



# THE COVENTRY TILE & MOSAIC TRAIL

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Front cover Image:  
Detail of the Martin Froy mosaic in Coventry's Belgrade



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| (1) Coventry Railway Station, Station Square         | (10) Lady Godiva Clock, Broadgate House, Broadgate      |
| (2) Aztec Panel, Bull Yard                           | (11) Coventry Martyrs Mural, Broadgate House, Broadgate |
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| (9) City Library mosaic façade, Smithford Way        | (18) Coventry Cathedral, Priory Street                  |

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# COVENTRY

## A BRIEF HISTORY

**Coventry** is a city with a long, varied and important history. Its origins are thought to lie in the 7th century with the building of an Anglo-Saxon convent. In 1016, the settlement was destroyed by the Danish forces of King Canute – the first recorded event in Coventry's history.

It was on the site of this convent that, in 1043, the Saxon Earl of Mercia, **Earl Leofric** founded the **Benedictine Abbey** which, until its dissolution in the 16th century, was central to Coventry's prosperity and stability.

**Lady Godiva** was Earl Leofric's wife. Legend has it that she chose to ride 'naked' through the streets in order to shame her husband about the plight of the town's poor. Probably, her nakedness was not total as she may well have worn her undergarments, but the story with its addition of a 'Peeping Tom' who looked on while the townsfolk stayed respectfully indoors, is a famous one. The legend of Lady Godiva will forever be associated with Coventry.



*Coventry's 'new' cathedral with the medieval cathedral's walls in the foreground.*

Coventry, which had received its city charter in 1345, was visited on frequent occasions over the years by medieval Kings and their retinues. On several occasions, parliament was ordered to gather at Coventry. The city was also, briefly, the capital of all England during the 15th century.

With the dissolution of the Abbey (now a Priory) in 1539, Coventry entered a period of decline. The city lost some of its guilds and its **wool and weaving trades** were particularly affected. Coventry was renowned for the quality of its blue cloth known as '**Coventry Blue**'.

During the Civil War, Coventry came out firmly on the side of the Parliamentarians, repulsing Royalist attacks more than once. In revenge, Charles II ordered that the city walls were to be torn down. Until that point, Coventry had been the best defended provincial city in England.

Coventry retained much of its medieval street plan right up until the start of the Second World War and some evidence of that plan can still be found today. The centre of the city is dominated by the three spires of its churches: The **Cathedral of St. Michael, Holy Trinity Church** and, just to the west, **Greyfriars** (now Christ Church).

Trade from medieval time onwards has always been important for Coventry's prosperity. The city was at the forefront of innovation in **silk weaving, clock and watch making, bicycles** and, from the start of the 20th century onwards, for **aircraft** and **motor car** production.

The landmark events which took place on 14/15th November 1940 and on 8/9th April 1941 changed the face of Coventry forever. In the bombing raids, Adolf Hitler's Luftwaffe destroyed many thousands of homes and businesses and killed over 1,800 people.

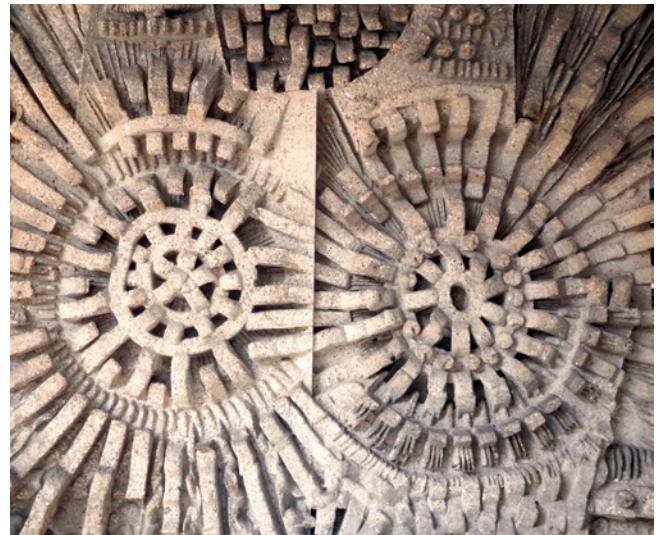
Following this terrible loss of life and physical destruction, Coventry became the first English city to embark on a comprehensive scheme for rebuilding its centre and suburbs, the plan for the city being produced in 1941 and revised in 1952. **Coventry Cathedral** and its physical link to the bombed-out cathedral church represents Coventry's own rebirth after the war and, now in the 21st century, is a moving symbol of the power of love and reconciliation.

