

Stoke Local History Group

Newsletter October 2021

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Next stop: Coventry Music Museum

STOKE Local History Group's next event will be a group visit to the hugely popular Coventry Music Museum on Ball Hill.

The visit is scheduled to take place on Friday 5th November – the usual first Friday of the month – and booking is now open.

The museum, founded by

Coventry Music Museum is on Ball Hill, at the junction with Marlborough Road

local journalist Pete Chambers in 2013, is fast becoming an historic feature of Ball Hill itself, and it shines a light on many chapters of Coventry's musical heritage.

Although much praised for its current exhibition about the city's 2-Tone movement, 'Ghost Town to Host Town', created to coincide with the City of Culture celebrations, the museum also features a host of other Coventry favourites, including Frank Ifield, Vince Hill, Hazel O'Connor, King, Lieutenant Pigeon, and the extraordinary Delia Derbyshire, famous for the Dr Who theme tune.

As might be expected, the 2-Tone material features pioneering groups like The Specials, The Selecter, The Beat and Madness.

This is a good opportunity to visit, but numbers are strictly limited and booking is required. Please be aware that space in the museum is limited and social distancing might be difficult. Anyone attending with the history group is asked to wear a face mask, as they would on a bus or when visiting a busy shop.

An admission charge will apply: the usual entrance fee is £4 but seniors in the group will pay a concessionally fee of just £2, payable at the door.

Book a place by emailing stokehistorygroup@gmail.com

THE BBC recently broadcast a stunning documentary about 2-Tone, the musical phenomenon that exploded out of Coventry in 1979.

Entitled *2-Tone: The Sound of Coventry*, the hour-long documentary dives deep into the history of the 2-Tone movement and features a rare interview with 2-Tone founder Jerry Dammers, as well as interviews with prominent characters such as Neville Staple, Pauline Black, Neol Davies and music mogul Pete Waterman. It's a gripping watch, and contains a fascinating insight into the social history of the period. It also contains some impressive visual images of Coventry. The programme is available now on BBCiPlayer. It was broadcast last month only in the West Midlands but will be shown nationwide on BBC 2 at a later date. The film was commissioned by BBC England and was a co-production between Coventry UK City of Culture Trust and Full Fat Television.

A street named after Siegfried Bettmann

PEOPLE sometimes ask if a street has ever been named after Stoke's most famous former resident, Siegfried Bettmann, the founder of the Triumph company in Coventry who lived at Elm Bank in Stoke Park from 1905 until his death in 1951.

The answer is that a small street in Cheylesmore was named after Bettmann when it was constructed during the post-war period.

According to Margaret Smedley, author of *The Meaning of the Street Names of Coventry*, the decision to name a street after Bettmann, a former Mayor of Coventry, was taken at a meeting in 1953, though the style of houses in this tiny street suggest it was a 1960s development.

This well-deserved tribute to Bettmann might seem a little overshadowed by an apparent misspelling of his name, but the honour was no doubt well intended.



A small street in Cheylesmore.

All photos: John Marshall



Other reminders of Bettmann's life and work can be found elsewhere in Coventry, including his old house Elm Bank which had a blue plaque attached by the Coventry Society in 2015.

There's also an interesting monument in London Road Cemetery, commissioned by Bettmann himself, to honour 68 Triumph workers who perished during the First World War. The monument (pictured left) was unveiled by Bettmann in March 1921 and it stands in a prominent position on the terrace above the carriageway gatehouse. The inscription on the monument reads: "Erected in the memory of our comrades who gave their lives for liberty in the Great War 1914-1918 by the staff and employees of the Triumph and Gloria companies."



Visitors to Canley Cemetery and Crematorium might also be aware of a statue in the pond (pictured right), located within the Gardens of Remembrance, with a nearby plaque which simply says that it's a gift from Siegfried Bettmann and his wife Annie. If anyone knows more about this statue, or the Cheylesmore street name, please let us know. □

A place for rest, recreation and remembrance: the War Memorial Park



The Grove, circa 1920, where the Leamington Road and Kenilworth Road divide. This site would later become the main entrance to the new War Memorial Park. The old Toll House is on the right. Photo courtesy of David Fry

In July this year, Coventry's War Memorial Park was meant to celebrate its 100th anniversary. The coronavirus pandemic prevented major events, but plans are in hand to stage a delayed birthday bash next year.

Peter Walters tells the story of the city's premier public park.

ON 4 December 1919, the Mayor of Coventry, Councillor Joseph Innis Bates, formally launched a public subscription appeal to create a new park for the city.

Earlier in the year a town meeting had been convened to decide how Coventry was going to remember the 2,600 men it had lost in the Great War – and the idea of a memorial park was born.

The site identified was roughly 120 acres of open farmland running alongside the old road to Kenilworth. It was described as a 'well-wooded and beautiful piece of land', just outside the city boundary but close to what were already many Coventrians' favourite country walks.

Another sixty-two acres of ancient woodland, known as Stivichall Common and flanking the farmland on two sides, was to be incorporated, with full public rights to it restored.

The main area of the new park would be taken up with playing fields, with space too for flower and agricultural shows and for meetings. There would be children's playgrounds and formal gardens for older folk, and an open air bath, if funds permitted. Old cattle ponds in the fields would be turned into a rock garden.

