Jabet's Ash

The newsletter of Stoke Local History Group, Coventry **May 2025**
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'Coventry's best kept secret' – the tiny Blitz Museum

OUR next outdoor event will be a group visit to a little-known museum - the small but fascinating Blitz Museum - which is tucked away in a corner of Coventry Cathedral ruins.

Described as "Coventry's best kept secret", it seems likely that many city residents have never visited the museum and some are not aware that it exists. But it attracts a good deal of attention from tourists who discover the museum on summer weekends or during school holidays.

Our special group visit will take place on Friday June 20th and will include a guided walk around the Cathedral ruins, which are all that remain of the once magnificent St Michael's Cathedral. The building was destroyed on the night of November 14th 1940 when it fell victim to the Coventry Blitz, an 11-hour period of bombardment during World War Two which wrecked a large part of the city.

Our museum guide Adam Neale

This year is the 85th anniversary of the November Blitz and it is expected that many events will be held in the city to commemorate this momentous event.

The Blitz Museum offers a tiny treasure trove of wartime artefacts and memorabilia, including the recreation of a 1940s school room and the inside of a period kitchen. Visitors can also watch a short video film, telling the story of what happened during the Blitz.

Our enthusiastic museum guides will be Adam Neale and Adam Wood, who will also reveal the secrets of the Cathedral ruins. We will round off our visit with a brief tour of the new Cathedral.

No booking is required. Just turn up. We will meet in the Cathedral ruins, next to the altar, at 10.30am on Friday June 20th. Admission to the museum is free but donations are always welcome.

A reminder will be mailed out nearer the time.

Stoke Local History Group
Friday June 20th, meet at 10.30am
Coventry Blitz Museum

Inside the Blitz Museum: a warden's post recreated.
Museum photos: John Marshall

Charterhouse reopens under National Trust control

The tranquil setting of Charterhouse, now managed by the National Trust.
Photo: John Marshall

THE National Trust has announced that Charterhouse, a 14th century former Carthusian monastery in Coventry, has reopened from May 21st.

The monastic house, founded in 1381 and Grade I listed, has been used for many purposes during its long life, including a monastery, a family home, a youth hostel and a training centre. It is home to some of the finest medieval and renaissance art in England and is set in acres of green space that includes a wildlife pond, a community orchard, a children's play area and an extensive grassland park beside the river.

Earlier this year, Historic Coventry Trust, which owns Charterhouse and oversaw its multi-million-pound restoration, entered into a partnership with the National Trust which now manages the site. It is the National Trust's first property in Coventry and details of its opening hours and admission charges can be found on their website. There is no charge for admission to the heritage park.

This wonderful postcard photograph of Stoke Green shows children playing in 1925. Some are wearing school uniforms and are no doubt pupils of local schools, such as the National School, just visible in the distance on the right. Binley Road is on the left, on the other side of the hedgerow. The setting is still recognisable today, though the trees have grown significantly since 1925. The postcard is part of Rob Orland's collection.

A brief history of the British post box

Last month, *Jabet's Ash* examined the history of what was once a familiar feature of many British streets - the traditional red telephone box. This month, as Royal Mail is set to enter the ownership of a Czech billionaire, we look briefly at another piece of historic street furniture – the red pillar box.

ACCORDING to Historic England, there are over 85,000 post boxes in England and around 115,000 in the whole of the British Isles. Some estimates suggest that a post box is located within half-a-mile of 98 per cent of the UK population. But we walk past these boxes every day, hardly pausing to glance, and often not realising what a key role they have played in the social history of Britain.

The post box, or pillar box, dates back to the 1850s and it owes its existence to the earlier reform of the postal system by Rowland Hill, who in 1840 introduced the idea of a universal delivery charge of one penny for ordinary letters.

A Victorian post box in Warwick with a fluted cast iron pillar and vertical slot for letters, 1856-57. *Photo: John Marshall*

This was accompanied by the invention of the first postage stamp, the Penny Black, which revolutionised the process of sending and receiving letters.