***We hope you enjoy our trail which will take you through the history of this most fascinating city using the ancient art form of tile and mosaic production.***

## TILE and MOSAIC LOCATIONS in the CITY CENTRE

**Key:** (1) the numbers in the text refer to locations shown on the city centre map inside the front cover

**(1) The Railway Station (1958-62, Grade II Listed)** was designed by W R Headley, regional architect to British Railways. The building is a bold design statement with its white tiled double height booking hall and stairwells. Simple clean lines disguise the intricacy of the tile and mosaic configuration which involves eight different tile profiles. The makers are unidentified at present but are likely to be either Richards Tiles of Stoke-on-Trent or Carters of Poole.



*Detail of the Aztec Panel, Bull Yard*

**(2) The Aztec Panel, Bull Yard (1966, Grade II Listed) & (3) Hertford Street panels.** Designed and executed on site by William Mitchell, sculptor; the Aztec Panel (2), on the outside wall of the former Three Tuns Public House, is in his typically robust abstract style. It is made of poured concrete, the sculptor's preferred material. The design was deeply cut into polystyrene blocks first. These were then attached to and faced the concrete shuttering before the concrete was poured inside. The material used was a product called 'Faircrete'. It allowed further modelling and hand undercutting to be undertaken for a short period of time after the concrete had been poured and the shuttering removed.

Inside the building the corresponding wall has a similar mural but less deeply modelled and more suited to interior decoration. When first opened in 1966, the Three Tuns had the most modish interior design and furnishing.

*(Now, turn around and on the wall of the adjacent building is an interesting black and white tile scheme typical of the late 1950s/early 1960s.)*

