

# Stoke Local History Group

Newsletter February 2021



*New student accommodation is scheduled to replace these buildings in Warwick Road, opposite Greyfriars Green. Photo: John Marshall*

## **Campaign group urges review of student accommodation blocks in city centre**

The city's principal heritage group, the Coventry Society, has urged the city council to have a re-think on the growth of student accommodation blocks, amid fears that the recent surge in development could end with a surplus of buildings which far exceed demand.

In a letter last month to Cllr David Welsh, cabinet member for housing, the Coventry Society says it initially agreed that the provision of specialist student housing was a positive development because it potentially freed up housing, previously used by students, for the local housing market. But the trend towards continued development of student blocks raises concerns, says the group.

"We are concerned that the sheer quantity of student accommodation already built and in the pipeline... is now disproportionate to the city's need and we are concerned that the city centre will be blighted for years to come by underused blocks," the letter says.

The Society calls on the council to carry out an assessment of future student housing needs and to refuse planning permission for future student buildings until a review has taken place.

The Coventry Society says that if planning permission is granted for future student accommodation, such buildings should be constructed in such a way that they could be easily converted for general residential use, if student demand falters.

In his recent response, Cllr Welsh has ruled out an immediate moratorium on student development. He said that an assessment of housing needs in the city must await the next scheduled review of the Local Plan, which has to take place by December 2022.

"It would not be appropriate to introduce a moratorium on a specific form of development prematurely, before evidence can be refreshed and analysed," he said.

He promised to instruct officers to take into account the point about future usability of buildings but said that any policy changes would need to be considered in the next review of the Local Plan. □

## Empress Building – a classic 1930s design

In 1933 there was much excitement in Stoke as plans were unveiled for new flats and a shopping arcade in a new structure to be known as the Empress Building.

In a report published on 21<sup>st</sup> July 1933, the *Midland Daily Telegraph* welcomed the plans which, it said, would give added beauty to Binley Road.

The project involved the demolition of a block of old buildings which had been standing for very many years,



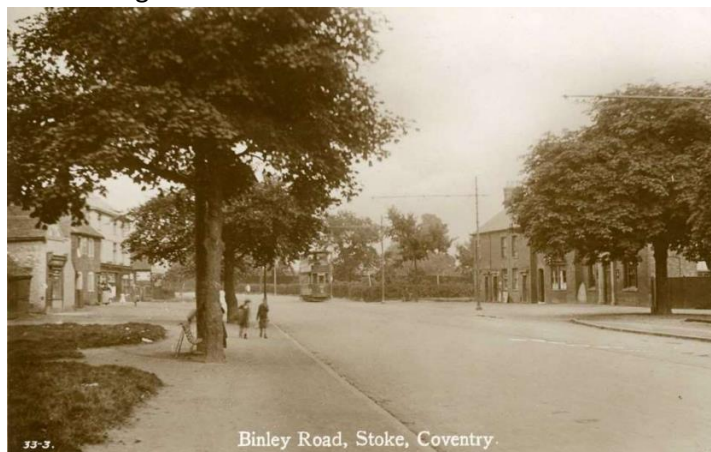
*Empress Building in the 1960s*

opposite the original Bull's Head Hotel.

These old buildings “appear to have been first used for farming purposes” and included an old blacksmith’s shop, the deeds of which were said to be about 400 years old.

“The scheme,” said the paper, “provides for the pulling down of about a dozen old cottages and shops, and on the site is to be built an attractive modern three-storey building, comprising eleven retail shops, a restaurant and flats. The building – which will be known as the Empress Building and forms one of the biggest building schemes in the Stoke district – has been designed to form one complete balanced block with a central entrance.

“The facade is to be executed in rustic bricks with stone dressings, and at night-time a striking effect will be produced by a Neon tubular lighting scheme in red and blue extending the whole length of the building which is about 175 feet.”



*Binley Road in about 1925. The old buildings on the left were demolished in 1933 to make way for the Empress Building.*

The newspaper drew attention to the Corporation’s recent efforts to improve the look of Binley Road by laying an attractive grass verge in front of Stoke Park.

“The improvement at this spot will not only wipe away a block of dilapidated property, which for many years has been an eye-sore,” said the paper, “but will also be the means of permitting an extension to the charming and spacious grass verge which the Corporation have laid along Binley Road. The existing stretch of grass

verge running in front of Stoke Park to Bray’s Lane has added considerably to the amenities of the neighbourhood, and, facing as it does the spacious Stoke common land [Stoke Green], the road is looked upon as one of the most picturesque in Coventry. The improvement contemplated will give the Corporation the opportunity of extending the grass verge and pavement for some distance past Bray’s Lane.” □

## Origins of a store called Owen Owen



*Coventry's first Owen Owen store, opened in 1937 and situated between Trinity Street and Cross Cheaping*

Several generations of Coventry folk have taken pleasure in shopping at what was once the city's premier department store – Owen Owen. It originally opened in 1937 but the Coventry store was severely damaged in the Blitz and was later replaced with a new building in post-war Broadgate. But what are the store's origins and why was it called Owen Owen?

