

# Stoke Local History Group

COVENTRY

## Newsletter November 2022

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editor John Marshall

### Historic Coventry Trust completes a decade of work on city's heritage sites

OUR next guest speaker at Stoke Local History Group will be Graham Tait, Assistant Director of Historic Coventry Trust, who will bring us up to date with some of the remarkable achievements of the Trust during its first ten years.



*Guest speaker Graham Tait.  
Photo: Historic Coventry Trust*

Historic Coventry Trust was first formed in 2011 and was previously known as the Coventry Charterhouse Preservation Trust, created with the aim of preserving the 14<sup>th</sup> century Charterhouse, a former Carthusian Monastery in London Road. The building has recently been the subject of a major scheme to repair and re-purpose the building as a heritage attraction within a newly conceived Charterhouse Heritage Park. It is expected to open next year.

Meanwhile the Trust has worked on a project with Coventry City Council and Friends of London Road Cemetery to restore parts of the cemetery, including the Anglican Chapel which is now

owned and run by the Trust. The raised promenade and carriageway entrance to the cemetery have also been restored. The Trust has also started work on the restoration of the non-Conformist chapel.

Other tasks taken on by the Trust include the restoration of the Lychgate Cottages in Priory Row, the repair and re-purposing of Coventry's remaining City Gates - Swanswell and Cook Street – and the magnificent restoration of Drapers Hall, one of the few Regency buildings in the city.

Historic Coventry Trust also undertook the impressive restoration of Hales Street and the Burges in Coventry city centre, as well as starting work on the creation of a nature walkway along part of the route of the old Coventry Loop Line, from Charterhouse to Gosford Green. Another recent project, just started, is the repair and restoration of Whitefriars Gate in Much Park Street.

Graham Tait, our guest speaker, is an archaeologist with a background in academic heritage, conservation and archaeology. He joined the Trust as Assistant Director in 2019 from Coventry City Council where he was a Conservation and Archaeology Officer.

