

Origins of Stoke Park and the impact of World War One

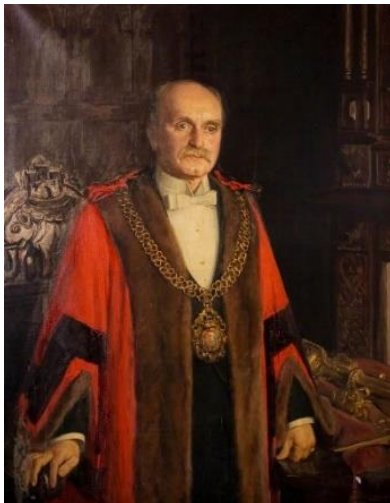
THE next meeting of Stoke Local History Group will feature a talk and slide show presentation by David Fry and John Marshall on the origins of Stoke Park estate and the experience of some of its residents during the Great War.

The meeting, which takes place at Stoke Library on Friday November 3rd, will look at the days before the estate was built, when a race course occupied the site, and will examine early efforts during the second half of the 19th century to create a prestigious up-market housing development, with large detached houses on large plots of land. It will ask why this development faltered in the early days, and trace its later development into what we see today.

The talk will look at the unique character of Stoke Park's first house, Park Cottage (pictured right), constructed by builder Alfred Mault for his own occupation in 1865, and will look at current concerns about the future of the building.



Photo: Jean Parker



The presentation will also examine the impact of the First World War on Stoke Park's most famous resident, the founder of Triumph, Siegfried Bettmann (pictured left). He lived in a grand Victorian villa, Elm Bank, and was Mayor of Coventry during 1913-14, though he felt obliged to resign when war began. His painful experience during those years will be contrasted with the deeply sad tale of another Stoke Park resident, Walter Wright, a senior manager at Dunlop, who lost his life when the ocean liner Lusitania was sunk by a German U-boat in 1915. There will also be an opportunity to consider debates taking place during the war about girls' education in Coventry, and the subsequent creation of Stoke Park School, which finally opened shortly after the war in 1919.

Stoke Local History Group meets at Stoke Library on Friday, November 3rd, beginning at 10.30am.

A Tuesday date for December

OUR meeting in December will take place at Stoke Library, not on our usual Friday morning but on TUESDAY DECEMBER 5th, beginning at 10.30am. Our speaker will be social historian Mark Johnson who will talk about his recent book on Coventry's Jewish Watchmakers, a community of skilled craftsman who began to settle in Coventry during the 1800s, making a significant contribution to the city's watchmaking trade. A sneak preview of the subject can be found in a small display, currently on show in the local history room at the Herbert Art Gallery & Museum, featuring information and historical artefacts relating to the Jewish community in Coventry.

Early leavers – famous folk who started life in Coventry

A NUMBER of famous people have hailed from Coventry and, quite rightly, we like to celebrate their achievements. But several of these people were only in the city very briefly and, it must be acknowledged, their talents only bloomed when they moved away and made a life elsewhere.

Dame Ellen Terry, for instance, was born in Market Street, just off the old Smithford Street, in 1847 and her birthplace is recalled on a blue plaque in today's Upper Precinct. She is also remembered in the current name of the old Gaumont Cinema (later the Odeon) in Jordan Well, now owned by Coventry University and known as the Ellen Terry Building.

But Ellen Terry's birth in Coventry was quite by chance and she didn't stay here long. Her parents, Sarah Ballard and Ben Terry, were provincial actors and were part of a theatrical touring company. They would probably have stayed at theatrical lodgings in Coventry and would have moved on very soon after her birth.

Like her theatrical sisters and brothers, Ellen never went to school and instead made her debut on stage at the age of nine in a production of 'A Winter's Tale' at the Prince's Theatre in London. She was enormously successful as a child actor and would have toured extensively. In later years she became known as the leading female actor of her day, performing her most memorable roles under the management of Henry Irving with whom she undertook tours to America, as well as tours around the UK.



Ellen Terry: photo from the collection of the National Portrait Gallery

Ellen Terry visited Coventry in 1906 to lay the foundation stone for the Empire Theatre, staying for a mayoral luncheon at St Mary's Hall. Dame Ellen died in 1928 and a permanent museum was founded at her former home at Smallhythe Place in Kent, an early 16th century house that she bought at the turn of the 20th century.



IN 1937 another well known performer was born in Coventry, the singer Frank Ifield. He was born in Coundon to Australian parents Richard and Muriel Ifield, who had travelled to England in 1935 to find work in the motor car industry. Richard Ifield was an engineer and inventor, who soon secured a job with Riley.

They initially rented a property at 98 Evenlode Crescent, Coundon, where their second son James was born. A year later, in November 1937, Frank Ifield was born. "My memory of those early years is fairly sketchy, as I was only a toddler when Riley went into administration in May 1938," Frank Ifield told Pete Chambers many years later. "As luck would have it my dad was snapped up in June of the same year by Bendix Brakes, a subsidiary of Joseph Lucas Ltd, and we moved to Wherretts Lane in Solihull."

After the war the family moved back to Australia, when Frank was still only 10, and they reportedly lived in a rural district, north-west of Sydney, where Frank was said to have listened to hillbilly music while milking the family's cow. He also taught himself to play the guitar and to yodel, imitating North American country stars. It was these influences that led to his later success. Frank began to perform on local radio before his first single was released in 1953, by which time the family were living in a Sydney suburb. Other singles followed in Australia before Frank Ifield moved back to England in 1959.

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His first UK single, 'Lucky Devil', reached number 22 in the charts, and by 1962 he was celebrating his first number one record, 'I Remember You', followed by other number one hits, 'Lovesick Blues' and 'She Taught Me How to Yodel', then 'Wayward Wind'.

