

Stoke Local History Group

COVENTRY

Newsletter May 2022

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editor John Marshall

Uncovering the hidden history of Stoke Park

AUTHOR Adam Wood will be delving into the hidden history of Stoke Park when he delivers an illustrated talk to the history group at Stoke Library, on Friday June 10th at 10.30am.

Adam's new book, *The Case of the Painted Bicycle Lamp*, will explore the mysteries surrounding the officially unsolved double murder of Richard and Mary Phillips in Stoke Park in January 1906.

The bloodied bodies of the elderly couple were found in their bedroom, with the previous days' newspapers piled up on a doormat. The only clue for Coventry police was the discovery of a crudely painted bicycle lamp, its side lights covered over, which the murderer had seemingly used as a lantern.

The book examines the events leading up to that fatal night and asks why, despite the owner of the lamp being charged with murder at Warwick Assizes, the case is officially classed as "unsolved".

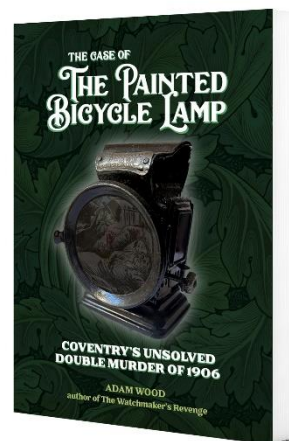
The book will be launched at a separate event at the Bull's Head pub in late June, to which members of the history group are invited. At that event, Adam Wood will tell the full tale of the unsolved murders.

But prior to the book launch, Adam will reveal exclusively to the history group some of his findings about the history of Stoke Park, including how its former use as a venue for Coventry Races provided an eerie premonition for future events, and some of the unusual events which occurred in the area in the mid and late Victorian era.

Those attending the Stoke Local History Group meeting will be able to obtain a specially-produced postcard with a code allowing a 20 per cent discount on pre-orders of the book.

The official book launch takes place at the Bull's Head on Binley Road on June 29th, starting at 7pm. No ticket is required and entry is free.

The history group meeting takes place on Friday June 10th at Stoke Library, starting at 10.30am. Booking, as usual, is required as numbers are restricted. Please book your place by emailing John at stokehistorygroup@gmail.com.



Adam Wood

Photo: John Marshall

The Watchmaker's Revenge

ADAM Wood's previous book, *The Watchmaker's Revenge*, tells the true story of watchmaker Oliver Style who, on the evening of May 27th 1880, walked into the Old Half Moon pub in Spon End and shot two customers and the landlady without saying a word, then just as suddenly left and made his way to Much Park Street, where he shot his wife, their infant son and his mother-in-law. In the process of telling this tale, Adam Wood shines a light on Coventry's watchmaking community in the Victorian period and illustrates the conditions and struggles of everyday life, as well as bringing back to life some of the forgotten houses, pubs and streets that once formed the backdrop to working class life in Spon End and other parts of Coventry. Signed copies of this fascinating book will be available to buy at the next history group meeting, price £10.

Biggin Hall – in search of a monastic grange

THE long-awaited episode of *The Great British Dig: History in Your Back Garden*, featuring Biggin Hall in Coventry, was finally screened on More4 this month.

The programme showed Hugh Dennis and a small team of archaeologists digging holes in the back gardens of Biggin Hall Crescent in Stoke, where residents happily joined the search for more information about medieval Biggin Hall, a building that once stood in this vicinity.

Little is known about the bustling hall that existed here from the 1050s to the 1530s. Was it just a humble farm or was it a far more important building? According to the programme, the answer, unequivocally, was that Biggin Hall was once a monastic grange, larger than originally assumed, run by lay monks to provide food and other resources to the nearby monks of St Mary's Priory in Coventry. The team found evidence to suggest that



Archaeologist Chloe Duckworth at work on the Biggin Hall dig.
Photo: C4

it was a far more prestigious grange than had previously been thought, reflecting the importance and status of the priory it served. The programme found no direct evidence of a rumoured moat that was once thought to have surrounded the grange, but suggested instead that a nearby spring was diverted to provide water and a fish pond for the community of lay brothers. Anyone who missed the programme can view it on catch-up TV, using the Channel Four app.

opportunity to see an exceptional exhibition at the Herbert Art Gallery & Museum about an eclectic range of people who have an historic connection with Coventry. The exhibition features paintings and photographs - some from the Herbert's own collection, others from the National Portrait Gallery - of numerous individuals such as George Eliot, EM Forster, Philip Larkin, The Specials, Susan Hill, Sarah Siddons, Ellen Terry, Billie Whitelaw, Mo Mowlam (right), Tom Mann, Basil Spence and several more. Panels beside the portraits summarise the achievements of their subjects and explain their connection with Coventry. 'Creative Connections' is currently on show at the Herbert Art Gallery but be quick – this absorbing exhibition ends on May 30th.

