and a balustrade which resembles the original features have been installed at the carriageway entrance and other restoration works include repair works to the Jewish Chapel, the 1871 mortuary room, the Bier Store and the Paxton monument. The cemetery is Grade 1 listed, with many of its buildings being Grade II listed, and was designed by Sir Joseph Paxton in the 1840s at the height of his career. Paxton used a rich variety of trees and plants, including trees he had

brought back from a trip to the Americas. Historic England recognises London Road Cemetery as one of the top five historic cemeteries in the country."

The newly restored Anglican Chapel is expected to be used for City of Culture events. In its April update the Historic Coventry Trust said: "The first phase of work has been completed at the Anglican Chapel and we think it's looking fantastic. This previously unused chapel will be used for events, education and activities, and will also be available to hire from later this year. Work is currently underway to carefully install underfloor heating under the existing floor tiles, and make it a great space for events. It will first be used for The Tides Within Us, a key event for Coventry UK City of Culture." □

# Remembering April 1941

When the Coventry Blitz is mentioned, we usually have in mind the horrific events of November 14/15<sup>th</sup> 1940 when the city endured one of the worst attacks ever experienced by a provincial town during the Second World War. But the sustained bombardment on that night was not the only serious air raid on the city.

This month marked the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of what is sometimes described as the “forgotten raids” in April 1941 which caused more devastation for Coventry’s beleaguered citizens.



*Workmen clear wreckage from the Central Police Station, adjoining the Council House (above) and a fireman dampens the severely damaged Henry VIII School (below). Photos: Coventry Telegraph and Henry VIII School*



The raids on 8/9<sup>th</sup> April and then again on 10/11<sup>th</sup> April saw prolonged attacks by bombers on a city still reeling from the wreckage of the previous year. Christ Church in the city centre was virtually destroyed in the new raids (see newsletter, January 2021), and the Coventry and Warwickshire Hospital suffered ten direct hits, causing devastation to the building, the patients and the staff. King Henry VIII School was also severely damaged, as was the Central Police Station and St Mary’s Hall.

A total of 451 people are believed to have been killed in the April raids. There were numerous casualties in Stoke, as elsewhere, and these included a 15-year-old boy from Hollis Road - one of four people from that road who were fatally injured in the raids. Seven people, including two babies and two pupils from Folly Lane School, died at a shelter at Smith’s Stamping Works, Ribble Road, and there were a number of fatalities at Barras Green Social Club. Many other casualties are remembered in Trevor Harkin’s book *Coventry April 1941: The Forgotten Air Raids* (2011).

## News in brief

- The three-day centenary weekend at Coventry’s War Memorial Park, scheduled to take place from July 9<sup>th</sup> to celebrate the 100<sup>th</sup> birthday of the park, has been postponed until July next year because of Covid restrictions. Other events are promised this summer to mark the centenary.
- Severn Trent Water’s Community Fund has awarded over £198,000 to Historic Coventry Trust to complete the planned Gosford Loop Line walkway and cycle route, the largest award ever made. The two-mile circular walkway will incorporate a history trail linking Charterhouse and Gosford Green.

# Copsewood Grange: a hidden gem



*Copsewood Grange today*

*Photo: John Marshall*

Almost hidden away beyond Binley Road is one of Coventry's most impressive mansions, the historic Capsewood Grange.

Originally built in 1872 for ribbon manufacturer James Hart, the house later became the centrepiece of the Peel-Connor

Telephone Works (GEC) and the extensive grounds became the site of a massive factory, employing thousands of Coventry workers.

These days the workers have long since gone but Capsewood Grange still remains - transformed in recent years into a very distinctive set of apartments.

The continued existence of Capsewood Grange is due in no small part to the sterling efforts of the Coventry Society which tirelessly campaigned to save the building after years of neglect, vandalism and arson. It's a tribute to those efforts that the mansion still stands and has been given a new lease of life.

The first owner of the building, James Hart, appears to have been particularly unfortunate because his acquisition of the site coincided with a sharp decline in the ribbon trade. His large factory, Victoria Mills, and his newly constructed home, Capsewood Grange, became known as "Hart's Folly".

