

Stoke Local History Group

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New plans submitted to Coventry City Council's Planning Committee could see the River Sherbourne uncovered as part of a new £1.9m scheme on Palmer Lane.

The plans, if approved, would see more of the river uncovered and a new public space created with steps down to the river, green landscaping, improvements to biodiversity from new planting, and installation of art and new lighting.

The Palmer Lane project is a partnership between Coventry City Council and Historic Coventry Trust and forms part of the wider High Street Heritage Action Zone. Funding of

£2m from Historic England has already helped to regenerate the Burges and Hales Street and the proposals for Palmer Lane are the next step.

Palmer Lane's history dates back as far as 1225 and is thought to be where pilgrims lodged when visiting St Mary's Priory. The 'Palmer' name comes from the palms (Christian symbols) that pilgrims once carried.

Carol Pyrah, Executive Director of Historic Coventry Trust said: *"The River Sherbourne has a special place in the hearts and imagination of Coventry people and this scheme is an opportunity to experience the river right in the heart of the city. Palmer Lane is a forgotten backland which we want to bring back to life."*

Revised plans have been submitted to build student residences on the site of the former Paris Cinema in Far Gosford Street.

The site, more recently home to the Empire music venue, is currently vacant but earlier plans for redevelopment were withdrawn after concerns were expressed about the overbearing character of the proposed student blocks and the lack of respect for the historic character of the area.

The new plans, submitted on behalf of the Beauford Group, slightly reduces the bulk of the scheme (illustrated in the image on the right). It also retains and improves the existing façade of the Empire, in what is seen as a nod to the heritage of the site.



The original cinema here was the Crown, which opened in 1912. It closed for modernisation in 1957 and when it reopened in 1958 was renamed the Paris Luxury Continental Cinema, later shortened to the Paris. The grand frontage of the original building has long since been lost and the old cinema lay derelict for a number of years after its closure in 1981. It reopened in 1999 as Riley's American Pool & Snooker Club, before being revived again as the highly successful Empire, which has now moved to Hertford Street.

Stoke Community Fun Day

Stoke Local History Group, in partnership with Stoke Library, will have a stall at this year's Stoke Community Fun Day, which takes place on Stoke Green Park on Sunday 29th August, from 12.30-4.30pm. Members are invited to visit the stall and meet other members of the group in an informal open-air setting. Lots of other stalls and activities will be available, including the council's Bands in the Park event from 2.00-3.30pm.



An old mosaic pub sign from the former White Lion Hotel in pre-war Smithford Street, discovered during refurbishment works in the Precinct, now has a new home. The tiled entrance sign has become part of the new Precinct landscaping, sitting within a planted border near Marks & Spencer.

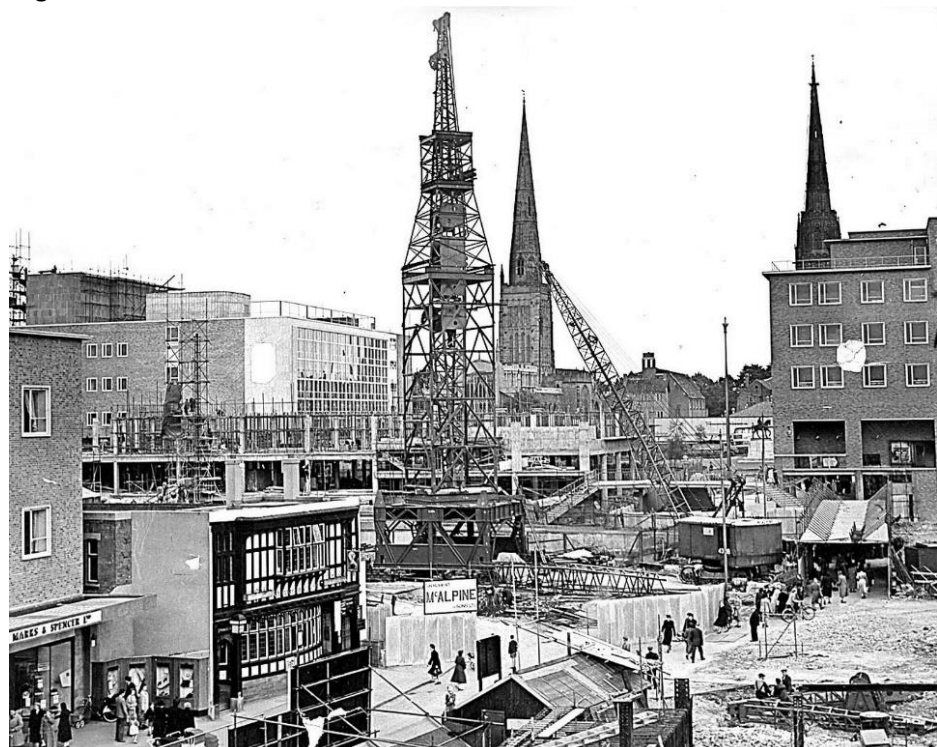
The White Lion was a feature of Smithford Street for many years, though the pub was much altered during its