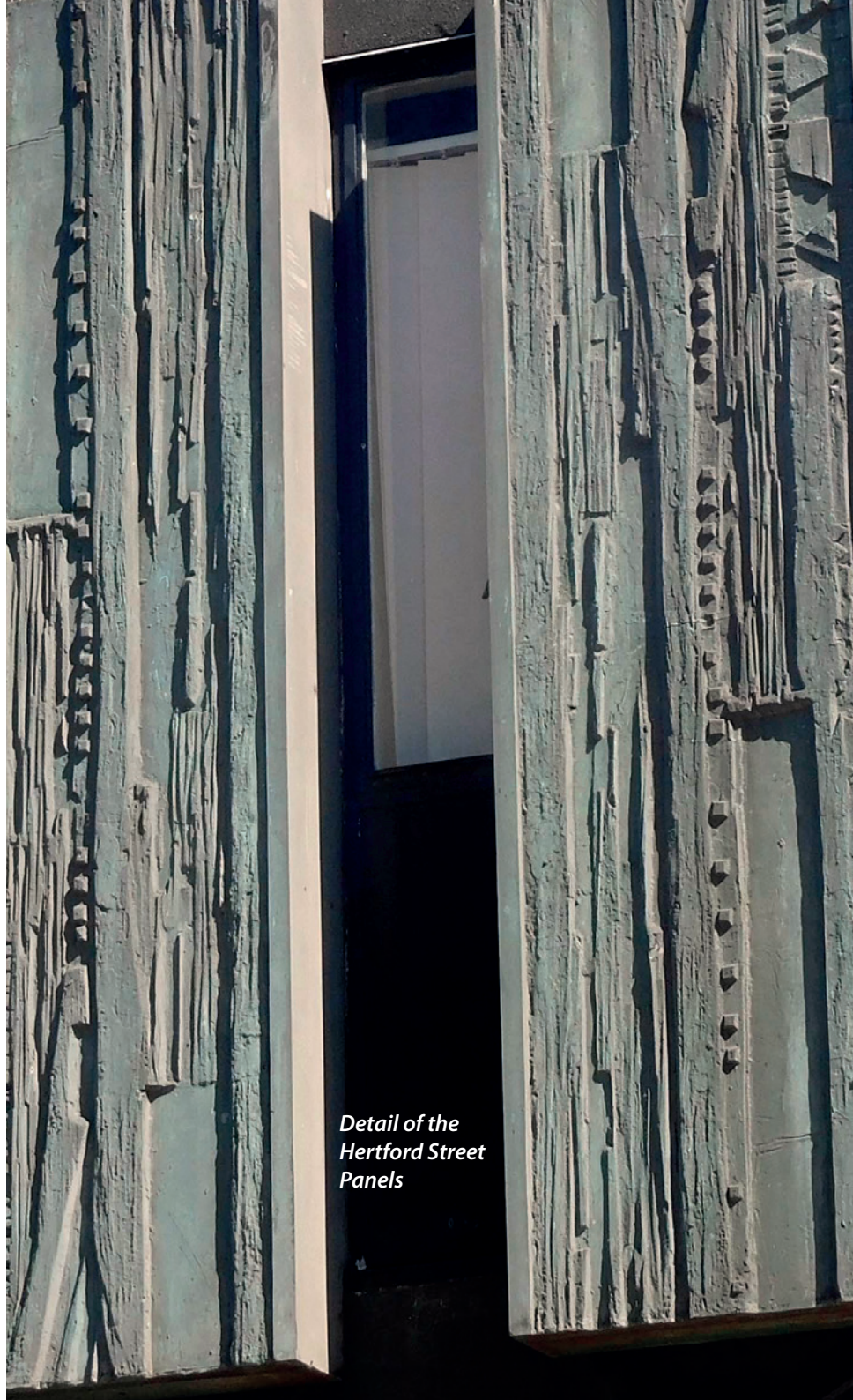
In contrast to the Aztec Panel, Mitchell's series of smaller vertical concrete panels which can be seen on the first- floor NW facade of the Hertford St building (3) are likely to have been produced in sections in Mitchell's studio and brought to site readymade for fixing to the building's elevation.

**(4) Coventry Market mosaic, Market Way (1958-60, Grade II Listed).** The City Architect and Planning Officer was Arthur Ling. His circular design with its planned roof top car parking for the new covered market was an architectural form which was unique to Coventry at the time of its design. The space is lit by a central raised circular roof light and the area below it is decorated with a mosaic which depicts a sunburst design echoing the light from above\*.

