

The Coventry Society.

Heritage Conference, LTB Showrooms, Saturday 28th October 2023.

‘Our Heritage, Our Future.’

Notes of Presentations.

Welcome by Peter Walters, Chair of the Coventry Society.

In welcoming guests to the Conference he reminded them that this was the third such conference to take place. The first had been held at the Old Grammar School in 2019, the second at Drapers’ Hall last year. Both buildings are wonderful examples of Coventry’s Heritage but so is the Litten Tree Building, even if at first sight it might not appear to be so. This brought him to what was very much the theme for the day, ‘hidden assets’. The Conference would begin with a presentation from Alan Denyer, the creative force behind what is now the LTB Showrooms.

1. The role of the LTB Showrooms in the city. Alan Denyer, Curator of the facility.

Alan welcomed attendees to the building and spoke about its philosophy. It was a community art gallery with over 80 works of art on display. It also hosted workshops, performances, events, community sessions, local bands and comedy.

The building opened in August 2021 on the upper floors above the Litten Tree Pub. However, this April the pub closed and Alan negotiated a free lease from the council and 100% relief of business rates. The lease was for the whole building, enabling the use of the ground floor which has disabled access. Alan has become a licensee and the provision of alcoholic refreshments for events has brought a little income for the building, which is otherwise maintained entirely by voluntary contributions.

The philosophy is to have an open access approach, lowering barriers to entry, to enable artists to display their works at the lowest possible cost. Alan said that he says, ‘YES, wherever possible’ to add to the cultural links in the city.

Alan told us that over a thousand artists had been engaged and there had been twenty thousand visitors. He wanted to create an inclusive physical space as an alternative to people getting their culture fix from their mobile phones. He particularly wanted to engage young people and student artists were key participants.

The Council lease was originally due to end in November, but has recently been extended for four months due to delays in the City Centre South scheme. Further information about the future of the building will be known in the New Year.

2. The Heritage of the LTB Showrooms. Mark Cook.

Mark traced the history of the building in an overview of the site. A photograph from 1888 showed Warwick Road with the Reform Club and next to it, three buildings which were demolished to make way for the building we now know as the LTB Showrooms. At the time the surrounding area was mainly marshland and prone to flooding until the Victorians took steps to prevent it. This allowed industrial buildings to be built in the area.

The LTB was erected with a very different frontage from that seen today, though the interior still has its original steel columns supporting concrete floors over three storeys, able to display the cars of the Rover Car Company. There were three lift shafts with lifts large enough to transport cars from one floor to another. The lifts no longer exist, the stairs occupying the space. The building was important enough to be visited by King George V in 1915 as the factory was used for war work.

The Rover Car Company factory was at the rear of the premises spreading out to Queen Victoria Rd. An aerial photograph showed the location of the Victoria and Albert buildings fronting Queen Victoria Rd, which served as the Cornercroft factory. In the photograph the double hipped roof of the LTB can be seen clearly with the car factory behind it. Between the wars, the Council bought the building with the intention of using it as a cycle museum. The 2nd World War intervened and saw it used for other purposes such as the ration centre while the upper floor served as the city architect's office. It was from here that Donald Gibson planned the city that would arise after the war. He was also responsible for authorising the removal of its frontage and replacement by that we see today.

After the war the building had a series of uses, initially in 1954 as Foulkes Kitchen Factory and Showrooms. Many people will remember it as 'Intershop', a store housing 20 independent shops, before its last commercial use from the 1990's to 2023 as the Litten Tree Pub.

3. City Centre South. Peter Walters, Chair of the Coventry Society.

Peter mentioned that the LTB building had a limited life left before the 'bulldozer advance' guard of the huge City Centre South scheme moved in. He said the Society had hoped to include a City Centre South presentation in the programme but this was not possible due to delays to the project. Members of the Society's Committee were meeting the developers in the coming week to hear more but he had managed to speak briefly to a member of the development group earlier in the week.

