

## Hidden Histories: Coventry's Jewish Watchmakers

THE next meeting of Stoke Local History Group will take place on Tuesday December 5<sup>th</sup> and will feature a talk and slide show presentation by Mark Johnson, author of a book about the hidden history of Coventry's 19<sup>th</sup> century Jewish watchmakers, who made a significant contribution to the city's watchmaking trade.

In the introduction to his book, Mark Johnson points out that Coventry has a rich industrial and commercial heritage, having re-invented itself time and again through the wool trade, weaving, ribbon making, sewing machines, bicycles and cars. Each of these fields has benefitted from the skills of immigrant families, who helped the city to establish itself as a maker of fine quality products.



Author Mark Johnson



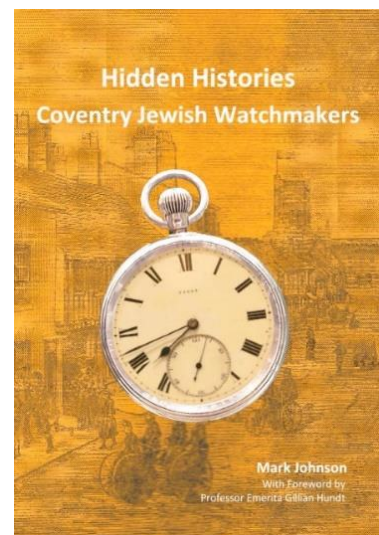
Part of a display currently on show at the Herbert Art Gallery & Museum about the history of Coventry's Jewish community

Such was also the case, says Mark Johnson, for Coventry's watchmaking trade which derived great strength from Jewish watchmakers who arrived in the city during the 1800s, mostly from Prussia and Bavaria in modern Germany. These watchmakers included prominent figures such as Philip Cohen and Alfred Fridlander, with the latter becoming a councillor, JP and a member of the volunteer fire service. By 1870 the Jewish community in Coventry had their own synagogue and the watchmakers played a key role in establishing the city as a renowned centre of British watchmaking during that period.

"The book traces the lives, adventures and achievements of these pioneers – all from immigrant families – through the joys and challenges that they faced in the rise, and the fall, of Coventry's watchmaking trade," writes Mark Johnson.

Mark will tell stories of Coventry's Jewish history from medieval times through to today, including three key players from the Stoke community: in Stoke Park, on Stoke Green, and in Stoke Heath. Can you identify who they might be? Come to Mark's talk on December 5<sup>th</sup> to discover more ...

Author Mark Johnson talks to Stoke Local History Group about Coventry's Jewish Watchmakers at Stoke Library on **TUESDAY DECEMBER 5<sup>th</sup>, beginning at 10.30am**. Please note this meeting takes place on a Tuesday, not the usual Friday.



# Ellen Terry's memorial chalice at the actors' church, Covent Garden

LAST month's *Jabet's Ash* featured a series of brief articles about famous people who were born in Coventry but found success elsewhere. One of these was Ellen Terry, probably the most celebrated actress of the Victorian period and beyond. She was born in Market Street, Coventry, in 1847 and enjoyed a sparkling career until her retirement from the stage in the early 1920s.

She died in 1928 at her home at Smallhythe Place, near Tenterden, Kent, aged 81. Ellen Terry was cremated at Golders Green Crematorium and her ashes are kept in a silver chalice at St Paul's Church, Covent Garden, London, widely known as "the actors' church".



*A silver chalice holds the ashes of Dame Ellen Terry*



*The grand portico of St Paul's Church, Covent Garden, with its mysterious front door. Pictured below is the entrance from Bedford Street. Photos: John Marshall*

The church was designed by Inigo Jones in the 1630s and its connection with the theatre began as early as 1662 with the establishment of the first Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, and was then reinforced in 1732 with the opening of the Covent Garden Theatre – later the site of the Royal Opera House – only yards from the church.