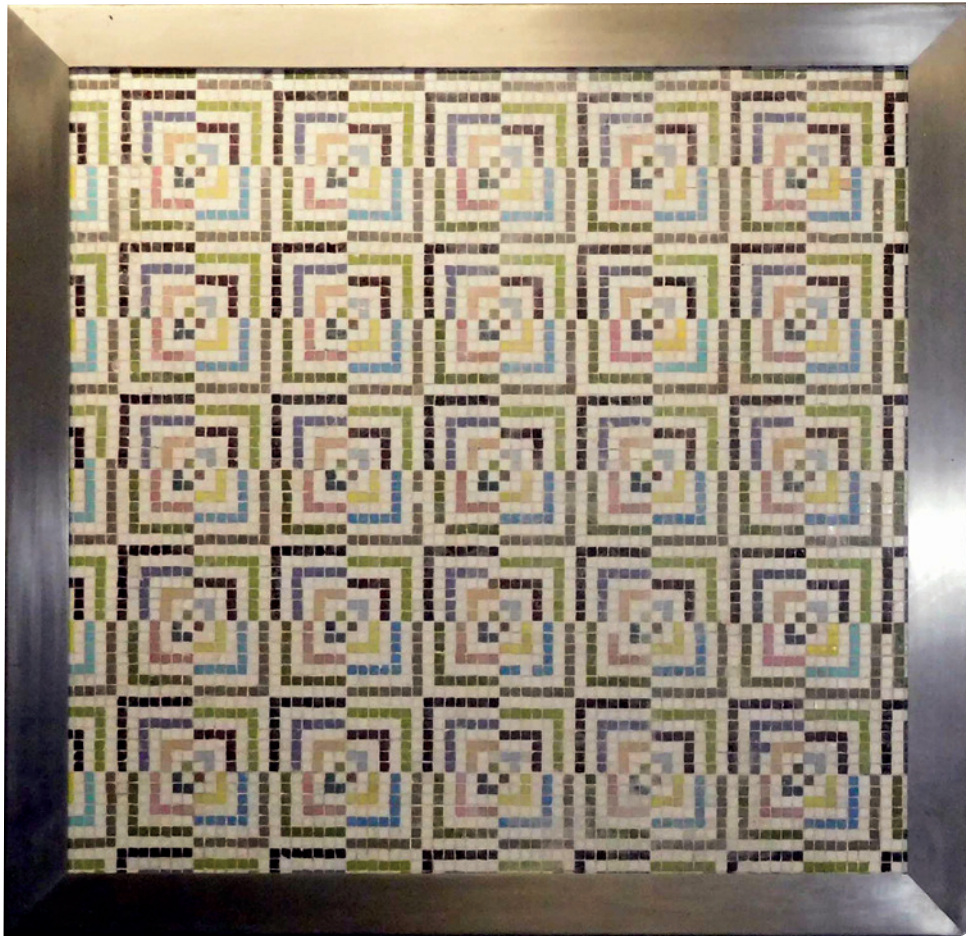
In a testament to the resilience and humour of the people of Coventry, two days after the November 1940 Blitz, a temporary market sprung up on the bombed site of the Rex Cinema in Corporation Street. It did not go unnoticed that the Rex had been showing 'Gone with the Wind' on that fateful night.

The market, with its variety of stalls, is well worth the visit.

*\*Unfortunately, at the time of writing, the mosaic is temporarily covered due to refurbishment.*



