

## Next stop: group visit to Lanchester Archives

IN March this year, Paul Nolan's talk to the group gave us an insight into the amazing talents of the little-known genius Frederick Lanchester, whose achievements ranged from motoring inventions, car production, the theory of flight and even advances in music.

As a follow-up to this presentation, Stoke Local History Group is now planning a visit to Coventry University to see, first hand, the impressive Lanchester Archives. The visit will take place on **Wednesday June 28th**, from 2-4pm. Further details will be sent out nearer the time - but please put the date in your diary.



Photo courtesy of Lanchester Archive

In the meantime, if you can't wait, Lanchester Archives will be taking part in this year's Coventry MotoFest which is happening over the weekend of June 3<sup>rd</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup>. The festival is described as "a weekend of non-stop cultural celebration and motoring madness." As part of the festival, Lanchester Archives say they will be "lifting the bonnet on a range of heritage vehicles, engaging with those whose knowledge and skills have rescued, repaired, and renovated these amazing cars." They expect to have about twelve classic Lanchester and Daimler cars on display. It all takes place at the Lanchester Library, Gosford Street, from 11am-4pm on Saturday June 3<sup>rd</sup>. See the MotoFest website for details of other events during the festival weekend.



### Jabet's Ash to get a story board

LOCAL residents in the Gosford Park and Stoke Park area have announced that an information board will be erected next to Stoke's most famous tree, Jabet's Ash, to tell the tale of its history. The tree, on the corner of Binley Road and Marlborough Road, is noted as an ancient boundary marker and is where Royal visitors were sometimes met when entering Coventry. The name "Jabet" may be a corruption of the word "gibbet" because evidence suggests that a gibbet may once have occupied the site. Another theory suggests that it was named after Joubert, who was Prior of Coventry in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. An announcement in the Stoke Park

residents' newsletter, *The Avenews*, said an agreement has now been reached with the council to clear and landscape a spot near the tree. The plaque itself will be funded by the Gosford Park Residents Association. The story board is expected to be similar to a notice next to the Joseph Levi Clock, opposite.

# Fancy a day out? Try Birmingham's Back-to-Backs

THE industrial revolution squeezed thousands of people into cities, made them work very hard, paid them a pittance, and obliged them to live in cramped, insanitary conditions.

A fascinating glimpse into the typical homes of working class folk can be found nearby in Birmingham, where the restored back-to-back houses in Hurst Street and Inge Street take us back to a time when life was tough and living conditions were spartan.

This extraordinary place in Birmingham also gives us an insight into how hundreds of Coventry people would have lived in the crowded courts which once dominated the centre of this city.

“For most of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century too, the back-to-back court was home for the majority of people in the English cities of the Midlands and the North,” says the National Trust. “From Birmingham to Nottingham, and from Liverpool to Leeds, back-to-back houses crowded along and behind every street. Birmingham alone had 20,000 such courts.”

We know that Coventry, too, was cramped with courts in narrow streets such as Much Park Street, Little Park Street, old Cow Lane and Spon Street. Nearer to Stoke, courts could be found in Gosford Street and behind the original properties in Far Gosford Street.



*Some of the inner houses in Court 15, Birmingham. The bay windows indicate a higher class of design than many similar properties, but the rooms were still tiny and walls were only one brick thick.*  
Photos: John Marshall



*By 1896, all houses fronting onto Hurst Street had been turned into shops, with the last trader (Mr Saunders, the tailor) not moving out until 2002.*

families, and these privies were originally called ‘earth closets’, meaning they were unattached to any sewerage system and required a man to visit each week (the ‘night-soil man’) to empty the buckets. Only in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century were the courts connected to a mains drainage system.

The surviving old court in Birmingham owes its continued existence to a matter of chance when it escaped demolition in the 1930s, when similar properties in the area were bulldozed. Court 15 survived, and it was eventually realised, in the late 1980s, that such a rare piece of social history ought to be saved.

“These courts,” says a National Trust booklet, “were not great pieces of architecture. They were cheap to build and cheap to live in; often they were overcrowded, badly maintained, and sanitation was poor. Two or three rooms were all such houses offered, and just a thin wall divided each house from its neighbour.”

Outside toilets were shared between

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It is thanks to the Birmingham Conservation Trust, and later the National Trust, that Court 15 has been expertly restored. It gives a vivid impression of how three different families would have lived, with each house representing a different period: the 1840s, 1870s and the 1930s. The transition from one house to another therefore takes us on an amazing journey through time and briefly puts us in touch with real people who once lived in these homes.

Birmingham Back-to-Backs are in Hurst Street and all visits are by pre-booked guided tours. It's an enthralling way to spend a couple of hours and is highly recommended. Bookings can be made online.

