

A walk on the wild side – exploring the nature of Charterhouse Heritage Park

THE history group's next summer outing will be a gentle guided walk around the extensive grounds and riverbank of Coventry's unique Charterhouse Heritage Park.

This fascinating walk will allow us to appreciate the vast area which currently surrounds Charterhouse – stretching all the way south to the Victorian railway viaduct designed by Robert Stephenson. Our principal guide will be John Payne of the Coventry Society who will share details about the park and explain future plans for improved access and signage.

The acres of green space around Charterhouse already include a wildlife pond, a community orchard, a children's play area, abandoned allotments, sports fields and grassland.

Exciting plans to open up some neglected areas are being led by several partners, including Historic Coventry Trust, the National Trust, the John Muir Trust, Warwickshire Wildlife Trust and Coventry City Council.



We will be able to witness improvements already made to the flow of the River Sherbourne and see how new ponds have brought additional wildlife to the area. We will also see the historic Folly Lane tunnel which goes under the Coventry Loop Line, next to the mainline railway which still operates between London and Birmingham.

The impressive Sherbourne Viaduct, now largely hidden from view, has been Grade II listed since 2015 and hopes are high that future work will clear some of the overgrown vegetation and reveal once more the splendour of the view.

Our guided tour around Charterhouse Heritage Park will take place on Thursday July 17th, starting at 11am. Meet outside the main Charterhouse building. A car park is situated on site, with access from London Road. A café with toilets should also be available. No booking is required. Further information will be sent out nearer the time. □

Stoke Local History Group

Thursday July 17th, starting at 11am

Guided walk around the grounds of Charterhouse Heritage Park



Out and about – summer visits and walks

Photos: John Marshall

The history group has enjoyed a couple of exceptional city walks and visits during the early part of this summer, kicking off with Adam Wood's 'Women of Coventry' tour in May, which allowed us to remember and celebrate some amazing women in the history of Coventry – including George Eliot, Cara Bray, Angela Brazil, Queen Isabella, Ellen Terry, Delia Derbyshire, Mo Mowlam, Margaret of Anjou, Lady Godiva and others. Our June tour - with a group of around 20 people - gave us a chance to visit the fascinating Blitz Museum, and also take a guided walk around the Cathedral ruins. We then stepped into the new Coventry Cathedral where Mary, our guide, held everyone in raptures with her deep knowledge of the Cathedral's art and its theological symbolism. One feature in the old Cathedral ruins stood out, the bronze effigy of Bishop Yeatman-Biggs - the only artefact to survive largely intact when St Michael's was destroyed by enemy bombing in 1940. Bishop Yeatman-Biggs was the first bishop of the newly reformed Diocese of Coventry when St Michael's became a Cathedral in 1918. On his mitre is a swastika, an old religious symbol, later subverted by the Nazis as a symbol of their regime. It was this Nazi insignia that spearheaded the destruction of Coventry Cathedral and much of the city during the War, strangely sparing the effigy of Bishop Yeatman-Biggs, housed in the Cathedral's Lady Chapel. More on this next month... Special thanks to our guides Adam Wood, Adam Neale and Mary. □



In March this year Ian Woolley gave a talk to the group about 'Coventry Mayors of the 19th Century'. In this edition of Jabet's Ash, John Marshall takes a closer look at one of those men...

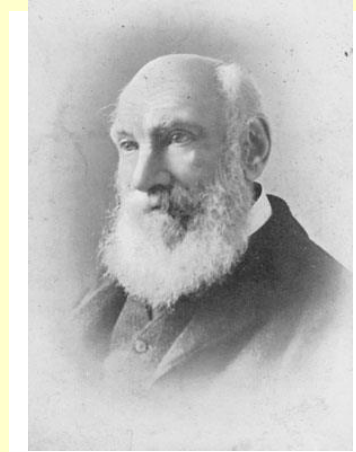
A man for all seasons: John Gulson

IN December 1904 there was much sorrow in Coventry when it was announced that John Gulson, one of the city's most prominent and respected citizens, had died in the early hours of Christmas Day.

Newspapers spoke of "Coventry's great loss" and the bells of Holy Trinity Church were tolled for one hour as a mark of respect. In the County Magistrates Court, the senior solicitor, Mr Masser, echoed the sentiments of numerous city folk when he said: "Coventry has lost a great benefactor, and every one of us feels that we have lost a personal friend."

During his long life – he was 91 years old when he died – John Gulson had been an immense presence in Coventry. He came from a Quaker family and was a successful banker, silk merchant and general businessman. He was a progressive social thinker, a Liberal in politics, an alderman and mayor on the city council, and a major benefactor to the city.

