

Stoke Local History Group

Newsletter May 2021

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As we welcome the world. We look at Coventry's influence on global music in Music City, Coventry.

GHOST TOWN 2 HOST TOWN

Explore Coventry's recent past and bright future - All wrapped up in an iconic song

CELEBRATING 40 YEARS OF GHOST TOWN

THE SPECIALS

Ride in the actual Ghost Town Car

Hear how Cov Kid Pete Chambers has lived the Coventry "Stereotype"

Admission: Adults £4.00. Concessions (Students, Seniors and People of Determination) £2.00 Children* £1.00
*between 5 and 15

74-80 Walsgrave Rd
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THE COVENTRY MUSIC MUSEUM

Coventry's year as City of Culture is at last underway and part of the celebrations will highlight the city's unique role in musical history.

Here in Stoke an exhibition at Coventry Music Museum, in Walsgrave Road, will track the city's journey from boom town in the post-Second World War years to the decline of manufacturing industry in the Ghost Town period. And It will also celebrate the resurgence of the city as host town for City of Culture.

Entitled 'Ghost Town 2 Host Town', the exhibition opens from May 20th and promises to include a look at Coventry's impact on the global music scene.

Curator Pete Chambers has said: "We hope 2021 will be our time to show the world just how amazing Coventry is as a place of music, from Delia Derbyshire and producer Tony Clarke to the 2-Tone movement and Pete Waterman who has sold over 500 million

records. I believe that this is our best ever exhibition, one that celebrates a Coventry musical icon in Ghost Town and looks at our future as an international City of Culture."

Also featured in the City of Culture events is a major national exhibition at the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, entitled '2-Tone: Lives & Legacies' which will examine the impact of 2-Tone on the nation's music, fashion, politics and culture.

The museum says: "The 2-Tone sound originated in Coventry's thriving music scene of the 1970s and the name derives from the legendary 2-Tone record label founded in 1979 by Jerry Dammers of The Specials, referencing a desire to transcend and defuse racial tensions in Britain at that time."

The Herbert exhibition has been organised in partnership with Coventry Music Museum and will highlight the bands that were part of the label, focussing on The Specials, The Selector and other ska-influenced bands such as Madness, The Beat and The Bodysnatchers. There will be special 2-Tone playlists and an area for visitors to leave their own memories, thoughts and highlights of the 2-Tone era. The exhibition runs from May 28th to September 12th. Booking is required.



Starley Gardens unveiled in city centre

Coventry's history continues to evolve and today's city centre is changing rapidly, with one of the most eye-popping changes being the construction of Starley Gardens in Cox Street - unveiled this month by Lord Mayor Ann Lucas.

This stunning open space replaces the former James Starley Building which once occupied almost the entire length of Cox Street.

Starley Gardens – named, like its predecessor, after famous bicycle pioneer James Starley – is part of a wider project by Coventry University to open up the entire area with green spaces and walkways, ultimately linking new university buildings to vistas of the Cathedral.



Starley Gardens, with The Hub on the left and the distinctive Fairfax Street residences in the middle distance.

Photo: John Marshall

The university describes Starley Gardens as “a striking open-air urban space” that will help the city to look its best ahead of its “well-deserved time in the national limelight as the UK’s City of Culture 2021.” Starley Gardens, says the university, will have the capacity to host a variety of cultural events all year round, bringing activity

and excitement to the campus, while helping to improve the social wellbeing and health of staff, students and the local community.

Future plans will see the university demolish the Alan Berry Building, opposite the Cathedral, enabling new landscaping and an uninterrupted view of Coventry Cathedral from the university’s Arts and Humanities facilities on the other side of Cox Street, which are currently being redeveloped.

James Starley – bicycle pioneer

James Starley is often described as the ‘father of the bicycle’ and his influence in Coventry was significant and far-reaching, creating the foundations for a major bicycle industry. The inventive Starley came to Coventry with his business partner Josiah Turner in 1861 to produce sewing machines. But the business changed dramatically when Turner’s nephew turned up in Coventry with a French-made velocipede. Starley made significant improvements to the machine and in 1871 he designed the Ariel, said to be the first true bicycle. Two of his inventions revolutionised this form of transport – the tangential spoke for bicycle wheels and the differential gear. Starley died in 1881 and is buried in London Road Cemetery. In 1885 his nephew John Kemp Starley designed the Rover Safety Cycle, a chain-driven machine with two wheels of the same size which is still the basis of bicycle design today.



Carriageway gatehouse gives insight into funeral rituals of the past



The restored carriageway gatehouse, viewed from inside the cemetery, looking out to London Road. Photos: John Marshall

THE recent restoration of the impressive carriageway gatehouse at London Road Cemetery - previously hidden behind a brick wall and largely ignored since the Second World War - has prompted some intriguing questions about its precise purpose. And that, in turn, has raised some questions about the rituals associated with a funeral procession at London Road when the cemetery was first designed. (See last month's newsletter for an overview of the cemetery restoration).



Prospect Tower (left), beside the cemetery's new wooden gates which are thought to be more in keeping with the cemetery's original design

Imagine, if you will, a funeral procession taking place in the mid-19th century. The city of Coventry, at that time, was still largely confined to the area within the old city walls, and London Road Cemetery was definitely on the outskirts.

It seems likely that Prospect Tower, which sits beside the main road and next to the cemetery's front gates, would have been used as a lookout post so that staff at the cemetery could glance back towards the city to view the approaching funeral cortege.

In those days, before motor cars, the procession would have been led by a horse-drawn carriage which would make its way, not to the front entrance but to the carriageway gatehouse, located further along London Road. This would

give access to a specially created tunnel under Paxton’s raised promenade – a distinctive feature of the cemetery’s original design.

Ian Woolley, chair of the Friends of London Road Cemetery group, takes up the story: “The protocol on these occasions was that once the bell had been rung in the Prospect Tower, making the workers aware of the approaching procession, a bier (a hand-drawn cart) would be brought from the Carriage House that is set in the inner part of the wall, and taken to meet the hearse at the entrance tunnel. The hearse... would stop on the London Road and the coffin would be removed. The hearse was not allowed in the cemetery at the time and it is unclear why this was so. It is possible that there was concern that the overhanging trees might be damaged by the horses and hearse. Alternatively, there may have been concern over the pathways being spoiled by horse droppings. This was, after all, a place also designed to be used as a park.”



Revealed at last: the old gated entrance tunnel is now visible again from London Road



The restored Bier Store, with new balustrades above. Below right: the Non-conformist Chapel, awaiting restoration.

In 1871 a mortuary was built next to the tunnel, under the terrace, but the exact reason why this was needed remains a mystery. But many years later it acquired a new purpose, as Ian Woolley explains: “During the Second World War it was combined with the tunnel and converted into a public air raid shelter. It is also said the mortuary was used for its

original purpose after the Blitz of November 1940.”

After the war, the tunnel and mortuary remained bricked-up until the recent restoration. The nearby Bier Store has also been restored, as have some of the balustrades on the upper terrace. A number of monuments have been restored too, and the Paxton Memorial has been deep-cleaned and repaired.

One of the next big steps will be the restoration of the Non-conformist Chapel, which the Historic Coventry Trust plans to restore and convert into office space.

- Quotations from Ian Woolley are taken from his invaluable book *A Victorian Resting Place for a Growing Industrial City: Coventry’s London Road Cemetery* (2015)

