

# Stoke Local History Group

COVENTRY

## Newsletter June 2022

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editor John Marshall

### 'A walk down the Sherbourne'

OUR next history group meeting will feature guest speaker Colin Walker who will present an illustrated talk about Coventry's most important river, the Sherbourne.

Without the River Sherbourne it seems unlikely that a settlement would ever have been created in the place that we now call Coventry.

The river supplied essential drinking water for the people and it also provided power for the early mills,

as well as offering water for important medieval trades, such as tanning and dyeing. The River Sherbourne also provided a natural boundary between the old city and some of its near neighbours, such as Far Gosford Street and Stoke.

Over the years, the river has gradually been culverted, especially in the city centre, and its course has been altered elsewhere. The flow of the river has been slowed down or speeded up, depending upon the needs of local industry, and the current river may not have a great deal in common with the original waterflow. But it still has a story to tell and Colin will take us on a fascinating journey along its route, pointing out its features, both natural and man-made.

The meeting takes place at **Stoke Library on Friday 8<sup>th</sup> July, beginning at 10.30am.** Booking, as usual, is required. Numbers are restricted. Please book by contacting John at [stokehistorygroup@gmail.com](mailto:stokehistorygroup@gmail.com).

• Colin Walker has been a heritage activist for many years and was a pivotal figure with the Spon End Building Preservation Trust, which saved and restored the 15<sup>th</sup> century Weaver's House, together with adjoining cottages. He is an acknowledged authority on the River Sherbourne.



*The River Sherbourne, pictured as it flows through the grounds of medieval Charterhouse.*

*Photos: John Marshall*



TOUR guide Phil Tutchings has joined forces with author Adam Wood and musician Nigel Ward to offer a walk, talk and music package in Stoke on Friday 15<sup>th</sup> July (11am to 3pm). The event will begin from the Old Ball pub with Phil's walking tour around Ball Hill, Gosford Green and Binley Road, before a return trip to the Old Ball for lunch, accompanied by music from local trio Urban Fox and then a talk by Adam about his Stoke Park murders book. The price is £15 (including buffet lunch). Places must be booked in advance. For further details and bookings see website

[www.bicyclelampbook.com/events](http://www.bicyclelampbook.com/events)

# A view to inspire

COVENTRY'S famous cathedral tower has now re-opened for visitors, giving unrivalled views across the city's changing skyline.

The tower has been closed for many months, caused first by Covid restrictions and then by the discovery of peregrine falcons nesting in the spire. Soaring over 100 metres high, this Gothic masterpiece survived the Blitz and is now the third-tallest in Britain.

The massive tower took 20 years to build in stages from 1373 and the spire was added in 1433. A spiral



*View from the cathedral tower, looking towards Stoke.*

*Photos: John Marshall*



staircase to the top of the tower has 180 steps. A visitor from Cardiff on the re-opening day, told us he was inspired to visit by a recent TV programme, *Coventry Cathedral: Building for a New Britain*, and the journey, he said, had been worthwhile. The tower is open to climbers on Fridays and Saturdays (11-3pm) and alternate Sundays. The price for adults is £5, with a discount for Go CV card holders. Check any late changes to opening times by phoning 024 7652 1234.

*Left: A view of Holy Trinity Church and surrounding skyline, as seen from the cathedral tower.*

## Stoke Park murders: book launch

ADAM Wood, our recent guest speaker at the history group, will officially launch his new book, *The Case of the Painted Bicycle Lamp*, at a special event on Wednesday June 29<sup>th</sup> at the Bull's Head pub in Binley Road.

The book tells the full story of the gruesome murder of Richard and Mary Phillips at their house in Stoke Park, Coventry, in 1906. Adam (pictured right) outlines the events leading up to that fatal night, and examines the principal evidence found at the murder scene – a crudely painted bicycle lamp, which didn't belong to the owners of the house and appears to have been left by a burglar.

The book asks why, despite the owner of the lamp being charged with the murders and standing trial at Warwick Assizes, the case is officially classed as 'Unsolved'. The book launch begins at 7pm. No ticket required. Just turn up.





# What did Bradshaw's Guide say about Coventry in 1863?

WE'VE heard a whisper that Michael Portillo was in Coventry during April – apparently filming a new episode for his popular television series *Great British Railway Journeys*, usually a well-informed and amiably presented snapshot of Britain, with a colourfully clad host as guide.

Classified by the BBC in both the travel and history genres, the programmes feature Portillo exploring Britain by rail, using a much-thumbed Victorian guidebook, *Bradshaw's Guide*, the first comprehensive travel guide to the railway system in Britain.

Coventry was featured in the very first series of *Great British Railway Journeys* in 2010, with Portillo asking about the impact of the Blitz in 1940 and finding out how trains helped to evacuate millions of children in Britain during World War Two. His latest visit to the city, sources say, will look at Coventry's development in the post-war years.