Back in the summer Michael Gove ruled that all new buildings with a height of more than 18 metres had to have a second stair core for safety. The industry had expected the rule to apply to buildings over 30 metres and for the City Centre South scheme it

has meant a re-design of some of the buildings. This has put the developers back by at least four months. It will now be the spring or early summer before demolitions begin.

One 'hidden asset' in the area due to be removed is the public art, some of which is, literally, hidden from sight. The Society has already had some conversations with the developers about this. He introduced Committee Member Aaron Law to speak further on the subject.

4. Public Art in Coventry City Centre South. Aaron Law.

Aaron began by illustrating the area affected by the Coventry City South redevelopment – equivalent to nine football pitches. A brief mention was made of the buildings and public art that had already disappeared and had been part of the Arthur Ling designed Precinct, e.g. Coventry Point. A report had been commissioned assessing the public art that exists and what would be worth keeping, for example the Three Tuns façade and the Elephant bollards. He then focused on a number of notable works of art.

- 'Thread Through Time' by Robert Conybear and Uta Molling in the Bull Yard was the most recent, dating from 1999. It was composed of crushed material from the Rolls Royce Parkside Works and constructed in Swansea. The work was selected by the public from several that were put on display. Unfortunately the laser incorporated into the piece doesn't work.
[See: <https://www.coventrysociety.org.uk/public-art-in-coventry/thread-through-time/>]
- 'Sir Guy and the Dun Cow' by Alma Ramsey-Hoskins was originally erected in the early 1950s on the north side of Broadgate House but is now found in Shelton Square on the archway into Bull Yard. Aaron thought this a rather unappreciated location. It was restored in 2007 and recently used in a Nativity cameo in Coventry Cathedral.
[see: <https://www.coventrysociety.org.uk/public-art-in-coventry/sir-guy-and-the-dun-cow-by-alma-ramsey/>]
- 'Three Tuns' by William Mitchell is a striking artwork which has formed the façade of the pub in Bull Yard since it was built in the mid-1960s. His method of construction meant there were patterns on the interior as well as the exterior of the pub. There had been a recent fire but the artwork [listed in 2008] can be saved intact. He noted that some of the interior patterning had previously been rather worn.
[See: <https://www.coventrysociety.org.uk/public-art-in-coventry/william-george-mitchell-three-tuns/>]

- The noteworthy bollards topped with the famous Coventry elephant crest are currently featured outside the Three Tuns and will be saved.
 - ‘Phoenix’ by George Wagstaffe, dating from 1962, was originally outside the former Woolworths/British Homes Stores at the entrance to Market Way where it was unveiled by Princess Margaret. It was later moved to the bottom of Hertford St. having been recast in bronze rather than its original weathered fibreglass.
[See: <https://www.coventrysociety.org.uk/public-art-in-coventry/phoenix/>]
 - Aaron briefly mentioned a number of other works whose future was less certain. The 2021 colourful ‘Endless Ribbon’ installation in the Hertford St. archway was a noteworthy piece by the internationally famous Morag Myerscough [e.g. work in the San Francisco Metro] but its form makes it unlikely to be retained. The Peeping Tom effigy, also in the Hertford St. archway, on the North side of the entrance, is by an anonymous artist. Its future is undecided. It is surrounded by a fibreglass work by William Mitchell from the late 1960s. Another large scale work ‘History of Coventry’ by William Mitchell dating from the 1970s, was carved by the artist into the wall of the entrance to Hertford House, but was later covered up and thought lost. However, this important work has recently been re-discovered and will be saved when the building is demolished.
[See: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-coventry-warwickshire-67243252>]
- Aaron’s insights were an invaluable contribution to the Conference’s aims.

Peter introduced Charlotte Ridpath to talk about the work being done with the River Sherbourne, another hidden asset of the city.

5. The Sherbourne Valley Project and its heritage impact.

Charlotte Ridpath, Cultural Heritage Officer, Warwickshire Wildlife Trust.

