

## In search of Coventry's bicycle and motor bike pioneers – a guided walk around London Road Cemetery

THE next history group event will feature a Sunday afternoon guided walk around Coventry's magnificent London Road Cemetery.

The walk - the first of several outdoor events during the summer - will be led by cemetery expert Ian Woolley who will show us a selection of graves and memorials associated with the early pioneers of Coventry's bicycle, motor bike and manufacturing industries.

A highlight of the walk will be a visit to the Triumph Memorial, an important structure on the cemetery's raised promenade, erected to remember over 60 employees of Triumph who lost their lives during the First World War. It was unveiled in March 1921 by Triumph founder Siegfried Bettmann. The monument was restored to its former



*A clipping from the Coventry Graphic in March 1921, showing Siegfried Bettmann, the founder of Triumph, unveiling the Memorial*



*The grave of George Singer, founder of the Singer Cycle Company. Photo: John Marshall*

glory in 2018 when a local group, Friends of London Road Cemetery, chaired by Ian, won funding to clean and repaint the memorial.

Our walk will also take us to the grave of Charles Hathaway, the brilliant Works Manager at Triumph who - as we discovered in a recent talk - was key to the company's success. His gravestone also commemorates his son, 18-year-old Sydney Hathaway, who was killed during the First World War.

Another significant grave during our walk will be that of bicycle pioneer James Starley, often referred to as the 'father of the bicycle industry'. And we will also visit the grave of George Singer, founder of the Singer Cycle Company who served as Mayor of Coventry from 1891 to 1894.

The walk takes place on Sunday May 17<sup>th</sup>, starting at 2pm. Meet at the Paxton Memorial, just inside the main gate. A charge of £2 per person will be made to cover the cost of the tour. There is no need to book.

Stoke Local History Group

**Sunday May 17<sup>th</sup>, starting at 2pm**

**A Sunday afternoon walk around London Road Cemetery  
with guide Ian Woolley**

# Joshua Perkins – esteemed resident of The Cottage in Clay Lane

IN 1886 an important local manufacturer, Joshua Perkins, moved into a large country house in Clay Lane, Stoke, well away from the hustle and bustle of the nearby city of Coventry. His house was called **The Cottage**, and it stood within a substantial area of land. Here he lived with his wife, several grown-up children and two servants.

Joshua Perkins owned Britannia Mill, a large factory in Payne’s Lane, and it was here that his workforce produced coach trimmings, lace and upholstery for railway carriages and later for motor vehicles. The firm was originally established in Lubenham, near Market Harborough, but it expanded in 1865 with the opening of the new factory in Coventry, employing about 200 people, later rising to 300.

Coventry in the 1860s was still reeling from the slump in the city’s traditional silk ribbon weaving trade, and the new Britannia Mill offered valuable opportunities for diversification in textile production.

The front elevation of the Payne’s Lane building was three storeys high and it extended to a width of 140 feet, surmounted by a large stone figure of Britannia. At the rear were weaving sheds, described as “lofty and well built”, and fitted throughout with modern machinery, comprising about 150 looms driven by a powerful engine and boilers.



*Aerial photograph showing Britannia Mill (centre) facing Payne’s Lane. Running alongside the factory site is Britannia Street, with the Binley Oak on the corner. Gosford Green is visible in upper right corner.*



According to a trade directory in the 1890s, Britannia Mill produced “every description of carriage trimmings and upholstering requisites, of the highest quality and in great variety of material and design”. These goods were supplied to the principal railway companies and wholesale coachbuilders, with products going to all parts of the United Kingdom and around the world.

Joshua Perkins’ new home in the 1880s, The Cottage, had originally been built for Alderman Thomas



*The Cottage, Clay Lane.  
Photo: Blyth, ‘The History of Stoke’ (1897)*

Morris JP, who was listed as the principal resident in a directory of 1850. At his death, the property passed to his son, Thomas Schuman Morris, who was also a magistrate and a leading citizen of Stoke, sharing a reputation with his wife for acts of benevolence towards the poor.

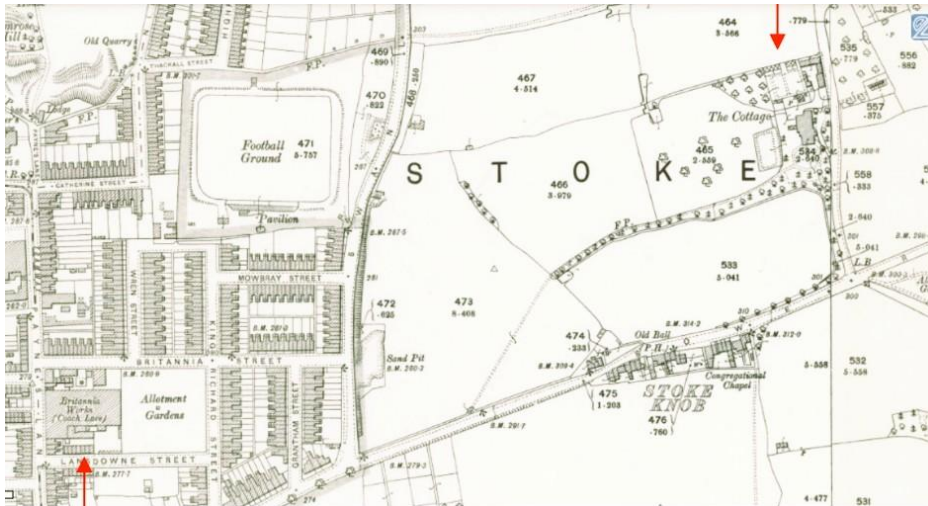
But it was the next occupant, Mr Edward Broughton, who extensively enlarged the property, and it was this larger house that Joshua Perkins acquired in 1886. Clay Lane at that time was still a rural lane and Ball Hill was still a hamlet, with few houses on Walsgrave Road and no houses at all on the land now occupied by Villiers Street and

surrounding roads. The entire population of Stoke at this time was 1,447, according to the 1881 census.

