

Stoke Local History Group

COVENTRY

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stokehistorygroup@gmail.com

editor John Marshall

Godiva: The Lady and the Legend

THE first meeting of the year for Stoke Local History Group will feature a talk and slide show presentation about Coventry's most famous historical figure, Lady Godiva.

Was she a real person and, if so, what connection did she have with Coventry? What can we truthfully say about her legendary ride on horseback, naked, through the streets of the city? Is it true? Who was Earl Leofric, her husband, and did he really impose oppressive taxes on the poor people of Coventry? Who was Peeping Tom? What impact does Lady Godiva continue to have on the city today? And in what ways has the legend of Lady Godiva entered popular culture - in art, films and popular music?



Our speaker, history group member **Iris Weir**, presents '**Godiva: The Lady and the Legend**', at Stoke Library on Friday February 3rd, beginning at 10.30am. There is no need to book. Just turn up.



Wassailing Tim Claye Photo: John Marshall

'Here we come a-Wassailing'

AN extraordinary re-enactment of an ancient tradition took place in Coventry earlier this month when volunteers from Allesley Walled Garden invited visitors to join them in their orchard for a seasonal ritual of wassailing.

The event saw Tim Claye (pictured) pour a small quantity of cider onto nearby apple and pear trees while he recited a few words to wish for a good harvest. Visitors were encouraged to join in with a rendition of the old song, 'Here we come a-wassailing', before being offered cups of warm cider as they watched a performance by Coventry Morris Men.

According to the National Trust, wassailing is a Twelfth Night tradition, with pagan roots, dating back to the Anglo-Saxon period.

"The purpose is to encourage the spirits into ensuring a good harvest the following season. It takes place on the twelfth night after Christmas and involves a visit to a nearby orchard for singing, dancing, drinking and general merrymaking. Revellers typically visited local orchards and fruit trees, sang songs, made a hullabaloo (often by banging pots and pans) and were rewarded by the orchard's grateful owner with some form of warm, spiced alcoholic drink from a communal wassail bowl or cup."

THERE is still time to visit a fascinating exhibition which explores the remarkable social history of youth culture, from the 1920s to the present day. The exhibition, at the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, draws on the extensive photographic collections of the Museum of Youth Culture but also includes many items with a local Coventry connection. 'Grown Up in Britain: 100 Years of Teenage Kicks', runs until February 12th.

Remembering Terry Hall

NUMEROUS tributes were paid last month to Coventry-born singer Terry Hall, frontman of The Specials, who has died at the age of 63.

With hits like *Ghost Town*, *Gangsters* and *Too Much Too Young*, Terry Hall and The Specials were at the forefront of the 2-Tone movement during the late 1970s and early 80s – providing what’s been described as the soundtrack of the era. The group were groundbreaking for their multi-racial membership and the way they used popular music to reflect a turbulent period of social upheaval, economic decline, unemployment and racial tension.



Born in Coventry in 1959, Hall spent his childhood in Hillfields and he attended Sidney Stringer School. His father worked at the city’s Rolls Royce aeronautics factory and his mother at a Chrysler car plant. After leaving school he worked at odd jobs before embarking on a career as a singer and songwriter. He joined a band known as the Coventry Automatics in 1977, which became The Specials in early 1979. The single *Ghost Town*, written by Jerry Dammers, was released in June 1981 and spent three weeks at number one in the UK Singles Chart. The B-side included Hall’s song, *Friday Night, Saturday Morning*, about a night out at Coventry’s Locarno.

Terry Hall left The Specials shortly after their initial chart success, forming Fun Boy Three and other bands before eventually reuniting with The Specials in 2008. They went on to record the aptly named *Encore* in 2019, which reached number one in the UK Albums Chart. A British tour in that year culminated in a triumphant return to Coventry, with sell-out concerts within the Cathedral ruins.

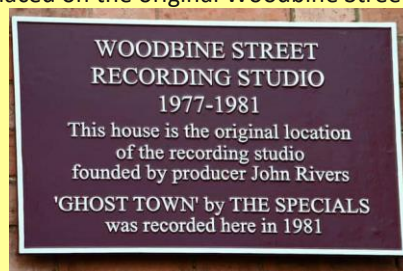
Elvis Costello, Billy Bragg, Boy George and Damon Albarn are among the many notable figures who have paid tribute to Hall. And in Coventry, Lord Mayor Kevin Maton summed up the mood by saying: “Not only was he a talented songwriter and inspiring performer who undertook a number of musical projects, he was a leading light for many in the fight for equality and justice.” Tributes were also displayed beside the city’s ring road and in front of The Empire in Hertford Street, as well as at a Coventry City football game.

- *Permanent displays featuring The Specials and the 2-Tone movement can be viewed at Coventry Music Museum.*



27 Woodbine Street. Photo: John Marshall

AN inconspicuous house in Woodbine Street, Leamington Spa, provided the unlikely setting for the original recording of The Specials’ most famous song, *Ghost Town*, in 1981. John Rivers created a studio at the house in 1977 when he converted the cellar into a basement recording studio. Shortly after the recording session with The Specials, John Rivers moved his studio to St Mary’s Crescent in Leamington, where it still exists and is still known as the Woodbine Street Studios. A plaque was placed on the original Woodbine Street house in 2021.