Charlotte explained some of the background to the project which had received funding from the National Lottery Heritage Fund. Its aim was to restore the River Sherbourne, highlighting the social history of the river and its cultural impact on the city. She believed that the urban landscape connected people with nature which was important for both physical and mental health. The river reflected the history of the place in which people and their families lived.

She said that when she arrived in the city and took on the project, she didn’t know much about Coventry or its river. There appeared to be nothing to connect the river with the people of Coventry, nor was there any coherent account of it. However, the internet proved to be a good source of information, also archives, some dating back to the 13th Century. Talking to people provided another good

source. This helped to produce an ever evolving document which attempted to pull all these stories and information together and create a coherent narrative.

The importance of water mills in the history of the river cannot be underestimated.

Over the 1000 years of its history, mills along the river had been used for many purposes ranging from food production to textiles and metal work. In the Middle Ages they were important for the wealth of the city [think of Coventry's connection with the famous blue dye]. At its peak the river, only nine miles long, boasted 13 mills along its length. As these mills changed functions, they often changed their names. People relied on the mills for different purposes, from providing work, food and materials. In 1808 for example, a new mill opened for rolling silver [and other metals].

There were two different types of mill, the overshot mill where water entered above the water wheel and pushed it forward, and the undershot mill where the wheel sits in the stream and is pushed forward by the power of the water. The latter requires more power than the overshot mill. Priory Mill was an example of the undershot type.

The expansion of the city created conflict between the river and the people. Flooding caused by too many mills on such a short stretch of water exacerbated the problem.

The heavy industrial use of the water by the mills meant that water was not clean and this contributed to diseases such as cholera. As the connection between the two was made, many mills were demolished.

Charlotte spoke of some of the events associated with the river. The first concerned a wife who went missing with her child. The mother was found drowned in Swanswell Pool, but the baby survived by being caught on the overhanging branches of a bush. It is said that the mother haunts the place looking for her baby.

Another was of a Catholic priest who fled to the Charterhouse after making an inflammatory speech in London. He was tracked down, captured and taken back to London.

Finally she spoke of a plane which crashed into the river in the 1930s. Charlotte showed a picture which she had managed to track down, showing the plight of the plane. Its occupants survived.

Events connected with the project will be found on the relevant Facebook page.

Included in the project are short films, some are already available, more will follow, illustrating the rivers history and wildlife. There will be a project website which it is hoped will be ready in the New Year and will contain maps and videos.

One further project connected with the Sherbourne concerns one of its tributaries, the Northbrook on the Coundon Wedge. It had been straightened for agricultural purposes but has been restored to its original channel. It now runs through its natural floodplain and has created a wetland which is already adding to the biodiversity of this area. She urged members of the audience to go along and have a look.

Peter Walters welcomed everyone back after lunch. Before he introduced the afternoon session, he told the assembly about some of the activities of the Society in recent months.

- The Society had hosted a number of heritage groups at Drapers' Hall on Sunday September 17th, the final day of this year's Heritage Open Days. More than 400 people visited the venue.
- A successful workshop was organised and views submitted of the city council's local plan which has implications for every aspect of city life including its heritage.
- The Society has given continued support for the Abbott's Park residential scheme which had now received approval, on appeal, by a government inspector.
- Over the summer the Society has organised visits to a number of the city's most interesting post-war heritage buildings, including Cardinal Newman School, soon to be replaced, and Holy Family Church in Holbrooks. Coventry's collection of modern churches is of particular interest to the Society and early next year, one of the monthly meetings will be devoted to the subject of post-war church design.
- As well as the developers of City Centre south, the Society continues to engage regularly with Coventry University and the City Council's senior planning team as part of the Society's on-going commitment to keep abreast of the most important issues affecting the city at the moment.

He then introduced John Payne, Coventry Society Secretary to speak about a project the Society is proposing.

6. Creating a Heritage Network. John Payne, Secretary, Coventry Society.

John told the meeting about the Society's idea of creating an email network to link people interested in the heritage of the city. Following the three heritage conferences, the Society now had contacts with many groups. The Heritage Network would create a self-selected channel for sharing information about heritage matters in the city. The meeting showed resounding support for the idea.

