

Remembering the Blitz – the story of Olga Stew

NEXT month marks the 85th anniversary of the Coventry Blitz which, on that fateful night of November 14th, 1940, destroyed the Cathedral and devastated many parts of the city - leaving numerous citizens homeless, shocked, heartbroken and bewildered. Hundreds lost their lives and many were injured.

The anniversary will be commemorated by numerous events and activities around the city, including at Stoke Local History Group where our guest speaker, Chris West, will recall the stories told by his mother, Olga Stew, who was a child on the night of the Blitz but who never forgot the frightening impact of the bombing.

Olga Stew was aged nine and living in Chapelfields on the night of the Blitz and she often relived the terror she and her family felt. Now, 85 years later, her son Chris West will share Olga's story.



Young Olga, aged about 8, playing safely at home before the Blitz



Chris with his mum Olga in 2012, at his 50th birthday party. Olga passed away in 2019.

Chris, an Earlsdon resident, said: "I grew up in Coventry in the shadow of the war. We lived three doors from the house my mum and her family were living in on the night of the Blitz. Her dad lived with us and they talked about it regularly and passionately.

"Mum always wanted to share her experiences and did so verbally, but I could never persuade her to write them down."

Last year, adds Chris, he finally wrote an account of his late mother's memories for Coventry Blitz Museum and he subsequently adapted the tale for a talk at Earlsdon Library. He has since shared the talk in schools, colleges and other community groups.

The talk at Stoke Library will take place on Friday November 7th, beginning at 10.30am. All welcome.

Chris West is a former senior city council officer and is now chair of a charity, the Heart of England Community Foundation.

Stoke Local History Group
Stoke Library
'Remembering the Blitz'
Friday November 7th, starting at 10.30

Cathedral to commemorate 85th anniversary of Coventry Blitz

A SPECIAL event will be held at Coventry Cathedral on Friday November 14th to commemorate the Coventry Blitz, which took place exactly 85 years ago.

The service, which starts at 5.30pm, will be led by the Very Reverend John Witcombe, Dean of Coventry, and will include contributions from Coventry schools, faith leaders, and choral groups. Guests from Germany will join via a video link.

Following the service, those attending will move into the poignant surroundings of the Cathedral Ruins as two sirens sound at 6.55pm to mark the exact time of the first air raid on November 14th, 1940. This will be followed by a two-minute silence.

The event will close with a specially commissioned Choral Piece, 'Litany of Reconciliation' by Ben Ponniah, and a peal of the Cathedral bells will ring out across the city. The event is free to attend, with tickets are available via the Cathedral website. □



Photo: John Marshall

'Moonlight Sonata' – the air raid of November 1940



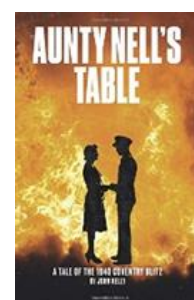
IT was not the first air raid on Coventry, nor would it be the last. But the raid on November 14th, 1940, was the single most concentrated attack on a British city during the Second World War.

Codenamed 'Moonlight Sonata', the raid lasted for 11 hours and involved nearly 500 Luftwaffe bombers, working from airfields all over occupied Europe. The German aircraft dropped 500 tons of high explosive bombs, 30,000 incendiaries and 50 landmines.

Coventry lost not only its great medieval church of St Michael's, the only English Cathedral destroyed in the War, but also much of its city centre. More than 43,000 homes, just over half of the city's housing stock, were damaged or destroyed during the raids, and many of the city's factories were severely damaged. The raids continued throughout the night and the people of Coventry were traumatised - with many wandering through the streets on the following day with a sense of shock and disbelief. The final death toll was put at 568, though the real figure was probably much higher. Hundreds were seriously injured. □

THE 85th anniversary of the Blitz provides a timely reminder that a novel written by John Kelly, a former speaker at Stoke Local History Group and a survivor of the Blitz, is still available on Amazon.

Aunty Nell's Table is based on the childhood memories of the author and tells the fictionalised story of the Mansell family and their staff at the Biggin Hall pub on Binley Road. It paints a picture of gruesome wartime experience as ordinary people did extraordinary things, like rescuing bomb victims from shattered houses, eking out food and fuel supplies, coping with looting, or providing emergency accommodation for the homeless. It also incorporates the tale of brave Polish airmen who were billeted at the pub. A passionate first novel by John Kelly, now retired and living in France, the book can be ordered from Amazon, priced at just £5.80. □



A house called Hope's Harbour

IMAGINE Bray's Lane in Stoke in the 19th century, a remote country lane with no houses on either side. A rural idyll, surrounded by fields, with an old public house, the Half Moon, near the junction with Binley Road. Nearby are farm buildings and a blacksmith's shop.

