

Stoke Local History Group

Newsletter November 2021

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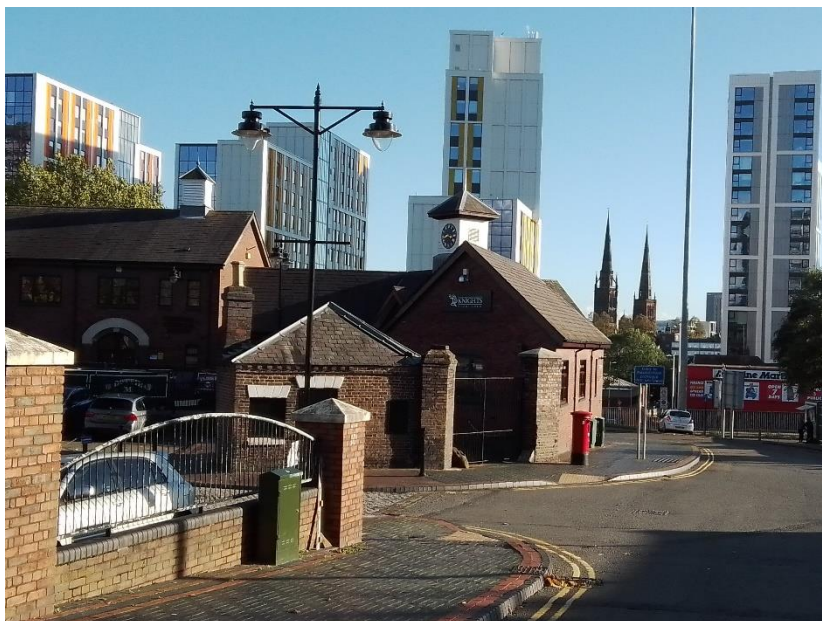
Winter Walk - Canal Basin

MEMBERS and friends of Stoke Local History Group have been invited to take part in a specially arranged **Winter Walk** which will take us around Coventry Canal Basin with specialist tour guide **Phil Tutchings**, who runs the history tour group **"In Godiva's Footsteps"**.

The walk is scheduled to take place on Friday 3rd December – our usual first Friday of the month - and will look at the

history of the canal and the role it played in the industrial development of Coventry. Phil will talk about the history of the surviving buildings and features at the Canal Basin, and will consider the connection between local collieries and the canal network. He will tell us about the role of the canal during the Blitz and will consider the industrial development of the surrounding area, including the old Daimler works.

Our Winter Walk will begin at Playwrights café at the Canal Basin at 10.30am on Friday 3rd December. The tour will last about 75 minutes. A special history group rate of £5 per person is payable for the tour. To ensure safety and comfort along the canal towpaths, numbers are strictly limited to 10 people. Please book your place, as usual, by emailing John Marshall at stokehistorygroup@gmail.com. If there is sufficient demand, an additional tour will be offered at a later date.



Entrance to Canal Basin, showing the old Weighbridge House and other buildings, against a backdrop of the current Coventry skyline. Photo: John Marshall



Drapers Hall – now wonderfully restored after standing empty for 30 years.

Photo: John Marshall

The original splendour of 19th century Drapers Hall has been brought back to life after a major restoration project, managed by Historic Coventry Trust. It will now provide a home for Coventry Music Service and promises to hold regular public concerts and events. The current building was designed in the Regency style and opened in 1832. It is the third Drapers Hall on the site, replacing earlier buildings constructed for the wealthy Drapers Guild. The newly restored Ballroom hosted its first concert this month, a brilliant solo performance by the legendary Tom Robinson, who first came to prominence in the late 1970s with the Tom Robinson Band and songs such as '2-4-6-8 Motorway' and the anthem 'Glad to be Gay'.

Bettmann and the Priory Street Works

LAST month we considered various places in Coventry associated with Siegfried Bettmann, the founder of Triumph and a long-time resident of Stoke Park. This month we turn our attention to a city centre location which probably represents Bettmann's greatest achievement – the successful establishment of a huge motorcycle factory in Priory Street which raised the profile of the company and turned the "Trusty Triumph" into a famous household name.

These days the site is marked only by a plaque on an outside boundary wall at the rear of the new Coventry Cathedral, built on part of the old factory site.



Plaque in Priory Street, unveiled in April 2000.

Bettmann, born in Germany in 1863, first arrived in England in 1883, working in various occupations before starting his own business, marketing German-built sewing machines in Britain and selling British bicycles abroad. In 1886 he formed a business partnership with fellow-German Mauritz Schulte and the pair moved to Coventry, determined to manufacture their own cycles. They rented premises at a site called Earl's Court in Much Park Street and began production in 1890, using the name Triumph for their products. The site is marked on maps of 1905 as the Gloria Works.



