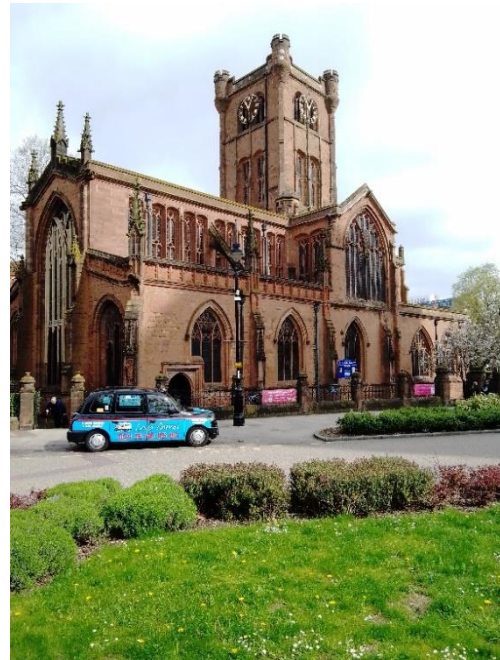


Group visit to St John the Baptist Church

WE begin our series of spring and summer outdoor events with a group visit to the historic church of St John the Baptist in Fleet Street, city centre.

Our visit will take place on Friday May 10th - beginning at 11am - and will feature a brief talk by local historian and author Peter Walters, who will say a few words about the origins of the church and its place in Coventry's history.

Some clues about the intriguing history of the site are given outside the church, where a notice declares that St John's was founded in 1344 by Queen Isabella, widow of King Edward II, on land called 'Babbelak' which she granted to the Guild of St John. It was to be served by two chaplains from the 'College of Bablake'.



St John's Church today. Pictured, left, is the church statue of St John the Baptist. Photos: John Marshall



"These priests," we are told, "were to say a daily mass for the repose of the soul of her late husband King Edward II, her son King Edward III, her daughter-in-law Queen Philippa, her grandson Edward the Black Prince and members of the Guild of St John."

The original small chapel was consecrated in May 1350 and was later much enlarged. Much of the fabric of the current building appears to date from the 15th century, although the church was heavily restored by George Gilbert Scott between 1858 and 1877.

These days, the church is strongly associated with the notion that it was once used as a prison for Royalist soldiers who were fearful of being "sent to Coventry" because they knew they would be shunned by local people.

The church notice explains: "At the time of the dissolution of the Guilds in 1548, the church was closed and given to the Mayor and Corporation. During the time of the Commonwealth (1642-1660), the church was used as a prison for Royalist soldiers captured at the Battle of Preston. As the sympathies of the citizens of Coventry lay with

the Parliamentarians, they gave the Royalist prisoners a hostile reception, giving rise to the saying 'sent to Coventry', meaning that someone is ignored or treated coldly."

After many years of lying empty, occasionally being used to hold markets and as a stretch yard for dyed cloth, the Corporation agreed to reopen the church as a place of worship. It was created a Parish Church on 24th July 1734.

GROUP VISIT TO ST JOHN'S CHURCH
with a short introductory talk by
historian and author **PETER WALTERS**
Friday May 10th. Meet outside the
entrance to the church at 11am.

Demolition crew tears down disused Harefield Road building

THE former Stoke United Reformed Church in Harefield Road has just been demolished, having stood empty and derelict for a number of years.

The church originally opened its doors in 1929 as the Stoke Congregational Church, replacing its former home at Ball Hill. It finally closed in 2016 when the congregation merged with Ansty Road United Reformed Church.

Although the building has been unused for several years, its recent life has not been without incident. In April last year the *Coventry Telegraph* reported that police found a huge cannabis farm at the disused building when they carried out a raid. It was said that police seized more than 1,400 cannabis plants and arrested a 27-year-old man who tried to escape but was later tracked down by police drones.

It was reported that police seized 1,411 plants during the raid, uncovering a large operation in the old building - which occupied a vast space between Harefield Road and Bray's Lane.



The original Stoke Congregational Chapel was built at Ball Hill in 1836 and prospered for many years, initially serving Stoke's small weaving community. But it was unable to cope with the rapidly expanding population of Stoke in the early years of the 20th century when the area became a suburb of Coventry. This prompted a move to larger, purpose-built premises at Harefield Road in 1929.

