

Spotlight on a little-known genius: the life and work of Frederick Lanchester

MOST citizens of Coventry will be familiar with the name 'Lanchester' and many will recall the old Lanchester College of Technology, which later became known as Lanchester Polytechnic.

Some will even have fond memories of attending concerts at the old Students' Union Building in Priory Street - affectionately known as 'The Lanch'. But how many people know much about Frederick Lanchester, the man whose name, for many years, became synonymous with the institution now known as Coventry University?

The next meeting of Stoke Local History Group will feature two guest speakers, Paul Henderson and Paul Nolan, from the Lanchester Archives at Coventry University, who will invite you into the world of Frederick Lanchester, a producer of cars but also an inventor, scientist, engineer and innovator who changed the course of transportation history at the birth of aeronautics and motoring.



'The Wooden Car' built by Fred as a private venture – the first petrol-electric hybrid car, produced in 1927. Pictured above: Fred with a glider. Photos courtesy of Lanchester Archive

Using photographs, documents and film footage from the vast Lanchester Archive, the talk uncovers this little-known genius, including royal connections, pre-WW1 hybrid power and the connection between the city of Coventry, the University and the factory where the last Lanchester cars were made.

Born in 1868, Frederick Lanchester is perhaps best known for designing and building the first all-British motor car in 1895 but he also published papers and books detailing the first scientific principles of flight, theorised about the principles of colour photography before it was a reality and devised military strategies that underpin business management courses still taught today.

The meeting about Frederick Lanchester takes place at Stoke Library on Friday March 3rd, beginning at 10.30am. There is no need to book. Just turn up!

Future meetings and events

IT'S worth noting that our April meeting at Stoke Library will take place a week later than normal, on Friday April 14th. This is because the previous week, the first Friday of the month, is Good Friday and a Bank Holiday. A group visit to Charterhouse is planned for May but we're still waiting for confirmation of the date. Other outdoor events will be organised during the first months of summer.

Lady Godiva: the woman and the legend

Iris Weir summarises some aspects of her recent talk about Coventry's most famous historical figure

STAND in Broadgate as the clock begins to strike the hour and you will see two Godivas. One is a crude pink naked figure with garish yellow hair, perched on a roughly carved white horse, which jerks its way into public view while Peeping Tom leers hideously from his window above. It's comical and endearing, a beloved feature of the city square. The other Godiva, a statue on a plinth bearing the words 'Self-Sacrifice', is tastefully naked in the classical style, mounted on a noble steed.



Godiva dominates this square in the heart of Coventry – but who was she? Is the enduring story true? Did Godiva really ride through Coventry to relieve the tax burden imposed on its citizens by her husband Leofric, or is it just a legend?



Godiva was a legitimate historical figure; she is listed in the Domesday Book as a wealthy landholder in her own right. She was well-connected: her brother Thorold, became Sheriff of Lincolnshire. In 1035, Godiva married Leofric, Earl of Mercia, who ruled an extensive kingdom stretching from the Welsh border to the Wash.

Both Godiva and Leofric supported religious foundations in areas where they owned land. One was in Coventry, where the nunnery of St Osburga had been destroyed by the Danes around 1018, during King Canute's reign. In

1043, on this site, Godiva and Leofric founded a Benedictine Monastery dedicated to the Virgin Mary.

Godiva lavished gold, silver and jewels on this establishment; also, a major attraction for pilgrims was installed in a silver case: the arm of St Augustine of Hippo. Despite her Coventry connections, Godiva probably never lived there, owning property elsewhere in Mercia.

How did Godiva come to be associated with a naked ride through the streets of Coventry? The tale first appears 150 years after her death, in Roger of Wendover's 13th century chronicle, 'The Flowers of History', a lively compilation of historical events. Godiva is described as a devout woman, begging her husband to free the people of Coventry 'from heavy bondage and servitude'. Leofric declared that if she rode naked through the marketplace, he would lift the tax burden. Godiva complied, and Leofric kept his promise. However, no evidence exists in Saxon documents, despite Godiva and Leofric being so well-known that their good deeds were recorded in the annals of their religious foundations.

Nevertheless, the legend of Lady Godiva's ride eventually entered the folklore of the city and huge Godiva Processions were held each year from the 17th century onwards. Even today, the legend remains a powerful symbol of justice, fair play and self-sacrifice, and the name Godiva is known throughout the world. □



Godiva and Leofric in a 19th century painting by John Clifton (Herbert Art Gallery)

Park Cottage – an extraordinary house in Stoke Park

COMPLETELY hidden behind tall hedgerows and a large bleak gate in East Avenue is the reputed first house ever to be built in Stoke Park and one of the most extraordinary buildings ever to be constructed in Coventry.

