

Celebrating the Elephants of Coventry

THE elephant features prominently on Coventry's civic crest and the image can be seen on numerous public buildings around the city. Elephants can also be spotted on street bollards, lamp posts, park gates and sculptures. The football club mascot is a sky blue elephant and there is even a sports centre designed in the image of an elephant.

History fanatic Scott Duffin, with the help of author Adam Wood, has gone in search of these elephant images and collected them together in an impressive new coffee table book - *Elephants of Coventry* - full to the brim with colourful pictures which the writers describe as 'a visual history of the city'.



ELEPHANTS of COVENTRY

A VISUAL HISTORY OF THE CITY



SCOTT DUFFIN with ADAM WOOD

The book takes us on a tour of Coventry and it describes the history and character of the locations and buildings where the elephant image can be found.

Scott Duffin and Adam Wood will share some of these pictures and stories when they join us for a slide show presentation at our next history group meeting, which takes place at Stoke Library on Friday April 5th, beginning at 10.30am.

In his introduction to the book, Scott writes: "Coventry is home to a fascinating collection of elephants, each adding a touch of charm and uniqueness to the city. They can be found scattered around various locations, each with its own story and significance... These charming elephants in Coventry not only enhance the aesthetic appeal of the city, but also serve as a reminder of the importance of art, culture and community. They spark conversations, elicit smiles and create lasting memories, captivating the imagination of both young and old."

The A4 book has 252 pages, with full colour pictures, and the paperback edition is priced at £20. Signed copies will be available to buy.

Stoke Local History Group

Friday April 5th at Stoke Library, beginning at 10.30am.

Scott Duffin and Adam Wood talk about their new book 'Elephants of Coventry'



Coventry Boy statue – a symbol of civic pride

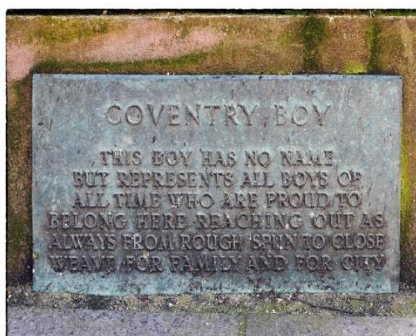
IN *Jabet's Ash* last month we looked at a new sculpture by George Wagstaffe - recently unveiled in a green space opposite the Cathedral - and the story it tries to tell about the city's rebirth and renewal. But there's another artwork on the same site which surely deserves equal attention, even though it's been there for years and might easily be overlooked.

This is the Coventry Boy, a magnificently crafted statue which vividly portrays the rise from poverty to affluence of a typical Coventry boy, riding on the waves of a growth in manufacturing industry. Nowhere in the city is there a greater celebration of Coventry's manufacturing history or its beaming sense of civic pride.

The sculpture was unveiled in 1966 and was situated, appropriately enough, close to what was then the Lanchester College of Technology, another symbol of the city's engineering prowess.

The Coventry Boy was created by sculptor Philip Bentham and was apparently based on a drawing by former Coventry Art School student Reg Rudge. The statue was commissioned by the Coventry Boy Foundation, an anonymous group of benefactors who wanted to symbolise the contribution of ordinary Coventry boys to the city's economic success. It was typical of the era that it should concentrate on boys, rather than girls, given that boys and men were implicitly seen as the principal breadwinners and key drivers of industry.

The statue depicts a young man holding a scroll in one hand, signifying perhaps the successful achievement of an engineering apprenticeship. His other hand holds a spanner and behind him is a factory. One foot is bare, indicating a poor background, but the other wears a shoe and is placed on the steps of success. One arm is clothed in a shirt sleeve, the other shows a sleeve rolled-up, ready for work. His head is held high and he wears a tie, as if to indicate a rise in social status.



At the foot of the statue is a plaque, saying: *'This boy has no name but represents all boys of all time who are proud to belong here, reaching out as always from rough spun to close weave, for family and for city.'*

It was not until ten years after the statue's creation that we got to know the identity of the person behind the Coventry Boy Foundation. It turned out to be Keresley businessman Alfred Harris – the sole benefactor of the charity who anonymously donated money for a variety of projects in Coventry during this period. These included contributions towards the cost of the Cathedral's Graham Sutherland tapestry and later a replica of the old Coventry Cross which once stood beside Holy Trinity Church (see *Jabet's Ash*, August 2023).

The charity first came into the news when an anonymous gift was made to Keresley Parish Church for a walkway and ornamental garden. Over the years there were many more gifts, among them churchyard projects at Corley, Ansty, Stoke and Baginton. Alfred Harris died in 1976. □



The Coventry Boy – a familiar but sometimes overlooked feature of the gardens in front of Coventry Cathedral.
Photograph: John Marshall

Stoke's National School – then and now

THE old National School at Stoke Green, now part of Pattison College, was first built in 1840 and initially provided elementary education for poor children of the parish. It was part of a national network of schools created by the National Society - a Church of England body which sought to promote Christian education.

