

## Tomb Tales – an exploration of Coventry's 19<sup>th</sup> century weaving trade

HISTORIC Coventry Trust has organised a special event at London Road Cemetery on Saturday July 6<sup>th</sup>, exploring the remarkable story of the city's 19<sup>th</sup> century ribbon weaving trade.

Specialist speakers will give brief talks in the Anglican Chapel about some of the prominent characters involved in the trade, and the crisis they faced when the industry collapsed in 1860. This will be followed by a tour of the cemetery, visiting the graves of some of those mentioned.

"The Cobden-Chevalier treaty of 1860 eliminated French import prohibitions and lowered tariffs between France and Great Britain," explains the Trust. "This badly affected Coventry's ribbon trade. Come and hear the stories of Coventry residents of the time and how they survived the crisis.

"Our researchers," they add, "will reveal the stories of John Cash, ribbon manufacturer; Charles Bray, ribbon manufacturer and host of the Rosehill Circle; Thomas Stevens, inventor of the Stevengraph; and Lizzy Stuart, singer of Scottish songs – and weaver of ribbons."



*Thomas Stevens, a weaver born of relatively poor parents, invented the Stevengraph, which allowed the production of woven silk pictures, often used for bookmarks or greeting cards.*

Speakers will include local historian David Fry, who has spoken on several occasions to Stoke Local History Group. The tour of the cemetery will be followed by refreshments in the Anglican Chapel.

The event at London Road Cemetery neatly follows our recent group visit to the Weaver's House in Upper Spon Street which allowed us to examine the life of 16<sup>th</sup> century weaver John Croke, at a time when the weaving of wool and the production of cloth was the backbone of Coventry's economy.

By the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, however, it was the weaving of silk ribbons, together with the production of clocks and watches, that dominated the life of the city's manufacturing industry. The talks and tour of London Road Cemetery will provide visitors with a vivid impression of the ups and downs of the weaving industry in Coventry during this period.

**Tickets are obtainable only from Historic Coventry Trust.** The event runs from 2pm to 4.30pm. The price for the whole afternoon is £10, which includes the talks, tour and refreshments. See the Trust's website for booking details. Search Historic Coventry Trust, What's On ('Tomb Talks – meet London Road Cemetery residents').



*Portrait of Charles Bray, a prosperous ribbon manufacturer who owned the Coventry Herald. He and his wife Cara were friends of George Eliot. Their home, Rosehill, became a centre for radical thinking on politics and religion.*

# Drinking fountain with a story to tell

LOCAL author and historian Peter Walters has contacted *Jabet's Ash* with an interesting addition to our story last month about St John the Baptist Church in Fleet Street and the drinking fountain which once stood outside.

We said that the fountain was erected in 1859 by the Coventry Temperance Association and was elaborately designed, standing over eighteen feet high and even attracting the attention of a specialist building magazine. But it appears that the fountain was not quite as good as it looked.

"The Temperance fountain outside St John's Church was beautiful to look at but never really worked properly," says Peter Walters. "By the early 1860s there were complaints that it either ran dry or flooded the street and it was fairly swiftly removed.



"It was replaced by a smaller drinking fountain made by George Smith's Sun Foundry in Glasgow that appears in slightly later pictures of St John's. We believe it was this fountain (can't quite prove it) that was eventually re-sited at the top of Earlsdon Avenue when the Memorial Park was opened in 1921."



*Drinking fountain in Earlsdon Avenue South: it quite possibly once stood outside St John the Baptist Church. Photos: John Marshall*

The newly positioned fountain in Earlsdon remained in use until the 1970s, after which its condition deteriorated. But it was restored to full working order by local Earlsdon community groups in 2015. "It's now Grade II listed and still working (just about)," adds Peter.

An information board next to the drinking fountain gives a summary of its eventful life, informing passers-by that fountains such as this were made in large numbers during the 1860s to supply clean water to towns as part of the war against water-borne diseases such as cholera. □

OUR article last month about a stroll through the burial grounds of Stoke Church (*Jabet's Ash*, May) gave us reason to mention Captain Percy Malin Pridmore, killed in action during the First World War and remembered on a Pridmore family memorial at Stoke. Further research has revealed that Captain Pridmore died, aged 31, near Ypres and was buried at Vlamertinghe New Military Cemetery in Belgium.

He initially served as a 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant with the Royal Warwickshire Regiment and was promoted to Captain in October 1916. He served with the Expeditionary Force in France and Flanders and was awarded a Military Cross for exemplary gallantry. Captain Pridmore is remembered not just at Stoke St Michael's Church but also on War Memorial Plaques at Westwood Heath Church and at King's College, London.



He was born in Coventry in January 1886, the only son of Alexander Percy Pridmore and his wife Florence Louise, daughter of ribbon manufacturer Joseph Cash. The young Percy was educated at Uppingham and King's College, London, and was married at Allesley in October 1916 to Constance Margaret Kerby. His parents' address was given as Burnt Post, at that time an area of Coventry.