In particular, he played a key role in the establishment of public libraries in Coventry, being as important in the 19th century as Andrew Carnegie would later be in the early 20th century. It was John Gulson who in 1868 oversaw the opening of the city's first public library in Hertford Street and when that became insufficient, he donated land for the building of a new Central Library next to Holy Trinity Church, previously the site of Coventry Gaol. The new library opened in 1873. An adjoining Reference Library was added in 1890 and the whole building was known throughout its life as the Gulson Library.



John Gulson's home at 7 Priory Row, a building which still exists today.

Photo: John Marshall

John Gulson was born at 150 Spon Street in Coventry on 23 October, 1813. His ancestors were largely in the leather trade, a middle class commercial family, and this was the occupation of his father, John Gulson Senior. But in 1828 the senior Gulson became a director of his brother-in-law's banking establishment in Coventry. This allowed his son, John Gulson Junior, at the age of fourteen, to become an apprentice in the firm and learn the business of banking.

On reaching the age of 21, the young John Gulson became a partner in the firm – known as Goodall, Gulson and Goodall – and by 1867 he was chairman, by which time the business was part of the Coventry and Warwickshire Bank. This bank merged with Lloyds Bank in 1876 and Gulson was a director from 1879 to 1886.

Meanwhile in 1838 or 1839 the young John Gulson had also formed a partnership with a Mr Merrick, a silk merchant, and they formed a silk business together – known as Merrick and Gulson – at premises in Vicar Lane. When Mr Merrick retired, John Gulson carried on the business on his own account and later moved to an office in the Bank Chambers in High Street.

The *Coventry Herald* explained that "the modus operandi of the business was to buy raw silk in London and send it to the mills in the country to be thrown; it was then warehoused and ready to be sold to the manufacturers." In 1850 Gulson entered into a partnership with Richard Caldicott before retiring from the silk

business in 1866. He then became involved with the Coventry Machinists Company, a cycle manufacturer, with premises in New Buildings and later Cheylesmore.

John Gulson married Sophia Miller, from County Derry in Ireland, in 1862 and the couple lived at the Gulson family home at 7 Priory Row. But they also acquired a country home, The Spring, just outside Coventry in the rural district of Stoke, where they spent the summer season.

According to John Short, who wrote a short booklet about Gulson, The Spring became an important home: "The estate had an area of 34

acres, consisting of a house, cottages and land which was formerly owned by Mr Luke Dresser, the actuary of the Coventry Savings Bank. Here, John and Sophia spent the summer months and were able to develop a garden of their own ideas, where they could offer hospitality to their friends and the members of the various voluntary societies in which they were interested. This, also, brought John Gulson into contact with the rural areas of Stoke and Binley and made it possible for him to record the rainfall, temperature and weather in the area and make comparisons with the readings in the garden at Priory Row, two miles away. As a leading landowner he became one of the conservators of Stoke Common."

The Spring at Stoke was located off the Binley Road, a short distance from Stoke Hill Farm, with an entrance track on the opposite side of the road from Copsewood Grange Lodge. As the above summary makes clear, John Gulson was deeply interested in nature and he had a particular interest in the changing seasons and the



Coventry's Central or Gulson Library, with St Michael's in the background

weather. His recordings of rainfall were well known in Coventry and his findings were regularly published in local newspapers. He loved birds, wildlife and trees and was also a keen country walker and painter.

John Gulson supported numerous efforts to extend education to Coventry's working class, and he was hugely influential in the fields of health and welfare work, as well as school provision. In 1834 he became secretary to the Mechanics' Institute, a body which aimed to foster literary and scientific pursuits among the artisan working class. In 1850 he became the first chairman of the Coventry School Board, which opened new schools in Spon Street and South Street. Gulson was also an active supporter of a new Art School, which opened in Ford Street in 1863.

In 1847 John Gulson had been co-opted onto the City Council and he later served for many years as an elected alderman, becoming Mayor from 1867 to 1869. At the time of his retirement from the council in 1903, his municipal career had stretched for 44 years, 38 of which were continuous. He was also a magistrate for over 30 years.

He was a close friend of Joseph Paxton, designer of London Road Cemetery and Liberal MP for Coventry from 1854 until his death in 1865. It was John Gulson who promoted a fund to commemorate Paxton, and this led to the creation of the Paxton Memorial at the cemetery.

Gulson will best be remembered, however, for his role in the creation of the first Free Library in Coventry. He was possibly the most distinguished public figure in Victorian Coventry and, according to the *Midland Daily Telegraph*, he was held in "universal esteem by all classes of his fellow citizens". □



*The Spring at Stoke Hill, the Gulson country retreat in summer.
Photo from Blyth 'The History of Stoke'*