*Detail of the  
Hertford Street  
Panels*

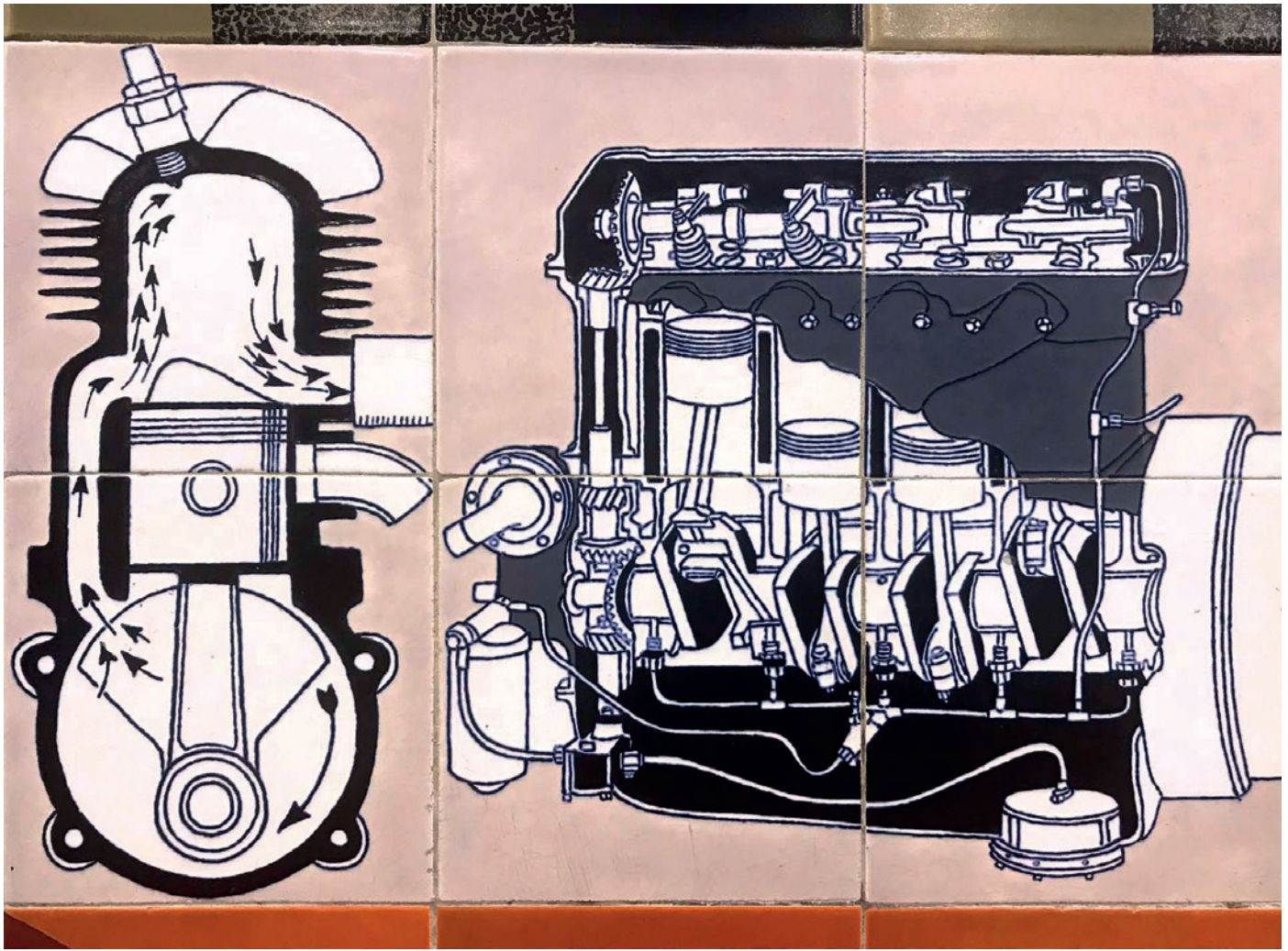


*The Headley Lewis Mosaics*

**(5) The Headley Lewis Mosaics, Ikea Car Park, Victoria Road (1964).** Robert Headley Lewis was Head of Fine Art at Coventry College of Art from 1959-1966. He was appointed Design Consultant to Coventry City Architects Department and it was in this capacity that he was asked to design a series of mosaics for installation in the underpasses at The Butts Radial Road. In 2006, one of the underpasses was deemed unfit for purpose but the mosaics were of such significance it was decided that four portions of the mosaic would be lifted, removed and redisplayed in the new Ikea car park (see below for details of the new location).

The designs of both walls of the underpass were glass mosaic in modular form. It was not until they were redisplayed that their most significant feature became obvious; once enough distance could be placed between the viewer and the mosaic (and this was impossible in an underpass) it became clear that the design had that outstanding quality of the 1960s movement known as Op-Art.

Directions: *The four panels mosaic can be found inside the ground floor Ikea car park on the wall opposite the store's car park entrance.*



*The Coventry Mural, Lower Precinct*

**(6) The Coventry Mural, Lower Precinct (1957).** This large mural was originally designed in two parts to line either side of a subterranean underpass which led down into the Lower Precinct. It was designed by Gordon Cullen, eminent architect, town planner and author/illustrator 'of Townscape', published in 1961. Arthur Ling was much influenced by Gordon Cullen's ideas on pedestrianisation and zonal spaces. The mural depicts silk weaving, clock and watch making, bicycles and motor cars as well as the broader history of architecture in the City. Sadly, the medieval maps and tracery section were lost in the 1970s due to careless workmanship.

The tiles were made by Carter's of Poole and are a mix of modern screen- printed designs and superbly intricate tube lining tile decoration to depict the various elements in the mural. Take a close look at the motor car engine and the bicycles to see a level of craftsmanship within the tile making industry, now increasingly rare.



*Detail of the Belgrade Theatre mosaic*

**(7) The Belgrade Theatre, Corporation Street (1955-8, Grade II Listed).** The theatre, designed by the City Architect, Arthur Ling, was named after the city of Belgrade; Ling was sympathetic to communism and developed many links with Eastern Europe. He was also influenced by the Bauhaus movement. The theatre was initially intended to be a venue for contemporary, left wing productions.

