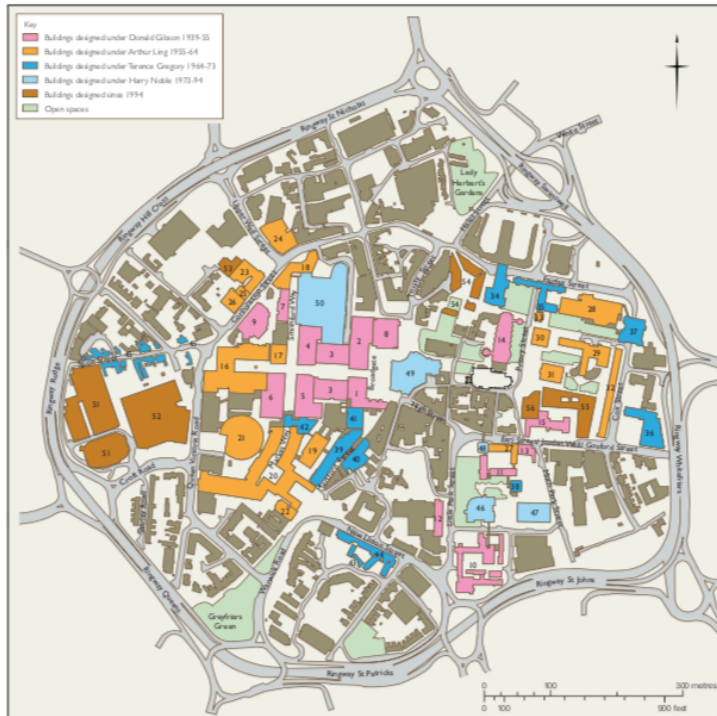




COVENTRY

Poster-child and template for postwar urban renewal



The centre of Coventry is poised for change on a scale not seen since the wholesale clearances of the 1950s that made way for the postwar city centre of shopping precincts, axes and vistas. And the infamous ring road— not so much a concrete collar as a concrete tourniquet. Come September, a good deal of what we will see on this tour will be rubble for the second time since the war.

Yet that very postwar reconstruction was hailed at the time as an inspiration and a template for other devastated towns and cities to follow. **Pevsner** called it 'one of the most imaginative examples of a twentieth-century city centre rebuilt after wartime destruction'. It was described as 'completely visionary' by the **Twentieth Century Society**.

And it continues to be praised in extravagant terms to this day, with

comparisons to Bath and Edinburgh. 'This was something which was in its day internationally lauded [as] that generation's version of Bath or Edinburgh New Town,' according to **Otto Samaurez-Smith**. 'This was something that they felt they could be proud of.' **Owen Hatherley** writes that 'the result is one of the most enjoyable townscapes in Britain of any era'.

Despite those plaudits, planning permission has been granted for **City Centre South**, a £300m 560,000 sq ft retail-led scheme that will see the demolition of a significant part of the postwar city centre. This may be your last chance to see these streets, buildings, arcades and squares and decide if what is proposed is civic vandalism or much-needed redevelopment 'to make the city a significant shopping and leisure destination in the West Midlands'.





The day starts with a guided tour of **Coventry Cathedral**, which was greeted with such derisory descriptions as 'a pavilion of ecclesiastical art' and 'a ring-a-ding God box' on completion, but voted the country's favourite building of the past 100 years in 1999. 'Spence's *Coventry Cathedral... has been handed down to us as a great vessel of post-war art and design, a colourful jukebox of the primary talents of the period*'.

Following that we will explore the postwar city

centre, including the **Upper and Lower Precincts**—covered shopping arcades on two levels inspired by the **Chester Rows**. These were the first pedestrian precincts in the UK.

For the time being they are to be spared, as is the circular **Coventry Market**, its flat roof laid out as a car park and the focus for a complex scheme of linked rooftop car parks. Not so **Bull Yard**, **Shelton Square**, **City Arcade** and **Hertford Street** which are due to be demolished. **Coventry Point**, John Madin's elegant, chamfered, conjoined, brutalist office towers have already been demolished.