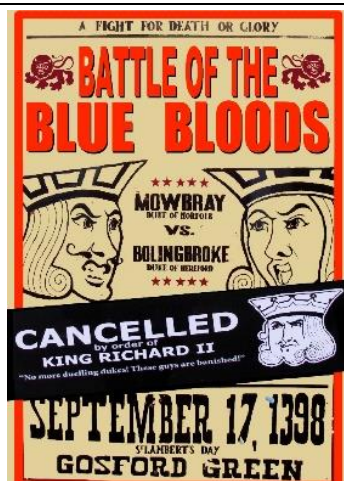


An early 19th century painting of the remains of Biggin Hall, a former monastic grange, later owned by the Drapers Company and leased out as a farm.

THERE is still an



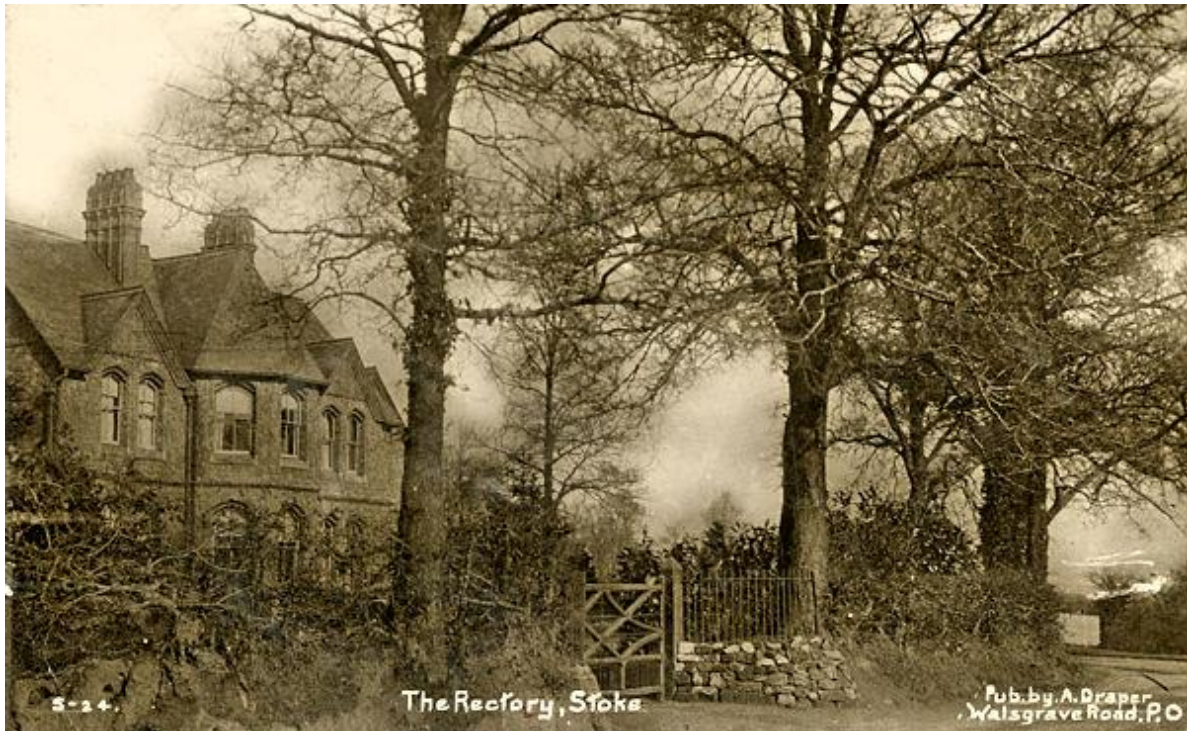
Image courtesy of National Portrait Gallery



LAST month's article about the 14th century duel

on Gosford Green between Thomas Mowbray and Henry Bolingbroke, prompted reader Paul Maddocks to tell us about a poster he spotted several years ago in Far Gosford Street, when the old buildings were being refurbished and a hoarding was placed around them. Art students at the local Coventry College were asked to do some artwork to display on the hoardings. One student chose to recall the famous Gosford Green duel, which was cancelled at the last minute by King Richard II. "There were many different styles and I spotted this poster by a graphic designer," said Paul. "I really liked it as it takes the image of playing cards and uses it like a boxing match style poster. When the restoration of the building was finished all the artwork disappeared and I never got the name of the person who did the design. Does anyone know who did it?"

