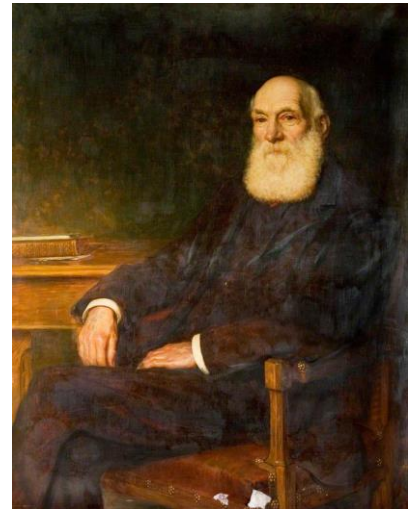


Spotlight on John Gulson, George Singer and other 19th century Mayors of Coventry

SOME important figures in the history of Coventry will come under the spotlight next month when Ian Woolley delivers an illustrated talk about 'Coventry Mayors in the 19th Century'.

The talk for Stoke Local History Group will take place on Friday, March 7th, at the usual venue, Stoke Library.

Among the most famous characters under review will be John Gulson (pictured right), whose name is familiar to many Coventrians because they remember the old Gulson Library, which once stood beside Holy Trinity Church, or the former Gulson Road Hospital, where many older citizens were born. But who knows much about John Gulson, the man, whose memory was also honoured in the naming of a school, as well as a road? Ian Woolley will tell us more.



George Singer (pictured left), the founder of the Singer cycles and motor car company, will also be considered. He first became Mayor in 1891 and his name is chiefly remembered these days not just because of his famous company but also because of his former home, Coundon Court, which is now a Coventry school.

Another notable figure in the 19th century was ribbon manufacturer Robert Dalton, who became Mayor in 1874 and whose name is now immortalised in Dalton Road.

Ian Woolley says there are many other characters within his talk, "too numerous to mention", but they all have one thing in common: they are all buried within London Road Cemetery. Ian is chairman of the Friends of London Road Cemetery and many members of Stoke Local History Group will recall our immensely interesting walk in the cemetery, led by Ian (pictured below, right), in September 2019.

Stoke Local History Group
Friday, March 7th 2025,
10.30am, at Stoke Library
**Ian Woolley talks about
'Coventry Mayors in the
19th Century'**



Swan Lane photograph reveals early football ground exit in 1907

THE photograph on the right shows some newly built houses on Swan Lane in 1907, looking down the lane from Walsgrave Road. On the immediate left is the junction with Britannia Street and further up is the junction with Mowbray Street. This plot of land had been bought for development in 1897 and was quickly laid out with these new streets and houses.



Photograph courtesy of David Fry



As a result of this expansion, Coventry City Football Club's first pitch in this area, originally sited in the vicinity of Wren Street, had to move north in 1899 to an adjacent plot, which came to be called Highfield Road (see article in *Jabet's Ash*, October 2024). An intriguing feature of the Swan Lane photograph is that it shows, almost hidden in the far distance, an early exit from the Highfield Road ground, then in its infancy as a football stadium and still surrounded by hedges and trees. The close-up picture here

- zoomed in from the original photograph - shows what the primitive exit looked like, long before the Spion Kop terrace was built and many years before the East Stand was constructed here in the 1990s. □

Summerhouses restoration almost complete



Site inspection: Cllr Akhtar, cabinet member for heritage, and Nicholas Dutton of Historic England. Photo: Coventry City Council

The renovation and restoration of three 19th century summerhouses in Coventry is expected to be completed by the spring, the city council says.

The Grade II listed buildings are within the Grade II* Registered Park and Garden at Stoney Road Allotments in Cheylesmore. Having fallen into disrepair, the summerhouses are the last remaining plots of the Park Gardens, established 200 years ago. The site is one of only four remaining detached Victorian town gardens that are listed on Historic England's Register of Parks and Gardens of Special Historic Interest.

Historic England provided a £250,000 grant for the restoration of the buildings. Additional support was provided by the Railway Heritage Trust and Network Rail. The site is still used as allotments and is managed by the Stoney Road Gardens Association. □

Alice Arnold – a trailblazer for women and all working people

A BLUE plaque has been unveiled to honour the memory of Alice Arnold, a pioneer who campaigned tirelessly to improve the lives of ordinary working people in Coventry and who rose to become the city's first woman Mayor in 1937.

The plaque was unveiled on one of her former homes, in Short Street, close to the city centre, next to Parkside.

