

The Coventry Society

Heritage Conference, The Old Grammar School, Saturday 19th October 2019.

‘The Future of Coventry’s Past’

Notes of Presentations and Discussions.

Welcome by Paul Maddocks, Chairman of the Coventry Society.

1. New City, Old Faces: Cllr. J. O’Boyle, Cabinet member for Jobs and regeneration.

Cllr. O’Boyle gave a presentation about the City Council’s recent achievements and plans for the future of the city centre. He spoke about the opportunities and the challenges the council faced, such as funding. He talked about the need to ‘join the dots’ between previous improvement schemes and the new schemes.

Cllr. O’Boyle showed images of the scheme for the Upper Precinct including a water feature which would be the new home for George Wagstaffe’s Naiad. Work to remove the escalator was scheduled to start on 28th October. Plans still show the jewellers at the top of the Precinct but Council Officers are working hard to renegotiate its location.

There are also schemes for Market Way and Smithford Way. The stalls from Market Way are to be relocated to Hertford Street. The overall approach is to open up the sight lines.

The landscaping scheme for the Bull Yard and the Water Park, which has just opened, is designed to create a new urban square. In addition to the Water Park there will be a 50 metre pool at the Alan Higgs Centre. He mentioned in passing that the old pool had been re-measured and was actually less than 50 metres in length, which meant that all previous records were no longer valid.

Cllr. O’Boyle spoke about the former Co-op building in Corporation Street. He said that the Council owned the ground lease and would have made more money by allowing the building to be demolished and the site redeveloped. However, he was proud of the resulting scheme and the apartments were now all sold, though some retail units remain to be occupied.

He spoke about the railway station development and said that the new building was coloured red because this was the colour he had chosen. He pointed out that it was the fastest growing railway station outside London.

The Telegraph Hotel would be the first 4-star hotel in the city.

He spoke about the transfer of 22 historic buildings to the Historic Coventry Trust. Cathedral Lanes was doing well now and the same developer is investing in City Centre South.

He touched on areas that needed attention including the Cox Street, Fairfax Street, Pool Meadow and the White Street coach park areas which give a poor impression for visitors arriving in the city by coach. He acknowledged they needed improving. Plans for Hertford Street include better services and lighting.

Questions and Answers.

Paul Maddocks asked about the Coventry Cross:

Cllr. O'Boyle said that a new one was being designed and a local sculptor we know was involved. The new cross would be located near to Holy Trinity Church, as close to its original position as possible. He said that it would encompass some of the features of the demolished cross and he was looking to incorporate features of the older original cross if this could be done without putting them at risk.

Victor Riley asked if there were any plans to improve the Canal Basin:

Cllr. O'Boyle said that it was a vexed question. The Ring Road was a barrier but there was a sub-group working on this.

Eleanor Nesbit asked about the City Wall and Greyfriars' Gate:

He said that the historic fabric of the city would be protected.

The Eastern Green Group asked if there were any plans to improve traffic in Trinity Street, Ironmongers' Row and the Burges:

There are no such plans, He mentioned that there are plans for very light rail elsewhere in the city centre.

Jon Plumley asked about the role of heritage in the City of Culture 2021:

Cllr. O'Boyle said that Coventry was a young city and the City of Culture would need to embrace all cultures, communities and diversity. He suggested that there would be other speakers to follow who would comment on this subject.

Ann Wilson, Coventry Tree Wardens, asked about the significant trees that are being removed in the city centre:

He said that they had had to take out a tree in Hertford Street but it would be replaced. He said that we needed to increase the amount of vegetation in the city centre.

Kyle from CADAS asked about the Archaeologist and Conservation Officer post:

Cllr. O'Boyle said it was being actively pursued at the present time. However, he stated that nothing had been held up by the absence of a post holder.

2. The Future of Coventry Buildings in the care of the Historic Coventry Trust: Ian Harrabin.

Mr. Harrabin outlined the origins of the Trust and its work. Starting off with the Charterhouse and the Charterhouse Trust, it had expanded to include other historic Coventry buildings which the Council passed to it in an agreement unique in the country and which was being studied by other authorities. He emphasised that the Trust worked well with the City Council to ensure this innovative scheme was successful. However, the Trust had to raise the money for the various schemes in order for the buildings to be confirmed in the control of the Trust.