But what did *Bradshaw's Guide* have to say about Coventry in 1863? We obtained a copy of the book and discovered that Bradshaw begins this section with a description of the railway approach from Rugby to Coventry:



*St Michael's Church, a dominating presence in 19<sup>th</sup> century Coventry.*

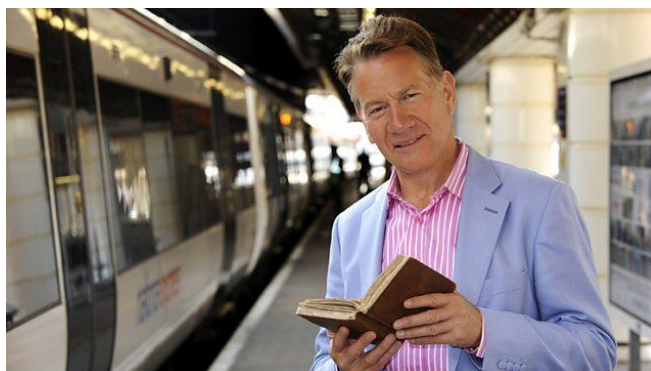
"After passing through a cutting we enter a wide extent of open country, and catch the first glimpse of the magnificent Coventry spires. From the embankment along which we proceed we can also see on the right, Stoke, Ernesford Grange... and the woods surrounding Coombe Abbey. The line crosses the Sowe by a beautiful viaduct of seven arches, and soon after the spires of Coventry rise distinctly above the intervening woods. We pass Whitley Abbey, which stands conspicuously on the left, cross a seven-arched viaduct over the Sherbourne Valley, enter a deep cutting, and shortly after we reach the station at Coventry."

And what happens when Bradshaw reaches Coventry itself? The principal hotel for visitors, it says, is the King's Head in Broadgate and Market Day is on Friday. The guide continues:

"The fine steeples of St Michael's and Trinity are the first to strike one in this old city, which is the seat of the ribbon trade, and a

parliamentary borough, 94 miles from London. It returns two members [MPs], and has a population of 41,647.

"Woollens and blue thread were formerly the staple manufactures; but they are now superseded by ribbons and watches, two branches introduced by the French refugees of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. About 2,000 hands are employed in the latter, and upwards of 30,000 on silk weaving, throwing, and the weaving and dyeing of ribbons. Alabar and power looms are chiefly used in the manufacture. This trade in late years has greatly increased; many



*Michael Portillo with Bradshaw's Guide. Photo: BBC*



*King's Head Hotel, destroyed in the Blitz, 1940*

steam factories having been erected: one just completed for Mr Hart is capable of holding about 300 large looms, and will give employment to 1,000 hands, producing as many ribbons as the whole town could make in 1830. Many women and children are employed. French ribbons are imported by the dealers; but in point of taste as well as cheapness, English productions are now a fair rival to foreign ones.



*Coventry Workhouse – part of the old Whitefriars Monastery*

“Coventry (like Covent Garden in London) takes its name from a monastery, founded in the 11<sup>th</sup> century by Leofric, the Saxon, and his wife Godiva, whose memory is honoured by an occasional procession. According to the well known story, she obtained a grant of privileges to the town by consenting to ride naked through the streets. To save her delicacy, the people closed their windows and abstained from looking, except Peeping Tom, whose bust, adorned with a *pigtail*, stands at the corner of Hertford Street.

“Many old fashioned gable houses are to be seen here in the narrow back streets. The *Guildhall* is a fine middle-age building, with a

timbered hall, adorned with escutcheons and stained windows. Another old pile is the *House of Industry*, near some remains of a priory.

“Three gates, and fragments of the town walls, with the Free Grammar School, Bablake’s old hospital (1350), the church, and the Exchange, a handsome building containing a noble hall, recently erected from designs by Mr James Murray, deserve notice.

“The beautiful steeple of St Michael’s on the Gothic church, is about 300 feet high; it was built by the two Botoners, mayors of the town, between 1373 and ’95; near it stands part of a palace belonging to the bishops, when Coventry was a diocese with Lichfield.



*The Corn Exchange in Hertford Street, opened in 1856 and designed by architect James Murray. Photos from [historicoventry.co.uk](http://historicoventry.co.uk)*

“The Cathedral, dissolved by Henry VIII, stood at Hill Close. Trinity, or the priory church, is also Gothic, with a steeple 237 feet high, of a later date. Here the Grey Friars acted their miracle plays at the feast of Corpus Christi – a series of Bible dramas, from the Creation to Doomsday. Henry VI came to see them.”

## **Observations on Bradshaw’s account**

- Bradshaw refers to Mr Hart having opened a large weaving mill. This is James Hart, the first owner of Copsewood Grange. Unfortunately the opening of the new factory, Victoria Mills, coincided with a sharp decline in the ribbon trade and his new enterprise became known as “Hart’s Folly”.
- The House of Industry is a reference to the Workhouse, based at the old Whitefriars Monastery.
- Bradshaw’s Guide states confidently that Coventry acquired its name because it was a settlement next to a convent. This was the favoured view at that time. But other theories later became popular, especially the view that the name derives from Cofa’s Tree, a tree belonging to Cofa. Local historian David McGrory queries both explanations. He says the earliest known spelling is ‘Couaentree’ - the first part of the name being a reference to the Cune (an ancient name of the River Sherbourne) and the second part (‘tree’) meaning a farmed village. So, the name might mean a farmed village by the River Cune, or perhaps a settlement where waters meet. □