The cleaned and restored mosaic entrance sign to the old White Lion, now at home in the refurbished Upper Precinct, close to its original location. Photo: John Marshall

lifetime. Its final form, a mock-Tudor style, is thought to date from 1921. But the old mosaic pub sign is said to be earlier, dating from the 1870s to the 1890s.

Much of Smithford Street was destroyed in the Blitz and although the White Lion survived, its upper storey was lost. The pub was finally demolished in 1955, the last surviving building from the old central shopping street.

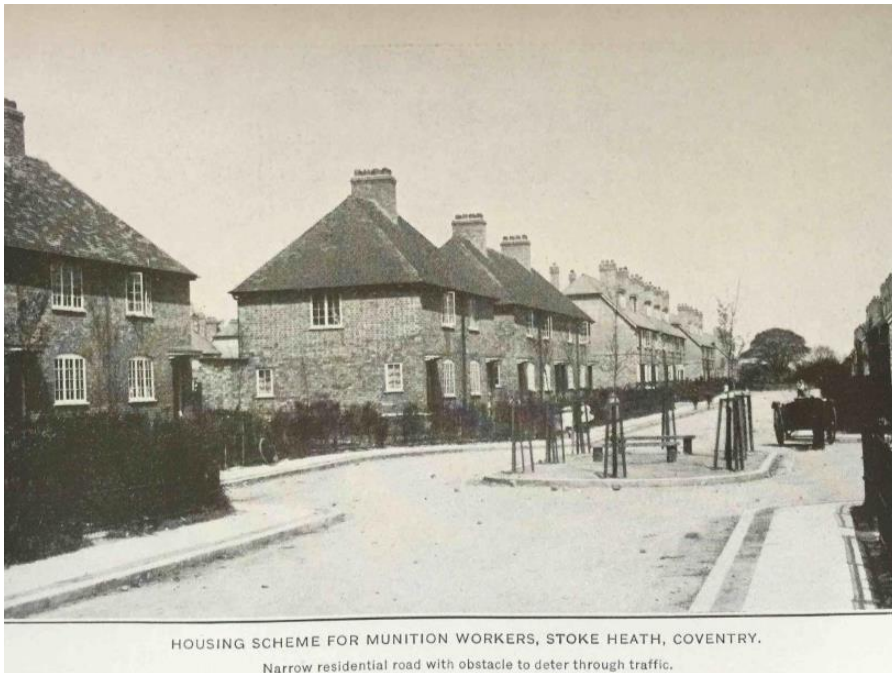
The White Lion is of particular interest to historians of Stoke because it was the place where Joseph Levi, a local businessman, formed the Coventry Philanthropic



The White Lion (above) was the last building remaining from the old Smithford Street and is surrounded here by the construction site for the 1950s Upper Precinct. The top storey of the pub was lost in the Blitz. Photo: Coventry Telegraph

Institution in 1854. The group's major aim was to alleviate poverty in the city which was particularly harsh during the economic slump of the 1860s. Several areas, including Stoke, were badly affected. Other philanthropic groups followed, and their work was commemorated by the Joseph Levi Clock, first erected on Stoke Green in 1934 and magnificently refurbished by the local community in 2016. □

Stoke Heath – a new suburb for war workers



HOUSING SCHEME FOR MUNITION WORKERS, STOKE HEATH, COVENTRY.
Narrow residential road with obstacle to deter through traffic.