We will also see many of the surviving buildings that caused the city to be called 'the best preserved mediæval city in England' as late as the 1920s. J B Priestley wrote in 1934: 'you peep round a corner and see half-timbered and gabled houses... I knew it was an old place, but I was surprised to find how

much of the past, in soaring stone and carved wood, still remained in the city'. Not any more. Of the 240 timber-framed buildings that survived the war, only 100 were still standing in 1958. By 1965 it was down to just 34.



On the tour we will see many of these, including **Ford's Hospital**, one of the finest timber-framed buildings in the country. It received a direct hit and city architect Donald Gibson wanted to clear or move it as it was in the way of his proposed new straight street to the station. One version of his plans shows it marooned pathetically on a roundabout in the middle of this road. Happily, the road was never built and Ford's Hospital was carefully repaired and restored at its original location on Greyfriars Lane.



We will also explore **Spon Street**, the largest enclave of mediæval buildings in the city—a mixture of restored houses and buildings transplanted from other parts of the city where they were 'in the way' to form a 'historic' precinct with **Bond's Hospital** and **Bablake School**.

Plymouth and Bristol both considered the transplant option but it was only ever put into practice in Coventry. Spon Street has been dismissed as a *'sanitised and inauthentic historic quarter'*, *'a down-at-heel Disneyland'* and *'an open-air Museum of Quaintness'* but the alternative—*isolated mediæval gems stranded and forlorn in a sea of mid-century modern*—is scarcely more appetising.



A short coach ride around the infamous ring road takes us to **Whitefriars Gate**, separated from the remains of Whitefriars Monastery itself by an elevated section of the ring road and only accessible via a subway. Astonishingly, the first sections of the ring road were built in 1959 as a generously



landscaped surface-level parkway with a 12-foot wide cycleway on either side. Coventry was, after all, the centre of the cycle industry before it metamorphosed into the motor industry.

But the road rapidly morphed into an urban motorway in all but name,

with multi-level junctions and no provision for cyclists or pedestrians. The original parkway/cycleway sections were eventually bulldozed and rebuilt to the new specification.



Beside the remains of **Whitefriars Monastery** stand two of Coventry University's most remarkable recent buildings. The **Lanchester Library** (1999) is named in honour of Frederick Lanchester, a pioneer motorcar manufacturer who is sometimes called Britain's Leonardo da Vinci. Regarded as one of the UK's greatest automotive engineers, it is reckoned that of the 36 key features of modern cars, Lanchester was responsible for half of them—including rack and pinion steering, disc brakes, monocoque construction and the accelerator pedal.



Designed by Short & Associates, Lanchester Library is as remarkable for its appearance—a miniature **San Gimignano** of fortified, staggered turrets, glazed atria and patterned brickwork—as for the rationale behind it. It is the world's first deep-plan, multi-storey,

naturally lit and air-conditioned building on anything like this scale. Standing incongruously beside it is Arup Associates' **Engineering, Environment & Computing Building** (2013), with a striking façade of profiled aluminium panels arranged in an interlocking hexagonal pattern. This pattern is punctuated by hexagonal openings shaded by aluminium hoods. The façades themselves lean inwards and outwards, adding to the warped, weird and frankly wilful appearance of the building.





Nearby is the **London Road Cemetery**, one of the earliest garden cemeteries in the country. All the great and the good of the city were buried here including, in a mass grave, the 568 victims of the air raid of 14 November 1940 that destroyed the cathedral.

Designed by Joseph Paxton in 1846 and otherwise known as **Paxton's Arboretum**, the London Road Cemetery is

now a Grade-I listed park and garden and one of the top five historic cemeteries in the UK. At around the same time, Paxton also laid out Birkenhead Park, designed the Crystal Palace and in 1854

became Coventry's MP. Fittingly, his memorial—an exquisite, slender, Victorian Gothic stone rocket—stands at the entrance to the cemetery. The cemetery also features a Norman-style Anglican Chapel and a Neo-Classical Nonconformist Chapel.