The buildings in the care of the Trust needed to be self-sustaining, any income they generated had to be sufficient to pay for their staff and general maintenance. He

said that they were working with the City of Culture group to ensure the buildings had a role in the future. The first five year programme had started in 2017. He outlined projects to be completed by 2001. Work on the Charterhouse had already begun with the Council in the process of creating a new enlarged entrance from the London Road. £21m was accounted for with £19.78m already in hand and £895k still to be raised. £16.15m had been identified for other projects so far but another £370k was needed.

He outlined some of the ways the Charterhouse would be used. The land would be a heritage park and negotiations were ongoing with the National Trust to manage the site for 5 years before returning it to the Historic Coventry Trust. The Riverside Walk was a more practical proposition now that the old railway line was in the Trust's possession. He showed some of the plans for the main building and site with reconstructions of the 'monks' cells', gardens and a café.

The London Road Cemetery featured in the plans as the Anglian Chapel was in the care of the Trust and it was hoped that it would be available for events in a year's time.

He talked about Drapers' Hall and the imminent start of work to restore and enhance it. It would not be under the control of the Music Service though they would have part of the building for their activities with the main hall available to them on a hire basis. The Trust was exploring the possibility of re-constructing part of the Mediaeval centre of Bailey Lane and plotting all historic buildings on the land behind the hall and facing the road.

He touched on some of the other buildings which the Trust had in its care, Whitefriars Gatehouse, Priory Row [Grade 2 listed] and plans for their future use subject to the money being available. The City Gates were also included but there were some problems with location and external access to the upper storey of Cook St. Gate.

Mr. Harrabin paid tribute to Carol Pyrah and Graham Tait, full time workers for the Trust, on what they had achieved so far.

Questions and answers.

John Burton of the George Eliot Society asked if the Historic Coventry Trust had any plans for Bird Grove, George Eliot's house on the Foleshill Road:

Mr. Harrabin said they had none and he felt nothing could be done until ownership of the house was resolved. Perhaps in five years' time he would be willing to look at it but at the moment there was so much else that the Trust had to undertake. He believed it was a great pity that nothing could be done particularly for 2021, as the author's fame and reputation was world-wide.

3. The Role of Culture in the City of Culture Offer: Cheniene Bhatena, Creative Director, Coventry City of Culture Trust.

The theme will be 'City of Spires, City of Industry, City of Dreams' and will fit within the wider context of the city's cultural strategy.

Ms. Bhatena introduced the concepts of five goals and seven good ideas. The aim is to build new partnerships, bringing the city together behind a common cause. Forty

million people live within two hours drive of Coventry and we want to let people know about the identity of Coventry, about its people and communities and to represent the city. It is a city in the heart of the U.K., a city of welcome, a pioneering twin city. It is our turn to be in the spotlight and to show 'a whole city of culture' and what we believe and cherish.

It is predicted to have a £350m impact. 2.55 million extra visitor days are anticipated and 2116 jobs will be created.

It should show our resilience and capacity to reinvent ourselves. Creativity, activists, pioneers and our international aspects will be emphasised. Dance organisations [over 20 in the city] and local artists such as George Shaw will be celebrated. Two-Tone and the Green Party were among the city's creations and the jet engine, the bicycle and the battery development centre have been part of its history. It has involvement from the cathedral, the universities and local business.

The heritage priorities include creating a new history for Coventry, for people, for communities, positive and lasting change for things such as building renovation, assisting nature's recovery and raising our ambition to achieve greater social inclusion.

The website will need to be a prominent tool in informing people of events. We have £2m from the National Heritage Trust for the natural environment. We will be involved with the Forestry Commission, the National Trust and London Road Cemetery and will work towards urban greening in the city centre.