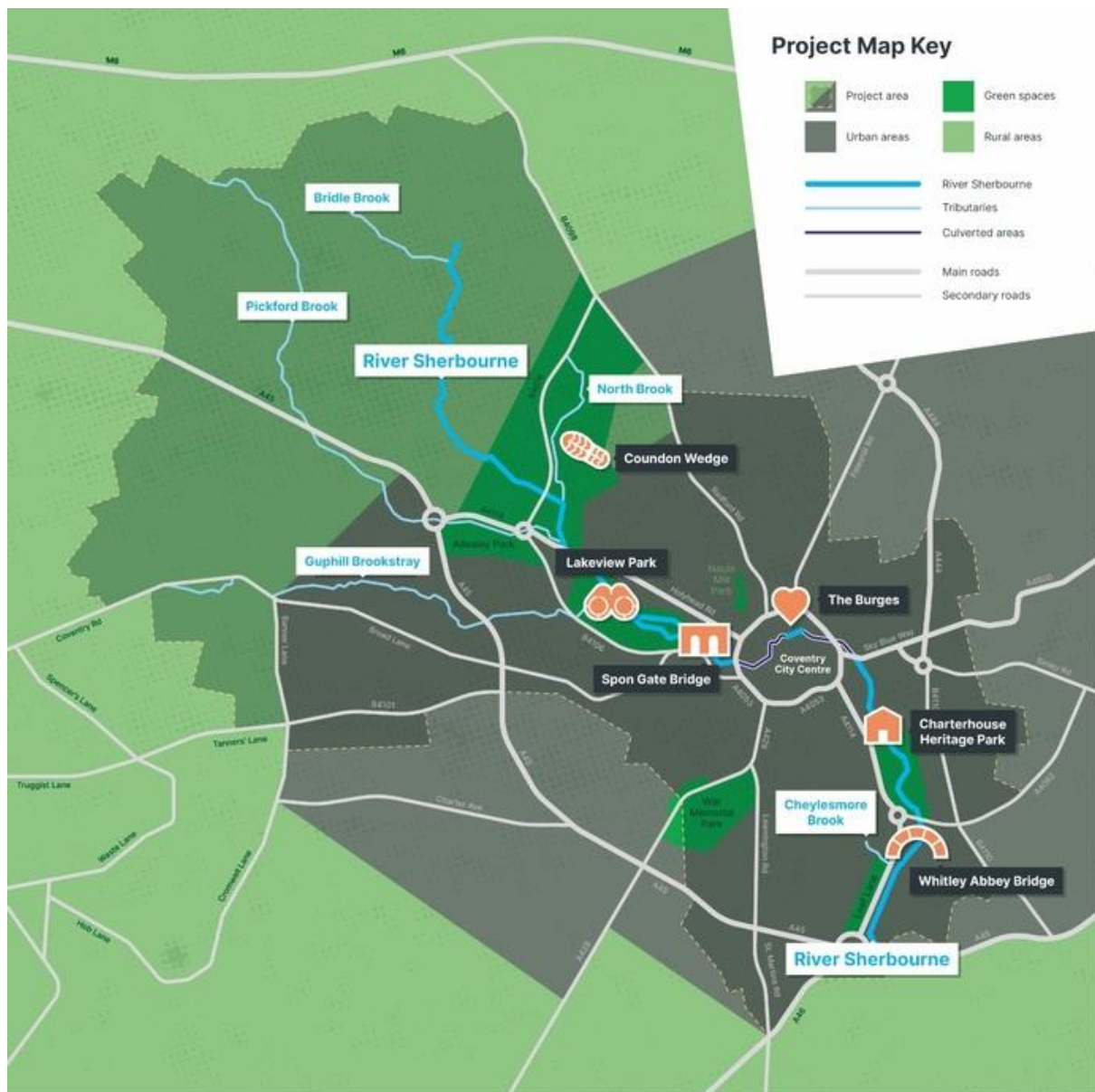


*Whitefriars Gate – work has begun on a new restoration project  
Photo: John Marshall*



*The non-Conformist chapel at London Road Cemetery is currently being restored.  
Photo: John Marshall*

The meeting, with a slide show presentation, takes place on FRIDAY DECEMBER 2<sup>nd</sup> at Stoke Library, starting at 10.30am. Booking is not required. Just turn up.



LAST month's history group meeting heard a summary of plans for the Sherbourne Valley Project, a major scheme to improve access to the river, heighten awareness, preserve the river's built heritage and improve the wildlife corridor which the river supports. The map above, courtesy of Warwickshire Wildlife Trust, shows the course of the river through the city and it also identifies several tributaries which often provide attractive wooded walkways through parts of suburban Coventry. It is envisaged that the

history group, with support from the Sherbourne Valley Project, will offer a guided walk along part of the river – a so-called 'River Ramble' - during the spring or summer. The photograph on the left shows the River Sherbourne at Whitley, with the old mill beside the bridge – one of numerous mills once powered by the river. This was demolished in about 1950 but the bridge still exists and the general scene is still recognisable today. □



## Murder at the Binley Road Toll House



*Binley Road toll house, pictured in c1906, the scene of a murder in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Photo courtesy of David Fry*

**ONE of the most infamous murders ever to take place in Stoke occurred in November 1772 when Charles Pinchbeck, the unfortunate keeper of the Binley Tollgate, was shot with a pistol during a burglary and died as a result of his wounds.**

As we will see, the two murderers were later apprehended and stood trial at Coventry Assizes in July 1773. Both were found guilty and were executed on Binley Common.

The Binley Tollgate, and the house of its keeper, was situated at Stoke Hill, near to Binley Bridge and the junction of the modern-day Hipswell Highway. It was within the boundary of Stoke and the toll house had been created after Binley Road was turnpiked in 1754.

Historically, this road had more importance than Stoke's other main thoroughfare, Walsgrave Road, which wasn't turnpiked until 1812. But both roads at this time would have been little more than narrow lanes, quite unlike the major roads of today. Tolls paid at a tollgate would pay for their upkeep.

**'...the offenders wounded the keeper of the said gate and afterwards plundered his house of ten pounds and upwards...'**

In his book *The History of Stoke*, Rev Thomas Blyth tells us that a notice was issued by Alderman John Hewitt at the end of November 1772, describing the crime at the toll house. He appealed for

help to find the offenders who appear to have murdered the toll house keeper during a burglary that went horribly wrong.