As a result of these changes, there was an enormous rise in the number of letters posted in the UK, from 76 million in 1839 to 168 million in the following year, when the Penny Post was first introduced. Ten years later this had doubled to 347 million letters.

It was Anthony Trollope, now more famous as a novelist, who pioneered the introduction of post boxes in Britain. In the 1850s he was working as a surveyor's clerk for the Post Office and he became aware of post boxes in Belgium and France. He proposed the introduction of such boxes, on a trial basis, in Jersey and Guernsey, and this successful experiment was extended to mainland Britain in 1853.

A Coventry post box from the reign of George V, in Aldermoor Lane, Stoke. *Photo: John Marshall*

Prior to this, senders of letters would have to take their post to a Receiving House – an early version of a post office - or await the arrival of a Bellman, who walked the streets and collected letters, sounding a bell to signify his arrival.

Early post boxes went through various designs but the basic form was usually a vertical 'pillar', with a small slot for inserting letters. The first boxes on Jersey were painted red but in 1859 a decision was taken to standardise the colour by making all boxes green. This was intended to make them less obtrusive but it proved to be unpopular and from 1874 all post boxes were repainted red.

The design of Victorian boxes tended to vary from region to region, and modifications were gradually introduced to improve their efficiency and, in particular, to protect letters from rainwater. Some early boxes were hexagonal in shape but in 1879 the Post Office, after several previous attempts, unveiled a standardised version that became a familiar and iconic design for generations to come - a cylindrical pillar with a round cap and a horizonal aperture beneath a protruding cap, featuring a front-opening door and a black painted base.

Apart from the basic shape, other features of the British pillar box give it a distinctive

character. Since the beginning, post boxes have usually carried the insignia or cipher of the reigning monarch, in addition to the words 'Post Office' which continued to be used until new boxes were branded with the name 'Royal Mail' in the 1990s.

Historic England say that 60 per cent of existing boxes have the mark of Queen Elizabeth II or a Scottish crown, with about 15 per cent from the reign of George V. Smaller numbers can be found - in descending order - from the reigns of George VI, Victoria and Edward VII, with an even smaller number from the short reign of Edward VIII. The first post box to carry the insignia of Charles III was unveiled in July 2024 at Great Cambourne in Cambridgeshire.

From 1857 standard pillar boxes were supplemented by small rectangular wall boxes, often placed into existing walls or into purpose-built brick pillars. Lamp boxes also appeared from 1896, attached to gas-powered street lights, and this type of box is still occasionally seen on rural telegraph poles.

This Coventry box has the insignia of Elizabeth II and is situated outside the Empress Building in Stoke, opposite the Bull's Head public house.

A Victorian wall box at the entrance to Stoke Park in Coventry, set into the estate's original gatepost.

A good example of a wall box can be found on the Binley Road in Coventry, at the South Avenue entrance to Stoke Park, where a Victorian post box is embedded into the original stone gatepost. Another Victorian wall box can be seen in Cuckoo Lane but this one is sealed and painted black, to signify that is no longer used.

Today, most post boxes remain the property of Royal Mail – which was separated from the Post Office in 2012 and fully privatised in 2015. A takeover by Czech billionaire Daniel Kretinsky was approved by shareholders last month but the long-term future of the service still remains unclear. A decline in the volume of letter post has caused major financial problems for Royal Mail and it is not yet known whether existing post boxes will continue to operate indefinitely.

In July 2015 Historic England and Royal Mail issued a joint statement in which they agreed a detailed policy for the retention and conservation of Royal Mail post boxes. Some have listed status and these have statutory protection. But there is no guarantee that our entire network of post boxes will survive.

Last month, the Letter Box Study Group reported that Royal Mail has unveiled a new solar-powered post box - a modified version of the traditional red pillar box - with an extra-large opening to accept bigger parcels. Customers scan their parcel's barcode and a drawer opens for them to drop it in, and they can also request proof of posting from a Royal Mail app. The move is part of a drive to make it easier for customers to use post boxes to send parcels and it might signify a brighter future for the humble British pillar box.

□ JM

A Victorian wall box in Cuckoo Lane, a heritage box painted black.
All photos: John Marshall