

'Plaques, people and places'

THE next meeting of Stoke Local History Group will feature a talk and slide show presentation by former city guide Phil Tutchings, who will take us on an imaginary tour of Coventry city centre, looking for clues about famous or interesting people with connections to the city.

The talk will feature current places such as St Mary's Guildhall, Broadgate, Greyfriars Green and the Railway Station – and people such as Lady Godiva, the poet Tennyson, George Eliot and Charles Dickens. Plaques in the city centre



*Plinth, plaques and a medieval Guildhall (top right).
Photos: John Marshall*



will be explored to highlight prominent individuals such as Donald Gibson and

Ellen Terry, as well as pioneering black actor Ira Aldridge who once managed the city's Theatre Royal in old Smithford Street.

Phil Tutchings also promises to say a word or two about features on the old Cathedral walls and sculptured panels in Bayley Lane, which contain historic details of previous occupants.

This intriguing meeting, entitled 'Plaques, people and places', will take place on Friday April 4th at Stoke Library, beginning at 10.30am. All welcome.



Old Ball closed and boarded up

THE future of the Old Ball public house, which has been a prominent feature of Ball Hill for many years, has been thrown into doubt as the building is currently closed and boarded up. The pub still has a notice next to its entrance, saying that it has re-opened under new management, but this arrangement appears to have been short-lived. Admiral Taverns, the company that owns the pub, has told the local media that it is considering its options and has not yet decided what to do with the pub. The reasons for the closure have not been revealed.



*Pictured this month – the Old Ball Hotel is not currently trading.
Photo: John Marshall*

Goodbye City Arcade – and farewell to Shelton Square, Market Way and Bull Yard

HOARDINGS now surround a vast chunk of Coventry city centre, as preparations begin for the demolition of many familiar features in this part of town. The former landmarks, some of which were looking a bit tired and faded, are to be replaced with a new development known as City Centre South.

The new development promises a high proportion of residential dwellings, together with new retail outlets, a hotel, cafes, restaurants and leisure facilities, with new walkways, artwork and public spaces.

About to be demolished are City Arcade, Shelton Square, Bull Yard and parts of Market Way, together with a part of Hertford Street - all of which sit adjacent to Coventry's main Shopping Precinct. An older building will also disappear, the former Litten Tree Building which started life in 1911 as the Rover showrooms.

Of the buildings to be demolished, it is perhaps City Arcade that most tugs at the heartstrings of those with fond memories of this once-thriving part of town. It was built in the early 1960s and was part of an extended shopping area designed by Arthur Ling, who had taken over the task of post-war reconstruction after Donald Gibson's departure in 1955. Ling himself was later succeeded by Terence Gregory.



City Arcade in the 1960s, when each shop had a colourful and uniform projecting sign

City Arcade was inspired by an earlier City Arcade, badly damaged during the Blitz, which once stood between the old Smithford Street and the original Barracks Market. The new version was famed for the birdcage at its entrance - extremely popular at the time - and this sat beside the Climax pub, named after the Coventry fork truck and pump engine manufacturer. This pub first opened in December 1962 and was a joint effort between Flowers and Ansells. It lasted until 1983, after which it reopened as the Bug and Black Bat, before changing its name again in 1994 to Rosie O'Brien's Pumphouse.

The small Virgin record shop in City Arcade is probably one of the most fondly remembered former stores. It was situated close to the birdcage and opened in 1973 as part of Richard Branson's emerging empire. According to local music journalist Pete Clemons, it became a focal point for the





Christmas shopping in a busy 1960s City Arcade

music scene in Coventry and was soon attracting customers from the city's polytechnic and university, including Simon Frith, the celebrated rock music sociologist, and DJ Simon Mayo who was a student at Warwick. It also seems to have become a hangout for future members of The Specials.