Peter then introduced the presentations for the afternoon beginning with a museum with a difference.

7. Museum of Me. Paul O'Donnell.

Coventry born artist, Paul O'Donnell is the Artistic Director of Community Interest Company, 'Extraordinary Us'. Museum of Me is a wall-less transportable set of structures which are used to display and celebrate the lives of 'ordinary' people. The Museum of Me is a new project that celebrates the lives of ordinary people by creating individual museums with, for and about them. It is a fun personal and

meaningful project that tells the story of each person through a collection of their objects and stories, offering a snapshot of the area in which they live.

On 24th May the Museum of Sandra Brownbridge opened in Cheylesmore. She is an English teacher who, since her retirement, has been teaching English to immigrants in the city. Paul showed photographs of the artifacts and features of Sandra's Museum which can still be found on-line.

[See: <https://themuseumofme.co.uk/sandra-brownbridge>]

Twenty-one such museums have been created over the past year, including that of a thirteen-year-old Palestinian boy, Yousef Hijaz. Each museum commences with an opening ceremony with red ribbons and canapes. Paul was proud of the fact that the museum is able to be reactive and responsive, changing things in response to current events.

As one of the participants had said, 'Everyone has an important story to tell.'

Peter mentioned that at last year's Conference, we had heard about two heritage projects in the city involving hidden assets and the next two speakers were returning to speak about the progress that had been made in the last year.

8. Friends of Spencer Park. Peter Elias.

Following his talk to the 2022 Conference, Peter brought attendees up-to-date on progress particularly with reference to the pavilion. He traced some of the history of the park, the gift of David Spencer over a100 years ago. A 1916 photograph showed the pavilion as it was when built and an aerial photograph showed its current state. The park borders three city wards. There are between 15 and 20 individuals who co-ordinate to look after the park. Progress has already been made with the tennis courts refurbished and many other activities staged. A small area in the pavilion has been used as a take-away café which proved popular. Any further expansion of this was handicapped as the toilets could not be used. Another room had been used for children's parties which have also proved popular. Therefore the focus this year has been on fundraising and seeking planning permission for work on the pavilion. With the help of Coventry University, plans have been developed for its refurbishment. Externally the building will look the same but the wood work will be replaced or repaired where needed. At present the interior consists of a number of rooms. The rooms will be removed to create a larger space. Some of the 1920s features will be restored but with modern fittings. The idea is to create a café and community space in the building.

The group running the park launched a petition earlier this year to gain the backing of the public for the plans. There was a big response. The take-away café had been used for consultation with the public as had local media. Fund raising had begun in

earnest, £15,000 had been received from the Council to kick-start the project, an application for community funding in 2022 had been unsuccessful but a second attempt in 2023 had resulted in a grant of £183,000. A charitable trust set up in 1964 from the proceeds of a vodka business, had donated £25,000. A more general funding appeal had so far raised £6,000. It is hoped to reach a target of £10,000 for that.

There are two more planning applications pending that require approval. A local architect had helped with the process. It is hoped that the public will give its support for the planning applications. If successful, the refurbishment work will commence in spring 2024.

9. Stoney Road Gardens. Charlotte Stranks, City Conservation Officer.

Charlotte began by giving a detailed introduction to the history of allotments in Coventry and the background to the Stoney Gardens from Medieval times. Since the mid nineteenth century, Stoney Gardens had been used, at least in part, for allotments. The site has been owned by Coventry City Council since 1935, though the actual allotments are under the supervision of the Coventry and District Allotments Society.

Apart from a relatively long use for allotments, what is notable is the survival of buildings from the Victorian era when many of the allotments would have been used by nearby urban middle class. The 'garden' is a rare survivor, only three other such sites still exist in England [still described as detached gardens] in Nottingham, Edgbaston and Warwick. Like those, Stoney Road Gardens is recorded as Grade II* listed.