Like his predecessors at The Cottage, Joshua Perkins enjoyed a fine reputation as a well-respected figure in the parish, but his time at Stoke was not without a hint of controversy, as we shall see.

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This map shows Britannia Mill in Payne's Lane (bottom left corner, arrowed) and The Cottage, Clay Lane (top right corner, arrowed), circa 1903-05. The area between Swan Lane and Clay Lane was largely open land.

Before moving to The Cottage (sometimes referred to as Stoke Cottage), records show that Perkins lived in Far Gosford Street and it appears that he was a worshipper for many years at All Saints Church, before becoming more involved with Stoke Church.

At Stoke Church, Perkins occupied various honorary positions, including churchwarden, and he is known to have been especially generous to the church, particularly in relation to the bells, which were increased from three to eight as a result of a scheme which he helped to fund. It is said that he also helped to finance a new Stoke Vicarage on Binley Road, and he was also a keen supporter of the Parish Rooms in Bray's Lane.

Construction of the Parish Rooms began in 1908 and by this time Stoke was in the process of a major transformation, from rural parish to city suburb. The area became part of Coventry in 1899 and there was a rapid expansion of urban development, with new streets laid out and hundreds of new houses built.



Joshua Perkins was a major benefactor at Stoke Church, pictured above in 1916 Photo courtesy Rob Orland

One of the new features of Ball Hill at this time was St Margaret's Church, built in 1910 to cope with the growing population. The church also wanted to build a Church Hall and Institute – a home for Sunday Schools and other activities- and this is when help from Joshua Perkins was sought.

In 2010, on the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of St Margaret's Church, a booklet produced to mark the centenary gave an insight into what might have happened before the Institute was built. It said:

*“It was whispered that a wealthy local businessman, Mr Joshua Perkins, who lived in a large house in Clay Lane, wanted to marry his deceased wife's sister, which was against the rules in those days, but the Vicar of St Margaret's did kindly agree to marry them, and Mr Perkins gave a handsome donation towards the building of the Institute. Mrs Perkins laid the foundation stone.”*

It is difficult to verify the truth of this speculation, but a few facts can be determined. First, we do know that it was traditionally forbidden for a man to marry his deceased wife's sister. The prohibition had lasted for centuries and was rooted in canon law and later in civil law. It was only in 1907 – after decades of debate in the Victorian era – that an Act of Parliament finally legalised marriage to a deceased wife's sister, though clergy of the Church of England were under no obligation to perform the ceremony.

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We do know that Joshua was married twice, first to Mary with whom he had seven children, and in 1908 to Elizabeth, the sister of his first wife who had died in 1902. Even though the law had been changed at this time, the marriage was doubtless still contentious in some quarters. It may be that the Vicar of Stoke Church was reluctant to give his blessing, and it may be that Perkins found a more favourable response at St Margaret's. We don't know. But, regardless, the available evidence shows that Perkins married his second wife on February 8<sup>th</sup>, 1908, at the Registry Office in Coventry.



*St Margaret's Church (right), built in 1910, and the Church Hall and Institute, to the left.  
Photo courtesy David Fry*

We know also that Joshua Perkins made a substantial donation to pay for the construction of the Church Hall and Institute, next to St Margaret's Church (now the Churchill Hotel). According to a newspaper report, a church meeting in 1910 heard that Mr Perkins was willing to defray the whole cost of the Institute, which amounted to a gift of something like £1,500, a very large sum at the time.

A report in the *Coventry Times* in July 1910 also disclosed that Mr Perkins bought an old cottage and garden on Walsgrave Road and was willing to give the garden to the church so that the Institute - designed

by local architect Thomas Tickner - could have a more desirable frontage onto the main road, rather than onto Argyle Street as originally envisaged. And the second Mrs Perkins did indeed lay the foundation stone for the new building.



*Church Hall and Institute of St Margaret's, now the Churchill Hotel. Photos: John Marshall*

We also know that by 1907 Joshua Perkins had moved out of Stoke Cottage and relocated to Wyken House, the former home of William Pridmore who was recently deceased. Wyken House was a large house with its own grounds, close to Stoke Church, and later destined to become a new housing estate known as Poets' Corner (see *Jabet's Ash*, April 2024).

The Cottage, meanwhile, became the principal home of Joshua's son, also known as Joshua Perkins.

Joshua Perkins Snr died in December 1919 at Wyken House, at the age of 80, and he was buried in the churchyard of Stoke Church. An obituary in the *Coventry Standard* described him as "an excellent type of Englishman, always affable and courteous, and ready to grant any favour or to do any good work which was within his power ... He abhorred publicity and found great comfort in the good that he could do for others quietly and unostentatiously." Mr Perkins, the paper said, had retained a lively interest in his firm but had not taken an active part in its management for the past seven years. By his death, the paper added, the whole of Stoke will be greatly the poorer.



His son, Joshua Perkins Jnr, continued to manage Britannia Mill but he later moved away from The Cottage - which no longer had a rural setting - and the building was acquired by Stoke Ex-Services Club, which officially opened in 1923. □ **JM**

*We have a group visit to Stoneleigh Village on Friday June 19<sup>th</sup>, starting at 2pm. Details in next Jabet's Ash.*