

Rob Ganley

111 Places
in Coventry
That You
Shouldn't Miss

Photographs by Ian Williams



emons:

Foreword

For Anna and Sue, Joe and Iris
Thank you for looking after us –
we couldn't have done this without you.
Rob Ganley & Ian Williams

Coventry is home to around 400,000 people, whose heritage lives on in its architecture and art, from its visionary centre to its outlying estates. In this book we've tried to capture the city's character through the stories of its unique but perhaps lesser-known places.

The difficulties of 2020 couldn't dent the enthusiasm of the Coventrians we spoke to. We'll share their passion for everything from artisan brewing to the history of watchmaking, from producing theatre in art deco surroundings to a shrine to Phil Silvers. We'll reveal Coventry's major medieval influence, and an industrial heritage from cloth-making to becoming an engineering powerhouse producing cars and bicycles. Indeed, the production of munitions made Coventry a prime target in World War II, resulting in the Luftwaffe flattening its medieval heart – and thus influencing its appearance today, as the city emerged from the ashes of the Blitz.

We'll cast light on a quirky homage to Lady Godiva, and the origin of the phrase 'sent to Coventry'. We'll reveal the significance of the elephant on the city's coat of arms and the crest of Coventry City FC, and its inspiration for architects. We'll explore the influence of Coventry's long roll call of homegrown stars, from *Man Like Mobeen's* Guz Khan, to Bhangra star Panjabi MC, rap artists, actors and inventors, politicians and sporting stars, to the impact of being awarded UK City of Culture status. As well as locations such as the city's cathedrals and boho FarGo village, we'll help you find gems including the largest bookstore in the region, the origins of the 2-Tone music scene, and George Shaw's paintings in the Tile Hill area.

For me, writing this guidebook has been a nostalgic and inspirational journey. I hope it reads as it is intended – a heartfelt tribute to the city of my upbringing – and that you, too, find inspiration in its pages.



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14 Canal Basin Bouncy Bridge

Footpath that puts a spring in your step

The Canal Basin footbridge over Coventry ring road, that carries pedestrians from Bishop Street to Leicester Row, is familiar to locals due to its small – but for some, a little unnerving – bounce. Indeed, walking across it has been likened to being drunk when you're sober!

Pedestrian access to the bridge, close to Junction One of the ring road, is either via long concrete ramp or steps, the latter framed with curved panels. The footbridge is around three metres wide with painted metal handrails for support, and its lower side walls are painted prominently with the words *Canal Basin*. Structurally, there's nothing to worry about, as it was designed by engineers to move up and down a little, allowing for bend and flex. Bridges such as the Canal Basin footbridge have a natural frequency, or number of times that they can move back and forth per second, so when forces such as a number of people crossing the bridge combine with wind disturbance caused by fast-moving high-sided vehicles below, the vibration lines up with this natural frequency and amplifies it. A similar but more significant process caused London's Millennium Bridge to capture national headlines when it swayed alarmingly under the weight of pedestrians at its official opening in 2000. It was crossed by some 90,000 people, with up to 2,000 people at a time, causing a reported sway of up to 70 millimetres. Londoners christened it 'Wobbly Bridge' and it was subsequently closed for modifications and repair work just two days after it was opened. It didn't reopen until 2002.

There were plans to demolish the Canal Basin footbridge around 2015, when it was set to be replaced by a street-level crossing, but strength of local feeling, and some residents' concerns around the safety of a pedestrian crossing at a junction of the ring road, resulted in this plan being shelved.

Address St Nicholas Street, CV1 4LY | **Getting there** BS5 or BS7 bus from Pool Meadow station, then a 3-minute walk, or a 20-minute walk from Coventry railway station via Broadgate and the Burges | **Hours** Unrestricted | **Tip** A new Playwrights Café, an offspring of the excellent established bar and bistro of the same name in the Cathedral Quarter on Hay Lane (see ch. 70) opened in the Canal Basin in summer 2020.



