

## New Coventry Cross unveiled in city centre

A NEWLY rebuilt Coventry Cross was officially unveiled in the centre of the city last month, located on the edge of Broadgate, between Primark and Holy Trinity Church.

The cross is based on a 1976 replica of the famous 16<sup>th</sup> century cross, and tells the story of Coventry's growth as an important medieval market town.

The new version, located close to the original site of the Tudor cross at Cross Cheaping, features a series of stained glass windows which recall the history of the cross and the role played in the city's history by Henry VI and his queen, Margaret of Anjou.

The monument stands 60 feet tall and contains 33 statues of animals, angels, saints and kings. In the centre is a remarkable 3D-printed sculpture of King Henry VI, based on the original Tudor statue.

The new cross is a rebuild of a 1976 replica which once stood at the rear of Cathedral Lanes.



*The new Coventry Cross attracts the attention of passers-by in its prominent location on the edge of Broadgate, opposite Holy Trinity Church.*

*Photo: John Marshall*

- *What is the connection between Coventry's famous Tudor cross and the parish of Stoke? See article on pages 3-4.*

### Heritage Open Days, September

STOKE Local History Group has no event this month because we take our usual summer break in August and September. But there will be no shortage of activities next month for those with an interest in history and heritage. Coventry's Heritage Open Days begin on Friday September 8<sup>th</sup> and continue until Sunday September 17<sup>th</sup>. Take a look at the Anglican Chapel in London Road Cemetery, visit Bagot's Castle at Baginton, have a tour of Henry VIII School or visit the King's Field Orchard in Stoke. Numerous other places are also open. Search online for 'Coventry Heritage Open Days'. Stoke Local History Group will return to Stoke Library in October.

# Stainless Stephen: a national comic entertainer

IN last month's article about Gosford Park Pool, it was stated that the pool was opened in 1934 by Stainless Stephen, who was assumed to be a "local entertainer". Not so, says reader Mark Cook, who points out that Stainless Stephen was in fact a nationally known comedian and entertainer.

Born in 1892 in the steel-making city of Sheffield, Stainless Stephen was the stage name of Arthur Clifford Baynes, who became an English teacher in 1922. After serving in the First World War, he made his first stage appearances as a comedian and became popular on local radio. He gave up his teaching job in 1935 and moved to London as a full-time entertainer.

On stage, he would dress in a smart tuxedo, a bowler hat with a steel band around it, a rotating bow tie and a stainless-steel vest. He became famous for his way of speaking punctuation marks during his monologues, as in "Somebody once said, inverted commas, comedians are born not made, full stop." He was never in the front rank of British music hall performers, according to writer Roy Busby, but he supported Will Hay at the Victoria Palace in 1944 and appeared on the bill of the London Palladium's Royal Command Performance in 1945. He retired in 1952.

Mark Cook comments: "I imagine he did the opening of the pool [at Gosford] in the style of his act, full stop, inverted commas..." □



*Cigarette card image of Stainless Stephen, 1935, WD & HO Wills. Picture and information from Wikipedia*



OUR group visit last month to Coventry Watch Museum revealed many things of interest, quite apart from the fascinating collection of watches, clocks and artefacts associated with the watchmaking trade. The museum itself is partly housed in three tiny cottages, typical of the many court dwellings which once dominated the old streets of Coventry. Spon Street suffered severe damage during bombing in World War Two and the current museum shows a vivid scar from that period – a deep crack in the side of the building (pictured right). The building remains structurally sound but the crack reminds us of the many perils associated with the Blitz. Pictured (above right) are the amazing volunteers who keep the museum ticking over. The museum is open on Tuesdays and Saturdays, 11am to 3pm. □



# The Coventry Cross: a 16<sup>th</sup> century gift from Sir William Hollis

A MARKET cross is known to have existed in the centre of Coventry as early as the 13<sup>th</sup> century but the most famous Coventry Cross was that bequeathed to the city in 1541 by Sir William Hollis, a former Mayor of London and “the son of Thomas Hollis of Stoke, near Coventry”.

William is believed to have been born in the parish of Stoke in around 1471 and his name is now remembered locally in suburban Hollis Road, a street of houses near Stoke Green, built shortly before the First World War.