Memorials in the church are dedicated to many famous theatrical personalities, including Charlie Chaplin, Noel Coward, Gracie Fields, Vivien Leigh, Ivor Novello, Richard Beckinsale, Barbara Windsor, and Diana Rigg. There's an interesting reason why visitors wishing to

view the Ellen Terry chalice, or memorials to other actors, can't gain access to the church through what appears to be the main door from Covent Garden piazza.

"People often ask why the great east door onto the piazza doesn't open," says a guide to St Paul's. "Inigo Jones' original intention was that this should be the main entrance with the altar at the west end of the church. However, this went against Christian tradition where the altar is normally placed at the east end. At the last moment, therefore, the altar was placed at the east end and the portico door [facing Covent Garden piazza] is in fact a fake!"



Visitors are advised to enter the church through the garden churchyard from Bedford Street. An Ellen Terry Museum

now exists at her former home in Kent and is run by the National Trust. Nearer to home, Coventry University has an archive collection of Ellen Terry memorabilia and the old Odeon Cinema (formerly the Gaumont) is named 'The Ellen Terry Building'. A blue plaque marks the spot near to Ellen Terry's birthplace in the Upper Precinct, once part of Smithford Street. □



*The interior of the "actors' church" at Covent Garden, with the Ellen Terry chalice on the right-hand wall.*

# How the sinking of the Lusitania brought grief to Stoke Park



As a follow-up to the recent talk about Stoke Park, *Jabet's Ash* presents the first of a two-part article about a tragic maritime event in May 1915, during the horrors of the First World War.

## Part One: Walter Wright

LIKE many people during this period, Walter Wright moved to Coventry during the Edwardian years to pursue a career in the burgeoning motor and engineering trade. He was soon employed by Dunlop and held a senior position in the company. Little did he know when he arrived in Coventry that he would later become embroiled in one of the most tragic events of the First World War.

Walter Wright was born to Scottish parents in Peru in 1872 but his father died when he was just five months old. As a result, the family moved back to Scotland and in later years, when Walter was in his early 30s, he became managing director of Stevenson's Wheel Company in Glasgow, which produced wooden artillery wheels. In 1906 he transferred to the company's premises in Hillfields, Coventry, and he moved to the city with his wife and children.

By 1908 the company had been taken over by another wheel company, Dunlop Rim and Wheels, and Walter was appointed as manager of the wheels department.



*A rare picture of Walter Wright, on the shores of Lake Ontario.  
Photo courtesy of Charles Barker/ the Wright family*



The 1911 census shows the family living at Dechmont, a house in Stoke Park, believed to be 7 East Avenue (pictured, left). Here lived Walter with his Scottish wife Janet, and children Joseph (born in Glasgow, 1901), James (born in Glasgow, 1904) and Elizabeth (born in Coventry, 1910). Also living at the house at Stoke Park was his wife's sister Elizabeth. Two other children, twins, had died of measles in 1909.

In 1915 Walter Wright travelled to America, on behalf of Dunlop, to buy timber for the production of military wheels. It was a potentially hazardous journey because the First World War was in full swing and even civilian shipping was at risk of attack. Walter was set to return as a first-class passenger on the Cunard liner Lusitania, a luxurious ship that was particularly known for its speed. Its maiden voyage from Liverpool to New York had taken place in 1907 and it soon held the record for the fastest Atlantic crossing.