The notice states that in the early hours of the morning on November 3<sup>rd</sup> 1772, three men went to the turnpike house near Binley Bridge and forcibly broke into the same.

"One of them," said Alderman Hewitt, "by discharging a loaded pistol, wounded the keeper of the said gate (of which wound he is since dead) and afterwards plundered his house of ten pounds and upwards, about seven

shillings thereof being in half-pence, and the said money was contained in two purses, one of them made of an old stocking, and the other of yellow canvas, both of which were taken away.”

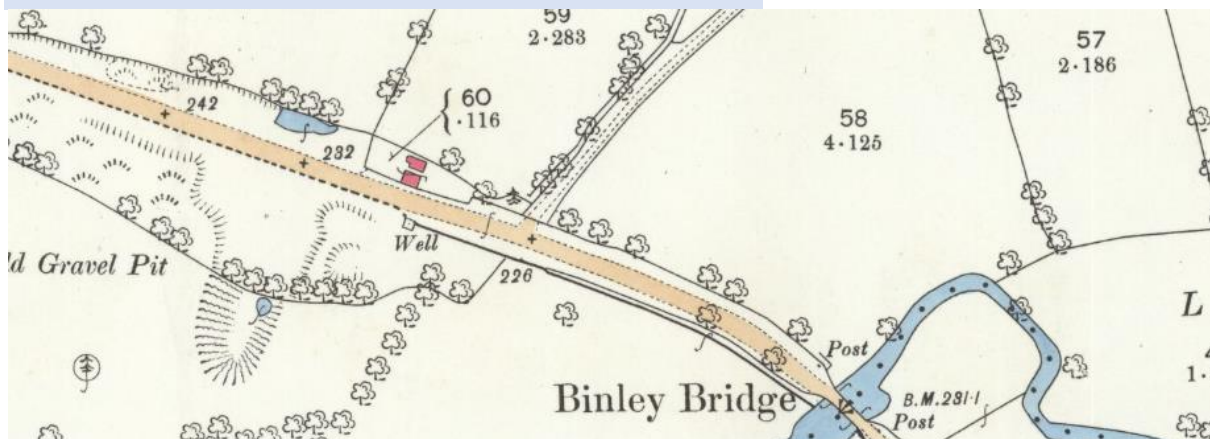
Hewitt tells us that the person who discharged the pistol was a tall man, dressed in a waggoner’s frock with a little round hat upon his head, whose voice the gatekeeper had heard before.

***‘...the men were executed on the following Monday; the scaffold being erected on Binley Common...’***

It was claimed that the charge with which the pistol was loaded was bought in a tradesman’s shop in Coventry, suggesting that the murderer was a local man. A considerable reward was offered for the apprehension and conviction of the offenders, including thirty pounds from the commissioners of the turnpike road and twenty pounds from Lord Craven.

It was also said that if any of the offenders came forward and identified the man who committed the murder, they would be entitled to a free pardon if the guilty man was convicted.

A crucial piece of evidence was also mentioned: it was stated that the robbers, in their hurry, left behind a remarkably strong stick, the club end of which had been previously used for walking.



*This map of 1887, over 100 years later than the murder, shows the site of the toll house, on the way towards Binley Bridge, with Copsewood Grange opposite. The executions evidently took place in this vicinity.*

In April of the following year, Thomas Fern of Church Lawford, and John Howe and Robert Verity of Brinklow, were apprehended, and the first two men were charged and committed for trial. Blyth gives us an account of what happened next.

“Howe was proved to have been acquainted with the murdered man, and it was further proved that the stick, the pistol and the smock frock, belonged to Fern, who had purchased the powder and shot in Coventry. It was further made clear that they belonged to a gang of burglars and had been guilty of many felonies.

“Both men were tried at the Coventry Assizes, July 30<sup>th</sup>, 1773, and after a trial of four hours were convicted before Mr Justice Willes, by whom they were sentenced to death, and were accordingly executed on the Monday following, the scaffold being erected on Binley Common, a short distance from the toll-gate where the murder was committed.”

As a footnote, we are told that the third man initially arrested, Robert Verity, escaped implication in the Binley murder, but was tried at Warwick for a burglary at Bilton and sentenced to seven years’ transportation. □