By 1879, only seven years after construction, the house was sold to Richard Moon, managing director of the London and North Western Railway. The estate at this time

covered more than 200 acres and even included the site of the old Biggin Hall. It is said that Moon bought the house because it overlooked the railway line and this allowed him to check if the trains were running on time. A stern disciplinarian, he gained a reputation for instilling a sense of fear into staff who could be summarily dismissed if they stepped out of line.

But he did make a contribution to the local community in Stoke, laying a foundation stone for a new vicarage and donating cash for a new pulpit at Stoke Church. He also gave a donation to the National School at Stoke Green.

Sir Richard, who was created a baronet at the time of Queen Victoria's Jubilee in 1897, died at the Grange in November 1899 and was buried at St Bartholomew's Church in Binley. ...continued on page 4



*Before restoration*

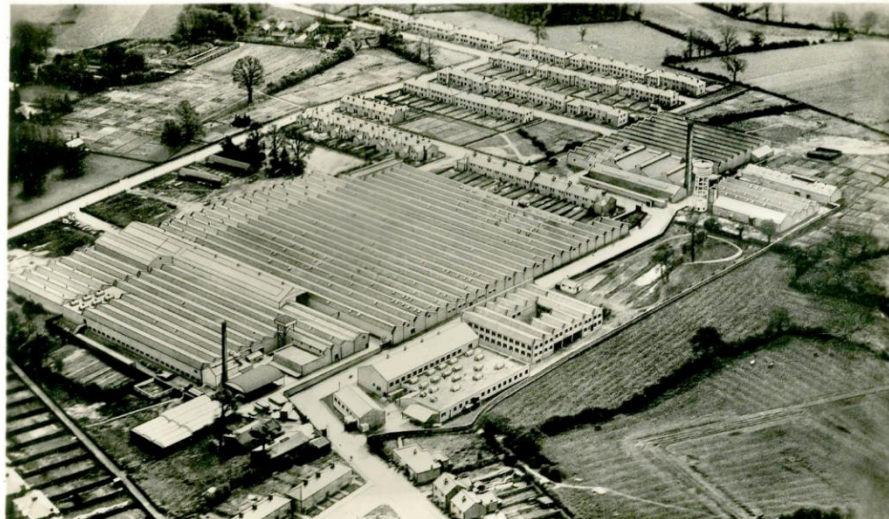
*Photo: Coventry Society*

After Sir Richard's demise, the ownership of Copswood Grange passed to a Mrs Mellodew who lived at the house with her two daughters, Florence and Brenda. The Mellodew ladies were benefactors within the local community and are known to have helped with the cost of the Parish Rooms - built in Bray's Lane in 1908 - and a local road is named in their honour.

But by 1916 a great change was underway as Copswood Grange became the property of the Peel-Connor Telephone Works, a subsidiary of GEC.

The company was keen to transfer its business from Salford to Coventry and initially acquired ten acres of land for a factory producing magnetos.

By 1920 the rest of the Copswood estate had been purchased (136 acres) and building work began on a vast new factory for the



*The huge Telephone Works at the Copswood Estate, 1926*

production of telephones and telephone equipment. The complex also included offices, a canteen and a ballroom. Such was the scale of the enterprise that the company even built houses for its employees, with new streets neatly reflecting the social hierarchy of the factory: Copswood Terrace for executives, Second Avenue for superintendents and First Avenue for artisans. The Grange itself became a company guest house and social club, also serving as a club house for the adjoining Grange Golf Club.

As early as 1923 the factory was also producing radios and the Copswood site was renamed the GEC Radio and Telephone Works.



*Copswood Lodge, built in 1870 and now restored.*

*Photo: John Marshall*

GEC went on to become Coventry's largest industrial employer, producing a wide range of telecommunications equipment, and by 1967 it employed around 18,000 people in several factories spread around the city.

The expansion went hand-in-hand with a series of takeovers and mergers, bringing together a number of companies in the telecommunications business.

In 1998 the Copswood estate was

renamed New Century Park, and in the following year the parent company GEC became known as Marconi plc. By 2009 the company, now owned by Ericsson, moved off the site to Ansty and large-scale demolition of the remaining Copswood buildings commenced.

The area is now a pleasant housing estate and the only reminder of the old days is Copswood Grange itself and the old Lodge on Binley Road. □