

Stoke Local History Group

COVENTRY

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editor John Marshall

DESCRIBED as “a weekend of non-stop cultural celebration and motoring madness”, Coventry’s annual MotoFest is set to shine a light on the city’s amazing motoring heritage when it revs up again on September 10-11th.

Like last year, the festival will include a special ‘Coventry Concours’ show, staged in the unique setting of the cathedral ruins and featuring a display of premium classic cars and motorcycles. The whole of the city centre will also become a stunning showcase for the city’s long motoring history.

Highlight of this year’s Coventry Concours will be a special guest appearance from the iconic ECD 400 Jaguar E-Type which, organisers say, will make a triumphant return to its home city, just

over 60 years since it started life as one of the seven project cars built for the E-Type launch in 1961.

“It became further immortalised in Jaguar history a month after the launch, when Formula One champion and motor racing legend Graham Hill drove the car to its first race victory at Oulton Park,” says the Coventry Concours team.



This classic Flying Standard car was on display last year, outside the city centre pub named in its honour. A range of Flying Standards were built at Canley from 1935.
Photo: John Marshall



This year’s event will have a Queen’s Platinum Jubilee theme, displaying 70 years of the city’s motoring heritage and will include motorcycles and modern vehicles from 1952 right up to the modern day. A panel of celebrity judges for Coventry Concours will include Sarah Crabtree, a popular member of staff from the TV programme *Bangers and Cash*.

- MotoFest is a two-day free festival, featuring a unique blend of motorsport demonstrations, static displays, live music, culture and many other elements, all with a connection to Coventry. For more details, visit <https://www.coventrymotofest.com/>



A popular city centre pub, The Flying Standard was named in honour of a car (above), but the building itself has no particular connection with motor vehicles (or pubs). This unusual building was constructed in 1938 and was originally known as Priory Gate, because it stands on the site of the original priory gate. The basic structure is steel but the complex exterior has a timber frame, with jetties, bay windows, balconies, gables and tall brick chimneys. It was designed to complement the 15th century Lychgate Cottages, which sit next

door in Priory Row. Retail units in the building were once occupied by Timothy White’s (the chemist) and H Samuel (the jeweller). Owen Owen also used the building as a temporary base after its first department store was destroyed in the Blitz. In later years, White’s and Samuel’s were joined by a Wimpy Bar.

Gosford Green convent school 'for girls from the silk mills of Coventry'

OLD maps of Gosford Green show a curious building on Walsgrave Road, often marked simply as a "Convent". This was St Joseph's Convent, a day and boarding school for girls, founded in 1862 by the Sisters of Mercy who, it is said, had been asked by the Fathers at St Osburg's to provide schooling for girls who worked in the silk mills of Coventry.



St Joseph's Convent, opposite Gosford Green.

Photo courtesy of Rob Orland



Map of 1906, showing a Convent opposite Gosford Green

At the outbreak of World War Two, the pupils and nuns were evacuated to Stoneleigh Abbey, at the invitation of Lord and Lady Leigh.

It was a wise move because the school buildings at Gosford Green sustained extensive damage during multiple air raids and the entire structure was destroyed in April 1941.

This prompted the school to purchase Offchurch House, in Leamington Spa, as a new base for the convent, led by Mother Magdalen Pennington.

Junior school pupils remained at Stoneleigh for the rest of

the war, and in December 1941 senior school pupils moved to the new premises in Leamington.

In 1944, Mother Magdalen was offered the opportunity to purchase Crackley Hall in Kenilworth, together with 40 acres of land, from industrialist John Siddeley. By the early 1990s, the Sisters of Mercy had transferred the school to a lay association and in 2001 St Joseph's merged with Princethorpe College. It became co-educational in 2010 and is now part of the Princethorpe Foundation. Crackley Hall today is an independent day school with around 240 pupils.

(Information from Crackley Hall School)

THE city of Hull has staged a number of events this month to mark the centenary of the birth of Philip Larkin, born in Coventry on August 9th 1922. His home city, by contrast, largely ignored the occasion but for anyone with an interest in Larkin, warts and all, it's worth catching up with a BBC programme, *Return to Larkeland*, a candid portrait by Larkin's friend and critic AN Wilson. The programme, first screened in 2015, was re-shown this month to mark the centenary and is now available to view on BBC iPlayer. It examines Larkin's early life in Coventry, his time at Oxford and his career as a librarian and poet.

Major change for historic Chace Hotel

WORK has begun on the transformation of an historic Coventry building which served the city for many years as an imposing and illustrious hotel.

The Chace Hotel on London Road finally closed its doors in December last year and is now being turned into a care home, offering “bespoke care home accommodation for those with mental health care needs”.

A last ditch effort in 2018-19 to revive the fortunes of the old hotel – by re-branding the building as a Laura Ashley hotel and offering boutique rooms and afternoon teas – was ultimately unsuccessful.



*The front entrance to the Chace Hotel, pictured shortly before its closure.
Photo: John Marshall*

The building, formerly owned by Corus Hotels, was acquired by the Fairhome Property Group PLC and the new care home facility will be run by the ‘Rethink Mental Illness’ charity. Under the plans, the existing main building will remain intact but a 1970s extension at the side of the property will be replaced.