The owner of the land, and the manorial rights, the Hon. Alexander Frederick Gregory of nearby Stivichall Hall, agreed to give the city council first option on purchasing it for £31,000, and it was estimated that it might cost another £19,000 to fence, drain and lay out the park, taking the total cost to £50,000.

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Gregory himself had pledged to return £2,000 of the purchase price as a donation, and by 23 December 1919, the deadline for the council's option, the Mayor's subscription appeal had raised the initial £31,000 and

preparations could begin for a grand opening ceremony, to be held on Saturday, 9 July 1921.



Opening day celebrations, 1921. Photo: Coventry Culture Trust/Coventry Archives, reprinted with permission

IT was estimated that on a blazingly hot afternoon more than 20,000 people were there to witness the opening ceremony, performed by that year's Mayor, Councillor William Grant, and the Bishop of Coventry, Huyshe Yeatman-Biggs. More than 3,000 children took part in a choral concert, there was folk dancing, relay races for youngsters, a physical culture display and that evening, dancing to the Vauxhall Brass Band from Foleshill.

The following year the path layout was agreed and the railway boundary fenced and in 1923 it was determined that the main entrance should be at The Grove, where the Kenilworth and Leamington Roads divided. Its ornamental gates should be mounted on pillars of stone from the medieval city wall.

By the same year around 450 copper beech trees had been planted to commemorate the fallen. Relatives of the dead could purchase a tree and a suitably inscribed plaque at a cost of a pound and five shillings each, a not inconsiderable sum for many families at the time.

In 1924 another public appeal raised a further £5,000

and a competition was launched to find a design for the war memorial. It was won by a Coventry architect, Thomas Francis Tickner, who died shortly afterwards, and it wasn't until 1927 that work began on the memorial, an 87-foot high art deco design in concrete, faced with Portland stone. A workforce of around 60 unemployed men built it, under the direction of prominent Coventry builder John Gray.

THE memorial, with a Chamber of Silence inside it to house the Roll of the Fallen, was dedicated on 8 October 1927 by Field Marshall Earl Haig, in the presence of Arthur Hutt, Coventry's only winner of the Victoria Cross, and Mrs Eliza Bench from Foleshill, who had sacrificed four sons to the war.

By then, many of the other features of the park – tennis courts and bowling greens, the rock garden and a basic infrastructure of pitches and changing facilities – were in place.

In 1928 a boundary extension formally added the memorial park and its immediate surroundings to the city of Coventry and as the new decade began, the pace of park development began to accelerate.



Unveiling the War Memorial, 1927. Earl Haig and Mayor Alderman Fred Lee. Photo: Culture Coventry Trust/Coventry Archives

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The creation of a small golf and putting course on land by the railway line in 1930 was followed by a rose garden the following year. By 1935 the park could boast a range of pavilions and shelters and an aviary, built near a small car park on the Leamington Road.

In June 1935 the new pavilions were in use for the first Coventry Carnival to be staged in the park.

Wartime saw the memorial park conscripted into the war effort. It became a site for anti-aircraft guns and barrage balloons – the concrete mooring points can still be seen close to Coat of Arms Bridge Road.

Its grassy expanses were also dug up to grow food and in the Spring of 1940 demonstration allotments were created to increase knowledge and aid food production, among farmers as well as ordinary citizens.



A busy Pavilion in the 1940s.

Photo: historicoventry.co.uk

THE first significant event of the post-war years took place on 5 October 1947, when in the presence of Field Marshall Viscount Montgomery, the memorial was re-dedicated to include the Fallen of World War Two.

More than 2,000 names were added to the Roll of Honour, of whom 1,085 were civilians, killed by enemy action. A new memorial tree planting scheme, largely at the informal western end of the park, gave families the

opportunity to purchase a tree and a plaque, this time for two pounds and five shillings.

The early 1950s added children's play equipment and a miniature railway to the park's facilities, both close to the main tennis pavilion. But in 1955 ambitious proposals for Winter Gardens and a new restaurant and swimming bath on the Stivichall Common fringe were dropped through lack of funding.

Over the next forty years improvements continued – a new aviary, expanded and modernised play facilities and at the turn of the new century, a skateboard park and state-of-the-art splash and play facilities.

The calendar of events continued to build, from the Donkey Derby and the Caribbean and Diwali festivals to the Godiva Festival, still one of the biggest events of its kind in the UK.

IN 2006, the city council invited regular users of the park to set up a Friends group, which was instrumental in helping the authority to secure £2.8 million refurbishment funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund and The Big Lottery. Completed five years later, the restoration of the park ran to twenty-eight individual cleaning, restoration and building projects. As a result, visitor numbers have soared as the park's qualities have once more come to the fore. In 2013 it was listed Grade II by English Heritage.



A colourful display in the park today. Photo: [John Marshall](#)

With the War Memorial Park having now

reached its centenary, it remains firmly embedded as one of Coventry's chief assets – a sporting arena, childhood playground, entertainment venue and fresh air destination for generations and a lifeline for many thousands in the current pandemic. The future holds rich promise. □



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www.coventrydresdenfriendshipfestival.co.uk/home



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