

Stoke Local History Group

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Coventry in the Spotlight: City of Culture

With the start of City of Culture, the national spotlight has fallen on Coventry and the city is doing its best, in still difficult times, to look spick and span for a year-long calendar of activities.

Anyone entering the city centre now, after a long gap, is bound to notice a range of significant changes, some of which are not yet complete.



Photos: John Marshall



The most striking change has occurred in the Precinct area which is still having the final touches applied. This area, originally designed by City Architect Donald Gibson and the centrepiece of post-war reconstruction, has been the subject of a sometimes controversial rejuvenation project which has sought to retain the original layout but refresh the area with new landscaping, paving and water features.

Much of the work here has involved the removal of later additions to the Precinct, which often caused clutter and were unpopular and unsightly. Perhaps the most significant recent change has seen the removal of Ernest Jones, the jeweller's shop, previously lodged under a ramp and bridge, all now gone, and which once blocked the vista between Broadgate and the Precinct. This opening-up of the area has also been assisted by the earlier removal of the hideous green escalator. Elsewhere, the prior pedestrianisation of Broadgate and the removal of the Nationwide Building Society from the top of Hertford Street – allowing the old restaurant bridge to be opened up again - has re-established the link between Hertford Street and Broadgate. And the reinvention of Cathedral Lanes as a vibrant restaurant quarter has surprised even the most sceptical Coventrians.

More recently, Hertford Street has had a colourful new makeover, and artwork can also now be seen in areas such as Bayley Lane and Pool Meadow.

There is also an extensive range of on-going projects to protect the city's most important heritage sites, something that would not have seemed possible only ten years ago. We'll learn more about these in future meetings or newsletters. For the moment, a report on page 2 gives a brief glimpse. □

Coventry on the BBC

Ramblings with Clare Balding: Urban Amblings in Cultural Coventry (first broadcast on BBC Radio 4, June 10th 2021, now available to listen on BBC Sounds)



Ian Harrabin walks along a proposed nature walkway between Charterhouse and Gosford Green with presenter Clare Balding.

Photo: BBC

This episode of Clare Balding's popular radio ramblings programme makes a rare excursion into an urban landscape to discover what's going on in Coventry.

Made as part of the BBC's contribution to the City of Culture celebrations, Clare takes a fascinating wander through the city with Ian Harrabin,

chair of the Historic Coventry Trust, who guides her through a richly historic route, explaining several projects which aim to preserve some of the most interesting but little-known parts of the city.

The walk begins at Naul's Mill Park in Coundon where Ian describes the work taking place to enhance the old mill pond, later a model boating lake, and to link the park to the city centre with a new green urban walkway.

They then walk through the city centre, stopping off at various points such as Bond's Hospital, the Precinct and the Cathedral, before emerging at London Road Cemetery where Ian explains the national significance of this marvellous cemetery, designed in the 1840s by Joseph Paxton. Clare is taken through the newly-opened carriageway gatehouse to London Road, and across the busy road to Charterhouse, the site of a rare Carthusian monastery.

The priory, says Ian, was founded in 1385 by King Richard II and after the dissolution became a private residence. The surviving buildings are currently being restored.

From here, the urban ramblers walk beside the River Sherbourne where they glance up at Robert Stephenson's magnificent but partly hidden viaduct. The Trust hopes to unclutter the viaduct and make it more visible, says Ian.

Finally, Clare clammers up an embankment to a disused rail line, the old Loop Line, which Ian explains will become a nature walkway and cycle path, linking Charterhouse to Gosford Green - scene of a famous duel in 1398 presided over by Richard II and ultimately leading to the War of the Roses.

A relaxed, informal, fascinating and enchanting piece of radio.



Photo: BBC

Another programme not-to-be-missed is a television film about the history of Coventry's most famous cars, told by local lad Mark Evans. The programme, **Classic British Cars: Made in Coventry**, was first broadcast on May 17th and is now available on BBC iPlayer. It describes some iconic Coventry cars, including the Daimler, the Triumph, the Riley and the Jaguar, and features interviews with some of the most interesting characters in the business.

More Coventry on the BBC

Coventry Cathedral: Building for a New Britain (first shown on BBC Four, June 9th 2021, now available to view on BBC iPlayer for the next 11 months)



Coventry Cathedral is recognised today as one of Britain's greatest post-war buildings and a key element of the post-war reconstruction of the city. Using a wealth of rarely-seen archive film, together with voices from yesterday and today, a new documentary **Coventry Cathedral: Building for a New Britain** tells the unique story of the rebuilding of the cathedral following its destruction in 1940. Narrated by Pauline Black, lead singer of the iconic

Coventry band the Selecter, and presented as part of the BBC's programming around Coventry City of Culture 2021, the documentary shows how architect Basil Spence created a new cathedral beside the ruins of the old.

