

Discovering Westwood Heath – historic former hamlet of the Stoneleigh estate

THE next meeting of Stoke Local History Group will allow us to explore the fascinating history of Westwood Heath – perhaps one of the lesser-known districts of Coventry - tucked away on the border between Coventry and Warwickshire, close to the University of Warwick.

Once a hamlet on the Stoneleigh estate and owned by Lord Leigh of Stoneleigh Abbey, the area was sold to Coventry Corporation in 1926 and has since developed into a significant outer suburb. But much of its original history remains, including the old village schoolhouse, a church and some old cottages.



The old school building is now occupied by the Greek Orthodox Church and the main Anglican church is St John's, founded in 1844. Both of these are on Westwood Heath Road, and not far away, on Gibbet Hill Road, stands Gibbet Hill Farmhouse, once the childhood home of

Sir Henry Parkes, who went on to become Premier of New South Wales and is widely regarded as the founding father of modern federal Australia.



Schoolchildren gather around the maypole in the 1960s. The Westwood School building is pictured on the left. Photos: Westwood Heath History Group

Our guest speakers will be Jill Kashi and Sue Podmore, members of the Westwood Heath History Group, who will tell us the story of the area. Jill will outline some key moments in the area's history, including what archaeological finds tell us about early settlements; the presence of Cistercian monks and Knights Templars; the coming of the Leigh family in the 16th century; and the much later establishment of the University of Warwick. Sue Podmore, meanwhile, will tell us about the history of the old school and her memories of being a pupil there in the 1960s.

**Friday March 1st beginning at 10.30am,
Stoke Library**

**A talk and slide-show presentation with
Jill Kashi and Sue Podmore of the
Westwood Heath History Group**

Pictured right: old cottages on Westwood Heath Road



Chief Constable Charsley – ‘an impressive figure when leading civic processions on horseback’

LAST month we revealed that Charles Charsley, Coventry’s Chief Constable during the First World War, was a former footballer for Small Heath FC – the forerunner of Birmingham City FC – and once won a cap as an England goalkeeper.

This month we’ve unearthed a magnificent photograph of Charsley, courtesy of David Fry, showing the Chief Constable on horseback in 1908 during a civic event in Coventry.

It was Alderman Wyles in Coventry who paid tribute to Charsley after the retired policeman’s death in 1945, saying that the former Chief Constable was a man of fine physique and pleasing personality, who cut a fine figure when leading civic processions on horseback.

As we discovered last month, Charsley came to the city in 1899, two months before the outbreak of the Boer War, and he served until the conclusion of the First World War. During those 19 years it is said that he reorganised the force, enhancing its status and efficiency.

Alderman Wyles told the *Coventry Evening Telegraph* (January 12, 1945) that Charsley had arrived in Coventry during a time when the force was in need of overhaul.

“He did this efficiently, and a high standard of discipline and conduct was set, although Mr Charsley maintained a fairness to all who served under him,” the newspaper reported. “He not only brought dignity to the office he held, but in every direction improved the relations that existed between the public and the local force.” □



AN application has been made to convert The Langleys, a large detached house at the north-west corner of Stoke Green, into eight self-contained flats - including a two-storey side and rear extension.

The Langleys is a locally listed building and is thought to date from the 17th century. Surprisingly little is known about the history of the building and it is not mentioned in Rev Blyth’s *The History of Stoke* (1897). Most accounts rely on speculation that the house might have been one of the properties observed by William Dugdale in 1640 when he noted that the

parish of Stoke was “now adorned with many fair summer houses”. The *Victoria County History* (volume 8, 1969) surmises that these fine houses were probably around Stoke Green, and that The Langleys might be a surviving example.

Although The Langleys is of 17th century origin, it was much altered in later years and shows little evidence today of its original appearance. It was once divided into two separate residences, The Langleys and The Laurels, and more recently the whole house has been used as a care home. □

A Bishop's Palace, a graveyard, and now a George Wagstaffe sculpture

Jabet's Ash looks at a new green space in front of the Cathedral and considers the rich history of the area

A NEW sculpture by George Wagstaffe, situated opposite Coventry Cathedral, now takes pride of place in a newly reconfigured green corridor, stretching from University Square in Priory Street to the Delia Derbyshire Building in Cox Street.

