

Coventry's trailblazing post-war Precinct: A tale of two architects

IN the late 1940s and early 50s, the city of Coventry faced an enormous challenge. During a period of intense post-war austerity - with a shortage of materials, labour and cash - the city had to begin the task of rebuilding after the tragic destruction of war.

The city turned to its chief architect and town planner, Donald Gibson, to take on the challenge. He'd been appointed as early as 1938 to modernise the city and, as David Fry will explain in a talk next month, he had already created a plan for a new city centre before the bombing raids began.

The destruction of the Blitz cleared away the biggest obstacle to his progress and presented him with a blank canvas for reconstruction. "The result," says David Fry, "was one of the earliest traffic free pedestrian shopping areas in the world."

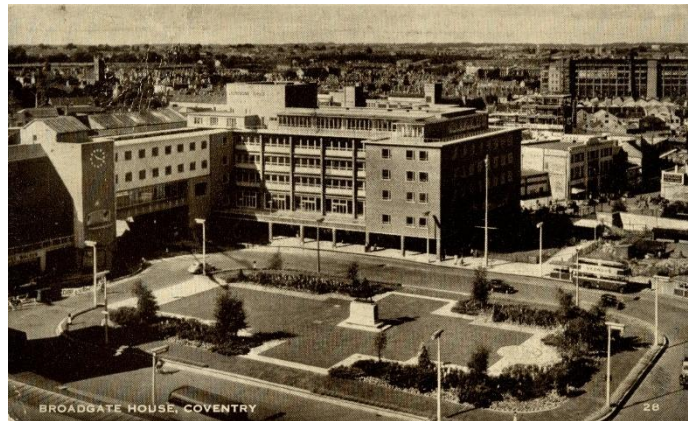
The talk to the history group on December 5th will explore Gibson's vision and will explain some of the difficulties and controversies which sometimes faced the scheme. And the talk will also emphasise that Gibson was not the sole architect of the finished plan.



The Upper Precinct and the Cathedral tower in 1956



Donald Gibson



Broadgate House and the garden island in 1953, the first part of the project to be completed. Development of the Upper Precinct, to the right, is yet to start. Postcard photos courtesy of Rob Orland

David Fry will remind us that Arthur Ling replaced Gibson in 1955 and his contribution "shaped the eventual look of the Precinct with a number of iconic developments that are assumed to be part of the Gibson plan."

The talk will contrast the styles of Gibson and Ling, examining the achievements of both architects in shaping the city we know today.

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Stoke Library, Friday December 5th, beginning at 10.30am

Donald Gibson & Arthur Ling

A tale of two architects

A talk by David Fry

City Arcade disappears into the dust

AS we look forward to David Fry's talk on December 5th about the post-war reconstruction of Coventry city centre, parts of the original scheme are currently being demolished to make way for the long-awaited City Centre South development.

The main parts of the post-war project – the Precinct, Smithford Way and Broadgate – will remain.

But parts of the periphery, such as City Arcade, Shelton Square and Bull Yard, are fast disappearing.



Photos: John Marshall



Our photograph (above) shows the view from Queen Victoria Road, with the Argos store and City Arcade already gone. The church tower on the right is Christchurch in New Union Street, with a glimpse of The Wave behind. At the time of writing, bulldozers were also making progress on the demolition of Shelton Square and the adjoining part of Market Way.

The City Centre South development will ultimately improve the prominence and visibility of the Circular Market but in the meantime market traders are concerned about

a decline in footfall caused by the surrounding mayhem. On November 13th they organised a protest in the Precinct (pictured) calling on the council to do more to promote the market, and to reassure shoppers that it's still safe to visit. □

THE historic Chace Hotel on London Road, originally the home of Coventry coroner Dr Charles Webb Iliffe, has been sold at auction by Savills, with a hammer price of £1.7 million.

The property has stood empty since the hotel closed in December 2021, with later plans to turn the building into a care home abandoned in 2022. The original building was Grade II listed by English Heritage in 2023. Auctioneer Savills described the property as a former hotel and manor house, with a total of 66 bedrooms in the main building and annex, plus a bar, restaurant and meeting rooms. They described the building as in need of modernisation.

The most recent listing on the Savills website describes the building as sold, though the identity of the buyer is unknown. □



Chace Hotel in 2021

Photo: John Marshall