

# Stoke Local History Group

Newsletter September 2021

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**ACTOR and comedian Hugh Dennis caused a stir in Stoke last month when he turned up at Biggin Hall Crescent and asked residents if he could dig a hole in their gardens.**

The television performer was joined by a team of archaeologists who were filming an episode of *The Great British Dig: History in Your Back Garden*. It appears that the team were looking for remains of the medieval Biggin Hall, which is thought to date back to the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

It is often assumed that all traces of the original buildings were long-lost and that any remaining fragments would not have survived after the area was cleared for housing.

Our exclusive photograph (right) shows the dig in progress, after which some of the findings went on display at the Coventry and North Warwickshire Sports Club.

We are told that archaeologists in the team, led by an expert from York University, will now be compiling a report about the dig. An episode of the programme is expected, but no date is known for the broadcast.

The series, produced by Strawberry Blond TV and commissioned by Channel 4, began earlier this year and aims to unearth the hidden history buried beneath our lawns and flower beds.

Hugh Dennis has said: "The Great British Dig is a fantastic format which combines finding out about the history of where you live and the surprising things that lie under your own back garden. It's kind of a community archaeology project."



Previous programmes have featured garden digs in Newcastle (C4 photo, left), looking for the remains of a Roman fort, and a dig in the gardens of Masham, North Yorkshire, where the team were searching for a hidden Viking burial ground.

These days the only visible reminders of the old Biggin Hall are the street name, Biggin Hall Crescent, and the nearby pub, the Biggin Hall Hotel. □

● **For a brief historical overview of Biggin Hall, and the pub named in its honour, see articles on pages 3-4.**

LAST month's Stoke Community Fun Day at Stoke Green Park allowed members of the history group to meet up for the first time since the pandemic lockdown. Our stall in the park, run in conjunction with Stoke Library, provided an ideal outdoor space for informal social gatherings. And it also allowed newcomers to learn more about the group and to browse through our ever-popular old photographs of Stoke. We were also able to publicise the library's invaluable collection of local history books. Corrine Spencer, organiser of the Fun Day, hailed its success, which attracted around 200 visitors and raised almost £900. Profits will go to two charities and will also be used for improvements to the local area.



*Photo: John Murray*



THE history group's first formal event since March 2020 will take place on Friday 1<sup>st</sup> October at the city's historic War Memorial Park, which celebrates its 100th anniversary this year. The event, 'A Walk in the Park', will entail a gentle stroll through Coventry's premier park, led by a guide from Friends of the War Memorial Park. An introductory talk by Peter Walters will summarise the history of the park. Full details have been circulated to everyone on the mailing list. **Booking is essential for this event.** Only a few places remain. The final places can be booked by emailing [stokehistorygroup@gmail.com](mailto:stokehistorygroup@gmail.com).

NUMEROUS events have taken place this month to mark Coventry's annual Heritage Open Days. Among the places open for free guided tours was the sometimes forgotten Lychgate Cottages in Priory Row, an historic gem located at the side of the Flying Standard pub.

The Lychgate Cottages are a row of timber-framed cottages dating to around 1415 and are a remarkable survivor of the Dissolution of the Monasteries (1536-41) which led to the destruction of the adjoining St Mary's Priory and Cathedral. It seems clear that the cottages were once part of the priory precinct.

Much of the original structure survives, but by the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century they were in poor condition until purchased and restored by the old Blue Coat School, which occupied the building next door. Victorian extensions to the cottages were added at the same time.

A new restoration project has recently been completed by Historic Coventry Trust which has given the buildings a new lease of life by turning them into impressive holiday cottages.



# Biggin Hall – not just the name of a pub

TO the Stoke folk who enjoy a pint of Marston's Pedigree at the Biggin Hall, it's a fine local pub. But few of the drinkers at the pub with the funny name – why Biggin? – will know that it is associated with history stretching all the way back to the Domesday Book.