Stoke Rectory: a new vicarage for an expanding rural parish, 1893



The new vicarage at Stoke, photographed in circa 1912

Photo courtesy David Fry

IN 1884 Thomas Blyth arrived in the parish as the new vicar of Stoke Church and he soon established himself as an important local citizen – at a time when the influence of the church on everyday life was still all-embracing and profound. Rev Blyth became vice chairman of the Foleshill Board of Guardians, chairman of the Stoke School Board, and chaplain to the Coventry Union Workhouse.

Blyth was also a noted scholar, a graduate of Queen’s College, Oxford, and was the author of several scientific, theological and biographical works, as well as translations from Greek and Latin. It was therefore no surprise that during his tenure at Stoke he would write a major volume of local history, published in 1897 as *The History of Stoke in the Parliamentary Boundary of the City of Coventry* - a substantial compendium of parish records and other material that took him eight years to compile and kept him “pleasantly occupied”.



Rev T A Blyth, arrived in Stoke in 1884.

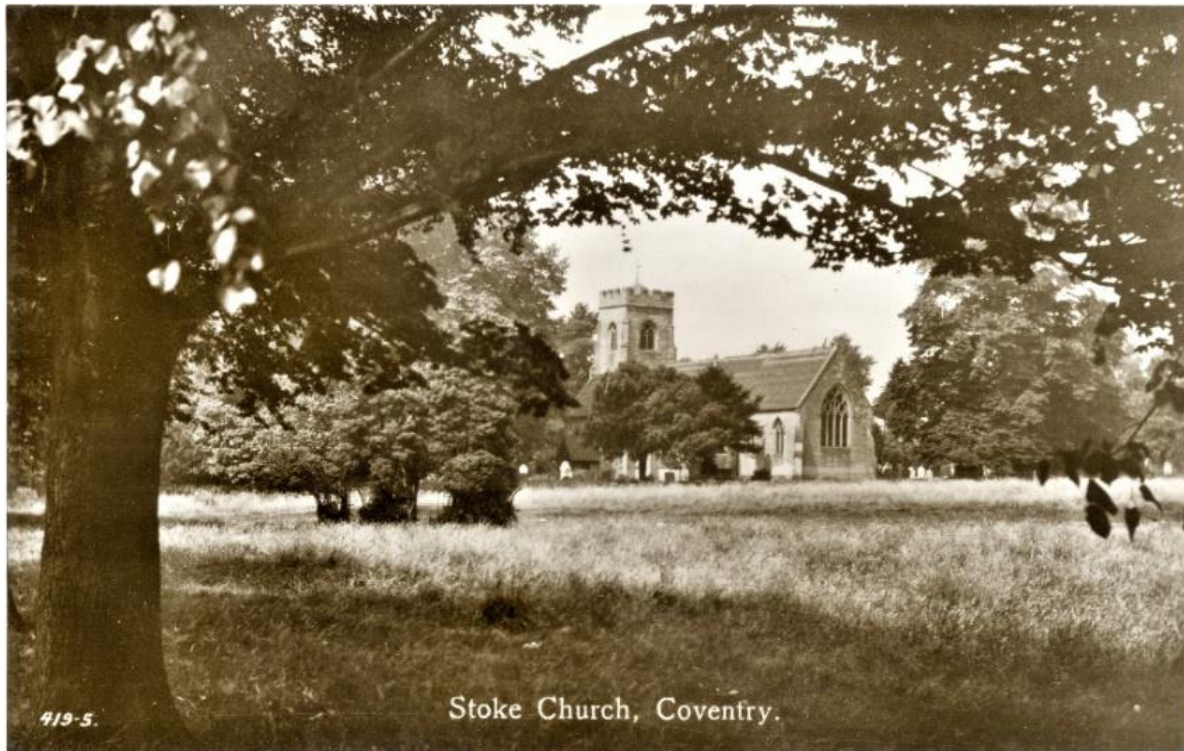
Contemporary accounts suggest that parishioners of Stoke welcomed their new resident vicar when he first arrived but did not immediately provide him with an official vicarage. This was because in 1778 the parishes of Stoke and Walsgrave-on-Sowe were united by the Bishop, and consequently Stoke did not have the advantage of its own parsonage. No objection to this arrangement was made until 1866 when a meeting of parishioners at the National School in Stoke considered the desirability of separating the two livings.

But it was not until 1885 that action was taken to implement the separation and a fund was established for the building of a new vicarage. The fund was prompted initially by the will of the late John B Twist, an influential local man, who left a sum of £250 as a nucleus for the building project. In due course grants were obtained from various sources and these were supplemented by local fund-raising efforts.