The society was founded in October 1811 and was known in full as the 'National Society for Promoting the Education of the Poor in the Principles of the Established Church in England and Wales'. Its aim was to ensure that "the National Religion should be made the foundation of National Education, and should be the first and chief thing taught to the poor, according to the excellent Liturgy and Catechism provided by our Church". Once established, National Schools would usually be overseen by the local vicar, church and parish.



The National School in 1897.

Photo courtesy Rob Orland



The school at Stoke was able to accommodate 133 children and was built in 1840-41 with grants from the National Society and the government. The building took the place of a poor house which once occupied the site.

According to the *Victoria County History*, the poor house was first created in the 1770s and by 1782 the supervisor was receiving two shillings weekly for washing and feeding the six regular occupants. But the poor house was

wholly or partly demolished between 1828 and 1832 and the new school was created by re-using materials from the demolished building. Paupers were transferred to separate tenements in 1830, given allotments in 1831, and removed to a new Foleshill workhouse after 1836.

Stoke's National School continued to provide elementary education for many years and entered the control of the local authority in 1948. As Stoke's population grew, other schools emerged such as the Stoke Board School in Briton Road, which initially opened in 1875 but was significantly enlarged at a later date, and Folly Lane School which opened in 1921.

In the 1970s the former National School, by now in a poor state of repair, was bought and refurbished by Betty Pattison and became part of Pattison College. Remarkably, the building is little changed in external appearance and continues to provide education for young children today. □



Now part of Pattison's College, the National School is still recognisable today, but notice the original chimneys have gone.

Photo: John Marshall

From the Caribbean to Coventry, via the Barbican estate

THE city of Coventry is currently featured in an exhibition at the Barbican Centre in London about the rise of 2-Tone music. The exhibition, entitled 'From the Caribbean to Coventry', can be found within the Barbican Library and runs until May 25th.

According to the Barbican brochure: "The sound of 'Ghost Town' by The Specials epitomises Two Tone, the Coventry-born musical genre that blended ska and punk. But like all genres, it didn't emerge out of nowhere... 'From the Caribbean to Coventry' plots a journey of sound that starts in France and Belgium during the First World War and ends in 1980s Coventry."



Photos: John Marshall

Through fan memorabilia, record labels and a variety of artefacts, the exhibition claims to track the hugely positive musical and other influences that Caribbean immigration has had on British culture.

It's a laudable aim but, alas, the exhibition is squeezed into a tiny space within the Barbican Music Library and it looks alarmingly like a miscellaneous display of objects, which collectively lack a strong narrative. Those relying solely on the displayed exhibits will find little about Coventry in the 1980s and no clear story about the social, political and musical developments of the period.



Part of the raised complex of flats at the Barbican

The glass display cases have QR codes, which suggests that more information might be accessible on smart phones, but an exhibition has to be judged on its own terms and this is disappointing. It deserves a larger space.

Visitors from Coventry, however, might console themselves by grasping the opportunity to look at the Barbican Centre itself, and the raw concrete brutalist estate – either loved or loathed - that surrounds it.

The Barbican is situated on the northern edge of what was once Roman Londinium, the oldest part of modern London and still administered as a separate entity by the City of London Corporation. The area now occupied by the Barbican estate is part of the parish of Cripplegate which, by the 1850s, was severely overcrowded with high, dark buildings and very narrow streets. The area was largely occupied by the rag trade – which involved anything from the buying and selling of cloth to tailoring and dressmaking.

Just like Coventry during the Blitz, Cripplegate suffered enormous damage and loss of life during the Second World War and the old parish was virtually demolished. Discussions began in 1952 about what sort of redevelopment should take place, and by 1957 it was decided that an effort should be made to boost the dwindling population of the City by creating a massive residential scheme.

Construction of the Barbican estate started in 1963 and it took over 12 years to complete, with the Arts Centre not open until 1982. The complex, designed by architects Chamberlin, Powell and Bon, was Grade II-listed in September 2001. Today, the 40-acre estate is home to more than 4,000 residents, living in over 2,000 flats, some of which are tower blocks. It's an unashamedly modernist, brutalist complex, radically different from the post-war Festival of Britain style chosen for earlier schemes elsewhere, such as Donald Gibson's Coventry.

Contained within the site is the Barbican Centre, the Guildhall School of Music, and the City of London School for Girls. The estate has elevated walkways and is best approached over a bridge from Barbican tube station. □