Enquiries by *Jabet's Ash* suggest that two apartment blocks are to be built on the site of the demolished church.

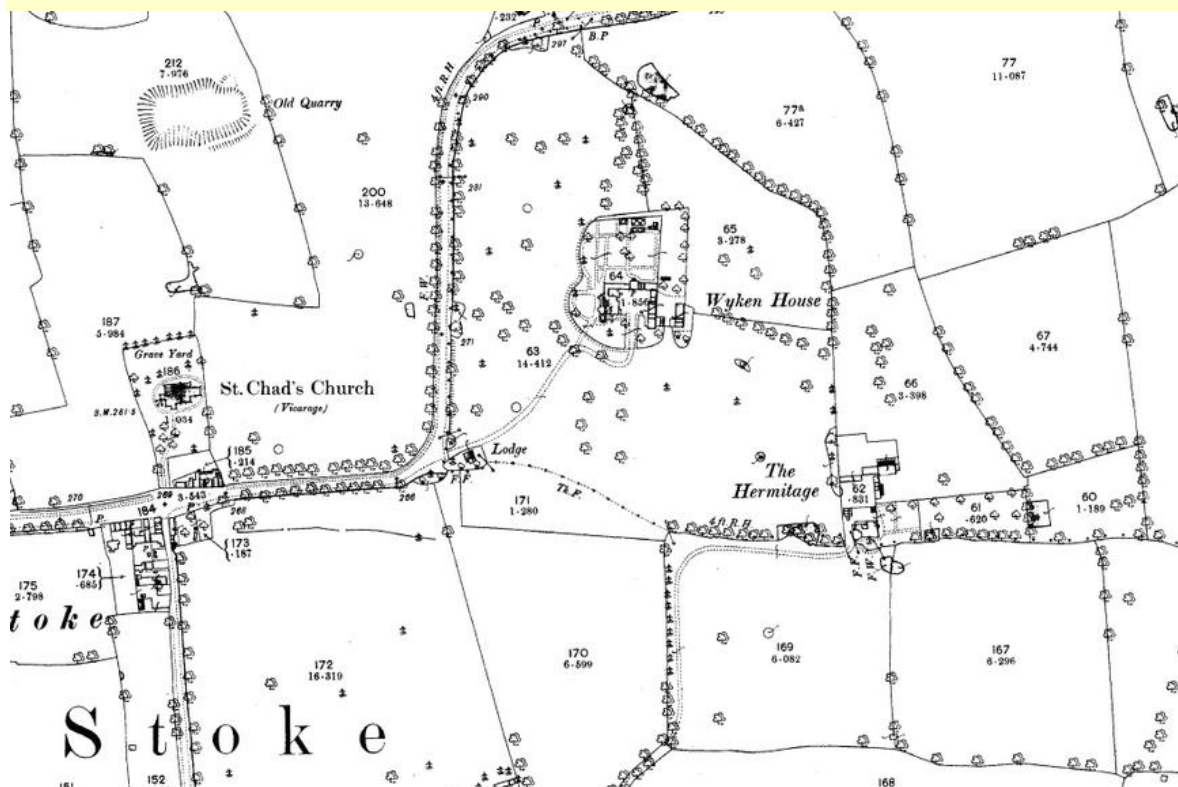


Above and top right: demolition underway at Stoke United Reformed Church earlier this month. Pictured, right, the building in 2022 when it was up for sale and under offer. Photos: John Marshall

Date for your diary

A GROUP visit to the remarkable medieval WEAVER'S HOUSE in Upper Spon Street is scheduled to take place on TUESDAY JUNE 11th, beginning at 11am. Further details will appear in the May issue of *Jabet's Ash*.

How Wyken House gave way to the Forum and Poets' Corner



At the beginning of the 20th century the area now widely known as The Forum and Poets' Corner was an isolated rural spot, only yards beyond the remote Stoke Church and dominated by the large residential villa and surrounding land of Wyken House.

Our map shows the area in 1887, where Walsgrave Road turns sharply left towards Ansty Road and onwards towards Walsgrave. Wyken House and its grounds are clearly visible, a short distance to the east of Stoke Church (marked on the map as St Chad's but better known to us as St Michael's). A small building on the corner is shown as The Lodge, and this was the gatehouse to Wyken House.