Within the site there are five surviving Grade II listed summerhouses, more than in any of the other English detached gardens. Two further structures are of interest but not listed. Charlotte's presentation showed the location of the five plots and illustrated the buildings there. The Stoney Road Gardens are on the 'Historic England at Risk' Register and both Historic England and the City Council are working to find a way to secure the future of the gardens. The former has offered a grant of £63,000 with matching funding of £15,000 from the latter. In September this year the work went out to tender and a management plan is being written for the long term conservation of the area.

The next talk involved a 'hidden asset' [that is in plain sight] but for which no firm future has been secured, the city's Carmelite Friary.

10. Whitefriars Monastery.

Sabine Coady-Schaebitz, Associate Professor of Architecture, Coventry University.

Sabine came to Coventry in 2009 to set up the School of Architecture at Coventry University. She told us about an international student workshop that was convened by the School in May to explore options for the future of Whitefriars. This was the second such event, a previous one being held in 2012.

Sabine explained that only a small part of the original monastery remains, with most of the historic site being located under the Ring Road. Over a week twenty students from Coventry and others from around the world, in six mixed groups, took up the challenge of preparing indicative schemes for the building. Sabine stressed that the resultant plans were 'thinking exercises' rather than worked up practical proposals.

The six proposals were:

- A place to play
- A place to gather
- A place to grow
- A place to banquet
- A place to pray
- A place to learn.

Sabine showed the audience plans put together by the students, illustrating imaginative and challenging ideas.

Sabine told us that the current use of the building as a repository for museum stock will cease when the IKEA building project is completed and a new future for Whitefriars awaits.

The next talk highlighted another hidden aspect of Coventry's story, its Jewish heritage.

11. Coventry's Jewish Heritage. Mark Johnson.

Mark traced the heritage to the 19th Century when Jewish watchmakers played a pivotal role in opening the Coventry Synagogue. He also stated that many of the children of the 'Kinder Transport' sought refuge in the city after the war.

The history of Jews in England goes back centuries. They contributed 25 Marks [£5,000 today] to ransom King Richard 1st from Austria. Yet in 1296 the Jews were expelled from country.

In the 19th Century a quill manufacturer and philanthropist, Moss Friedlander, convened a meeting in the White Horse Inn [now long gone] to suggest creating a fund for the poor in Coventry. So began the Coventry Philanthropic Society. This led to the building of the synagogue in Coventry, the consecration of which was led by

the Chief Rabbi. Many Jews from immigrant stock were watchmakers, some of the earliest in the city.

Mark told the story of how a murderer had been caught by a Jewish pawnbroker, when he tried to pawn silver spoons stolen from his victim.

He spoke about the current exhibition in the Herbert Art Gallery, which includes a film of Jewish refugees, and his recently published book, in which there were many hidden and migration stories to be found. This is available at the Herbert or on-line.

12. Developments with Riley Car Heritage. Victor Riley.

Victor gave a focused update on the Riley Car Heritage Trust's work since it established its base at Unit 8 in the Coventry Canal Basin in 2019. In the Coventry Society's Heritage Conference of that year Victor had given the story of the establishment of the Trust. The base is now open five days a week, Tuesday to Saturday 12.00 noon to 3.00 pm. It contains the accumulated artefacts and ephemera of the Riley story in Coventry, donated by various Riley Clubs and individuals. Various projects, such as recreating the first Riley car, have centred on the Coventry base. It also holds one of the only two earliest surviving Riley bicycles. The centre has begun working with Coventry schools on educational outreach work as well as hosting visits from primary schools. It is intended to extend this work by having one school visiting each week in the spring. Victor's contribution to Coventry's industrial heritage, being the son of one of the original Riley brothers, is greatly valued and his active support in his late eighties, of the Coventry Society's Conference is to be admired.