The first-floor meeting place is decorated with a mosaic designed by Martin Froy which is called 'The Four Seasons'. It is made from Swedish ceramic and Italian glass tesserae. The visual difference between the two mediums is quite visible and significant.

Martin Froy (1926- 2017) was a painter of figures, interiors and landscapes. He was part of a school of British abstract artists active from the 1950s to 1970s. His work is well known and continues to be exhibited regularly.



*The Lady Godiva Café*

**(8) The Lady Godiva Café (Caffè Nero), Lower Precinct (1957-8).** The Lady Godiva Café is now somewhat altered, though its basic circular cantilevered shape remains. The lower part is covered with green glass mosaic, as are the internal walls. These are part of the original decoration. The upper outer white glass mosaic is a newly restored element (2002), the original green tesserae are much more closely set together and with a greater variation in shades of colour. These subtle differences change the overall effect between the old and new. The glass tesserae were made by Angelo Orsoni of Venice, a company that is still making glass mosaic today.

*When the café first opened it was a favourite meeting place for young people in the city and today makes a convenient break for refreshment on our trail.*



**(9) The City Library Mosaic façade, corner Smithford Way and Lower Precinct (1958-60, Grade II Listed).**

This beautiful set of glass mosaic panels can be seen on the first-floor façade of the building, the former Locarno Ballroom\*. The panels were designed by the muralist, Fred Millett and are interestingly offset with plain brick panels.

Fred Millett (1920 -1980) lived in Berkhamsted. His artwork was very varied and included paintings and abstract sculpture. He completed many commissions in schools and other locations across Britain.

*\*The Locarno Ballroom was a very popular venue throughout the 1960s, the Rolling Stones appeared there as part of their first UK tour, playing a twenty- minute set and making use of the revolving stage.*



*The City Library Mosaic Façade*



**(10) The Lady Godiva Clock, Broadgate House, Broadgate (1948-53, Grade II Listed).** The Lady Godiva Clock is part of the first phase of development following the wartime devastation of the city centre. The first City Architect and Planning Officer for Coventry, Donald Gibson, was appointed, aged just 29, in 1938 and it was his masterplan that formed the basis for that planned post-war redevelopment of Coventry.

Gibson commissioned the sculptor, Trevor Tennant to design the clock. The backdrop to the Lady Godiva feature is made up of ceramic tiles by Carters of Poole. On the hour, Lady Godiva appears riding below the Peeping Tom of legend. Interestingly, in the earliest versions Peeping Tom does not feature as Lady Godiva rides through the city in protest, so it is said, against her husband, Leofric's excessive taxes on the people. She rides 'naked of raiment', which could mean that she was seen without her wealthy finery but wearing a simple shift. However, legend soon had it that she rode naked and the citizens, out of respect for her, stayed indoors except for one 'Peeping Tom', who later had his eyes burned out as punishment.

Trevor Tennant (1900-1980) trained at Goldsmith's College of Art and at the Royal Academy. He exhibited twice at the Royal Academy and was a member of the Artists International Association. He also collaborated closely with Dorothy Annan (1900-1983), ceramic muralist and painter. Her murals were mainly for public commissions, including a Listed work now conserved and on display at the Barbican Centre, London.

**(11) The Coventry Martyrs Mosaic Mural, Broadgate House, Broadgate (1948-53, Grade II Listed).** The Martyr's Mosaic is located in the foyer of the east entrance to Broadgate House. Access is through the doorway under the archway on Hertford Street.

Donald Gibson commissioned this work from the Head of Coventry College of Art, Hugh Richard Hoskins (Head from 1947-1962). Hoskins visited Geneva to find inspiration for his designs in mosaic.

The mosaic depicts eleven Coventry martyrs burned at the stake in the first half of the 16th century at or near Little Park Street. The eleven were all Lollards, a religious group who were strongly represented in the dyers and textile industries of the Midlands. The Lollards were followers of John Wycliffe who had translated the Bible into vernacular English in the 14th century. They believed that church services should be held in English and therefore accessible to ordinary working people, rather than conducted in Latin which was not widely understood.