There will be a project called 21 Streets of Culture, one in each of the 18 city wards plus 3 more. Projects will also include Humans of Coventry, Theatre Absolute [which will encourage writing – What's your story?] Sound Systems, the Irish Community, Highly Sprung – Upswing and Illuminos and 'Home is what we build around us'. It will celebrate Coventry Modern – post war architecture and urban design and there will be a theme of Coventry Re-imagined with sector development at the centre of themes labelled 'Dynamic', Collaborative' and 'Caring'.

The city will be split into four quarters with a 'Producer' for each quarter of the city. The four 'producers' are: Ann Gillespie [North West], Ellen Booth [South West], Molly Adkins [South East] and a fourth to be appointed in the Autumn for the North East. The activities will take place in schools, libraries, community centres and shops. Programme principles will be announced to encourage people to get involved. The website and a newsletter will be prominent.

Paul Maddocks spoke about Coventry's role in enhancing Coventry's built environment which was followed by various speaker describing local heritage projects in which they are involved.

4. Establishing a Coventry Motor Archive: Victor Riley.

Riley is one of the oldest car marques that originated in Coventry. Mr. Riley spoke about the reasons for setting up the archive. Some family members had been close to throwing away significant papers and had not appreciated their significance. The plan is to create a museum at the Canal Basin. It will be open on Tuesdays and

Wednesdays before the end of November, staffed by volunteers. He related a couple of interesting stories about people involved with the company and hoped the archive would bring out more anecdotes.

5. Stoney Road Gardens heritage threat: Gabrielle Edmonds-Baker.

The speaker began by outlining who they were and what they do. She made a point of stressing the historical significance of the gardens. There were 100 plots in total, spread out over 10 acres. The land was leased to the allotment/garden holders from the council and managed by the Stoney Road Association. The allotments, which were 100% occupied, were intended as affordable spaces for people with small or no gardens. A multicultural approach was adopted and it was the aim to develop skills and encourage people of all ages to garden. They are the oldest working gardens/allotments in the city, some of them retaining their brick built sheds, Victorian and Edwardian, which are Grade 2 listed.

The original land formed part of the hunting grounds for Cheylesmore Manor but in 1819 it was sold to the Marquis of Hertford. The plots were referred to as detached gardens rather than allotments. In 1913 the whole area was converted and the two largest buildings were constructed. In 1935 the council took control of the land. Mrs. Edmonds-Baker referred to the condition of the buildings. Over the years many buildings had been lost but two 'summerhouses' from the early 20thC were in use and in good condition whilst others needed repair work. Two of the buildings are considered to be high priority, with a half -timbered summerhouse to be repaired first. In 2018 three of the summerhouses were listed as 'heritage at risk', indeed as is the whole site. However, repairs on any listed buildings are subject to restrictions. The problem is lack of funds but grants are being sought from the National Lottery Fund. A petition has attracted 100 signatures and many more messages of support. One of the aims of the Association is to try to give non-gardeners more access which will entail holding more seasonal open days, more events, community days and education to involve future generations. People who have summerhouses will have more obligations and particularly will need to ensure that their gardens are in good order for open events.

6. Willenhall Local History Group: Iris Weir [introduced by Mark Cook].

The group has produced a photography project – 'Imagine Willenhall' – which is a study of a suburb and its people. The aim is to bring the City of Culture to the suburbs, to tell the story of Willenhall through visual imagery and people's own reminiscences. Photo Miners visited the group at the Haggard Centre and have familiarised themselves with the area. 'Willen 'All Together' was a community event with music, dancing, food and celebration. There is a section on Willenhall as a small village, a collection of local history photographs, courtesy of David Fry, and a banner display which has been outside the St. John Divine Church and is now on display at the bottom of Bishop Street opposite the Old Grammar School.

Their future plans involve a Powerpoint presentation of Willenhall's history and

development for schools and youth groups, a photo loop sequence for Willenhall Social Club, a reminiscence theme on Facebook page and liaison with other suburban history groups whilst continuing with celebratory events.

7. Medieval Coventry Project: Mark Webb.

Mark Webb gave some background to the history of the charity, which had been set up three years ago. It has produced a timeline of Medieval Coventry up to the dissolution of the monasteries. The aim of the organisation is to share knowledge about Coventry in the Middle Ages and to develop relationships with partners in Historic England, Oxford University, Warwick University, the Historic Coventry Trust and others.