In 1929 Wyken House and its land (pictured right) were sold for housing development. It was a landmark moment and indicated the beginning of a new spurt of urban growth in the 1930s, by which time the Edwardian suburb of Stoke was now encroaching even further to the east, merging into Wyken.

The area once occupied by Wyken House was soon demolished and replaced with



the newly created Wordsworth Road and other roads, collectively known as Poets' Corner. The land previously occupied by The Lodge turned out to be an ideal spot for a new cinema, The Forum, which opened in November 1934. Although the cinema no longer exists, the area in this vicinity is still often known as The Forum, a name which gradually came to supersede an older name for the district, Church End.

Wyken House itself had been the home of the Pridmore family, prominent local landowners and highly influential in the affairs of Stoke Church and parish. Memorials to several family members exist within the church.

The census of 1901 shows Wyken House occupied by William Frederick Pridmore, then aged 87, with son William, aged 56, and daughter Ellen, aged 52. A few grown-up grandchildren are also present, together with three servants – a groom, a domestic and a cook. Both William Frederick and his son are described as “agricultural valuers” and, despite the family’s link



The Lodge – a gatehouse to Wyken House.

Photos courtesy of David Fry

with Stoke Church, the census states that Wyken House is within the ecclesiastical parish of St Mary Magdalene, in the civil parish of Wyken. The Lodge at Wyken House was occupied at this time by the gardener John Fennel, together with his wife Hannah and child.

Both William Pridmore and his father died within a month of each other, in February and March 1907. William’s obituary gives a good indication of what life was like in Stoke for an affluent, civic-minded gentleman, during this period. A report in the *Coleshill Chronicle* in February 1907 records that William’s death came as a shock to many, since he was active right to the end.

“Mr Pridmore was in his 60th year, the report states, [he was actually 62] “and was well known in Coventry and the district, having lived in Stoke all his life, and having taken an interest in every worthy cause which had been brought forward in the locality during the last forty years.”

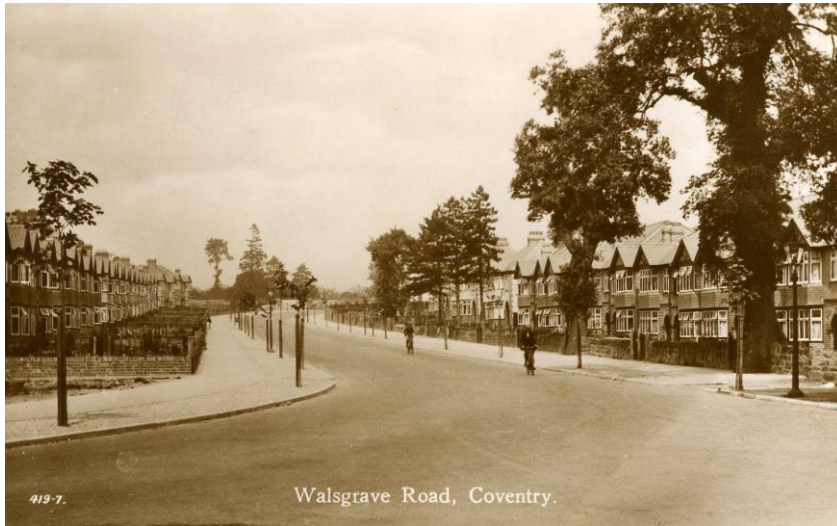


The Forum Cinema, pictured in 1935. The building took the place of The Lodge which once stood in this vicinity. The cinema opened in 1934 and had seating for 1,640 people.

“Only last Wednesday,” the report goes on, “he was present at a meeting of the Foleshill Board of Guardians, and participated in a discussion on the proposed new loop line from Folly Lane to Foleshill... Mr Pridmore was a staunch churchman and had been connected with Stoke Church all his life. In 1882 he was elected Vicar’s Warden, and in 1890 he became Lay Rector, and both these

positions he retained up to the time of his death.”

The obituary tells us that Mr Pridmore was deeply interested in Sunday school work, and as far back as 1875 became Superintendent of Stoke Sunday School. He was also interested in day schools and in 1887 was elected to the Stoke School Board. He also worked as a member of the Stoke Parish Council, becoming its chairman in 1894, and he was chairman and treasurer of the Stoke Common Conservators.