The Chace was first built between 1897 and 1903 as an opulent country residence for Dr Charles Webb Iliffe, a prominent figure in the local community who worked for 40 years as coroner for Coventry and North Warwickshire. He also sat on the Poor Law Board of Guardians and served for 37 years as medical officer to Coventry Workhouse. In later life he ceased medical practice but remained active in municipal life, becoming a city councillor and a JP. He was also known as an entertaining after-dinner speaker.

Dr Iliffe was in his late 50s when he moved, with his wife Annie, to the rural isolation of Willenhall, then little more than a tiny hamlet. The Chace was built in the form of a large country manor, in half-timbered, gabled style, looking gently down towards the nearby River Sowe and situated close to the turnpike road to London. The house had an elegant sweeping staircase and exquisite Edwardian rooms.

By the time of Iliffe’s death, in 1921, his principal residence had moved to The Woodlands in Kenilworth Road, and by 1930 his former home in Willenhall had been sold. It was purchased by Gertrude Patience Williams and a Mr Hartop of Leicester, who turned the building into an independent hotel.



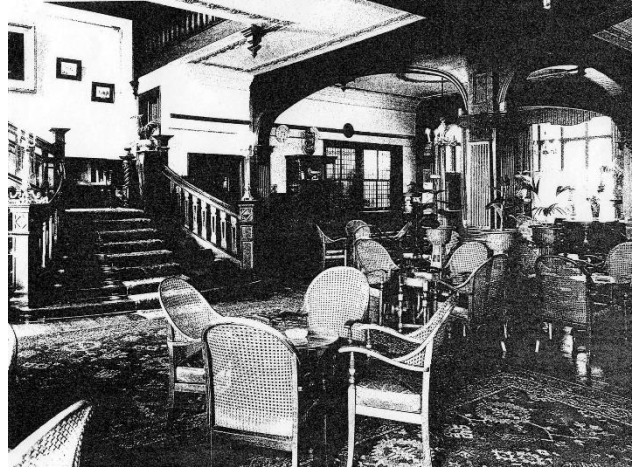
Chace Hotel & Coventry Road, Willenhall.

The new owners were keen to extend the property and in April 1932 an application was made to Foleshill Rural District Council to add a lengthy extension, facing London Road. The application was approved in April, by which time the area had become part of Coventry, following the boundary changes of that year. The new flank was built in red brick with Tudor style timber work, akin to the original

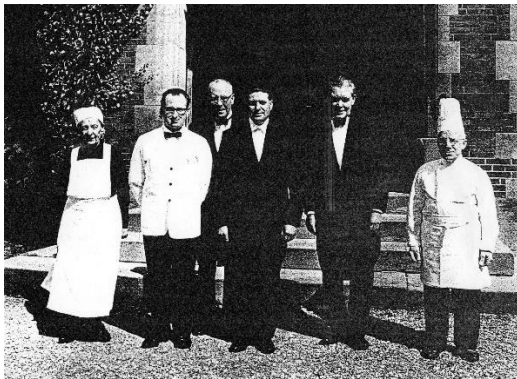
building. It is this London Road frontage that would come to dominate the image of the Chace Hotel for the next 80 years.

Life at the Chace Hotel in the 1950s was deeply traditional, with a rigid hierarchy and strict rules of etiquette. My own mother worked there during this period, as a lowly laundry assistant, and my earliest boyhood memories relate to The Chace, and the sprawling acres of the new Willenhall estate.

Like many other families in post-war Coventry, we lived in a prefab, initially built as temporary accommodation and having the advantage of being simple, functional and cheap. There were hundreds of prefabs all over Coventry - not just Willenhall - and these took their place within a landscape of war-time workers' hostels and bright new council estates.



Edwardian interior of the Chace Hotel



Staff at The Chace, including Freddie, the chef

I lived within a single-parent family, with my slightly older sister, Dianne, and my mother, Jean, who had to struggle constantly to make ends meet. Mother's job in the laundry at the Chace Hotel was almost certainly low paid and was hard work, with few labour-saving devices.

The laundry was hidden away inside a large, barn-like garage, where the hotel owner, presumably Mr Hartop, kept his sporty green car. It's tempting to use the term "Dickensian" to describe the laundry, but this might not be entirely accurate. But the equipment and conditions were certainly primitive when compared to modern facilities. There were large rectangular sinks with brass taps, copper boilers, huge mangles and long rollers to iron the sheets. There was also a

series of racks where sheets could be hung and then raised to the ceiling with pulleys, to dry. The space available to the women workers was small and the conditions were often hot.

The Chace in those days had gardens at the rear of the building where vegetables were grown, out of sight of the guests. There was also a large greenhouse and a pig sty. A young gardener called Paul, who limped around with an iron brace on his leg – probably caused by polio – was happy to show me around and I particularly remember a huge tub of pigswill – waste food from the hotel - being brought to the pig sty and slushed into containers for the animals to eat. It was an early glimpse of *The Good Life*, but without Barbara and Tom.

We left Willenhall - and the grind of the Chace Hotel laundry - in 1961 when mum

married a good man from Warwick and we moved there, with a change of school, a change of house and a change of surname to boot. I was eight years old and there was everything to play for. But that, as they say, is another story.



Laundry workers at The Chace, Lil Friday, Christine Elliott and my mother Jean Leeson, circa 1957

John Marshall

• With thanks to Willenhall Local History Group for background information and pictures.