Park Cottage was built in 1865 by local builder Alfred Mault, who worked on many projects around the city with architect James Murray, who created many of Coventry's most distinctive Victorian buildings. The term 'builder' may be misleading when applied to Mr Mault because, as we shall see, his talents were far-reaching and his achievements went far beyond the building trade.

His architect friend James Murray created a number of new buildings in Coventry, including the Corn Exchange in Hertford Street and a new School of Art in Ford Street. But he also worked on a number of schemes to renovate and extend existing old buildings in the city.

It is known, for example, that Murray, together with Mault, worked on a plan to renovate and restore 13th century All Saints Church in Allesley and they also worked together on a major extension of 14th century St Mary's Guildhall in Bayley Lane - both completed in around 1862-63.



Inside Park Cottage: the wall panelling here is said to have come from All Saints Church, Allesley

It would appear that Alfred Mault took full advantage of his involvement in these schemes by removing unwanted fragments of the old buildings to construct Park Cottage, a house he designed for his own occupation. The result is a large detached house in imitation Tudor style, built with old timbers and other material taken from some of the historically most important buildings in Coventry. There is even a suggestion that he might have used old stones from the city wall for parts of his own house's construction.

And it was not just the external structure of the house that benefitted from this 19th century recycling. Studies have shown that internal decoration and panelling in the house is also likely to have come from

All Saints and St Mary's, all of which makes Park Cottage a unique building.

Part of the work undertaken at All Saints in Allesley involved the removal of square pews in the body of the church and their replacement with more open seating. The panels from these pews, it is believed, were used as panelling in Park Cottage. It is also thought that Mault took doors and windows from St Mary's Hall and other places to create some of the more unusual features in his own home. A small window above the front door at Park Cottage, for example, is thought to have come from St Mary's.

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A rear view of Park Cottage from Bray's Lane, currently the only visible part of the house to outsiders. Photo: John Marshall

Stoke Park itself was first laid out for housing in the 1860s, having previously been used as part of a race course, and Mault seems to have been the first person to acquire a plot. The census in 1861 shows Mault living at Stoke Green but by 1871 the census shows him living at Park Cottage, the only house in Stoke Park at that time.

Mault was an exceptionally well educated man and was said to be extremely influential during this period in Coventry. "He was the City Surveyor, Corporation Bailiff and Coventry's Health Officer," observed local historian David McGrory. "He sat on council committees in the 1850s, he was secretary of the Builders Union, was a Private in the Coventry Volunteer Rifle Corp ...[and] he also played for Coventry and North Warwickshire Cricket Club." Mault also designed the Elizabethan style baths that once stood in Hales Street.

By the end of the 1870s Mault had moved away – first to France as a railway engineer and then to

Tasmania as an engineering inspector – and he died in Hobart in 1902.

Meanwhile his old house in Coventry became the home of Henry Vickers Jones, whose family took up residence in around 1880 and stayed there until 1975.

These days Park Cottage, a locally listed building, appears to be unoccupied and local residents are concerned about its future. There are fears that the house is deteriorating and in urgent need of restoration. But the current owner, we understand, says the house is occupied for part of each year and repairs are being undertaken.

Local residents have raised the issue at a newly formed Lower Stoke Citizens' Assembly, attended by ward councillors, and they hope to gain assurances about the future of the building.

John Marshall

- Further information about Park Cottage and Alfred Mault can be found on the Coventry Society website, with contributions from Charles Barker, David McGrory and Paul Maddocks.

What's in a name? *Jabet's Ash*

THE history group newsletter has been going for almost three years and has always been known simply as 'The Newsletter'. The time seemed right to give it a proper name, especially as it seems likely to continue for the foreseeable future. Rather than call it 'The Beano' or something equally daft, it seemed more appropriate to choose a name with a distinctive Stoke association. The name chosen therefore is 'Jabet's Ash', a name with a unique and famous Stoke flavour. Many readers will know that Jabet's Ash was an ancient ash tree on Binley Road which for centuries was a landmark and boundary marker. It was often used as place where important people would be met when visiting Coventry. A tree still exists on the site and a plaque marks the spot. An article about Jabet's Ash was featured in the October 2020 newsletter.