For the final part of the day, we return to the city centre, where we will walk the surviving streets around the cathedral, including **Priory Row** and the



timber-framed **Lychgate Cottages**, cross the ruins of **St Mary's Cathedral** (Coventry is the only UK city to have three cathedrals) to **Millennium Place** and the **Whittle Arch**. A new glass footbridge (built as part of the **Phoenix Initiative**, which was shortlisted for the Stirling Prize in 2004) takes us across the remains of the city wall and over the enchanting **Lady Herbert's Gardens** and



almshouses, bookended by the Grade-I listed **Swanswell** and **Cook Street Gates**—the last two remaining gates from Coventry's city wall, which originally comprised 12 gates and 20 towers.

Our final stop is the Grade-II listed **Belgrade Theatre** for tea and tiffin in the café of the first civic theatre to be built in Britain after the war. Or, alternatively, cocktails in the **Generators Bar** on the roof of the former *Coventry Evening Telegraph* building opposite the theatre. Or real ale in **Hops D'Amour** in the arcade round the corner, Coventry's first micropub, located in a former Singer sewing machine shop.

Booking

This is an all-day coach trip on Tuesday 13th June 2023. The centre of Coventry is mostly pedestrianised, but for those concerned about the amount of walking that might be involved, there will be shortcuts and places to sit out parts of the tour.

Cost is **£47.00** for Stroud Civic Society members and **£65.00** for non-members—if you haven't yet joined or rejoined Stroud Civic Society, please follow this link. *If you are a couple but only one of you is a member, please note that the other must pay the non-member rate.*

<https://stroudcivicsociety.co.uk/home/membership/>

This price includes all coach travel, a guided tour of Coventry Cathedral, a guided tour of the city and cemetery with live wireless audio commentary and the coach driver's tip. Food and drink are not included. There will be a break for coffee on arrival, for lunch, and for tea before departure.

We have held the price for members at the same level as 2019's Newport tour, despite additional costs—including a £10.00 per head charge for the guided tour of the cathedral and massively increased coach hire costs. *If you are a member but feel able to pay the non-members' rate to help the tour break even, that would be appreciated.* All bookings for the 2021 tour will be honoured.

Payment

Please pay by bank transfer (BACS) directly into our bank account at **Stroud Civic Society, account number 10785091, sort code 40-43-21, reference COVENTRY.**

Then send a confirmation of your payment with your details to tim.mars@yahoo.co.uk to secure your place on the tour. An acknowledgement and further details will be emailed unless you enclose a stamped self-addressed envelope.

If it is not possible for you to pay by bank transfer, send a cheque payable to Stroud Civic Society with your name and address to: Tim Mars, 19 Highfield Road, Stroud GL5 1ER.



Timetable

Coach departs Stratford Park Leisure Centre in Stroud at 8:30am on Tuesday 13th June, returning around 7.00pm. The coach has a toilet and USB charging points at all seats. Please ensure you arrive in plenty of time and note we cannot guarantee exactly when the coach will arrive back in Stroud.

For more on Coventry's cycle industry, the Coventry Blitz, Donald Gibson's plans and many more photographs, please click on the link to the prospectus for the original tour we were unable to run in 2021.

<https://mailchi.mp/9dc778d244ae/news-from-stroud-civic-society-issue-7263637>

Tim Mars first visited Coventry as a teenager with a school party to see the newly built cathedral. Over the past two years he has revisited Coventry many times while researching this tour, as well as reading books and articles, and undertaking extensive research online.

Tim has enlivened previous expeditions to **Newport, Oxford, Milton Keynes, Birmingham, Swindon, Bristol** and **Cardiff** with his erudition, passion and humour. If you have been on any of these trips, you will know to expect an eclectic mix of history, townscape and anecdote. And meetings with remarkable buildings...

