

Coventry's Victorian Murder Mile

FOR the next meeting of Stoke Local History Group we welcome back true crime writer Adam Wood, who will take us on a fascinating but sometimes gruesome journey along the route of Coventry's Victorian Murder Mile.

Based on his popular walking tour in Coventry city centre, the slide show presentation will take us on an imaginary stroll on the dark side of the streets, revealing true tales of grim history on almost every corner.

In Adam's own words: "Hear how the caretaker of a prestigious city centre office slit the throat of his sister-in-law – with whom he had enjoyed an illicit affair, fathering her young child – when she began a romance with another man. And how the horrific story of a double murder in a city centre pub has two bizarre relics, both of which can be seen to this day.



Kirby House at night: crime scene



"That's not to mention the tale of a woman who desperately attempted to conceal the birth of her newborn daughter before her unknowing husband returned home from a four-year prison sentence, or how an old woman known for crippling headaches was found head-down in a water butt, just her feet and ankles showing."

Adam Wood also promises to say a word or two about a hideous crime committed during the Edwardian period, outside the city centre. This is the true tale of an elderly couple who were brutally murdered in their bedroom at Stoke Park in 1906 - a story told in depth in one of Adam's books, *The Case of the Painted Bicycle Lamp*.

Join us, if you dare, for Adam Wood's illustrated talk at Stoke Library on Friday November 8th, beginning at 10.30am.

Stoke Local History Group
at Stoke Library

Friday November 8th, 10.30am

**True crime writer Adam Wood takes us on a gripping
journey along Coventry's Victorian Murder Mile**



THEN AND NOW: Highfield Road Stadium in its prime (above) and the site now - a green space in the centre of Signet Square (right). See pages 3-4 for an article about the intriguing history of Singers and Coventry City FC.



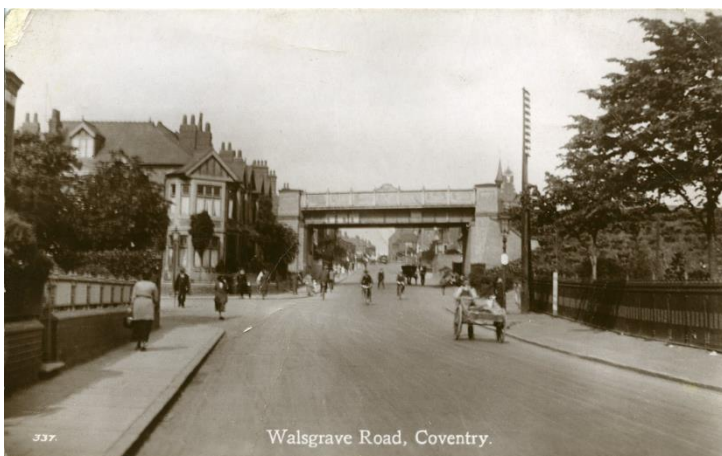
Signet Square photo: John Marshall

Before and after: the slope up to Ball Hill



THE postcard photograph on the left, probably taken around 1907, shows a rarely seen view of the slope up to Ball Hill, with newly built houses lining Walsgrave Road on the left, including the corner house at the Swan Lane junction, nearest to the camera.

What's missing here is the railway bridge, built later and requiring the demolition of some of the houses. The bridge was designed to carry the freight line railway - known as the Coventry Loop Line - which opened between 1914 and 1916.



A later photograph, dated about 1926, shows the approach to Ball Hill but this time the view is dominated by the railway bridge. The house on the corner of Swan Lane is still clearly visible, but little can be seen beyond. *Photographs courtesy David Fry*

Coventry's Victorian Heritage

THE next meeting of the Coventry Society will feature a talk by Tim Bridges from the Victorian Society about Coventry's Victorian Heritage. The meeting takes place at the Church Hall of St John the Baptist Church in Fleet Street, on Wednesday November 13th, starting at 7.30pm. Free admission for Coventry Society members, £2 for visitors.

A NEW book has been published about the city's unique and historically important 16th century guildhall tapestry. *The St Mary's Hall Coventry Tapestry: Weaving the Threads Together* is described as a beautifully curated book and is edited by Dr Mark Webb with contributions from Jonathan Foyle, Wendy Toulson, and George Demidowicz. The book contains high quality photographs and is available exclusively from St Mary's Guildhall shop, price £20.

Highfield Road stadium remembered – 125 years after the first match

A QUIET ceremony took place last month when a new plaque was unveiled in the middle of Signet Square to mark the 125th anniversary of Coventry City Football Club's Highfield Road stadium. The plaque was placed in the middle of the square, in what was once the centre of the pitch.

A housing development now occupies the site and a plaque was originally erected in 2014 to remember the Highfield Road days. But the first plaque had deteriorated and was therefore replaced - exactly 125 years since the first match at the ground took place.

