

## **COVENTRY SOCIETY ANNUAL REPORT 2021-2022.**

**The past year has been one of rapid change for the Coventry Society, with the continuing impact of the pandemic being only one of our challenges.**

**In November, our Chair Vince Hammersley had to step down for health and family reasons. We offer him our heartfelt thanks for his hard work and commitment to the Society through challenging times.**

**We've also said farewell to our Treasurer Colin Walker, who after many years of steering the Society along the right financial path has finally been able to pass on the baton to Jim Passmore. Colin has been a mainstay of the civic society here in Coventry for many years and for that he'll be long remembered.**

**As we reach this year's AGM, the rest of the committee is made up of Terry Kenny, Trevor Cornfoot, Peter Hunter, Paul Maddocks, Nicola Norman, Aaron Law, John Goodman and our Secretary John Payne, all of whom are offering their diverse talents and expertise to our cause.**

**Our membership, as it stood at the end of January this year, has risen to 160, with 156 paid members, three life members and one honorary member. But during the past twelve months, sadly, we have lost founder and life member Ralph Butcher and long-standing members Bill Shakespeare and Shirley Woolston.**

**Covid has meant that although we held eight meetings in the year up to January, three of them had to be online.**

**Nevertheless, we've explored some fascinating subjects in those meetings, from the history of the Memorial Park and the work of medical pioneer and engineer George Smith Clarke to the Belgrade's new venue for young people, the work of Coventry craftswomen in the 1920s and the question of whether the composer Handel ever played the organ in St Michael's Church.**

**In the midst of a coronavirus year we also managed to make well-attended visits to Charterhouse and Drapers Hall, the Burges and the city gates, all courtesy of the wonderful Historic Coventry Trust, and to historic gems like Bonds Hospital and the church of St John the Baptist in Spon Street.**

**But highlighting and refreshing our knowledge of Coventry's superb heritage in buildings from the distant past is, of course, only one strand of our Coventry Society portfolio.**

**We believe that as a civic society we have an important role in commenting on, supporting and at times opposing, a whole raft of contemporary planning, infrastructure and development issues.**

**Over the past twelve months, we have responded to City Council consultation exercises on Open Space, Energy, Affordable Housing, a Statement of Community Involvement and an Urban Forestry Strategy.**

**We were consulted by the City Council on their plans for a Blue Plaque scheme in the city and earlier this year ourselves co-ordinated the production and installation of two plaques on The Firs school complex on the Kenilworth Road. We are now in the process of drawing up a list of future plaques that we feel will enhance the city's story.**

**Following a meeting in early 2021 with the City Council and its partners to discuss the new railway station plans, we supported and assisted the artist Christopher Tipping with his striking station windows project.**

**We also raised £1000 in funding from the University of Warwick to survey and highlight the 'grotesques' among the city centre's rich collection of building decoration, working with artist Mary Courtney, historian Dr Daniel Reed and the university's Naomi de la Tour to hold workshops, visits and meetings. A map of the city's 'grotesques' can be found online.**

**Partnerships play an increasingly important part in the work of the society. We are members of the St Mary's Guildhall Stakeholder Group and have been able to give advice on the major regeneration scheme now nearing its completion. We haven't been happy with all elements of the project, but overall we believe it to have been a success.**

**We are also members of the Burges Cultural Programme, a project led by Coventry University, and the Sherbourne Valley Project, which we supported at the funding stage and help whenever we can.**

**The society, we believe, performs an equally valuable service in monitoring planning applications in the city and publishing information about those that are regarded as significant.**

**At times that may lead us into broader policy issues. Concerned about the lack of clear council policies towards student accommodation in the city, we directly approached the councillor with responsibility for housing. Since then, we are heartened to learn, the council has agreed to use Article 4 directions to bring the conversion of larger Houses in Multiple Occupation under control. We continue to argue for a proper planning approach to the provision of student housing.**

**In terms of scale, the two most significant planning applications over the past year have been the huge City Centre South project and the City Council's proposals for Coundon Wedge.**

**After lodging a formal objection to the City Centre South development the previous year, we are now closely monitoring progress, with two particular aspects in mind – the preservation of post-war public art in the scheme and the need to include an appropriate level of affordable housing where at the moment there is none.**

**Although some eighteen hectares of former Green Belt land at Coundon Wedge were earmarked for housing, it is our view that with 3200 houses already planned for Eastern Green and Keresley, the City Council's proposal is unnecessary and inappropriate. We have formally objected and taken up the matter with the area's MP Taiwo Owatemi.**

**We've also focused our attention on smaller developments, expressing our reservations about schemes involving two former city centre pubs, Whitefriars and the Penny Black, trying, unsuccessfully, to get the former Paris cinema in Gosford Street listed and objecting to an out-of-scale student development in the Harper Road area off London Road.**

**We've also raised concerns about the loss of St Nicholas Church in Radford, now beyond saving, and have submitted an application to locally list another former ecclesiastical building, St Columba's United Reform Church.**

**Further afield, we continue to be active members of Civic Voice and while plans to host the Civic Voice national conference in Coventry during the City of Culture year had to be abandoned because of Covid, we've been instrumental in getting information about both that organisation and the Coventry Society on to Wikipedia.**

**Our own greatest challenge since the pandemic has been finding a reliable and affordable place to meet. Between last September and this AGM we have met in eight different locations, a peripatetic existence which, while interesting, is not sustainable.**

**Fortunately, that has not stopped the flow of information to our members. We continue to publish three stories a week on our News Blog, a total of 159 stories over the past year. We have 1726 people following us on Facebook, 4300 on Twitter and 726 on Instagram.**

**The Society is financially sound and playing its full part in a city now experiencing the biggest development boom since the post-war years. The future looks busy.**

**Peter Walters.**

**April 2022.**