

Stoke Local History Group

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stokehistorygroup@gmail.com

A NEW series of *The Great British Dig: History in Your Garden* is currently being screened on television and is expected to include an episode about last year's surprise archaeological dig in residents' back gardens at Biggin Hall Crescent, Coventry.

The series, shown on TV channel More4, aims to unearth the hidden history buried beneath our back gardens, and it employs a team of archaeologists to explain some of the artefacts found. The series is presented by actor and comedian Hugh Dennis.



According to the Rutland & Stamford Mercury, historian Chris Carr from Lincolnshire (pictured above with Hugh Dennis) was invited to join the team at Coventry to comment on the dig. Photo: Nick Carr

The dig in Coventry aimed to find evidence of medieval Biggin Hall, which is thought to date back to the 13th century. Findings from the dig were briefly on display at Coventry & North Warwickshire Sports Club. It was previously assumed that all traces of the original building were lost.

At the time of writing, no date for the Coventry episode has been announced. But episodes already screened in the new series include the search for a Roman fort in Falkirk; a search for long lost prehistoric roundhouses in Stretton, Staffordshire; a search for a revolutionary 19th century prison in Devizes; and a search for a vanished building in the garden of Georgian stately home Beningbrough Hall, Yorkshire.

If anyone missed these episodes, they can be viewed on demand via the Channel Four app. Meanwhile, readers are advised to look out for the Coventry episode on More4. The programmes are being shown on Wednesdays at 9pm.



Photo: John Marshall

February Walk: exploring Far Gosford Street

FOLLOWING the success of our Canal Basin Walk in December, tour guide Phil Tutchings has agreed to lead another walk for the history group in February, this time exploring the historic environment of Far Gosford Street. The street has a colourful history going back to at least the 12th century and is still brimming with fascinating stories.

The walk will take place on Friday February 4th, starting from Fargo Village at 10.30am.

Members and friends are asked to book a place by contacting John Marshall at stokehistorygroup@gmail.com.

A reduced fee of £5 per person is payable on the day. The walk is likely to last about 75 minutes.

Stoke reminiscences from the 1930s

Bill Sutton grew up in Cheylesmore, attended Whitley Abbey School and was a long-time member of the Whitley History Group, now sadly defunct. He has lived in Chapelfields since 1971 and at one time was a regular contributor to the Coventry Evening Telegraph, which printed many of his stories about local history. In what follows, Bill shares with John Marshall some of his late father's reminiscences about working in Stoke.



Bill's father, Alf Sutton (pictured right in the 1930s), was born in 1901 in Westhoughton, Lancashire. "Dad started work in the coal mines in 1915 but came to Coventry in search of work when the mines closed," says Bill. "He worked for Coventry Corporation from 1929 until 1966, with a four-year break from 1942 to 1946 when he served in the army. He lived in Cheylesmore and died in 1994."



Alf Sutton, marked with an X, with fellow workers in 1929

Alf lodged with a family in Hollis Road during the early 1930s and his job with the council involved building new roads for the new Stoke Aldermoor estate.

"He told me that there was originally a pond on the site of what became the Aldermoor pub," says Bill. "The pond was filled in using soil dug out during the construction of the Gaumont cinema in Jordan Well [later the Odeon]. The soil was carried by horse and cart to Stoke Aldermoor.



Former Aldermoor Hotel, site of a pond

"One day a horse was backing a cart up to the pond when it slid on the mud into the pond, taking the horse with it. The carter jumped in to hold the horse's head above water but it could not be saved. I think local legend had it that the horse was left there but dad saw it removed the following day."

Another of Alf Sutton's stories involved a second landmark



The old horse pond at Stoke Green, pictured about 1912

pond, this time the old horse pond at Stoke Green, later a paddling pool and now a children's play area. "Dad worked on converting the old horse pond at Gentlemen's Green [an old name for Stoke Green] on Binley Road into the paddling pool. He always claimed that he put the final skim on the bottom of the pond but said he would not have taken so much care with it if he had known that Hitler would drop a bomb on it!"

