



## Watch Museum visit, Saturday 29 July, beginning at 11am

A REMINDER that our next event is a group visit to Coventry's unique Watch Museum in Spon Street, located in what is probably the city's last surviving court dwelling. The Watch Museum contains an impressive collection of watches, clocks, equipment and artefacts – all relating to the historic watchmaking trade in Coventry.

The museum can easily be found in medieval Spon Street, just a brief stroll from St John's Church. It sits behind the recently closed Samoan Joe's pub (previously known as The Shakespeare) and is reached through a short alley at the side of the building. Signs on Spon Street indicate the entrance. The museum is run entirely by volunteers and has an admission charge of just £2 per person. Meet outside the museum at 11am on Saturday July 29<sup>th</sup>. There is no need to book.

## Old Grammar School building faces new challenge

THE Old Grammar School in Hales Street, expensively restored in 2015, faces a new challenge after tiles began to fall from its roof. Roadside barriers have now been placed around the building to block off the pavement and prevent pedestrians being hurt by falling debris.

The building is run by Culture Coventry, the Trust that also operates the city's Transport Museum, the Herbert Art Gallery and the Lunt Roman Fort at Baginton. Steve Wiles, the Director of Operations for the trust, told the *Coventry Observer* that the Old Grammar School had closed temporarily due to "unforeseen issues" with the roof.

"A heritage surveyor has been commissioned to carry out a detailed assessment of the roof and associated structures, to fully understand the extent of the remedial works required," he told the paper.



Barriers now surround the Old Grammar School

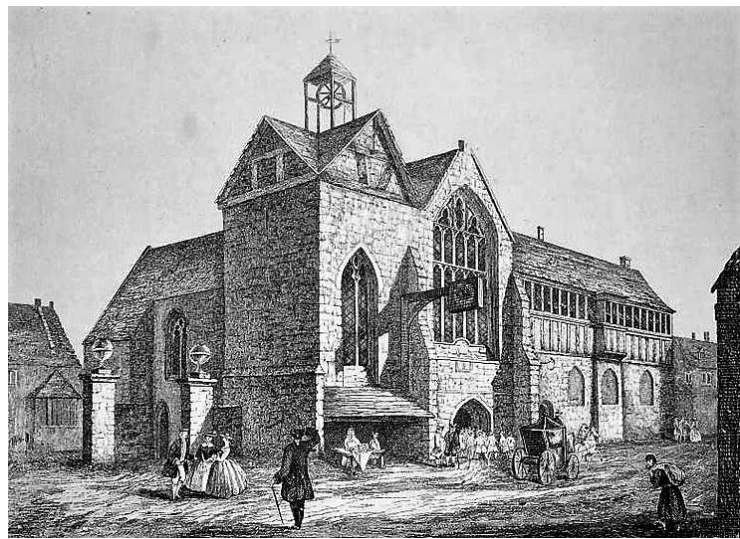
The old Grammar School, a Grade I listed building, was closed and unused for many years but reopened in 2015 after a £1.5 million restoration project, partly funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund. □

# The Old Grammar School, formerly the Hospital of St John

THE building known to most Coventrians as 'the Old Grammar School' was originally part of St John's Hospital and was founded in around 1157 by the Benedictine Prior Laurence of St Mary's Priory. It is thought to have been rebuilt in the 14<sup>th</sup> century and would have been significantly larger than the present structure.

The hospital had its own chapel and was maintained by gifts and endowments from local benefactors. It had around 24-30 beds for the sick and infirm of the city, as well as for travellers in need of lodgings. The hospital was run by a priest, three under-priests and five women who provided 'provisions and requisites' for the poor people who lodged there. In 1522 there were also three clerks.

The present building in Hales Street is the original church, and it is thought likely that some of the sick and infirm would have been accommodated here, leaving only the chancel set aside for worship.



*An engraving of the Old Free School in the 19<sup>th</sup> century: the library occupied part of the half-timbered building on the right, demolished in the 1840s for the construction of Hales Street.*



*A pre-war image of the Old Grammar School, with Bishop Street straight ahead.*

*Photo courtesy of Rob Orland*

The hospital was dissolved at the Reformation and was acquired in 1546 by John Hales, who turned the building into a Free Grammar School, in honour of King Henry VIII. Much of the original building and adjoining garden was lost over the years, caused by the widening of the Burges in 1794 and by the creation of Hales Street in 1848. The west front of the current building (facing Corporation Street) was reconstructed in 1852 in orthodox Gothic style.

Among the many pupils who were educated at the Free School was the Warwickshire-based herald and scholar

William Dugdale, who achieved prominence during the 17<sup>th</sup> century as a medieval historian. He is best known to us as the author of *Antiquities of Warwickshire* (1656), which became a model for large-scale county histories. He was knighted in 1667. We owe to Dugdale the interesting observation that part of the parish of Stoke (almost certainly Stoke Green) was "adorned with many fair summer houses" in 1640.

Other distinguished former scholars of the school were George Berkeley (later Baron Berkeley) of Caludon Castle, John Davenport, who founded New Haven in Connecticut, Thomas Sheepshank, who became Bishop of Norwich, and Samuel Winter who became Provost of Trinity College, Dublin.

The Grammar School survived for over 300 years before a new school was built in Warwick Road in 1885. □



# Remembering Gosford Park Pool and the era of open-air swimming

THE 1930s has been described as “the golden age of lidos” when outdoor swimming became popular, and many pools were created around Britain, either at seaside locations such as Scarborough – with its famously elegant South Bay Lido – or at inland locations like Tottenham or Edmonton in London.