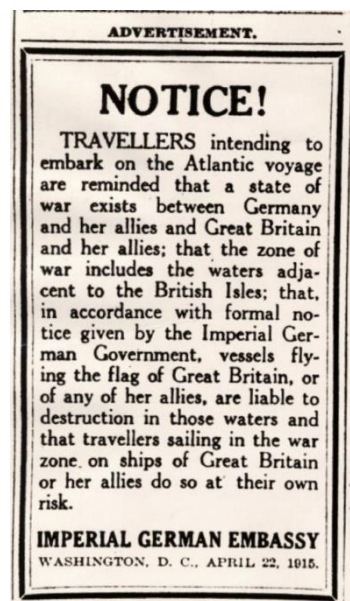
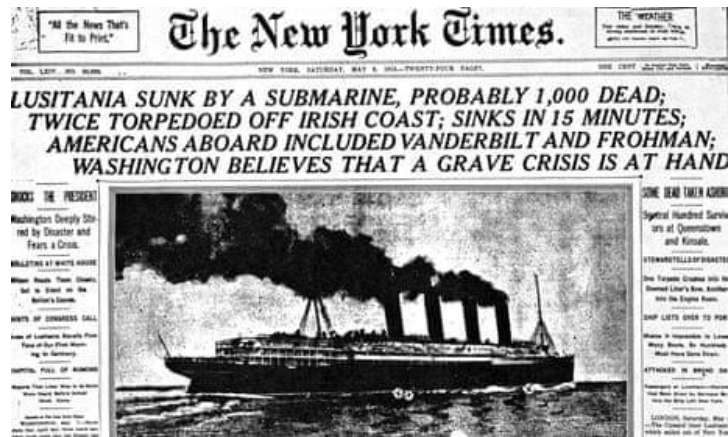
The story is told that Wright cabled his wife from New York to say that he was scheduled to depart for the homeward journey on May 1<sup>st</sup>, on board the Lusitania. But such were the dangers to shipping that the German Embassy in Washington had posted a notice in New York newspapers, explicitly warning passengers of the perils that might lie ahead, particularly in waters off the Irish coast, adjacent to the British Isles (see press clipping, page 4). Warnings were also given by the British authorities.

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What happened next would have dramatic consequences for Walter Wright and his family, waiting patiently for his return to Stoke Park. A succinct account of the episode is given in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*:

“In May 1915 the Lusitania was returning from New York to Liverpool with 1,959 passengers and crew of board. The sinking of merchant ships off the south coast of Ireland and reports of submarine activity there prompted the British Admiralty to

warn the Lusitania to avoid the area and to recommend adopting the evasive tactic of zigzagging, changing course every few minutes at irregular intervals to confuse any attempt by U-boats to plot her course for torpedoing. The ship’s captain, William Thomas Turner, chose to ignore these recommendations, and on the afternoon of May 7<sup>th</sup>, the vessel was attacked.



“A torpedo struck and exploded amidships on the starboard side, and a heavier explosion followed, possibly caused by damage to the ship’s steam engines and pipes. Within 20 minutes the Lusitania had sunk, and 1,198 people were drowned. The loss of the liner and so many of its passengers, including 128 US citizens, aroused a wave of indignation in the United States, and it was fully expected that a declaration of war would follow, but the US government clung to its policy of neutrality. Later, in 1917, however, the United States did cite German submarine warfare as a justification for American entry into the war.”

Unknown to some, the Lusitania was carrying a cargo of rifle ammunition and shells, and the apparent carriage of munitions was used by the German government as an excuse for the attack. But the moral outrage in Britain, Ireland and the United States was profound, bitter and long-lasting.

No other word was heard from Walter Wright and his body was never found. He was just 42 years old. Back home in Coventry, his two sons eventually

went on to work for Dunlop, and his widowed wife Janet lived until 1942, when she died at the age of 71. She is buried in London Road Cemetery, with her twin boys and two of Walter’s sisters.

In May 2015, largely at the instigation of Ian Woolley, chair of the Friends of London Road Cemetery, a ceremony was held at the family grave to commemorate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the sinking of the Lusitania. Many of Walter’s grandchildren and great-grandchildren were present, together with the then Mayor of Coventry, Hazel Noonan, and Friends of London Road Cemetery. A headstone at the site recalls Walter Wright and the tragic event that led to his death.

Part two of this article next month considers the way in which the sinking of the Lusitania stirred up a wave of hostility towards German-born citizens in Britain, including Siegfried Bettmann at Stoke Park.

- An account of Walter Wright’s life can be found in Ian Woolley’s book, *A Victorian Resting Place for a Growing Industrial City: Coventry’s London Road Cemetery* (2015). Further information about the Lusitania can be found online. A particularly good site is ‘The Lusitania Resource’.



*The Walter Wright memorial at London Road Cemetery. Photo: John Marshall*