

## The Life and Times of Joseph Paxton

THE next meeting of Stoke Local History Group will feature local author and journalist Peter Walters who will talk about the remarkable life of the Victorian landscape gardener Joseph Paxton, best known in Coventry as the designer of the city's magnificent London Road Cemetery.

Joseph Paxton was born in August 1803, the seventh son of poor farm labourers in Bedfordshire, and he rose from those humble beginnings to become, at the age of 20, the head gardener at Chatsworth House, the Duke of Devonshire's large country house in Derbyshire.

At Chatsworth, Paxton forged a formidable reputation with his designs for gardens, fountains, a model village and an arboretum. In the late 1830s he also built an iron and glass conservatory – known as the Great Conservatory – and a lily house, specially designed to house a giant lily with a structure based on the leaves of the plant. It was at Chatsworth that Paxton met and married Sarah Bown, the housekeeper's niece, who often took charge when he was absent.



*Sir Joseph Paxton*  
National Portrait Gallery

In 1851 came Paxton's greatest achievement and his national fame, when he produced a revolutionary design for the main hall of the Great Exhibition - a vastly magnified version of his glass house at Chatsworth. It was relatively cheap, simple to erect and remove, and had a prefabricated, modular design, with an extensive use of glass. It became known as the Crystal Palace and won widespread critical acclaim when the Great Exhibition opened in Hyde Park in May of that year.

Following the exhibition, Paxton was knighted by Queen Victoria and when the event finished, his Crystal Palace was famously re-erected at Sydenham where it stayed until it burned down in 1936.

Paxton stayed as head gardener at Chatsworth but took on a large number of other projects, including his work at Coventry. He became the Liberal MP for Coventry in 1854 and achieved great wealth through successful speculation in the booming railway industry.



*Paxton's Memorial at Coventry's London Road Cemetery.* Photo: John Marshall

Stoke Local History Group  
Stoke Library, Friday December 6<sup>th</sup> 10.30am  
Peter Walters talks about  
'The Life and Times of Joseph Paxton'



## Celebrating 150 years of rugby football in Coventry

THE Herbert Art Gallery and Museum has put together a small display in the museum's Local History Room to mark the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Coventry Rugby Club, which claims to be the city's oldest major sports club.



The club's history began in 1874 when a group of players, including members of Stoke Cricket Club, participated in a match against Allesley Park College. This game is thought to be the first organised rugby football game ever to be played in Coventry and – unlikely as it seems – was played using rugby football rules in the first half and association football rules in the second.



The Herbert's small display case features artefacts from the club's history and includes information about the club's triumphs and misfortunes over the years - concluding with an optimistic view of the current set-up at Butts Park Arena. There is also a four-minute video, telling the story of the club and showing brief glimpses of Coventry teams in action on the field. □

## Blitz deaths remembered at city cemetery

REMEMBRANCE Sunday was marked as usual this month with a ceremony at London Road Cemetery, where the Rev Canon Richard Hibbert of Holy Trinity Church led a service to remember those who lost their lives in the Blitz and were buried in a mass grave.

This was followed by a brief service at a nearby cluster of Commonwealth War Graves, amongst which are the final resting places of seven men from the Royal Engineers who were killed while working to defuse a wartime bomb at Whitley Common.



*Remembering those commemorated at some of the Commonwealth War Graves at London Road Cemetery*



*A monument at London Road Cemetery lists the names of many who were killed on the night of the Blitz*

Over 500 people are thought to have died in Coventry on the most dramatic night of the Blitz - November 14<sup>th</sup> 1940 - and a decision was taken to bury the bodies in a mass grave at the cemetery. The first funeral was held on November 20<sup>th</sup> 1940 and a second funeral was held on November 23<sup>rd</sup>.

Further fatalities occurred in the following year, during air raids on April 8<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup>, and the total number of people killed in Coventry during World War Two is estimated at over 1,200 people.

Representatives of the German cities of Dresden and Kiel attended this year's ceremony and laid wreaths on behalf of their citizens. □



# Whatever happened to Stoke's chapel on the hill?

IN the 19<sup>th</sup> century the area we now call Ball Hill was little more than a small hamlet, sometimes known as Stoke Knob and noted for two distinctive features – a pub, which still exists, and a congregational chapel.

The congregational chapel was a neat, red-brick building, opened in 1836 and serving a largely rural community of farm workers and weavers. It was originally a branch of the Vicar Lane chapel in the centre of Coventry and its origins reflected the widespread influence of non-conformism during this period.

Non-conformist groups – including Baptists, Methodists and Quakers, as well as Congregationalists – had become a significant force within Coventry by the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and their influence later spread to the city's outlying areas, including Stoke.