13. Warwick Modern Records Office. Dr. Pierre Botcherby.

It is 50 years [1973] since the Archive was established. Celebratory events have taken place. The reasons for founding the Archive were to bring together a diverse range of materials. As well as donations by the staff there is a wide array of Trade Union and industrial relations material, also Coventry and Warwickshire related matters, campaign materials [many of left-wing causes] and higher education information including on Warwick University and the former teacher training college. There is also the National Cycle Archive.

Pierre encouraged local groups and individuals to use the archive, it was not necessary to apply and the place is open Monday to Friday from 9 am to 5 pm. It does help if interested parties can specify beforehand the documents they want to see. The centre encourages photography. Finally he invited members of the audience to be involved in seminars and for local groups to go along to the archive.

14. Recent Archaeology in the City. Matt Parker-Wooding, City Archaeologist.

Matt told us there had been fairly little archaeological development over the past few months. He told us about some of the findings of the University of Leicester Archaeological Service [ULAS] research at the Charterhouse, outside the café area. Findings included the remains of monks' cells, a piped water network, monastic tiled floors and a fourteenth century pin. Publication of a layman's report and a full technical report are planned.

The search for the site of St. Anne's chapel, which preceded the Charterhouse, has continued but so far without success. Trial pits were dug for Heritage Open Days on sites that looked promising from geophysical surveys, but no remains found. The main findings were thought to be bedding trenches from a Victorian plant nursery. Archaeology from the site of the Black Horse Pub in Spon End had not revealed the medieval manor house, but the remains of old stone and timber framed buildings that fronted Spon End. The car showroom had failed to implement the required archaeological investigation and is now required to put in a trench, which might reveal some useful information.

Archaeology at Pickford Green Road has revealed an Iron Age field system dating from 350-50 BC. It is hoped that the Eastern Green investigations in phases 2 and 3A might find further Iron Age remains.

Archaeology in the Keresley SUE had revealed Bronze Age remains as well as locally produced medieval pottery.

Coming soon, Matt was hopeful that investigations of the Bishop Street/Well Street site, opposite the Old Grammar School, will produce some interesting finds and City Centre South might also produce some interesting results.

Matt felt the creation of the Heritage Network would be helpful in promoting Archaeology Open Days in the city.

15. The Masterji Legacy. Tara Patel.

Tara is the daughter of the celebrated Coventry photographer, Maganbhai Patel, more commonly known as Masterji. In 1951 Masterji arrived in Coventry from India where he had been a headmaster- hence his more common name. His early photographs were simply the product of his hobby as an amateur photographer. He started working professionally from his studio in Widdrington Road as the first Indian photographer in the city. In 1969 he opened his long term studio in Stoney Stanton Road; it still exists today. He died in 2018 at the age of 96.

Tara used examples of his photographs to show the roles he played in the home and community, where he was greatly respected. His work was more widely celebrated

very late in his life. In 2016 he had his first solo exhibition and a year later his first book. This was the same year he was awarded an Honorary Doctorate from Coventry University in recognition of his outstanding contribution to photography and heritage in Coventry. In 2021/22 the exhibition went to Compton Verney. This wider exposure of Masterji's work and its telling of the stories of those who went to his studio had also led to links with other Asian photographers. Tara is understandably very proud of her father and continues to promote his work.

16. Questions and Comments.

Following an invitation to ask questions about any of the talks from the day, there was only one comment concerning the Stoney Road Gardens.

It was pointed out that the gardens were now plagued by badgers. Starting with two a few years ago, the population had expanded and they had become a nuisance because, to the despair of the allotment holders, they were eating the produce. Whole crops have been lost. Allotments holders are beginning to wonder whether it is worth carrying on because of the ruin to the crops caused by the badgers. In addition, the animals are burrowing into the railway embankment to make their setts. There is concern that they will undermine the railway line. Despite appeals to various bodies, including Network Rail, little help has been forthcoming.

The Chairman brought the day to an end by thanking all the speakers who had shown their commitment to their various projects, to Alan Denyer for hosting the Conference at the LTB and to the audience for their attendance.