The answer can be found at the westernmost tip of Montgomeryshire, Wales,

where a boy named Owen Owen was born in 1847, the son of a tenant father. Owen was the first child of his father's second wife, Esther Elizabeth, who died when the young Owen was only eight, having given birth to six children.

His mother had a brother, Samuel, who needed help to run his draper's shop in Bath, so Owen Owen was dispatched to Bath where his uncle gave him a home and an education. The boy Owen began working at his uncle's shop in 1860.

**In 1868, Owen, then aged 20, moved to Liverpool to set up his own drapery business. He leased premises in London Road where he concentrated on rapid turnover and low profit margins. The business expanded rapidly and by 1873 he had over 120 employees and a quarter of an acre of floor space. It is said that he insisted on a high standard of service, and in the early days he himself greeted customers as they entered the store.**



*The shattered remains of the Owen Owen store after the Blitz*

Brought up in a Wesleyan Methodist family, Owen Owen became a Unitarian in the 1880s and politically he was a Liberal. According to his entry in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Owen saw staff as an extended family and he built hostels for them in Liverpool, later inviting them to his estate in Wales for holidays. He was one of the first big shopkeepers to introduce a weekly half-day holiday for his employees, who were mostly from Wales, and he set up the Owen Owen Trust in 1900 to help retired members of staff.

It seems that Owen was not interested in opening stores in other cities but he invested in other enterprises, most notably North American railways but also in other drapery businesses. He also created a property company with substantial London investments.

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Owen moved to London in 1891 but continued to manage the Liverpool store which became one of the largest in the north of England. Throughout his life he was a generous supporter of the arts and education, particularly in Wales, and was also a funder of Liverpool University. From a Coventry perspective it's interesting to note that he

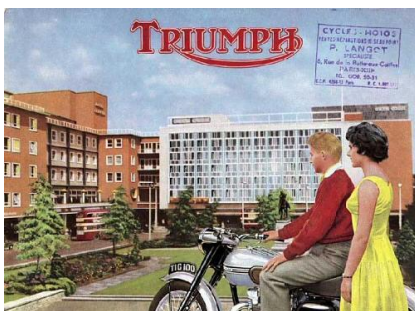
was also a keen cyclist, who moved from the tricycle to the bicycle after a course of lessons in 1897.

Owen Owen died in 1910 at the age of 62. In the years that followed, the Liverpool store ran into difficulties but was taken over in 1925 by Owen's son-in-law, Duncan Norman, who built a new store and revived its fortunes. He also sought to expand the business and built a new store in Coventry, the first of a number of new Owen Owen department stores around Britain.

The Coventry store opened in 1937 and was located at the top of the newly-created Trinity Street. War broke out in 1939 and Coventry experienced its first major air raid in October 1940, when the new store was damaged. But the decisive blow arrived during the Blitz on November 14<sup>th</sup> when Owen Owen suffered a near-direct hit. The steel-framed outer structure remained intact but the roof was blown off and the interior was reduced to a shell. The store's basement, which housed one of the largest air raid shelters



Advertisement in the Coventry Evening Telegraph, 31<sup>st</sup> September 1954. Images courtesy of Historic Coventry website



Owen Owen and Broadgate provide a backdrop for this Triumph booklet in 1956

in town, survived the raid and fortunately there were no fatalities.

But at least one auxiliary fireman was lost fighting the blaze. Following the war, a decision was taken to start again with a flagship store in the newly-designed Broadgate square. This attracted huge queues of enthusiastic shoppers when it was formally opened by the Lord Mayor on 1<sup>st</sup> October 1954.

The new manager was a woman, Miss Pinnock, who presided over 400 staff working in numerous departments. A former

long-serving member of staff, Bernard Stone, told the *Coventry Evening Telegraph* in 2006 that Owen Owen was always a family firm. "I remember when Mr Duncan Norman was chairman," he said. "Sadly, his elder son Jack was killed in the war and so the younger boy took over who we all called Mr John."

The store served the city for over 50 years before being taken over by Alders in 1996. It now belongs to Primark, as the future of Britain's old department stores looks increasingly unclear. □