The new green corridor has been made possible following the demolition of

the old Alan Berry Building - originally known as F Block and completed in 1963 - which for many years was the main administration centre of the Lanchester College of Technology, later Lanchester Polytechnic and now Coventry University.

The university says the idea is to create a high-quality landscaped space, providing an uninterrupted view to Coventry Cathedral from its new Faculty of Arts and Humanities in Cox Street. It is the latest stage in the redevelopment of the university campus and follows the creation of Starley Gardens in Cox Street, which took the place of a former teaching block.

For those with an interest in history, the newly created green space provides us with an opportunity to take a fresh look at the amazing history of the area, which was once the site of a Bishop's Palace, a garden, an orchard and a graveyard.



As it was: the Alan Berry Building once occupied a prime location in front of the Cathedral.

Photographs: John Marshall



Phoenix Tree: George Wagstaffe's new sculpture now sits in the newly created green space.

According to information provided by the university in 2016, the area has a long and varied history. It points out that Priory Street is a relatively modern road, only opened in 1856-57. Prior to this, the site was occupied by the Palace and Gardens of the Bishop of Coventry and Lichfield. The palace was located on the grassy area just outside the east wall of the modern Cathedral, extending across what is now Priory Street to the current area of gardens and graves.

Land was first given to Bishop Alexander de Stavenby for the Palace in 1224-5. Almost 60 years later his successor Bishop Roger de Meuland was given further land and £133 to repair and extend the existing palace. The palace was a grand building consisting of a great hall for receiving guests and dining, sleeping apartments, kitchens, storage rooms, stables and gardens.

The gardens were to the east, towards where the George Eliot Building now stands, and contained orchards, fishponds and a banqueting house. The main building ceased to be a palace in 1539 when St Mary's Cathedral was closed and demolished –

the result of King Henry VIII's Dissolution of the Monasteries - and the Bishop moved to his other residence in Lichfield. But the palace buildings and gardens remained.

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By 1646 the palace buildings are known to have been subdivided into different properties and by 1749 a map of Coventry shows only the Bishop's orchard still here. These orchard gardens were given over to burials in 1793 when nearby St Michael's churchyard was at full capacity. But this was a short-term arrangement as burials ceased in 1848, with the opening of London Road Cemetery.

During the 1960s the temporary burial ground was incorporated into Lanchester Polytechnic. During the creation of a new garden, says the university, a number of headstones were discovered. One belonged to the organist of St Michael's from the early 19th century, whilst others sadly illuminated the very high mortality rates of children in Victorian times.

One family, the Worcesters, lost all three children in quick succession, each under the age of six months, whilst another mother had been laid to rest with her five children. Groups of large families, often sharing accommodation with insufficient rudimentary arrangements for human waste disposal, resulted in overcrowded slum conditions where streets became, effectively, open sewers.

The poor living standards created the ideal breeding conditions for illnesses such as cholera, typhus and diarrhoea, exacerbating the number of deaths amongst the new born and young.

● This article is based on information supplied by Coventry University. An information board can be seen on site. Quotes by George Wagstaffe (below) are taken from the website of the Lord Mayor's Committee for Peace and Reconciliation.



Site of a temporary burial ground from 1793. Some burials were exhumed in 1951 and re-buried in London Road Cemetery.



Symbol of renewal: pictured against the backdrop of the new cathedral. Photographs: John Marshall

Phoenix Tree – symbol of rebirth and reconstruction

BLITZ survivor George Wagstaffe was commissioned by Coventry University to create a new sculpture for the garden created after the clearance of the Alan Berry Building. 'Phoenix Tree' sits opposite Coventry Cathedral and is modelled on new trees growing out of fallen trees, thereby symbolising the notion of rebirth and demonstrating how the city was built again from the ruins of the Blitz.

George Wagstaffe has said: "The sculpture is about new life, new possibilities and new beginnings. It takes inspiration from a strange group of criss-crossing trees I painted in Wales. I asked the farmer about the trees and was told a tree had fallen 90 years ago. It was buried, then new trees started to spring from the dead tree and grew much taller than the one that had fallen. The story fits in with what I believe in – in rebirth, that all things break up naturally in nature and out of that comes something new, growing sometimes stronger than before, like Coventry. I can remember walking over the rubble near this site, studying near here and watching the new cathedral go up. I saw something beautiful come out of destruction here and hope my statue can do the same. I hope this is a fitting statue to symbolise the city and a growing university because for me the university is bringing life to the city." □