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Rev Blyth during this early stage was living at a house in Stoke Park and this area appears to have been a focal point for some of the vicarage fund-raising activities. One newspaper report in 1888, evoking the spirit of the period, said that “a sale of fancy and useful articles for the augmentation of the vicarage fund was held in a field in Stoke Park, kindly lent for the occasion by Mr Townend” and it declared that “a goodly sum” had additionally been raised by a coconut throwing apparatus.

“The Singer Band was in attendance”, the report continued, “and received three hearty cheers at the suggestion of the vicar. Three cheers were also given for Mr Townend. Dancing was kept up till dark and the proceedings concluded with the National Anthem.”



Stoke Church, surrounded by extensive fields in the early 1900s

Photo courtesy Rob Orland

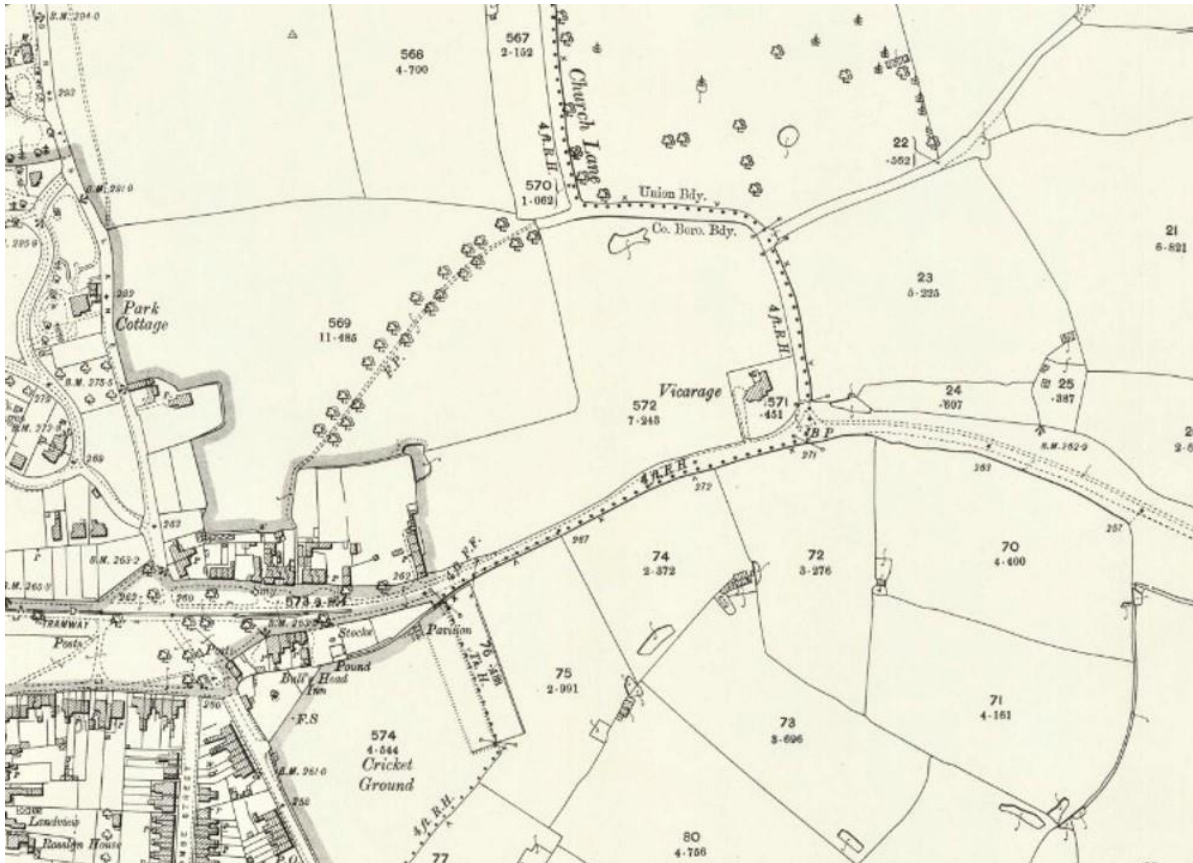
By November 1892 sufficient funds had been raised and the foundation stone for the new vicarage was laid by Sir Richard Moon from Copsewood Grange, in the presence of the Lord Bishop of Worcester and many local dignitaries. The *Coventry Herald* reported that a large bottle, hermetically sealed, and containing the first issue of Blyth’s *History of Stoke*, was deposited by the vicar in a specially prepared cavity under the foundation stone. In addition to the vicarage ceremony, the Bishop used the occasion to consecrate an extension of the churchyard at Stoke Church, achieved by incorporating some of the adjoining glebe land.