Congregationalists first established a foothold in Stoke when a Sunday School was formed at Stoke Row in 1813. This became the genesis of the new chapel at Ball Hill, which in 1851 had seating for around 170 people and also ran a popular Sunday School. The building was described as being in plain Gothic style with three lancet windows at the front, and was built in the 1830s at the expense of the Vicar Lane congregation, led by its influential pastor, the Rev John Sibree.



*This map of 1889 shows the hamlet of Stoke Knob, with fields on either side of Walsgrave Road and just two distinctive buildings, the Old Ball Inn and the Congregational Chapel.*



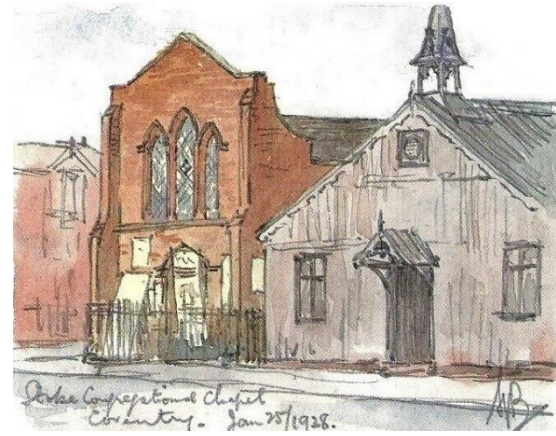
The photograph on the left shows the chapel building in about 1906, with its Band of Hope marchers in front. This was a time of rapid urban expansion in Stoke and the picture gives a clue about what was happening. On the far left is a building being demolished, to make way for the construction of another new street in the district, in this case Marlborough Road. And beside the chapel is a vacant plot of land with a notice in front, announcing that a new chapel building is to be constructed on this site.

When this photograph was published by David Fry and Albert Smith in the second volume of their book, *The Coventry We Have Lost*, in 1993, they assumed, understandably enough, that a new chapel was planned for the empty site because the old chapel's days were numbered. From the evidence in this photograph, they assumed that the old chapel was about to be demolished, along with the adjoining buildings in the picture, to allow Marlborough Road to be built. But this turned out not to be true.

A new chapel was indeed built on the vacant plot but this was not a replacement for the original chapel but an addition to it. The fact is that Stoke Congregational Chapel was no longer large enough to serve the expanding district of Stoke and more space was needed. This need was fulfilled by a new "temporary" structure which sat beside the old chapel and turned out to be little more than a corrugated iron building which, remarkably, still survives to this day.

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For a number of years both chapel buildings at Ball Hill continued to sit side-by-side, busily serving the social, educational and religious needs of the immediate community. Aside from worship, activities at the Stoke chapel included a girls' sewing guild, a men's social club and a ladies' sewing class, as well as the regular Sunday School. A painting by Sydney Bunney in 1928 (right) gives an impression of what the two buildings looked like.



But even in 1907, when the temporary 'tin tabernacle' was first constructed, there was an awareness that a bigger single building would eventually be required. A document in 1913, unearthed from Coventry Archives, explains that the original church had successfully served the area for 70 years but by the early 1900s "the startling growth of Coventry had completely revolutionised the village of Stoke" and the new iron building was no more than a stopgap before a new site could be found.



*This postcard of Ball Hill in about 1913 shows the two chapel buildings together on the left. Photo courtesy David Fry*

The 1913 document states: "We have at present about 400 scholars on the roll and the two buildings are filled on Sunday afternoons, often to overflowing, and the chapel has to be used for worship and Sunday School, as well as for many other gatherings."

Accordingly, a new building fund was established in 1910 and after much effort - even during the war years - sufficient money was raised to build a new church in Harefield Road, which eventually opened in 1929. This building remained in use until 2016 when the congregation merged with the Ansty Road United Reformed Church.

But what happened to the old buildings left behind at Ball Hill after the move to Harefield Road? We know that the temporary iron building became a retail outlet and many local residents will remember it as a bed shop during the 1990s and beyond. It is now an all-purpose grocery store. And the original chapel? Was it finally demolished in 1929, having escaped that fate in 1907? Apparently not, it seems.

Research by *Jabet's Ash* has discovered that the old chapel site immediately became home to a gents' outfitter, and was listed in a street directory of 1931-32 as number 74a Walsgrave Road. It continued to be listed as a gents' outfitter for a number of years and was under the proprietorship of Harold Williams between 1960 and at least 1970.

These days, although largely ignored and looking nothing like the original chapel, the building appears to be still in existence and now operating - much disguised - as a Subway sandwich shop. Any careful glance at this building will reveal its peculiar but distinctive shape, its lack of a conventional first floor, and even the original red bricks, which are still just visible behind its current pebbledash exterior. What else could this unusual building be, other than the shell of the old Ball Hill chapel? □



*Ball Hill today, with an unusual pair of buildings on the site of the old Stoke Congregational Chapel Photo: John Marshall*

**John Marshall**