Importantly, the film also puts the new cathedral into its wider context, showing how it was just one element of the celebrated post-war reconstruction of Coventry, and part of an architectural movement that came to be known as the "Festival of Britain" style.

The hour-and-a-quarter documentary is by filmmaker John Wyver.

The documentary explains how Rev Richard Howard, Provost of Coventry Cathedral, made an immediate commitment to rebuild after German bombers reduced the cathedral to rubble in November 1940.

In 1951 Basil Spence won a competition to design a new building, which he constructed in a bold modern style,



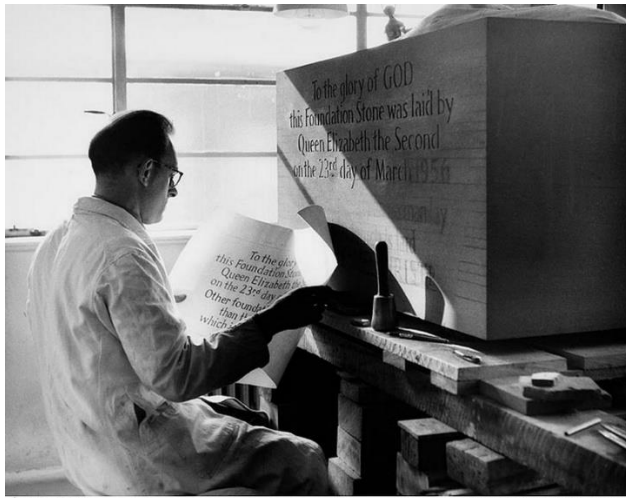
Crowds gather to watch the foundation stone laying ceremony in March 1956

adorned with a wealth of modern artworks. The cathedral contains works of art commissioned from some of the major artists of the day, such as Graham Sutherland, who designed the vast tapestry, John Piper and Patrick Reyntiens who created the multi-coloured window for the Baptistry, and John Hutton whose carved angels and saints cover a huge glass screen at the main entrance, linking the new cathedral to the ruins of the old.

Despite a shortage of funds and some major architectural challenges, the new building was completed and consecrated in the presence of Queen Elizabeth II in May 1962. It has since become one of the most prized modern buildings in Britain.

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Although some viewers might be irritated by an occasional blasé comment in the film, the presence of some extraordinary archive footage makes up for any misgivings.



jjp01_01_025_16 SOURCE: Historic England Archive

Letter carver and sculptor Ralph Beyer carving the foundation stone. Beyer (1921-2008) also carved the inscriptions along the walls of the cathedral nave

architect and filmmaker who was commissioned to document the construction work, was brought to our attention thanks to one of the Ghost Town screenings.

“The footage, which had been sitting in an attic until a family member who attended one of our events in December 2018 brought it to our attention, has been used to wonderful effect in John Wyver’s film to bring the story of the cathedral’s building to life.”

Some of this archive footage emerged out of a project led by Professor Helen Wheatley of Warwick University who acted as a consultant for the new film.

Professor Wheatley said: “The collaboration grew out of our project ***Ghost Town: Civic Television and the Haunting of Coventry*** which sees us working with media archivists to bring programmes made in and about Coventry back to the city.” It was thanks to screenings of programmes in the cathedral as part of Ghost Town that previously unseen material on the rebuilding of the cathedral came to light.

“I’m particularly delighted,” Professor Wheatley added, “that the wonderful colour cinematography of Barnard Reyner, a local

Research by Louise Campbell of Warwick University provides some essential historical commentary for the film but the real gems are the bits of archive footage showing interviews with Basil Spence and his contemporaries. Commenting on the programme, Professor Campbell said: *“I hope that the programme will convey the enormous significance of the cathedral as the premier project of Britain’s post-war reconstruction, and Spence’s extraordinary skill in designing a building which supplied a reassuring link between past and present.”*



Coventry Cathedral today: one of the most celebrated buildings of modern Britain. Photo: John Marshall

□ Thanks to Warwick University press office for some of the information used in this report. Old photographs from Historic England Archive, with thanks also to the Coventry Telegraph.



Photo: BBC

Two other programmes worth a mention are **Antiques Roadshow**, **World War II – The Aftermath**, in which Fiona Bruce (pictured left) visits the ruins of Coventry Cathedral to hear stories about the desire to rebuild and reconcile in the aftermath of World War II, and one of the two episodes of **Antiques Roadshow** from **Kenilworth Castle**, first broadcast back in March and featuring the excellent Pauline Black on Coventry, plus a story of how Coventry car manufacturer John Siddeley saved Kenilworth Castle. These

and other programmes are available on BBC iPlayer. Search online ‘BBC Coventry UK City of Culture’ for details.