During the First World War, Coventry sent thousands of young men to war and many did not return. It is estimated that some 35,000 men were enlisted from the city, with official figures suggesting that 2,600 were killed in action - almost certainly an underestimate. But whilst the battles raged in Europe, enormous efforts were also being made at home and Coventry became a major centre for wartime armaments production, becoming a boom city in the process.

Stoke Heath estate, above, 1917, built for munition workers



Heath Crescent, 1919

Months. New suburbs grew up like mushrooms, thousands of strangers of both sexes flocked to Coventry from all parts of England in answer to the call for munition workers."

Munition workers in the factories, often girls and women, were drawn from all over the country. In 1911 the city had a population of 106,000 but war workers would swell this to 170,000 at the height of the conflict. David McGrory, in his book *Coventry and the Great War*, quotes Coventry's *Official Handbook*, written just after the war:

"It is safe to say that no English city was so completely absorbed in munitions production as was Coventry... It was not merely a question of adaptability of existing facilities. New factories sprang up in such numbers and on such a scale as to change the whole face of the city in the matter of a few



A giant naval gun barrel is taken by rail across Stoney Stanton Road from the Ordnance Works factory on the right, 1912

It should be added that workers flocked not just from other parts of England but from Ireland, Scotland and Wales too.

One of the new suburbs to emerge during this process was Stoke Heath, which saw the transformation of common land into a carefully planned housing estate – specifically designed for workers at the nearby Royal Ordnance Works which dominated a large area around Red Lane and Stoney Stanton Road.

Unlike some parts of the city, where war workers relied on cheap lodgings or temporary huts and hostels, some workers at the Ordnance Works benefitted from permanent purpose-built housing.

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The Coventry Ordnance Works had been established in 1905 by a consortium of shipbuilders. It quickly expanded to become a major supplier of naval guns and claimed to be one of the largest factories of its type in Europe. The First World War led to a greater range of products being produced, from the famous 15-inch naval gun barrels to small Howitzer field guns. The company also produced torpedoes, bombs and shells.

Massive guns for Royal Navy warships were moved to the main rail line by a light railway system. Local people became accustomed to the sight of these huge guns being taken by rail

across Stoney Stanton Road, through Webster's Brick Works, past Courtaulds and onto the main line at Lockhurst Lane.

The company is said to have employed almost 3,000 women and over 6,000 men, many of the men being excused military service because of the importance of the work they were doing.

The Stoke Heath Housing Scheme, a Coventry Corporation project backed by the government, was one way of dealing with the enormous challenge of accommodating so many workers. The initial plan was to build 599 dwelling houses and ten shops, with space allocated for a school, church and allotments.

Houses were designed to have ample space, modern facilities and good-size gardens, front and back. The layout of the estate was also carefully considered, with generous green spaces, a large crescent and even traffic-calming measures, as seen in the first photograph on the previous page.



Stoke Heath rent strikers at Pool Meadow, January 1919



Discharged soldiers and sailors at tea, Stoke Heath Peace Celebrations, August 1919. All photos courtesy of David Fry

about high rents and the poor quality of the houses on the showpiece new Stoke Heath estate. By the end of the year a series of mass public gatherings had turned into a rent strike, and even though the council reduced rents by more than a shilling a week and launched an enquiry into shoddy building work, there were threats of another strike if a school was not built to serve the area."

But these complaints did not deter another form of solidarity when community celebrations finally took place in Stoke Heath to mark the end of war, as our photograph on this page shows. □

It was all a far cry from the monotonous rows of simple terraced streets that tended to predominate in older parts of Stoke. But the final quality of the houses never really reached the high expectations of planners.

Construction workers had been drafted into Coventry to build the scheme and the standard of work was sometimes below par. So much so that towards the end of the war, in 1918, local unrest at Stoke Heath led to a rent strike. Peter Walters, in his book *Coventry: Remembering 1914-18*, explains:

"In May 1918, the city council was compelled to meet in special session to discuss residents' complaints