Alice Arnold's emergence as an important and outspoken civic leader could hardly have been imagined at the time of her birth in January 1881. She was born in Coventry Workhouse where her mother Caroline, who already had three young children, was obliged to go after being abandoned by her husband.

Caroline's husband Samuel had an eventful life, characterised by an inconsistent record of employment, bouts of poverty and convictions for theft, drunkenness and assault. In 1880 he faced a further charge after assaulting his three-year old daughter Mary Ann, by beating her with a strap. He was sentenced to two months with hard labour, and was jailed again later that year for failing to pay maintenance for Caroline and the children.

It was in these circumstances that Caroline and her children entered the Workhouse in 1880. They stayed there for a dismal fourteen months, with Alice being born just two months after her mother's initial admission. Meanwhile Samuel was in trouble again, convicted of manslaughter and jailed for six months after his opponent died following a bare-knuckle fight.



Alice Arnold in her civic finery, as the first woman Mayor of Coventry. She had previously refused to wear civic robes.



*Current Lord Mayor Mal Mutton unveils a blue plaque to honour the memory of Alice Arnold.
Photo: John Marshall*

The Arnolds were discharged from the Workhouse in February 1882, when Alice was just over a year old, and it's evident that Caroline and Samuel were later reunited, with two more children born. According to Cathy Hunt, who has done much to unearth the story of Alice Arnold, the family lived in a poor area of court dwellings in or around Chantry Lane and St Agnes Lane, a district cleared as slums in the 1930s.

Like many Coventry girls at the time, Alice left school at the age of eleven to work in a factory. By 1901 she was working as a cycle packer and at some point became an employee of the Rudge Whitworth cycle factory in Spon Street, which from 1915 joined the war effort – producing fuses, shells and rifle ammunition. It was one of many Coventry factories engaged in war production, which relied very heavily on women workers who often replaced men who were away on military duties. Thousands of young women flocked to Coventry during this period to work in the city's factories, with many living in sparse lodgings or wartime hostels.

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Alice Arnold was committed to social justice and had a deep desire to improve the conditions of life for working people, especially during this period of intense and demanding wartime production. She was a trade union activist and a champion of women's rights, and in 1917 was appointed as the Women's Organiser for the Workers' Union, a full-time position.



Labour councillors after the 1919 election, with Alice Arnold pictured on the left and Ellen Hughes on the right, the first women councillors in Coventry. Photo: Cathy Hunt author website

In 1919, in the first municipal elections since the war, Alice Arnold, who was sponsored by the Workers' Union, and Ellen Hughes, who stood for the Labour Party, became the first two women councillors in Coventry. It was the beginning of a tough but ultimately successful journey for Alice, who fought hard to make an impact in the male dominated council chamber.

"Alice's political career," wrote Cathy Hunt, "was characterised by her determination to support men and women and their families equally in their daily battles against the indignities of poor housing, insecure employment, inadequate services and poor health. She burst onto the political scene with a determination to raise and tackle these issues and every time she spoke out, the press was keen to report her words and actions, hopeful of provoking reaction among its readers. She seldom disappointed, using her position as a councillor to extend her service beyond her work as a trade union organiser, in order to seek decent treatment for those she

considered to be powerless and underrepresented."



Women of today, including historian Cathy Hunt (fourth from right), celebrate the life of Alice Arnold. Photo: John Marshall

In 1931 Alice Arnold became an alderman and by 1936 she was the longest serving Labour member of the city council. This led, despite some opposition, to her becoming the city's first woman Mayor in 1937, a year in which the Labour Party won control of the council for the first time.

Alice Arnold never married and lived at several different flats in Short Street during the 1930s, one of the council's first municipal housing schemes in the 1920s. She was living in Short Street when she became Mayor in 1937. Other addresses during her working life included

Goring Road, Hewitt Avenue and Three Spires Avenue. She served on the council for 36 years and continued as an alderman until her death in 1955.

The blue plaque at Short Street – a collaboration between the city council and the Alice Arnold branch of the trade union Unite - was unveiled on January 28th by Coventry's current Lord Mayor Mal Mutton. The Unite Union in Coventry is a direct descendant of the Workers' Union, for which Alice was a member, a shop steward and a paid organiser. □

Further reading: The fullest account of her life can be found in the booklet *A Woman of the People: Alice Arnold of Coventry 1881-1955* by Cathy Hunt – Coventry and County Heritage series, published by the Coventry Branch of the Historical Society (2007). Alice's mother Caroline was the sister of Oliver Style, the notorious character at the centre of Adam Wood's book *The Watchmaker's Revenge* (2021), which gives a good insight into the Arnold family and a summary of Alice's career.