The popularity of the Virgin shop in City Arcade was further enhanced in 1974 by Coventry kid Pete Waterman - later to become a pop music legend as part of Stock, Aitken and Waterman – who moved his early shop Soul Hole from a cramped basement in Hales Street to the first floor of the Virgin record shop. Other shops in City Arcade included an educational bookshop, a florist, a shoe shop, a hi-fi store, a sports shop and a café.

In 1962, when City Arcade was first completed, it formed part of a single pedestrian street, crossing over the main Precinct and running all the way from Corporation Street to Queen Victoria Road, with Smithford Way and City Arcade at either end. But this development was never inevitable. Shopkeepers were initially outraged by the idea that car drivers would be unable to

park outside their shops, so it looked at one point as though a more conventional street, with access to cars and buses, would be built. Arthur Ling managed to persuade the council to avoid this “ghastly compromise” and the input of traffic was therefore narrowly avoided, though parked cars in the early days were allowed in Market Way.

Market Way skirted the unique Circular Market, built in 1957, and provided more space for shops and pubs, with cars parked on the roof of the market and adjoining buildings. The Market Tavern dates from this time and it formed a popular stopping-off point for busy shoppers and market traders. It was also a bustling pub in the evenings and was complemented by a nightclub called the Forty Thieves, which added an extra zing to the night-time economy, later becoming Busters.



Market Way and the Forty Thieves. Photo courtesy of Rob Orland

Market Way was also the location of Jill Hanson's record shop, which opened in 1957 and led the way in Coventry for the emerging pop culture of the late 1950s and early 60s. It became the most important place in the city for buying records, long before Virgin, and was the first record shop to provide the *Coventry Evening Telegraph* with a Top Ten listing of best-selling singles, based on sales in the shop. The shop was situated close to Woolworths, next to the current Poundland, in part of Market Way that will survive.



Shelton Square, named after the Coventry archaeologist John Shelton, was primarily intended to punctuate the pedestrian street with an office block and an open public space - providing an

entrance to the indoor market and a link with City Arcade. The office block was designed during Arthur Ling's tenure, in association with London architects Ardin & Brookes. The square was originally designed to have two levels of shops, like the Precinct, with a grand stair descending into the square below. But this was removed in 1966 when the use of the upper level as separate shops was abandoned.

Bull Yard dates from 1965 and marked a transitional phase between the designs of Ling and his successor Terence Gregory. It showed a distinct change in style from the earlier architecture, with its vertical slats and windows on the low-level upper floor, and a concrete fascia above. Part of its original purpose was to provide access to the Barracks car park but it was later pedestrianised when an alternative access to the car park was provided under Hertford Street.



Shelton Square in 1962, showing the original two-tier shopping plan. Photo: John McCann/RIBA



The Three Tuns pub with its distinctive concrete mural

The distinguishing features of Bull Yard were its Dome newsagent shop and the Three Tuns public house, fronted by a cast concrete mural by William Mitchell. The pub was closed in 2010 and converted into a restaurant. More recently, a gay-friendly venue, The Yard, enlivened the square but this too has now gone, having moved next to the Council House in Earl Street.

For Bull Yard and other areas mentioned here, the shutters are now down, the shops have closed and the pubs have finally called time. □

Sources: A variety of sources were consulted in the preparation of this article, the principal books being EB Newbold, *Portrait of Coventry* (1972); Kenneth Richardson, *Twentieth Century Coventry* (1972); and Jeremy and Caroline Gould, *Coventry: The Making of a Modern City 1939-73* (2016). Numerous online articles were useful, especially the contributions in Rob Orland's Historic Coventry Forum, which also provided many of the photographs. Information about the Virgin record shop was provided by Pete Clemons in the *Coventry Evening Telegraph* (April 14, 2014). **JM**



An impression of how part of the city centre should look after redevelopment. The listed circular market, seen here, is retained but becomes more prominent in the new design, with much better pedestrian access. Almost 1,000 homes have been given the green light in the first phase of the project, with space for shops, businesses and public open spaces. Construction is scheduled to start this summer and the first homes are expected to be completed by early 2027. □