## Life in Coventry's crowded courts

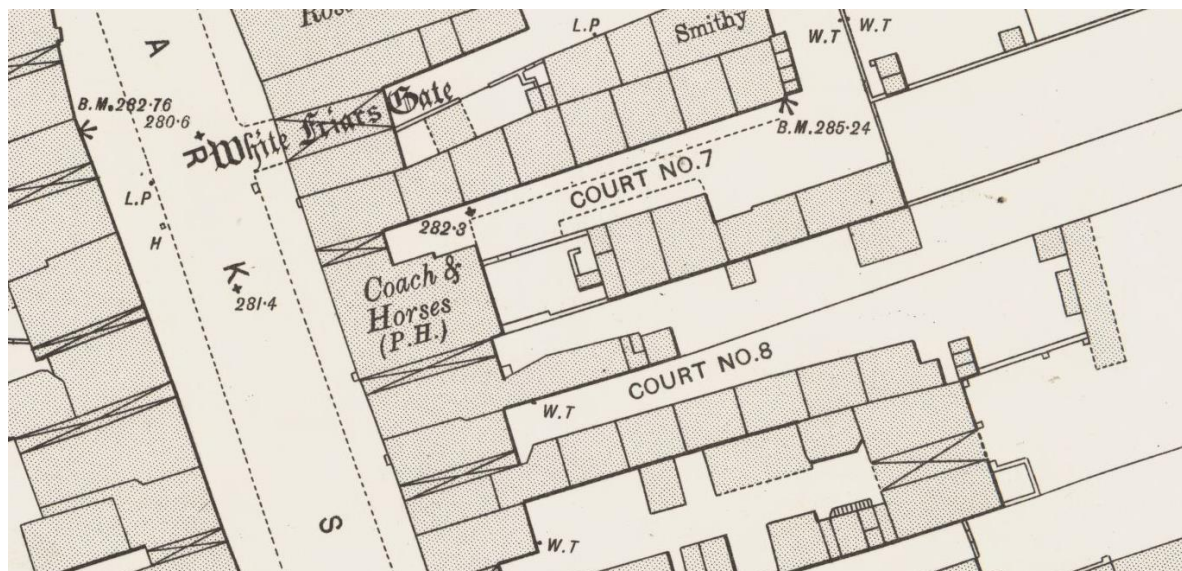
**THE industrial population of Coventry expanded very quickly in the early years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and, as a result, there was enormous pressure on space within the city's creaking medieval street plan. The effect was a concentration of housing on every available piece of land.**

A number of large old houses, which once had generous gardens, soon lost their outdoor space.

"Many gardens were rapidly built up with parallel rows of small dwellings, often with weavers' workshops on their upper floors," notes the *Victoria County History*. "Passages through or between the houses on the street frontages provided the only access to these crowded and often insanitary courts."



*Much Park Street in 1912, where many courts were located. Whitefriars Gate (right) is virtually the only remaining building now.*



*Detail from a street plan of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, showing courts behind the original frontages in Much Park Street.*

In the forty years between 1801 and 1841, the population of Coventry almost doubled and it was not considered possible to expand the city outwards, where ancient Lammas and Michaelmas lands were protected from development. Consequently, virtually all additional housing was squeezed into the inner city. By 1843, a report on working class housing found that conditions were very bad. *...continued next page*

“The town possessed many very old houses,” says the *County History*, “some of which were timber-framed buildings with upper storeys projecting into streets which were often ‘narrow, crooked, ill-lighted, ill-paved and cleansed, and very ill-ventilated. Lanes, courts, and alleys abound in every direction and of the worst kind’.

“In these the inhabitants were so congested ‘that disease takes root in the human frame as speedily as though the locality itself were pestiferous.’ Such conditions were plentifully distributed through Coventry.”

It appears that the worst areas were places like Leicester Street, Tower Street and Palmer Lane. The neighbourhoods of Cow Lane, Warwick Lane, Greyfriars Lane, Barrack Yard, Much Park Street and St John’s Street were all neglected and unhealthy, with parts of Spon Street ‘notoriously so’.



***It was recently announced that the Weaver’s House in Upper Spon Street is to begin a project to restore the footprint of the former court building which once stood behind the existing house. The court was used as housing in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and the aim is to show what life would have been like in the courts. “We’re asking the public to get in touch if they have any connection or memories to share – even if it is just scraps of information which might seem trivial as this might be a vital piece of the jigsaw!” said Tina Woodroffe. “The plans will be on display during Open Days in 2023 and photos, memories and family reminiscences would be very much welcomed to help us build an authentic picture of life in the court houses.”***

“It is true that most tenements in Coventry were of two storeys, each house occupied by a single family. But there were many back-to-back houses in the older parts of the town where there were also three-storey buildings with one entrance and without through ventilation, each containing three or four families. A report in 1849 gives many instances of overcrowding in these areas. In Brewery Street, for example, a man, wife, five children, and four lodgers occupied one room, and this was not untypical.”

In the 1840s, even recently constructed houses left much to be desired.

“They were built as cheaply as possible with the object of getting quick returns from rents, and as many dwellings as possible were squashed on to small spaces. Often they consisted of rows of houses 18 feet deep by 12 feet wide, the ground floor comprising a kitchen of say 12 feet by 10 feet, together with a ‘back-kitchen, pantry, coal-hole and staircase’. Above this were two bedrooms (often used for business purposes), while the upper storey was intended for a ribbon-weavers’ shop, capable of taking up to four looms.”

In his book, *Coventry: Six Hundred Years of Municipal Life*, Frederick Smith tells us that by 1849 a number of diseases had reached epidemic proportions, including scarlet fever and typhus, with a high level of mortality.

He wrote: “The streets were generally long, and were narrow and, mostly tortuous, and there were no less than 164 courts, alleys and yards (in many cases without any thoroughfare, and approached by long covered passages), containing in all 1,813 houses,

occupied by 7,408 persons. Overcrowding was prevalent...”

Of 98 streets, some had sewers but 76 had no sewers at all. For those sewers that existed, the outlet was usually into the Sherbourne. In some places there might be one privy per house, but in others there would be one privy for seventeen houses. Of 163 courts and yards, there was an average of one privy to six houses.

These days, the Watch Museum in Spon Street occupies part of what is thought to be the last surviving court in Coventry. The museum acquired Court 7, behind the former Shakespeare pub, in 2002 with the intention of renovating the site and turning it into a permanent Watch Museum. We hope to visit later this year. □