Ball Hill – the thriving centre of a new Edwardian suburb

IT'S difficult to imagine Ball Hill as anything other than a typical suburban shopping centre, with its lengthy row of shops on either side of the road, punctuated occasionally with a café, a betting shop or post office. But, of course, it was not always so.

In the nineteenth century Ball Hill was still a tiny hamlet with little more than a sprinkling of cottages, a Congregational church (opened in 1836) and an old pub, known at that time as The Ball Inn. The whole area was usually referred to as The Ball, after the pub, and seems not to have acquired its current moniker 'Ball Hill' until later. The hamlet only became part of Coventry with the boundary changes of 1899.



At some point The Ball Inn became known as the Old Ball and by about 1907 it seems to have been significantly enlarged. That coincided with the very rapid development of the area, with new houses being built along Walsgrave Road from Gosford Green to Clay Lane. New streets, like Marlborough Road, St Michael's Road, Clements Street and Kingsway, also appeared on either side of the main road and Ball Hill suddenly emerged as the busy heartland of a new Edwardian suburb.



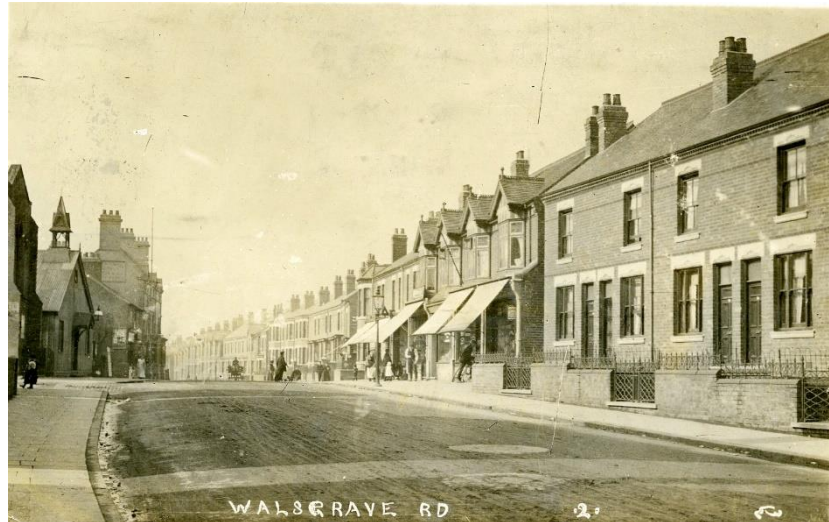
But even then, Ball Hill did not instantly become a shopping centre, nor was it designed as such. True, there were shops on this part of Walsgrave Road but most of the new buildings on either side were houses, not retail stores.

Our photograph on the left, showing Ball Hill at its junction with St Michael's Road in about 1911, illustrates

the point superbly. The corner shop is Vincent Wyles, the butcher - now the Smile Centre and remembered by many as the former PDSA. But other buildings in 1911 - on both sides of the road - are houses, not shops, with tiny front gardens.

In the years that followed, some owners of those houses converted their front rooms into shops and gradually more owners followed suit. The end result was the familiar shopping parade we know today, with former front gardens now displaying goods for sale. Another notable feature of this photograph is the trees in the distance, indicating that urban development at this stage had not gone beyond the junction with Clay Lane and Bray's Lane. Here the new suburb stops, the road narrows, trees line either side, and the road slopes gently down

towards the semi-rural surroundings of Stoke Church. Only in later years did urbanisation expand beyond this point. As houses and shops developed on Ball Hill, so too did social, religious and educational facilities. The Congregational church had started life in 1836 but this proved inadequate for the rising population of Stoke in the early years of the twentieth century. An additional temporary building was constructed by the church in 1907 and this provided extra space for activities like sewing classes and a men's social club, in addition to church services and Sunday schools.



This photograph of Ball Hill dates from 1912 and shows the congregational chapel buildings on the left, with houses on the right, later to become shops.



By 1910, a much bigger church, St Margaret's (pictured left), was constructed on Ball Hill, on a sizeable plot of land on the corner of the new Argyll Street. It was built by a local firm, Garlicks, in red brick, and opened for worship in the following year. Shortly afterwards, a Church Hall and Institute was built near the church, and this became a major centre for social life in the area, providing facilities for social clubs, dance classes and numerous sporting activities, as well as choir practice and Bible classes. The building still exists but is now known as the Churchill Hotel.

Another addition to Ball Hill in those early years was a new public library, one of three new branch libraries built in Coventry with funds from Andrew Carnegie, the Scottish-American businessman and philanthropist. The library sat on the corner of Kingsway, at the bottom of the hill, and was opened in 1913. Carnegie visited the library in the following year, during a trip to Coventry to receive the honorary freedom of the city. He was escorted by the Mayor Siegfried Bettmann, the founder of Triumph and a resident of nearby Stoke Park.

In due course Ball Hill even had the luxury of an outdoor swimming pool, located behind Kingsway, on a strip of land beside the railway line, signifying a final step in the enormous leap from rural hamlet to thriving suburb in an expanding industrial city.

John Marshall

A shorter version of this article originally appeared in *The Avenews*, the Stoke Park residents' newsletter, in March 2021. Photographs courtesy of David Fry and Rob Orland.



Ball Hill in 1926: the absence of traffic is striking to modern eyes.