The club started life as the workplace team of Singer's, the cycle manufacturer, and steadily built up a loyal following before changing its name from Singers FC to Coventry City FC in 1898. The next year, 1899, the club acquired the Highfield Road site and they stayed there until 2005 when they moved to what was then called the Ricoh Arena.



*A new plaque in Signet Square
Photo: John Marshall*



White Lion pub on the left, first home to Singers FC

Singers were formed in 1883 at the Lord Aylesford pub in Hillfields, a popular meeting place for cycle workers at the nearby factory in Canterbury Street. But the club's first headquarters was The White Lion pub at Gosford Terrace, Walsgrave Road, opposite Gosford Green. The pub landlord made a back room available as a players' dressing room, conveniently close to the club's first pitch, Dowell's Field, situated across the Green, off Binley Road.

In 1884 the club became members of the Birmingham County FA and in 1887 they moved their pitch to a new site between Paynes Lane and Swan Lane, at a time when some of the current streets in that location were yet to be built. This new pitch was known as the Stoke Road Ground – the name referring to what we would now call Walsgrave Road.

The new site had the advantage of being enclosed by hedges and trees and had only two entrances, one from the vicinity of the Binley Oak pub and other down an alley beside the White Lion. This allowed the club to charge admission to the ground, said to be 2d per supporter. Money was collected at the two entrances, one at the White Lion and the other at the Binley Oak, Paynes Lane, which also claimed a role as a base for the club.

But this was a period when the city was rapidly expanding and the Stoke Road Ground was soon to be swallowed up by new streets and housing developments. This obliged the club to move to an adjacent plot, slightly to the north, home at the time to the Craven Cricket Club. The new ground was perfectly



*Coventry City Football Ground
Postcard view of the early Highfield Road ground in 1912*

placed for the club, known by this time as Coventry City, and a new stand was built on the site to hold 2,000 fans. The ground became known as Highfield Road because that was originally the only street leading to it.

The first game at Highfield Road, in 1899, was against Shrewsbury Town which City won 1-0 before a crowd of 3,000 spectators. But the first season at the new ground was said to be truly dismal, though the club battled on and in 1908 they joined the Southern League before finally achieving Football League status in 1919.

Prior to this in 1910, following a fairly successful season, a new barrel-roofed main stand had been built on the



Highfield Road ground in 1963, little changed since 1936

north side, and on several occasions during the 1920s efforts were made to build up the terrace on the Spion Kop end. By 1927 a terrace roof had been purchased from Twickenham rugby ground, which provided cover for 11,000 spectators on the West End terrace. It is said that during construction of this roof, it was discovered that the pitch was unlevel, falling seven feet from corner to corner, a fault not rectified until 1963. (Any casual visitor to Signet Square today will observe that the land has a noticeable slope from King Richard Street up to Thackhall Street).

By 1936, following City's promotion to Division Two, the rotting wooden planks of the original 1899 stand had to be replaced with a new Main Stand at a cost of £14,000. And in November of that year, significantly, the club was able to purchase the freehold of Highfield Road from the Mercers' Company for £20,000, thanks to a loan from Sir John Siddeley.

The club was now firmly established at Highfield Road and could accommodate 40,000 spectators, a claim demonstrated in 1937 when a then record crowd of 44,492 attended an FA Cup game against West Brom. But attendances varied and by 1939 the average gate had slumped to 13,000.

Floodlights were installed in 1953 and by the early 1960s a momentous transformation of the club was underway under the stewardship of Derrick Robins and Jimmy Hill. This prompted a massive programme of ground improvement, beginning in the summer of 1964 with the demolition of the old Thackhall Street stand and its replacement with the Sky Blue Stand, with its spectacular vaulted roofing.



*King Richard Street entrance in the 1990s: now a road less travelled
Photo: John Marshall*

The glorious Jimmy Hill era reached a climax in April 1967 when City celebrated promotion to the First Division with a thrilling victory over closest rivals Wolves, in front of an astonishing crowd of 51,455 supporters. It was a high peak in City's history and probably the most memorable game ever to be played at Highfield Road.

In the summer of 1967, following the club's elevation to the First Division, the double-decker West Stand was built and a further improvement was made in 1968 when the Main Stand was replaced after the old one was gutted by fire. A final piece of the jigsaw came much later, in 1993, when work started on the construction of the East Stand, which covered the old terrace at the Swan Lane end and turned Highfield Road into a state-of-the-art, all-seater stadium. The club played its final game at the stadium on April 30th 2005, when they beat Derby County 6-2 in front of a capacity crowd of 22,728 spectators. □

● The new commemorative plaque at the old Highfield Road ground was organised by club historian Jim Brown, author Lionel Bird and a number of other club supporters and city council staff. Sources consulted for the preparation of this article included some excellent books, such as *Coventry City at Highfield Road, 1899-2005* by Jim Brown (2006), *Coventry City: A Complete Record 1883-1991* by Rod Dean et al (1991), and *Singers to Sky Blues* by David Brassington et al (1989).