He performed at the Coventry Theatre several times during the 1960s and, over the years, made at least two visits to his childhood home at Evenlode Crescent. In 1972 he was pictured outside the house with his mother Muriel and on another visit to Coundon in 2012



Frank Ifield (pictured right) at the Coventry Music Museum in 2017 with writer of 'Godiva Rocks', Alan Pollock. Photo: Joe Bailey

he told Pete Chambers of the Coventry Music Museum: "I obviously don't remember anything about the house, but I did come here a few years ago and it's great to see it again."

Relatively recently, in 2017, he made a rare appearance at the Music Museum at Ball Hill, where he helped to launch a new musical at the Belgrade Theatre, 'Godiva Rocks', which celebrated music by Coventry artists, including some of the most famous Frank Ifield songs. He is currently 85 and lives in Australia.



SOMEONE else with a Coventry connection is Lee Child, the stunningly successful crime fiction writer who created the American action-hero character, Jack Reacher.

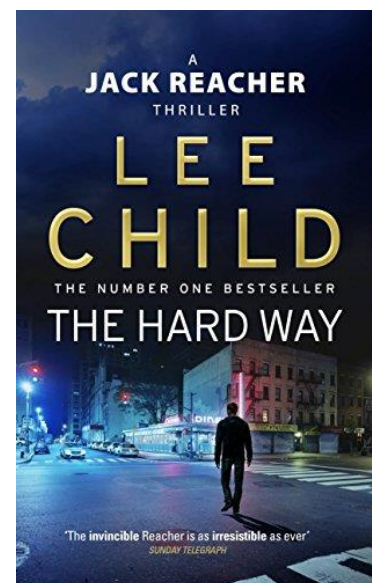
The author was born in a nursing home in Coventry in October 1954, "literally a minute's walk from the Jaguar plant", as he explained in an interview with Bob Cornwell. In those days he was known by his real name, James Dover Grant. He was the second of four sons and his family moved to Birmingham when James was just four years old.

His parents, he has said, "were very aspirational, classic old-fashioned lower middle class, prevented from getting an education for various reasons, and it was still the generation that absolutely revered education. So they did the whole middle class thing of moving to the right area so that we could go to the right primary school, and then go to the right secondary school."

The "right area" turned out to be Handsworth Wood, a premier residential suburb of Birmingham, where the young James went to Cherry Orchard Primary School before moving to the independent King Edward's School in Edgbaston.

He later established a long career as a presentation director with Granda TV in Manchester but that came to an abrupt end when corporate restructuring left him redundant. At the age of 40, Grant decided to start writing novels and his first book, using the pen name Lee Child, was published in 1997. The novel was well received, Jack Reacher had been created, and in 1998 Child and his wife and daughter moved to the United States. Since then, he's become one of the world's most prolific and successful crime writers.

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OUR final early leaver is the actor Nigel Hawthorne, who became well-known and widely admired for his role as Sir Humphrey Appleby in the acclaimed television comedy 'Yes, Minister'. He later received even greater international success when he played the lead role in Alan Bennet's 'The Madness of King George III', initially in the theatre and then on screen.



Nigel Hawthorne (centre) with fellow actors Derek Fowlds and Paul Eddington in 'Yes, Minister', later 'Yes, Prime Minister' Photo: BBC

Nigel Hawthorne was the son of a Coventry GP, Charles Hawthorne, and his wife Rosemary (nee Rice). Charles

came from a family in Walsgrave and had been a public schoolboy, educated at Epsom and Clare College, Cambridge. Nigel's mother, Rosemary, was the daughter of a Coventry doctor and apparently had family connections with Elizabeth Garrett Anderson, one of the country's first women doctors, and Millicent Garrett Fawcett, President of the Women's Suffrage Society.

After the couple's marriage at Coventry Cathedral, they moved into The Limes, "a sturdy Edwardian house on the Binley Road," according to Nigel's autobiography. Charles Hawthorne entered a practice not far away at Gosford Green, and four children were born within four years: Sheila first, then Nigel in 1929, and finally twins Janette and John.

Nigel Hawthorne recalled: "The home we had in the Binley Road was pleasant enough and there was a garden at the back where we children could play, but my father had become increasingly concerned about the proximity of traffic. An academic friend of his, Gilbert Hutchinson, had been offered a university post – in Cape Town of all places – and managed to infect my father with some of the enthusiasm he himself felt about emigrating to the sunshine and fresh air of this land of promise."



At home with partner Trevor Bentham in 1992. This photo appeared in the autobiography 'Straight Face'

Accordingly, Nigel Hawthorne and his family set sail for South Africa in 1932 and settled in Cape Town, in a house he later described as "a large and ugly pile, depressingly dark, with a rickety verandah in the colonial style..." Nigel was not quite four years old.

Nigel Hawthorne returned to England in the 1950s and worked extensively in the theatre, including roles at Stratford East with the legendary Joan Littlewood and at the Royal Court in London. But it was not until the 1980s that he came to national prominence with his sublime performances as Sir Humphrey Appleby in the television comedy.

Described as an intensely private man, he was said to be irritated by press intrusion into his personal life – he was gay and had a 20-year relationship with theatre manager Trevor Bentham, which he made no attempt to conceal. But this all burst into the public domain in the run-up to the Oscar ceremony for 'The Madness of King George', when he was sensationally 'outed' by the press.

He wrote candidly about these events in his autobiography, *Straight Face*, which also discussed his uneasy relationship with his father, his harsh schooling in South Africa, and his personal battle, especially in the early years, to make a success in the theatre. The book was written in his final days, when he was battling against illness, and was published posthumously in 2002. He'd been knighted in 1999 and died at his Hertfordshire home in December 2001, at the age of 72. □

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