

Remarkable story behind the historic Litten Tree Building in Bull Yard

THE next meeting of Stoke Local History Group will feature local historian Mark Cook, telling the remarkable and surprising story of the Litten Tree Building in Bull Yard – scheduled for demolition under current plans for the new City Centre South development.

The Litten Tree Building started life in 1911 as the Rover Showrooms, with an extensive Rover car factory at the rear, spreading outwards towards Queen Victoria Road. The external appearance of the building in those days was



The original Rover Showrooms, in a building now known as the Litten Tree, with the old Hertford Street to the right. The picture below shows the pub in 2021.

very different to what we see today, having had a radical makeover in the post-war period. But even today, the internal structure of the Litten Tree Building has clues about its original use, with steel columns supporting



concrete floors over three storeys, and space for three lift shafts capable of transporting heavy cars from one floor showroom to the next.

In later years the building had many different roles, including use as a Food Office during the Second World War - issuing ration books to residents - and as an office for Donald Gibson and the City Architects Department, which used the building as a base for planning the reconstruction of the city after the Blitz.

In 1954 the building became Foulkes Kitchen

Showrooms and it housed a number of other traders before becoming the well-remembered Intershop, a store housing around 20 independent shops. More recently the building was transformed into a pub, The Litten Tree, and these days it functions as a community arts centre, hosting exhibitions, workshops, local bands and events.

The fascinating story of the Litten Tree Building will be told by Mark Cook, with a slide-show presentation, at our meeting at Stoke Library on Friday February 2nd, starting at 10.30am.

AT our meeting in December, Mark Johnson raised a total of £170 for the Coventry migrant charity Carriers of Hope. All proceeds at the meeting from the sale of his book, *Hidden Histories: Coventry Jewish Watchmakers*, were donated to the charity, as was his speaker fee of £50 from Stoke Local History Group. Members may wish to know that speaker fees are often required for guest speakers and the £2 per person collection at each meeting helps to pay these fees, as well as other routine expenses such as tea and coffee. All contributions are always welcome and appreciated.

Looking back: moments from 2023



Umbrellas fit for a king

Photo: John Marshall

Godiva on time for crowning of a king

LAST year, on Saturday May 6th, a new king was crowned at Westminster Abbey - the first coronation for 70 years - and here in Coventry the council thoughtfully provided a large screen in Broadgate so that citizens could watch the proceedings. But the weather was unkind and the deckchairs and tables in the city's square remained largely unoccupied during a day of persistent drizzle.

But one famous Coventrian refused to be deterred by a few drops of rain. At exactly the moment when the Archbishop of Canterbury was about to place the crown on the royal head, out popped Lady Godiva to see what was going on. She paused for a while, possibly perplexed and slightly annoyed that she was facing the wrong way, but then casually rode away as though completely satisfied that everything was in order. Peeping Tom, too, lived up to his name and had a casual glance before scurrying away.



ANOTHER major moment in 2023 occurred on Saturday April 1st when Charterhouse, the city's former Carthusian monastery, opened to visitors for the first time after a major restoration project by Historic Coventry Trust. The 14th century site was rescued after it was put up for sale more than a decade ago, and now boasts three restored wall paintings of national importance, plus 70 acres of parkland and a new café/bar operated by Michelin-star chef Glynn Purnell. The Grade 1 listed building began life as a monastery in 1381, providing a home for a silent order of

monks. In later years it was used as a private residence for various individuals, including the final owner Colonel Wyley who bequeathed Charterhouse and the surrounding land to the people of Coventry. Our visit in May was a highlight of the year. Now closed for the winter, Charterhouse will reopen in the spring. □

Coventry Chief Constable during First World War was former England goalkeeper

LAST month's *Jabet's Ash* had reason to mention Charles Charsley, Coventry's Chief Constable during the First World War, who had local responsibility for implementing the government's Aliens Restriction Act.

This legislation severely restricted the activities of German-born citizens in Britain and often led to their internment for the duration of the war. Chief Constable Charsley, we noticed, seems to have carried out these duties with admirable common sense and his dealings with people like Siegfried Bettmann and others were always fair-minded, friendly and calm.



Small Heath FC, Second Division Champions, 1892-93. Charsley is pictured in the back row, third from left.