Sources: King's College, London/ Imperial War Museums/ Westwood Heath Residents Association

# Centenary celebrations for Catholic school and church

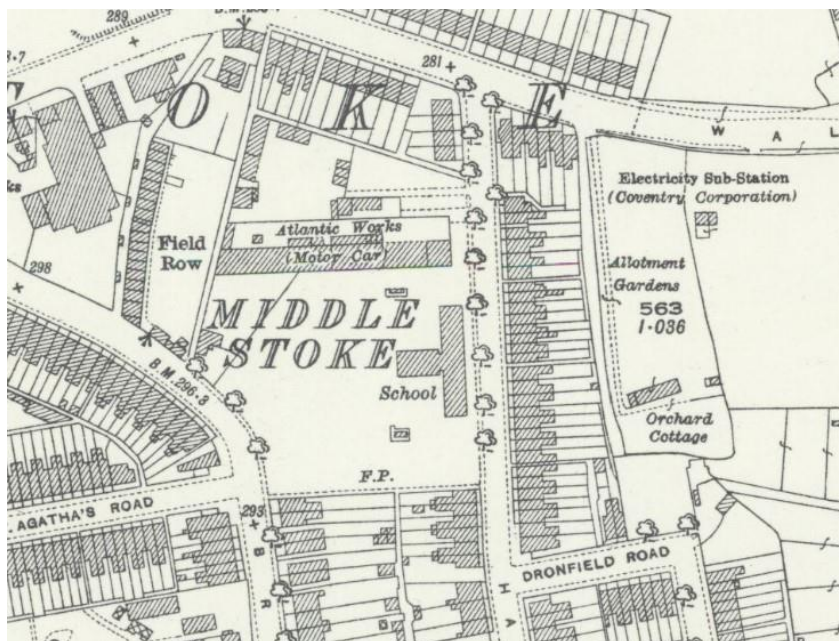
**A MAJOR event took place this month to celebrate the centenary of Sacred Heart School and Church.**

After a special Thanksgiving Mass at the Harefield Road church, action moved to the extensive grounds of the current Bray's Lane school which was soon teeming with pupils, ex-pupils, teachers, parents, neighbours and visitors. Colourful balloons, fairground rides, ice creams and Irish dancing were just some of the attractions on offer before the activities reached a climax with a fireworks display.

The story of Sacred Heart goes back to the early 1920s when the suburban expansion of Stoke was well underway and there was a significant influx of workers from other parts of the UK and Ireland, many of whom were Roman Catholic.

This upsurge in newcomers was prompted by Coventry's rapid industrial growth, with numerous factories offering employment to incoming workers. Factories in the Stoke district during the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century included the Humber Works in Folly Lane, the Ordnance Works in Red Lane, Morris Engines in Gosford Street and Courthouse Green, and the Peel Connor Telephone Works at Copsewood Grange, later known as GEC.

The establishment of the Peel Connor Telephone Works in 1920 is often cited as a particular reason why Roman Catholics felt a need for a new parish in Stoke. The company had originated in Salford but a decision was taken to move to a site in Coventry, and many workers moved here from the North, with the company providing houses for many employees on the newly built roads of the Copsewood estate.



*This map published in 1926 shows the original school plot in Harefield Road. Notice that houses in Walsgrave Road come to an abrupt end beyond the Harefield Road junction.*

The nearest Catholic school and church was St Mary's in Raglan Street, Hillfields, but this became congested and was clearly too distant for the growing community in Stoke, particularly those at Copsewood. It was Father Joseph Walsh, the parish priest of St Mary's, who was asked to foster a new parish in Stoke and a site was found for a new building in Harefield Road.

Sacred Heart School first opened in 1924 but it took another ten years to build a separate church, with the school in the meantime offering space in its adjoining hall-chapel for Mass. Sliding doors separated the school hall from the chapel, and the

cramped facilities also provided a bedsit for the first priest, Father Bunce, who was formerly the assistant priest at St Mary's.

The school had four classrooms and was built to accommodate 200 children. According to a report in the *Midland Daily Telegraph* (29 February, 1924) there were already 195 children on the books when it opened.

The cost of the building was said to be about £7,000, of which only a small proportion had been raised. There was a separate entrance for boys and girls, with the playground similarly divided.

By 1928 a house was acquired in Harefield Road for a new priest, Father Hayward, and by October 1933 it was reported that arrangements were in place for a stone-laying ceremony for a new church, to be built alongside the school.

The new church, which could seat 315 parishioners, was officially opened by the Archbishop of Birmingham in 1934 and a report in the *Coventry Herald* (5-6 October, 1934) declared that the new building was the "culmination of six years of intensive effort on the part of the parish priest [Father Hayward] who has worked unceasingly to liquidate the major portion of the debt on the existing schools and the temporary church."



*The original Sacred Heart School in Harefield Road. Below left, the school entrance, and below, pupils pictured at the rear of the old school. Photos courtesy of Mary Hampson*



Artefacts on display at the centenary event included a glowing report about the academic success of the school and there was also an old 'Punishment Book' which suggested that discipline was strict. Entries for 1955-56, for instance, included one boy receiving a stroke on each hand for "persistent talking" and another received a stroke on the hand for "playing with a pen knife". Other boys (the offenders were always boys) were punished for fighting in the playground and "impudence to a dining room assistant".

By 1964 a new parish, St John Fisher, was formed in Wyken and this relieved the pressure of numbers at Sacred Heart. But the old school was clearly too small and the local authority eventually decided that it was no longer fit for habitation.

Steve Carroll's 'Brief History of the Parish' tells us that a site was considered for a new school at the rear of allotments in Shakespeare Street but it later transpired that an existing school building in Bray's Lane was now vacant. Sacred Heart School therefore moved to Bray's Lane in 1977 and it has been there ever since. This allowed the old school to be demolished and its place was taken by a new, larger church in Harefield Road, completed in December 1979.

The original church still stands but is now much changed and used as a church hall. □