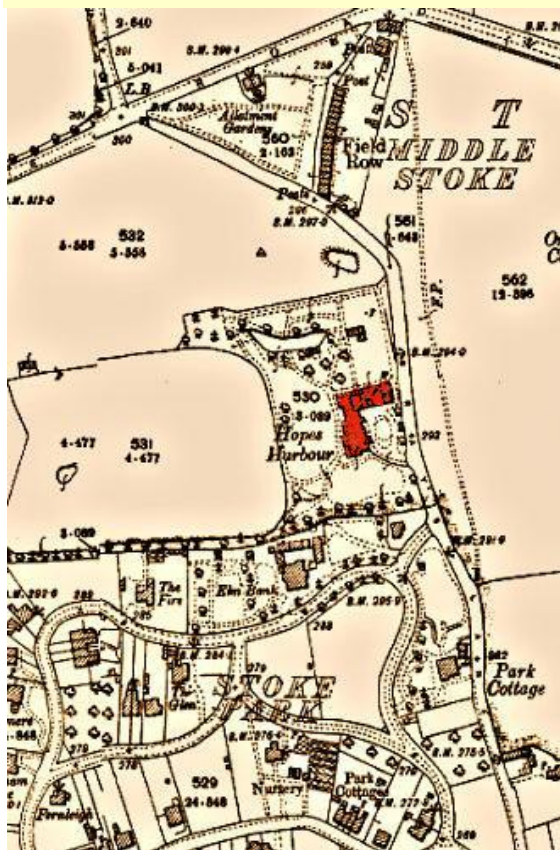
It was not until the mid-1860s that things began to change, with the laying out of roads for a new and exclusive housing development, to be known as Stoke Park. But progress was slow and the new site, enclosed within stone walls, did little to disturb the peace of Bray's Lane.

It was within this quiet country lane that a new house was built in 1879 for Her Majesty's Inspector of Factories, a man called Otto Striedinger. It was a grand house, with its own spacious grounds, and it carried a wonderfully evocative name, 'Hope's Harbour'.

Otto Striedinger was a native of Bavaria, Germany, and had been an officer in the Bavarian army. He arrived in England during the Crimean War as a member of the German Legion but stayed on when the Legion was disbanded. According to records held at the National Archives, he became a naturalised British citizen in February 1861.



An illustration of Hope's Harbour in an edition of *The Builder* magazine, 1883, showing a view from the rear.



Bray's Lane in 1906, still a quiet country lane, with Hope's Harbour marked in red and Stoke Park below.

Striedinger took a variety of educational posts before moving to Coventry as the regional Inspector of Factories. He employed an architect from Birmingham to build his house, which was widely recognised as being ahead of its time, so advanced that it merited an article in a national magazine, *The Builder*, in 1883, just four years after its completion.

When it came to be sold, several years later, Hope's Harbour was described as "a very attractive and superior country house", standing in its own grounds of three acres, including large tennis lawns and well planted kitchen gardens, with glasshouses, stabling, and a coach house.

It contained four reception rooms, seven bedrooms, a dressing room, tower room and "excellent servants' offices", with timber panelled walls throughout. The article in *The Builder* also highlighted its home comforts and labour-saving devices, such as the latest gas heating:

"Gas has been largely applied for heating the hall, many of the rooms, the two baths, and for the cooking stoves; and a small gas-engine pumps the water, brushes the boots, cleans the knives, and assists in other domestic work. The bells throughout are on the Zimdars's pneumatic system, and the entrance can be opened from the servants' department and the front vestibule by a 'Sesame' pneumatic appliance. The

house is efficiently ventilated, and we learn that these labour-saving devices have satisfactorily borne the test of actual experience.”

The name ‘Hope’s Harbour’ was not Striedinger’s invention. An earlier house of that name, on the same site but apparently not on the same plot, is known to have existed in the 17th century. In 1646 it was the birthplace of Joseph Harwar, a member of an old Stoke family, who would later become president of Magdalen College, Oxford. He died in 1722 and was buried at Stoke Church.

A brief reference in Canon Blyth’s *History of Stoke* says that by 1766 Hope’s Harbour had been demolished, with the land now let to Thomas Robinson, a farmer.

According to a report in the *Coventry Standard* in 1917, an ancient map of the parish showed that the original Hope’s Harbour encompassed a large section of land consisting of three adjoining closes, one with a considerable frontage onto Walsgrave Road, one bordering Bray’s Lane and the third was backland.

Bray’s Lane in those days was known as Stoke Hill Lane, or sometimes Cross Lane, meaning the lane that crossed from Lower Stoke to Stoke Hill, or what we now call Ball Hill.



Hope’s Harbour in the 1890s, with the main entrance on the right, facing Bray’s Lane

‘During his tenure at Hope’s Harbour, Otto Striedinger turned the house into a lively centre of social and political activity. He was one of the leading Liberals in the city... ‘

During his tenure at the new Hope’s Harbour, Otto Striedinger turned the house into a lively centre of social and political activity. He was one of the leading Liberals in the city and gave garden parties in the grounds and held Liberal political meetings.

An article in the *Coventry Herald* described Striedinger as an “ardent Liberal” who devoted his spare time to public work, serving for a number of years on the Stoke School Board. He was also President of the Stoke Liberal Association, a member of the executive of the Coventry Liberal Association, a member of the executive of the Nuneaton Division Liberal Association, and other bodies.

“He took great interest in horticulture and was an exhibitor at some of the local

shows. For many years he led an extremely active and busy life, riding great distances on his tricycle, making long railway journeys, and generally going through an immense amount of physical exertion.”

His working life as Inspector of Factories meant that he was keen to enforce the provisions of the Factory and Workshops Act, updated in 1878 and designed, in part, to regulate the amount of time that women and children could work, not just in factories but also at home in domestic workshops and weaving households.

Striedinger’s work, however, was abruptly halted in 1885-86 when he was seized with “a severe affliction of a rheumatic character” and he took leave of absence to visit Buxton and also Germany. But after resuming his public duties he became unwell again and was confined to his bed for five months.

In 1887 he was taken to Berchtesgaden in Bavaria where his condition deteriorated and he died suddenly, leaving a widow, a son and a daughter. Hope’s Harbour was put up for auction and in 1891 it briefly became the home of Colonel Thomas James Aylmer Studdy.

Find out, in a future edition of Jabet’s Ash, how Hope’s Harbour had a few other owners before eventually becoming the first Stoke Park School. □ JM