But did you know that Charles Charsley was not just a policeman? Further investigation has revealed that Charsley was once a prominent footballer, well known in the West Midlands as a former goalkeeper for Small Heath FC - the forerunner of Birmingham City FC - and he even made one appearance for England.

Charsley was born in Leicester in 1864 and joined Birmingham City police force at the age of 21, becoming Chief Inspector in 1889. When only 34 he was appointed Chief Constable of Coventry, a position he occupied from 1899 until his retirement in 1918.

"Mr Charsley will be remembered in the Midlands as a brilliant Association Football goalkeeper," declared the *Coventry Evening Telegraph* after the former policeman's death in 1945. "He played for Small Heath Alliance and was capped for England in the game against Ireland at Perry Barr, in 1893."

Between 1886 and 1894 Charles Charsley made 80 appearances in the FA Cup, Football Alliance and the Football League for Small Heath as an amateur. He helped the club to the inaugural Football League Second Division championship in 1892-93, and played a few games in the following season, including a 'test match' against Darwen which won them promotion to the First Division.

In February 1893, about six years before moving to Coventry, Charsley became the first Birmingham City player – and the only player who had played in its Small Heath Alliance days – to represent England at full international level when he was capped against Ireland. England won the game 6-1.

In Coventry, Mr Charsley was a member of the city's Amateur Operatic Society and had a pleasant tenor voice, taking part in Gilbert and Sullivan productions at the old Hippodrome. He was said to be a man of fine physique and pleasing personality, and was an impressive figure when leading civic processions on horseback.

Following his retirement as Chief Constable of Coventry, Charsley moved with his wife to Weston-super-Mare, where he played a prominent part in public life. He became a member of the Borough Council in 1935 and was Deputy Mayor in 1939-40. He was also well known as a writer of short stories, plays and pantomimes. Several pantomimes written and produced by him were presented in Weston, and for one of them he also composed 23 musical numbers. Mr Charsley died, at the age of 79, only seven days after his wife. □

Citywide heritage updates

Waterworks House to have new role as children's home

A HISTORIC house, associated with the old waterworks in Spon End, is to be transformed into a children's home, the city council has said. Waterworks House in Doe Bank Lane was originally built as a home for the manager of the waterworks - a major project in 1847 to provide clean water for the city.

The old waterworks were commissioned in the mid-19th century amid growing concern about the inadequate supply of sufficient water for the city and heightened awareness of the link between dirty water and epidemics of diseases such as cholera. In response, the Corporation promoted the Coventry Water Act of 1844, which authorised the construction of a waterworks and the sinking of a deep artesian well in Doe Bank Lane. The works were completed in 1847 at a cost of £29,000 and later expanded to two pumping houses with tall chimneys, providing millions of gallons of clean water to the city.



Waterworks House

Photos: John Marshall



The original pumping stations were demolished just before the Second World War and the rest of the site was replaced in the 1990s with a new housing estate. But the well house is still present and still supplying water from its base in Cumbria Close (pictured, left).

Meanwhile the former home of the waterworks' manager was privately owned for a number of years but now awaits its new role as a children's home. The four-bedroom house will provide accommodation for children aged 10 to 18 years old and will employ 14 full-time staff, the council said. There will not be any alterations to the appearance of the locally listed building, which planners describe as a fine example of "domestic Gothic" architecture. □

St Nicholas Church faces new demolition plan

NEW plans for St Nicholas Church in Radford could see the post-war building demolished and replaced with a care home. The "severely dilapidated" building has stood empty for years and a report in 2021 estimated that repair of the church could cost in the region of £2.8 million. Previous plans to build affordable houses on the site came to nothing, and a bid to demolish the church and build a care home in its place was rejected in September last year. But a revised plan by Exemplar Health Care has now been submitted. A decision is expected in March. The church was designed in 1953-55 by architect Richard Twentyman and was one of several new churches built in Coventry during the immediate post-war period. The original St Nicholas Church, built in 1874, was destroyed during the Coventry Blitz. The Coventry Society has previously criticised the way in which the post-war building has been left to deteriorate, and the 20th Century Society has previously lodged objections to its demolition, saying the building was critically acclaimed when first constructed and of national significance. □