*The original Biggin Hall, built in the Middle Ages*

*Picture courtesy of David McGrory*

Biggin, also written as Bigging, is thought to come from a Scandinavian word for habitation or building. And the ancient parish of Stoke was originally made up of two hamlets, Stoke itself, and Bigging. The Domesday Book records that land there was held by someone called

Thorkil who in turn sub-divided it between Wulfric and the more modern-sounding Ralph. Some time in the Middle Ages a large moated house, the original Biggin Hall, was built near what is now the junction of Biggin Hall Crescent and Lindley Road. It may have been the house of the Deyville family in the 13th century, but nothing is known of its occupants until the 17th century when William Partridge, a doctor, lived there. By 1766 it was owned by the drapers' company of Coventry and let to a farmer. Farming stopped there in the early 19th century and in 1817 some excavations were carried out at the site, and traces of an ancient building and a chapel were found. By that time what was left of the hall was used for meetings and by the Sunday school. It was demolished after 1840 and by about 1885 only part of the moat and a cow-shed marked the site.



The Biggin Hall pub was built in 1923, some 430 yards from the original building. And as the area was developed for housing, all traces of hundreds of years of history gradually disappeared. All that's left is the funny name thanks to the pub which, fortunately, is now recognised as special, and not just by its regulars.

Six years ago Historic England awarded it a grade II listing because of its features including its large inglenook fireplace. Listing gives it the protection

that the original hall never had. But will it last for as long? Only time will tell. □

**Charles Barker**

● Information from *The Illustrated History of Coventry's Suburbs* by David McGrory (Breedon Books, 2003 - re-issued in a second edition by DB Publishing, 2018) and *The History of Stoke* by The Rev TA Blyth (1897). This is a slightly updated version of an article first published in *Avenews*, the Stoke Park residents' newsletter, in May 2018.

# A fine example of Brewers' Tudor style

THE Biggin Hall Hotel, named after the medieval Biggin Hall, is a fine example of a new style of urban pub architecture that surfaced in Britain during the inter-war years.

It seems that licensing authorities in the 1920s had grown tired of traditional boozers, with their Victorian and Edwardian reputation for drunkenness and disorder. Something new, more respectable, was required, and brewers were quick to adopt an "improved" style of public house, more fitting for the growth of middle class suburbia.



*The Biggin Hall Hotel today: Grade II listed*

*Photo: John Marshall*

According to English Heritage, these better class public houses were generally more spacious than their predecessors, often with restaurant facilities, function rooms and gardens, and were consciously designed to appeal to families and a mix of social classes.

Their key target, clearly, was the respectable middle class family, rather than the heavy-drinking working man.



33-8.

*Binley Road, Stoke, Coventry.*

*The Biggin Hall Hotel can be seen in the centre of this photograph of Binley Road in 1926.*

*Photo courtesy of Rob Orland*

The Biggin Hall Hotel, opened in 1923, was typical of the new style.

It was designed in 1921 by the architect Thomas Francis Tickner for the brewery Marston, Thompson & Evershed.

Tickner was based in Coventry and designed a number of buildings in the area, including the main Portland stone Memorial in the city's War Memorial Park.

His design for the Biggin was in keeping with the fashionable style of the period, which

became known as "Brewers' Tudor", incorporating as it did an extravagant mock-Tudor grandeur.

"This style reached its height of popularity in the 1920s and 1930s," says English Heritage, and "was intended to evoke romantic notions of a Merrie England and employed half-timbering and internal wooden panelling.

"Although the Biggin Hall Hotel did not provide overnight accommodation, by calling it a hotel, it was considered to have status and respectability, broadening the class of its clientele."

This part of Stoke was growing rapidly during the period, with new housing and nearby industry, particularly the GEC which became a major employer. The Biggin Hall Hotel sat neatly within this newly established suburbia, with its mix of social classes. It had a touch of elegance and a feeling of urban affluence.

Opposite the pub at that time was the Triumph Recreation Ground, which included a cricket pitch, tennis courts and a club house. This area, too, was later developed for housing. □

**John Marshall**