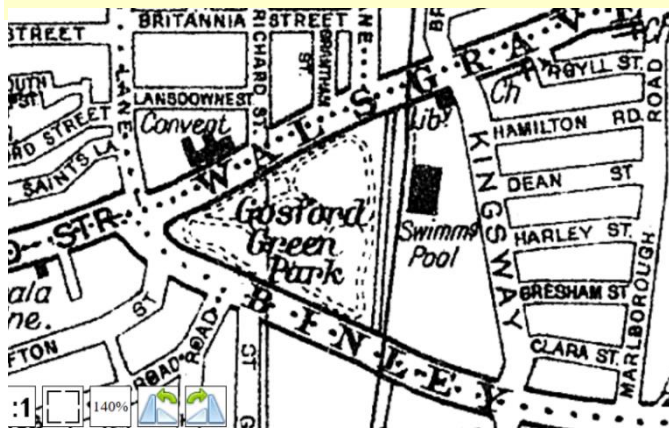
Provincial towns were quick to join the race to create these fashionable outdoor pools – some known as lidos, others not – and Coventry was no exception. Two pools were opened in the city, one near Green Lane and the other next to Gosford Green in Stoke.



Gosford Park Pool, August 1955

Photo: Coventry Evening Telegraph

The pools in Coventry opened in the early 1930s and were privately financed and built, remaining popular until finally being pushed out of business in the 1960s by the irresistible allure of the smart new Coventry Baths.



The pool at Stoke, known as Gosford Park Pool, was located behind houses in Kingsway, tucked out of sight beside the railway embankment. The entrance was off Walsgrave Road, between Stoke Library and the railway bridge (now a road bridge). It became a well-used venue for sporting competitions – such as racing, diving or water polo – as well as for casual recreational swimming.

When it opened in May 1934, the *Coventry Herald* welcomed the new facility, saying it “will doubtless meet a very great demand in the heavily housed Stoke area”, and the paper described the unique features of the pool, such as artificial warming of the water which, it said, would make swimming attractive in all weathers. This feature, as we shall see, was not always apparent in later years.

The opening ceremony, we are told, featured a local entertainer called ‘Stainless Stephen’ who made an amusing speech and then became the first person to dive into the pool, where he engaged in mock combat with the ‘Loch Ness Monster’. This was followed by swimming displays from local champions, as well as a water polo match between Coventry teams.

The Deputy Mayor, at the opening ceremony, admitted that the Corporation Baths (in Priory Street) were sometimes overcrowded and he threw out the suggestion that some arrangement might be made with the

owners to allow school children to use the new Stoke pool. This idea seems to have been taken up because generations of local children would later remember being taken to the pool for lessons.

A number of contributors to the Historic Coventry Forum recalled their experiences at Gosford Pool in the 1950s or early 60s, with most evoking at least a cold shiver or two: "I well remember going to Gosford Pool with my school, Frederick Bird's," said one man. "I hated it. It was so cold. Especially in the winter months."



*A local swimmer at Gosford Park Pool  
Photo: Historic Coventry Forum*

Another person agreed: "I also remember going to Gosford Pool with my school, St Mary's. I never did learn to swim- it was too cold. The best thing about the visit was hot Oxo after the lesson!"

A woman from Wiltshire commented: "Like most kids who went to Stoke Junior, I learned to swim at Gosford Pool, spent a lot of summers there either swimming or sunbathing on the terrace, jumping off the diving boards and eyeing up the boys. One very famous day my sister dived in and lost the top of her bikini. There was a mass jump-in of boys volunteering to retrieve it. Simple fun, and the water was always warmer in the rain... Always a popular place."

Another contributor recalled that Gosford Pool had a wider role, creating an important recreational space in a busy urban area. "Over eight years I spent a lot of time at the Gosford," he wrote. "I must have seen hundreds of people turn up for a swim and found it too cold. But it had another side, many people found it a quiet haven in the city, just to sit and read in the

sunshine. A number of young people brought books and did their homework in the quiet of the poolside. One guy in particular was Alf Tye (Coventry water polo captain) who one summer spent a huge amount of time at the pool, swotting for his finals before joining the Aussie Air Force."

There was some agreement that Kenpas Pool, on the other side of the city, was posher than Gosford Pool, with one woman declaring that "Kenpas baths looked rather swish in their art deco style". But despite complaints about cold water, it seems clear that the open-air facility at Gosford was enormously popular, especially in warm summers, when huge numbers would flock to the pool.



*An advertising postcard for Kenpas Pool.*

*Photo courtesy of David Fry*

Swimming at Gosford was complemented by indoor bathing at Livingstone Road Baths in Foleshill (opened in 1937) and by another open-air pool, on the outskirts of the city at Ryton Bridge Hotel.

But the city's two open-air lidos, Gosford and Kenpas, would eventually fall victim to changing fashions and by the mid-1960s their future looked uncertain. In 1966 the *Coventry Evening Telegraph* reported what seemed like the end of an era. The owners of the Gosford Pool, it said, had taken the decision not to reopen that year. It had been popular enough in the past, the owners said, but now that so many people had cars, television sets and other amusements, enthusiasm for open-air swimming seemed to have dropped right off. There was also fierce competition from the newly opened central swimming baths, so the Gosford Pool had to close. The Kenpas Pool carried on for a few more seasons and in 1967 was renamed The Oasis, but it, too, would ultimately close. It was replaced by housing in a cul-de-sac, aptly known as Poolside Gardens. □

**John Marshall**