Mark said that Coventry had 'the best':

- * Leet Book.
- * Early 16th Century census and tax information.
- * ACE designation status.
- * Guildhall and Tapestry.
- * Vernacular buildings [Coventry has more 14th and 15th Century vernacular buildings than any other city in the country].
- * Religious buildings.
- * Medieval art.
- * Archaeology resources.

He went on to describe the projects that the organisation was involved with:

- * VR model of Spon Street.
- * Exhibition of Royal women of influence.
- * The Medieval Coventry conference.

New projects:

- * Drapers' Hall archaeology and publication of the findings from the 1980's dig.
- * Proposal for a 2021 exhibition of Coventry's trades and industries.
- * A variety of publications.
- * Historic Times Atlas – a map of the city showing how it would have appeared in the past – a version for Coventry. [Volunteers would be needed to help populate the map, which will be published in 2021].
- * Digital walking tours using smart phones.
- * Drapers' Hall – restoring all the original furniture, cutlery and glassware for a permanent exhibition.

www.medievalcoventry.co.uk

8. Coventry Archives: Victoria Northridge.

This is the new name for the former History Centre. Ms. Northridge was at pains to point out that any enquiries should be directed to archives@culturecoventry.com

and not the former email of the History Centre. Based at the Herbert, the archives had three underground stores and all the various city archives were under one roof. Some of the services were free such as helping with some research and accessing documents but others did have a charge. The archives consisted of some of the earliest material going back to 1182 but current council documents were still being received. Building plans were particularly popular.

Chassis and car registration registers were held covering any make of car from Coventry. There were local studies collections, maps [including the earliest, Speed's map] and newspapers [including Jopson's Coventry Mercury from 1747]. There was an audio visual collection and a South Asian collection. A new digitisation project was underway with co-operation between Coventry University and the City Council. There were special collections not in the catalogue, for example the one concerning Mary Ann Evans being the most prominent but also that of Tom Mann, the trade unionist and Angela Brazil a once popular author.

The aim was collaboration and outreach and it was hoped to sponsor and host events. One suggestion put forward was to adopt a collection particularly for those that needed digitisation and preservation.

9. St. John's Church: Mike Polanyk.

He told the assembly that they would like to open the church more frequently to visitors but they are reliant on volunteers to manage this. They now have a scrap book created by a former rector, the Reverend Cuffe, spanning the years 1874 to 1896 which is full of personal notes [sometimes very personal observations on local people and events in a very argumentative way], with references to Benjamin Poole and Francis Skidmore.

10. Allesley Walled Garden: Tim Claye.

Mr. Claye, representing Keith Draper who was indisposed, pointed to the location of the garden at Allesley Park and commented that it was almost hidden. He added something of the history of the hall and grounds which had once been the home of Lord Illiffe.

There was still evidence of the ridge and furrow method of cultivation which had been farming practice at one time. The garden itself attracted all sorts of people, the young, the old and the enthusiastic. The garden was managed on organic principles with some old varieties going back to 1787. The group managed one quarter of the garden with the other three quarters shared with other stakeholders which sometimes led to tension amongst the groups.

He paid tribute to the enthusiasm and dynamism of Keith Draper.

He finished by saying he thought they could learn and share with the Stoney Road group.

11. General Discussion.

- Carol Pyrah suggested that we do a Heritage Month as part of City of Culture 2021 – just make it happen!
- John Burton from the George Eliot Society said that a survey of George Eliot elements had been done in 1990 and was repeated this year. It is currently in the foyer of the Albany Theatre.
- Mark Cook suggested that we produce historic postcards of the city for City of Culture year. He felt that Coventry was behind with many aspects of heritage regeneration and city of culture gave the opportunity to catch up.
- Jacqui Ibbotson said that local producers could help with projects.
- George Demidowicz spoke about John Thornton and the plaque in the Burges. He was concerned about the lack of conservation staff in the city.

The Chairman brought the proceedings to a close with a hope that the exercise could be repeated in the future.