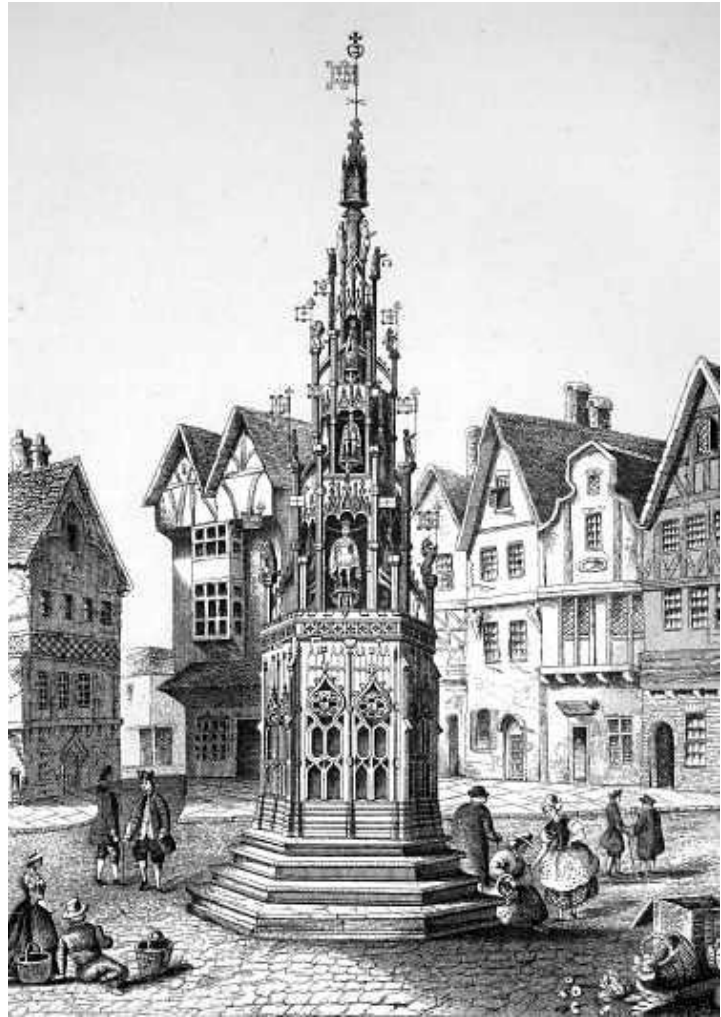
An account given by the Rev Blyth in his book *The History of Stoke* (1897), says that William was the second son of Thomas Hollis (sometimes spelt as Holles or Hollys), who “according to tradition lived in a house situated on a piece of land called the Hall Place, which now forms part of the Glebe Land.” The site of the house was said to be near the church and opposite Stoke Row, and the *Victoria County History* surmises that it was probably a house known as Stoke Hall, long since demolished.

From a note in the Stoke Parish Register, it appears that William moved to London where he afterwards met “with great success”. He began as an apprentice to a mercer named William Kirvile and rose to become a wealthy merchant and master of the Worshipful Company of Mercers. According to Blyth, Hollis was appointed Sheriff of Middlesex in 1528, became Lord Mayor of London in 1539 and was knighted by Henry VIII in 1540.



Sir William died at his London home in October 1542 and was buried in St Helen’s Church, Bishopsgate. He left the bulk of his estate to his three sons but left £200 in his will (the equivalent of about £55,000 today) for the construction of a new Coventry Cross, which was to be built, like its predecessor, at Cross Cheaping.

The new cross, which replaced an earlier cross built in 1422, was widely admired for its architectural



*An engraving of the famous Tudor Coventry Cross by WF Taunton, from Benjamin Poole’s 19<sup>th</sup> century book, ‘Coventry: Its History and Antiquities’*

quality and was described by William Dugdale, the 17<sup>th</sup> century historian, as “one of the chief things wherein this city most glories, which for workmanship and beauty is inferior to none in England.”

The cross was modelled on an existing cross at Abingdon in Berkshire (now Oxfordshire) and precise instructions were left by Sir William in his will about what the cross should contain and how it should be constructed. It was completed in 1544 and became an impressive monument to his memory.

Benjamin Poole, the 19<sup>th</sup> century historian, described it thus: “Architecturally, its style was Gothic; but the richness and profusion of its ornamentation made it something more than a simple production of Gothic art. It was hexagonal, each side being seven feet at the base; rising, and finely diminishing in three storeys to the height of fifty-seven feet. There were eighteen canopied niches, beautifully adorned with statutes, some of which were brought from the White Friars monastery, which at that time was undergoing ‘dissolution’ under Henry VIII... “

The lower storey of the cross included statues of Henry VI, King John, Edward I, Henry II, Richard I, and Henry V. In the second storey were Edward III, St Michael, Henry III, St George, and Richard II. And in the upper storey were St Peter, St James, St Christopher and two monks, probably intended to represent two of the religious orders which for centuries had been located in the city. In a lantern surmounting the top was a figure of Justice.

After standing for more than 125 years, says Poole, “this glorious monument was, in 1669, thoroughly repaired and restored to a state of even more than its original brilliancy. Its decorations were renewed, and it was so enriched by painting, gilding and ornamentation, that it became an object of general admiration; and by common repute, of all structures of the kind, the Coventry cross was inferior to none. Such was its glowing splendour in the sunshine on a summer’s day, that it is said the eye could scarcely bear to look upon it; and to show that no expense had been spared in the renovation on this occasion, it may be mentioned that the outlay was £276, that is, considerably more than the original cost of its erection.”

From this time onwards, however, the cross gradually deteriorated and it appears to have been neglected. In 1767 a note in the Stoke Parish Register observed that “This cross is now in ruins, and has been so for fourteen years past, or more.” A few years later, in 1771, the dilapidation was so complete that it was taken down, around 100 years after its magnificent restoration.

Some of its statues, ornamental stones and figures, says Poole, “were gathered up by relic-mongers and others who desired to possess a memento of the old architectural celebrity, and were appropriated to rustic work in gardens, or otherwise, according to the tastes of the possessors.” Only three statues survived, and these found their way to St Mary’s Guildhall. Many years later the statue of Henry VI was moved to the Herbert Museum.

A replica of this famous Coventry Cross was created in 1976 and was placed next to Holy Trinity Church. But this was removed in more recent times to allow the expansion of the restaurant quarter at Cathedral Lanes. □



*A replica of the Coventry Cross created in 1976, next to Holy Trinity Church. Photo: David Ross, Britain Express*

□ Dates relating to Hollis are taken from Blyth, though other accounts give slightly different dates. Other aspects of the history also tend to vary in different places. Sources consulted here include: Blyth, Thomas, *The History of Stoke* (1897); *The Victoria County History, Vol 8* (1969); Poole, Benjamin, *Coventry: Its History and Antiquities* (1870) and Smedley, Margaret, *The Meaning of the Street Names of Coventry* (2000). **JM**