32 — Ellen Terry Building

One of the first female stage superstars

Coventry-born Dame Alice Ellen Terry was a great female actor, and one of the first female stars of the stage. Terry took the acting world by storm at the turn of the 20th century, achieving huge popularity with Victorian audiences. Today her name graces the Ellen Terry Building, previously the Gaumont Palace Theatre and later Odeon cinema. Today it's a Grade II-listed building, and part of Coventry University.

Terry was born in Coventry in 1847 to a family of actors – indeed her sister, Kate, was grandmother of the actor Sir John Gielgud. Ellen was a child actor, first appearing in Shakespeare plays in London at the age of nine, and touring throughout Britain in her teens. In 1878 she joined the Henry Irving company as his leading lady, and for more than 20 years was acknowledged as the finest Shakespearean and comic actress in Britain. The company even toured America. Terry changed direction in 1903, becoming manager of London's Imperial Theatre and producing plays by George Bernard Shaw and Henrik Ibsen. She continued to act on stage until 1920, and in the early years of films from 1916 to 1922. Terry also gained notoriety for her personal life. She first married at the age of 16 to an artist 30 years her senior, although this lasted less than a year. She subsequently had three further marriages, two illegitimate children, and several romantic liaisons that reads like a who's who of stars of the day.

The iconic building was named after Terry in commemoration of the golden age of cinema. The building was refurbished in 2000, updated with a more modern appearance while maintaining its art deco heritage. Inside there's a ballroom, a stage for concerts, a proscenium arch, and an organ rising from the floor of the orchestra. Visitors can avail themselves of the restaurant above the art deco foyer. Coventry university holds an archive of Terry memorabilia.

Address 34-35 Jordan Well, CV1 5RW | **Getting there** 6-minute walk from Pool Meadow bus station, 15-minute walk from Coventry railway station | **Hours** Always viewable from the outside | **Tip** Next to the Ellen Terry building is the Phoenix pub, a marvellous listed house with art nouveau gables, built in 1906. The Phoenix is always lively and serves great food.



45 Humber Road Tunnel

Eerie 1830s' pedestrian subway

The north and south entrances to the Humber Road Tunnel, which cuts beneath the London to Birmingham railway, are today Grade II-listed in their own right, due to their interesting architectural detail that dates back to the golden age of railways. While interesting, these architectural gems are not the easiest to find. At a bend in the Humber Road next to the Ben Day Care Centre, there's a narrow, surfaced footpath heading south-west from the road. It's fenced on either side for much of the way, and is a little overgrown in places, with trailing brambles, but is easy enough to navigate. Following the path, pass first under a heavily graffitied blue-brick subway beneath the former Coventry Loop Line embankment, then within 150 metres from the Humber Road is the Humber Road Tunnel's north portal. The tunnel itself is around two metres high and two metres wide, and is incredibly dark – perhaps not for those who suffer claustrophobia! Walking through its length of approximately 30 metres creates a strange and disorientating sensation. In fact, visitors might want to bring a torch.

The tunnel dates from 1838, when it was first built as part of the first major wave of railway development in Britain during the Industrial Revolution. It was in the 1830s that the London to Birmingham Railway was established under the guidance of the company's chief engineer, Robert Stephenson, the first line in the world linking major cities.

The tunnel portal itself is constructed from stone, and comprises a central rounded arched opening with retaining walls on either side. Most interesting is the detailing: it has an inner band of zigzag decoration, with an outer band of scalloped mouldings, and the outer wall is capped with large stones. The south entrance to the tunnel carries the exact same detailing, in much the same condition, albeit adorned with graffiti.



Address Near Humber Road, CV3 1LL | **Getting there** 20-minute ride on the 3 bus from Pool Meadow station, followed by a half-mile walk | **Hours** Always open | **Tip** Continue along the footpath, which crosses the River Sherbourne, and after about half a mile joins Shortley Road, opposite the London Road Cemetery (see ch. 57).