The house cost a total of £2,510 and was designed in the early English style of architecture by Mr J Chatwin of Birmingham. It was built on a half-acre plot, donated by William Frederick Pridmore of Wyken House, on the corner of Binley Road and Church Lane - providing an easy walking route for Rev Blyth from his new vicarage to the church. It is notable that a *Coventry Evening Telegraph* report referred to the lane beside the house as Blind Man’s Lane.

Reflecting on the vicarage now, from the vantage point of the 21st century, what is really remarkable about the house is its splendid rural isolation, with no hint of the suburban sprawl that would later swallow up much of the countryside along Binley Road.

As the map of 1903 shows (see next page), there were certainly houses on Binley Road but these were largely confined to a cluster of buildings on a site now occupied by the Empress Building, together with a row of cottages opposite containing the original Bull’s Head pub. Beyond that, going away from town, there was virtually nothing but open fields.

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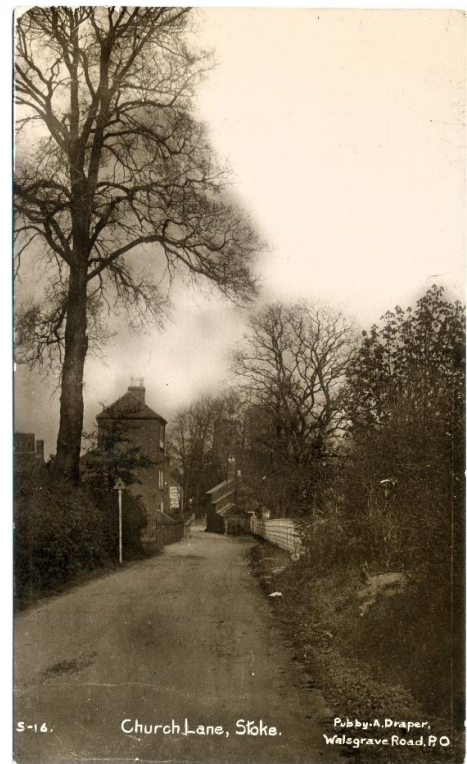


Map of 1903 shows the Vicarage (centre right) on the corner of Binley Road, well removed from the cluster of houses opposite the Coventry & North Warwickshire Cricket Club. Church Lane is shown on the map as a narrow rural lane. The photograph below shows Church Lane in c.1912, looking down towards Walsgrave Road with the church straight ahead.

Church Lane, too, was no more than a narrow country lane, punctuated occasionally by the sight of a weaver's top shop, a lone cottage, or the distant view of the Rose and Crown pub or the Church tower on Walsgrave Road. All this changed in the 1920s and 30s when much of Binley Road was developed, spurred on by the rapid expansion of GEC which had taken over the old Copsewood Grange. Similar expansion occurred along Walsgrave Road, in the area now known as Poets' Corner.

Rev Blyth would have seen many changes in Stoke during his time in the parish, including the arrival of the Humber Works in Folly Lane in 1908 and the rapid expansion of streets and houses in the Ball Hill area during the early 20th century. He even contributed to the area's expansion in various ways, including the construction of the Parish Rooms in Bray's Lane, which opened in 1908 (see newsletter, August 2021). But he did not live long enough to see the city expand eastwards towards Binley or Wyken. He died in 1913, at the age of 69, and was buried in the churchyard at Stoke.

The vicarage itself lasted only until the 1960s when it was demolished to make way for the current building, a neat but undistinguished block of flats known as Heron House. We can only wonder whether the 1960s demolition crew found a book under the foundation stone – Blyth's legacy, *The History of Stoke*.



John Marshall



Top TV chefs Glynn Purnell and Paul Foster to headline fun-packed programme of food and fun at Coventry Food Festival in the city centre. No tickets required.

The two top chefs will headline the food festival, which takes place in the city centre from **Friday, 17 June to Sunday 19 June**, offering everything from cooking demos and a packed food market around Broadgate to a 'Coventry cook-off' competition.

The RAF is also bringing a full-sized Spitfire plane and cockpit to Millennium Place [front Coventry Transport Museum]. The iconic aircraft will be visiting as part of a tour across the Midlands highlighting and celebrating the area's rich RAF heritage.

A tour of the rare blue reconnaissance Spitfire PR. XIX will be stopping off in Coventry on 18 and 19 June to coincide with Coventry Food Festival. Families are invited to get up close to the aircraft and hands-on with the interactive activities on the ground.

Further details from the website – coventrycitycentre.co.uk