

'A bomb in a bicycle basket' – the IRA bombing in Broadgate, 1939

IN October 2015 a memorial stone was unveiled on the lawn beside Coventry Cathedral to remember victims of an IRA bomb attack in Broadgate in 1939, which killed five people and injured more than sixty.

The bombing – which wrecked buildings and shocked the city – took place on August 25th 1939, just nine days before the outbreak of World War II.

Adam Wood, local historian and city guide, has researched the incident for a new book - to be published next year – which will tell the story of the bombing.

Members of Stoke Local History Group will gain a preview of the book when Adam talks to the group on Friday October 3rd at Stoke Library.



Aftermath of the bombing in Broadgate, one of the principal shopping streets in pre-War Coventry. Photo: Historic Coventry



"On 25 August 1939," says Adam, "a bicycle was parked up against the kerb outside Astley's shop on Broadgate, with a deadly cargo in its basket."

"It was a Friday lunchtime, and the street was packed with people. At 2.30pm a huge explosion threw passers-by to the floor and blew the glass from the windows of shops and offices the length of the street."

"More than sixty people were injured, a dozen seriously, and five people lost their lives."

"Hear the human stories of those involved, how the families of the dead attempted to rebuild their shattered lives – not to mention how Stoke was the epicentre of the bombers' operations."

Stoke Local History Group
Friday October 3rd, beginning at 10.30am, Stoke Library
Adam Wood talks about 'The Bombing of Broadgate, 1939'

Another busy year ...

Annual Report, 2025, Stoke Local History Group

NUMEROUS prominent people in the history of Coventry have been featured in a series of talks at Stoke Local History Group during the past year.

Among these were the Victorian photographer Joseph Wingrave, who gave us the first photographs of Coventry; Joseph Paxton, who designed London Road Cemetery; Sir Henry Parkes, the Canley boy who became Premier of New South



Joseph Paxton, National Portrait Gallery London

Wales; and various 19th century Mayors of the city, including John Gulson and George Singer.

We've also explored Coventry's Victorian Murder Mile and we've considered a series of plaques and places in the city centre which highlight the lives of various individuals, such as Ira Aldridge and Ellen Terry.

An early summer walk continued the theme with a city centre guided tour - looking at the lives of prominent women of Coventry, including Lady Godiva, George Eliot, Angela Brazil, Delia Derbyshire and Alice Arnold.

Other outdoor events have taken us to the Blitz Museum at Coventry Cathedral and the extensive grounds of Charterhouse Heritage Park.

With thanks to all guest speakers and guides throughout the year: David Fry, Adam Wood, Peter Walters, Sheila Woolf, Ian Woolley, Phil Tutchings, Adam Neale and John Payne. Thanks also, as usual, to Stoke Library.

Alongside these meetings and events, the newsletter, *Jabet's Ash*, has been produced by John Marshall each month, featuring a wide variety of topics. Thanks to Rob Orland for making all editions available on his website, Historic Coventry.

Our AGM takes place on Friday October 3rd, before a talk by Adam Wood. The AGM is expected to be a brief bit of business, the main task being to elect (or re-elect) a steering group for the year ahead.

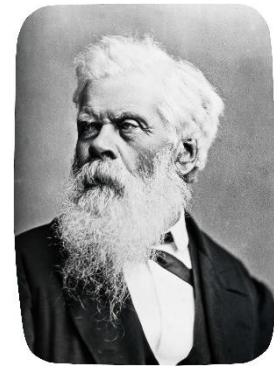
Volunteers wanted

ARE you able and willing to lend a hand with organising our future meetings? Help is sometimes needed to prepare the room at Stoke Library (moving book shelves and bringing in chairs) and clearing the room afterwards. Help with refreshments would also be appreciated, and it's always useful to have someone on hand who knows about technical malarkey, like projectors and laptops. Please have a word with John or send an email if you would like to help. The address is stokehistorygroup@gmail.com . Thank you!



Dates for your diary – talks for the year ahead

A SERIES of history group talks will take place at Stoke Library during the year ahead. Dates include Friday October 3rd; Fri November 7th; Fri December 5th; Fri February 6th; Fri March 6th; and Fri April 17th. Note there is no meeting in January. Meetings are usually held on the first Friday of the month, with the exception of April which is later than usual, to avoid a clash with Easter. □



Sir Henry Parkes, National Portrait Gallery Canberra



Alice Arnold, Mayor of Coventry, 1937

WH Smith makes historic exit from Coventry city centre

THE name WH Smith has been a familiar part of almost every British high street for around 120 years, with a dependable network of branches selling newspapers, books and stationery. But these ubiquitous town centre stores are now a thing of the past.

The historic retailer has quit the UK high street and sold its 480 stores to Modella Capital, owner of Hobbycraft, for £76 million. Smith's said the move will allow it to focus on its travel shops, meaning that WH Smith will retain and extend its presence in railway stations and airports. But the brand will disappear from the high street and Modella has already started to rebrand its newly acquired stores as TG Jones.



*Smith and Jones (above and below), Smithford Way.
Photos: John Marshall*



The new name does not refer to a real person – it is just a marketing ploy - and the Coventry store in Smithford Way has recently undergone the rebranding.

It's not the first time that Coventry has lost its city centre branch of WH Smith. This time no damage has been done – the shop in Smithford Way is likely to stay exactly the same – but on a previous occasion there was an almighty calamity. That occasion was the Second World War when WH Smith's, along with many other stores in Coventry, was completely destroyed during the Blitz.



Photo courtesy Rob Orland/ Historic Coventry

Our photograph above shows the old WH Smith branch in Hertford Street, Coventry, in 1933. The shop, on the right-hand side, bears the old WHS logo between the windows on the first floor. Next door, only partly visible

on the right, is a branch of George Loveitts, the auctioneer and valuer, a company still active in the city today as an estate agent and auctioneer, now with premises at Greyfriars Green. Further up Hertford Street, on the right, is the Queen's Hotel, with a canopy over the entrance, and beyond that can be seen the imposing structure of the National Provincial Bank, built in 1929-30 and still in existence as NatWest Bank.

Our second photograph (below) shows what happened to WH Smith and other businesses in Hertford Street after the air raids on November 14th 1940. The picture was taken on the day following the Blitz, with firefighters still tackling the blaze at the Queen's Hotel. The WH Smith shop was almost completely demolished.

It's interesting to note that two members of staff who worked at this branch of WH Smith were among those killed in the IRA attack in Broadgate, just over one year earlier (see front page). One was Rex Gentle, aged 30, a trainee manager from Wales, and the other a local lad, John Arnott, just 15.



NATIONALLY, WH Smith can trace its history back to 1792 when Henry Walton Smith and his wife Anna first established a news vendor business in Little Grosvenor Street, Mayfair. After their deaths, the venture was taken over by their youngest son William Henry Smith, the first WH Smith.

William Henry took full advantage of the railway boom and in 1848 opened the company's first news stand at Euston Station, later cornering the market at UK railway stations. His son, also named William Henry, became a partner in the business (hence WH Smith & Son) and the firm became a major player in wholesale newspaper distribution, revolutionising the newspaper trade by chartering night trains to deliver papers to the provinces on the same day as publication.



Victoria Station, Manchester, c1932. Photo: History Today

It was only later that the company began to develop its high street retail chain, with the first store opening at Clacton-on-Sea in 1901. By 1933 the firm had 311 high street shops, 1,400 bookstalls and 48 wholesale outlets.