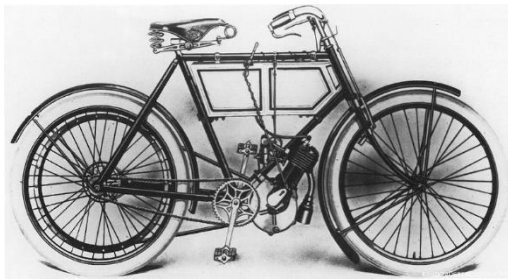
A busy Priory Street in 1912, with the Triumph Works on either side. Photo courtesy of David Fry

By the mid-1890s Triumph had acquired a larger factory in Priory Street and this was eventually extended to become a vast site, employing hundreds of people and straddling both sides of Priory Street. The bicycle business boomed and Triumph became what was probably the largest cycle firm in the country. But they were keen to try something new and in 1902 they built their first motorbike, which was

basically an ordinary bicycle with a Belgium-made Minerva engine attached. By 1905 the company was producing its own engines and sales rose rapidly, reaching something like 3,000 motorcycles a year by 1909.

Although Bettmann suffered personally from a tidal wave of anti-German sentiment which swept through the country during the First World War (he felt obliged to relinquish his position as Mayor of Coventry in 1914) his Triumph company prospered greatly during the period, with Bettmann making a major contribution to the war effort.

The story has often been told that in 1914, just two weeks after war was declared, Bettmann received a phone

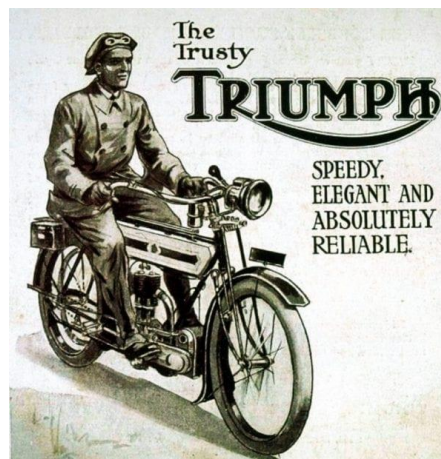


The first Triumph motorbike, 1902.

call from the War Office, asking the company to provide 100 Triumph motorbikes for the British Expeditionary Force, which was due to go to France. They were to be delivered to an army camp in the south of England within 48 hours and although it was a Saturday and the factory was closed, Bettmann rounded up some workers and had the bikes ready and delivered to Coventry railway station in time for the evening train on Sunday.

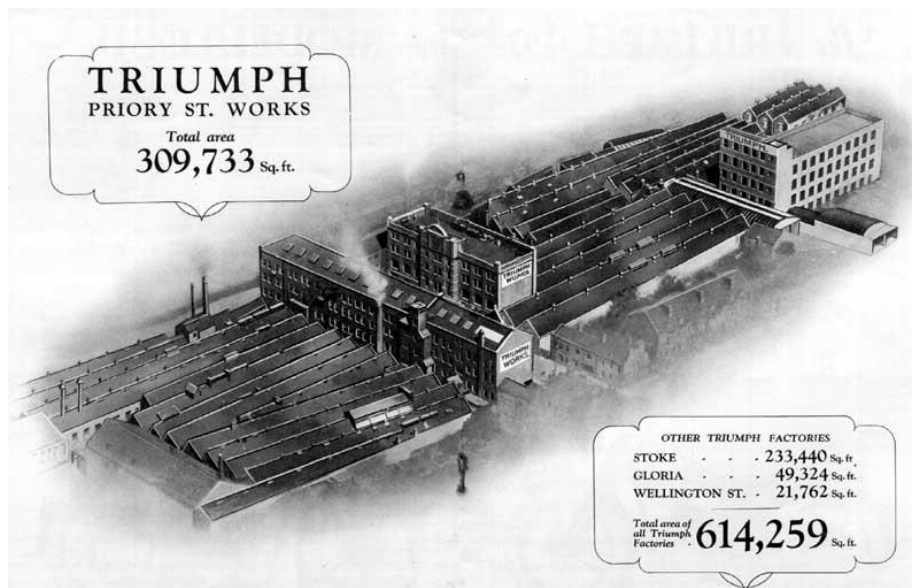
Triumph went on to produce around 30,000 motorbikes for the War Office and these machines were known as “Trusty Triumphs” by the soldiers that used them - signifying an enviable reputation for reliability in often difficult conditions. It proved to be a useful marketing slogan for Triumph.

In 1917 Bettmann’s friend and business partner Mauritz Shulte – who seems to have had an eye for good engineering, together with an entrepreneurial flair – resigned from Triumph and was succeeded two years later by Captain Claude Vivian Holbrook, who Bettmann had first encountered at the War Office when negotiating the contract for the supply of Triumph motorbikes.