William Pridmore was a Justice of the Peace and at one time a member of the general committee of the Coventry and Warwickshire Hospital, as well as being a trustee of the Coventry Savings Bank. He had strong connections with the Warwickshire Yeomanry and, in his younger days, was extremely fond of hunting and cricket, being a keen supporter of Stoke Cricket Club. The obituary says he was “the owner of considerable land throughout the district”, and in the year before his death he had gifted land at Wolvey for a burial ground. The obituary concluded that William was a man of strong opinions but “with regard to his personality he was one of the most amiable of men.”

Newly built houses on Walsgrave Road in about 1935. The old trees on the right would once have skirted the grounds of Wyken House. Newly planted trees on the left gave an added flourish to the new housing development.

The house and surrounding land was acquired by the proprietors of the Newcombe Estates Company who laid

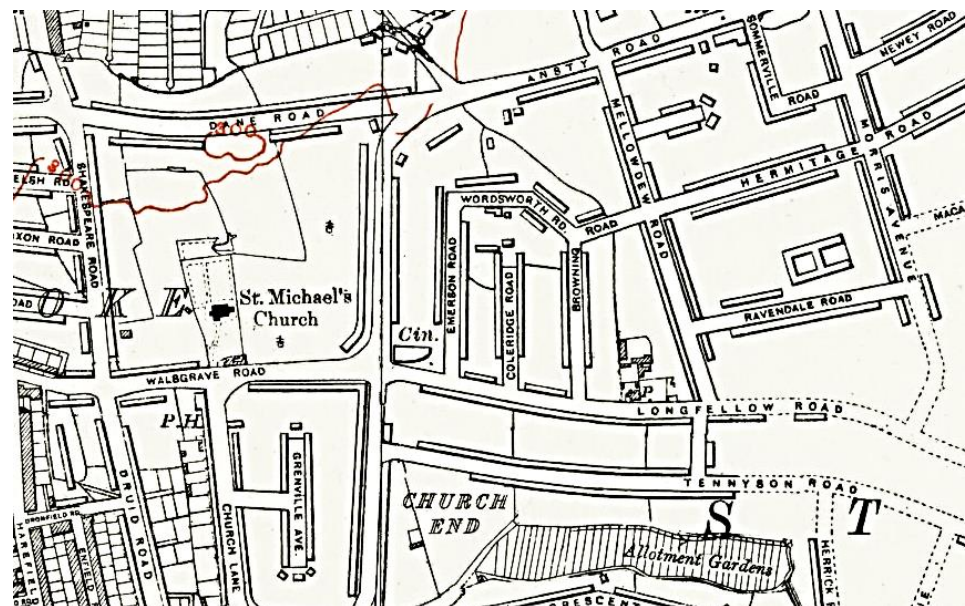
out the roads and then sold off plots to local builders for housing development. By 1931, a thousand homes had been built in the area, stretching along the new Longfellow Road and many adjoining streets named after poets. New houses also lined the pathways of Ansty Road. Soon the urban area of Wyken expanded up to Caludon Castle, and in later years, much beyond. □

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John Marshall



A street map of 1938 showing Stoke St Michael's Church and, to the right, the newly laid out roads of Poets' Corner. The cinema is shown on the corner of Walsgrave Road, where The Lodge would previously have been. Wordsworth Road now takes the place of the old Wyken House.

Rover Showrooms, Three Tuns and Hertford Street: a photo retrospective

IN January this year, local history enthusiast Mark Cook told us about the history of the Litten Tree Building, which started life in 1911 as the Rover Showrooms. As this whole area is now earmarked for demolition as part of the City Centre South scheme, it gives us an excuse to look again at what the area looked like in an earlier era.

The Rover Showrooms (right), situated in front of Rover's Meteor Works, which stretched back to Queen Victoria Road. The exterior of the showrooms was remodelled in 1955 and these days is known as the Litten Tree.



The Three Tuns (left), which sat next to the Rover Showrooms. The building was originally a coaching inn, dating back to at least 1750. It closed in 1965 to make way for the construction of Bull Yard, where a new Three Tuns was built.

Looking up Hertford Street (right) with the Rover Showrooms on the left. The bulky building at the top of Hertford Street is the Empire Cinema. The street was originally constructed in 1812-13 to ease congestion along Warwick Lane. Hertford Street was rebuilt and pedestrianised in the early 1970s.