Alf Sutton was aged 93 when he died and "many of his stories stick in my memory," Bill said. □

Blue plaque for Kingsway house will celebrate 'Mouldy Old Dough'



25 Kingsway, pictured last year Photo: John Marshall

PETE Chambers, curator of Coventry Music Museum in Walsgrave Road, is planning to place a plaque on an inconspicuous house in Kingsway, Stoke, to celebrate the famous recording of 'Mouldy Old Dough'.

A crowdfunding appeal for £700, launched by Pete Chambers to pay for the plaque, reached its target within 30 hours.

The record, by Coventry group Lieutenant Pigeon, reached the top of the charts in 1972. It was the first number one single by a Coventry band and was recorded in the house at Kingsway.

Pete Chambers said: "Now in its 50th year, the song has created a legacy of its own. It was recorded in the front room of 25 Kingsway in the Stoke area of Coventry and I believe that there should be a blue plaque on that very house. This is part of Coventry music history."

'Mouldy Old Dough' was the brainchild of Rob Woodward and Nigel Fletcher, both already part of experimental band Stavely Makepeace. Their hit single was performed by their spin-off band Lieutenant Pigeon and caused a sensation by featuring Rob's mother Hilda, playing an upright piano.

The sight of Hilda bashing out the tune on *Top of the Pops* remains a cherished memory for many who recall the period. The piano was later donated to Coventry Music Museum.

The record was also unusual because it was basically an instrumental – apart from an occasional growl of the title 'Mouldy Old Dough' from Fletcher. It was number one in Britain for four weeks and charted around the world. The record's skilled honky-tonk piano player, Hilda Woodward, died in 1999 at the age of 85.

Pete Chambers was delighted to raise the money for a plaque so quickly. He told his followers on Facebook: "Wow, I can't believe this, we reached the target in about 30 hours! So to all who donated, you guys are amazing, as are the Oldham Athletic fans who gave because 'Mouldy Old Dough' is the song played at all their matches."

It has also been announced that Coventry Music Museum is celebrating the 50th anniversary of 'Mouldy Old Dough' by staging a special exhibition, which opens on February 19th. Writing in the *Coventry Observer*, Pete Chambers said the new exhibition "will look at this extraordinary record and the people behind it."



"Highlights," he wrote, "will include a reconstruction of the front room of 25 Kingsway where the record was recorded, a new and exclusive interview with Rob and Nigel, a chance to have a selfie with Lt Pigeon himself and a rather strange way of accessing some of the mind-blowing trivia connected to this song and its legacy." □

University Students' Union set to reopen Priory Visitor Centre

THE currently closed Priory Visitor Centre and the Priory Undercrofts are to be taken over by Coventry University Students' Union, according to a report by the Coventry Society.

The Society has been told that Coventry City Council has agreed Heads of Terms with the Students' Union and a lease will be finalised before the end of January for both sets of premises. Both buildings have been closed for several years and their condition is said to have deteriorated.

It is understood that the Students' Union are planning to operate both buildings as a cultural and heritage attraction, underpinned by a commercially sustainable business plan. The vision is for the site to be used as a conference and training space, a community facility and a cultural destination.

Before the lease is enacted, the council will carry out refurbishment of the premises. This includes the replacement of the air conditioning unit in the Undercrofts – which is needed to maintain the area as a scheduled monument.



Priory Visitor Centre: currently closed

Photos: John Marshall



Work underway at the Priory Undercrofts this month

Initial refurbishment of the Visitor Centre has already been completed but this revealed further problems with the roof. Repairs are set to be completed this month.

The Coventry Society has been told that Culture Coventry are relocating the nationally recognised artefacts to alternative locations. Specialist companies have been commissioned to undertake an appraisal of the artefacts and arrange their removal to alternative locations.

The most significant asset is the Apocalypse Stone, which is to be relocated to the Herbert Art Gallery to be displayed alongside three larger pieces of stonework from the city's collection. A very large piece of stonework which was originally part of a pulpit will remain in situ at the Visitor Centre as it is too large to relocate without risk of damage. □

Source: Coventry Society News 3/1/22