Holbrook persuaded Bettmann to begin manufacturing cars, and the company acquired premises for this purpose at Clay Lane, Stoke, a factory previously used by the Dawson Car Company. It produced its first car in 1923, the Triumph 10/20 model. But its first major success came in 1927 with the Super Seven model, which went on to sell one hundred cars every week.

Triumph produced other popular cars during the period and in 1935 it expanded production of vehicles by acquiring the former White & Poppe factory in Holbrook Lane. But the fortunes of the company were mixed and it struggled financially during the Depression of the 1930s. Bettmann blamed Holbrook for financial mismanagement of the company and it was during this period that the founder retired. The financial crisis meant that the various parts of Triumph (bicycles, motorbikes and later, cars) had to be sold off to different buyers and by the end of the 1930s the career of Siegfried Bettmann, now in his 70s, finally came to an end.



The Priory Street Works continued production but could not survive the Blitz of November 1940, which virtually destroyed the factory. Motorbike production was hastily resumed at a temporary factory in Warwick before moving to a new home in Meriden. Car production later moved to the Standard Works at Canley, which first assembled Triumph cars in 1946. □

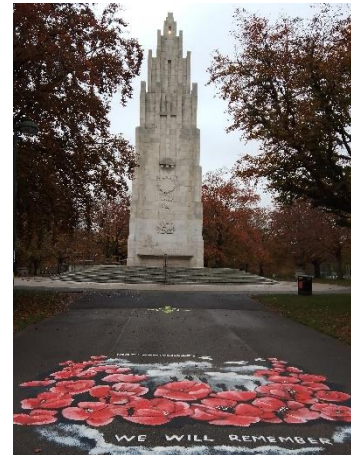
The immense Triumph Works in Priory Street were destroyed in the Blitz.

• A variety of sources have been consulted in the preparation of this article but a book by Damien Kimberley, *Coventry’s Motorcycle Heritage* (2009) was particularly helpful. **JM**

Remembering Charles Ponder - from Stoke

SOME estimates suggest that over 3,000 young men from Coventry were killed in the First World War. Some of those youngsters were conscripted when military service became compulsory in January 1916, many volunteered when war began, and others were already in the armed forces before the conflict broke out. Inevitably, some of those killed were from Stoke.

Charles Ponder was one such man from Stoke who perished on the battlefields of Europe. He was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal for bravery and is commemorated on the Ypres (Menin Gate) Memorial. He is also remembered at St Michael's Church in Stoke and at Coventry's War Memorial Park, where a tree plaque bears his name.



Charles was born in Stoke in 1888, the son of Thomas and Mary Ann, who in the census of 1911 are shown to be living at 171 Walsgrave Road, in the heart of Ball Hill. Charles' father Thomas was a greengrocer and hardware dealer, possibly based in a shop at their Ball Hill home, on the corner of Clements Street.



Charles enlisted in Warwick in 1908, at the age of 19. He was a Private in the Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry 2nd Battalion and was based in Hong Kong at the outbreak World War One. When war began, the soldiers were shipped to France and onwards to Flanders to serve on the Western Front. Charles and his fellow soldiers were ordered to take over trenches from the French, just east of the village of St Eloi, a seventeen-mile march away. Conditions were said to be atrocious. There was little protection, no drainage and the trenches were little more than a series of detached holes in the ground, no more than three feet wide and 30 to 50 yards apart. It was impossible to move up and down, the water was at least knee-deep, and there was nowhere to sit down or even put a rifle down. The men simply had to stand, motionless in water, for the whole of their 48-hour tour. By the time they were relieved some were unable to move and most suffered from trench foot. Food was usually cold and contaminated by mud.

In early February 1915, trenches 19, 20, 21 and 22 had been taken by the Germans. Orders were given to launch an attack to retake them. In the ensuing battle, which began at 4am on February 15th, all of the trenches were recaptured but Captain Francis Cayer Campbell Rogers and twelve other ranks were killed. Lieutenant H C Carkeet-Jones and 28 other ranks were wounded.



Menin Gate in Belgium. Other photographs show Charles Ponder's plaque and tree in Coventry's War Memorial Park.

Park photos: John Marshall

Charles Ponder was one of those who lost his life. He was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal for conspicuous bravery under heavy fire when he dragged back a wounded officer to safety, presumed to be Lt Carkeet-Jones.

Private Ponder was just 26 years old. He has no known grave and is just one of many Stoke men who went away to war but never came home.



● This article is based on information kindly supplied by Gill Mills, who oversees the Remembrance Tree Trail for Friends of the War Memorial Park. See also Trevor Harkin's meticulously researched book, *War Memorial Park* (2007) for details of other Great War casualties.