*The Coventry Martyrs Mosaic Mural*

**(12) The Guildhall, Bayley Lane (mid. 14th Century to early 15th Century, Grade I Listed).**

*Note: The opening hours of the Guildhall vary throughout the year. Visitors are advised to check times of opening prior to their visit.*

Medieval floor tiles are found in the west Oriel window of the Great Hall; these could be in their original location. Upstairs, in the Treasury there is a pavement made of fragments which may have also come from the Great Hall. These pavement fragments are likely to have been moved here as part of the 1946 rebuilding of the tower after the wartime Blitz.

Archaeological evidence of kilns suggests a significant local tile making industry in the area. One such kiln site in the environs of the city was discovered in 1911 at Stoke and another, in 1940, a short distance away in Clay Lane. The name of the street is a strong indicator too, for kilns were often built close to a source of suitable material. Archaeological evidence confirms that commercial tileries were in operation at Coventry for some 150 to 200 years.

Tile-makers from Coventry were allowed to form a Guild, suggesting that manufacture here was unusually important. However, we cannot be certain that the tiles found in the

Guildhall are from Stoke. The Treasury pavement contains fragments of tiles, some heraldic and some with Latin forms, which are the same design as tiles made at Chilvers Coton, just south of Nuneaton. Medieval tilers were known to travel from place to place taking their moulds and designs with them. What we do know is that both Chilvers Coton and the tile making centres local to Coventry share many of the same designs.

The Arms of Berkeley are situated in the Oriel window of the Great Hall. In this same floor two tiles are decorated with the capital letter 'R', which perhaps makes a connection with Richard de Beauchamp, 13th Earl of Warwick (1382-1439) whose mother was Margaret Ferrers, and his first wife, Elizabeth de Berkeley. If this is a reliable attribution, this would probably place the dating of the tiles somewhere between his succession as earl in 1401, and his remarriage following Elizabeth's death in 1422.

The Guildhall also contains two other interesting tile features, a small fireplace in the Princes Chamber decorated with what are likely to be English Delft tiles, probably made in London circa 1730 to 1750. Notice the cute little angel motif in the corner of some tiles. There is also a much larger, stone and plaster fireplace in the Mayoress Parlour dating from the restoration of 1834-35 and decorated with early Minton tiles.

*Medieval tiled floor, The Guildhall*



**(13) Ellen Terry Building, Jordan Well (1928-1930).**

Formerly the Gaumont Picture Palace and later the Odeon Cinema. The architect was Percy Bartlett, chief assistant to William Henry Watkins of Bristol. The impressive white, modernist, glazed terracotta faience has colourful, Egyptian-ate pilaster capitals and a green frame to the central window. The most likely manufacturer for this façade is Hathern of Leicester.

*Detail of the  
Ellen Terry Building*



**(14) Ex-Coliseum Dance Hall and Café (1921-3).** Next door to the Ellen Terry Building we can see this former dance hall, a bold Edwardian, baroque style building in white faience topped with balustrade and dome. Not much is known about this building, other than that it was part of the Gaumont in 1928. The architect is thought to be J. H. Gilbert.

*Ellen Terry Building*



**(15) The Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, Jordan Well (1960).** In the History Gallery of the Museum there is a small collection of medieval tiles. Worth a visit just to see the interesting 'loopy king' tile. The impressed tile, in the same display case, is recorded as a floor tile found in the Benedictine Priory.

**(16) Holy Trinity Church, Priory Row (14th century, Grade I Listed).** The sanctuary contains a Minton tile floor which was part of the refurbishment of Holy Trinity by George Gilbert Scott in 1854-6. Above the Sanctuary there is a more elaborately decorated Altar floor. It is a common feature of tiled church floors that the decoration becomes more elaborate following the pattern of the Liturgy, thus the nave and aisles will be of plainer decoration than the Sanctuary or Baptistry.

*'Loopy King' medieval tile,  
Herbert Art Gallery &  
Museum*



*19th Century, Minton  
tiled floor, Holy  
Trinity Church*

**(17) Visitor Centre, the Phoenix Initiative, St Mary's Priory (2003).**

Note: *The opening hours of the Visitor Centre vary throughout the year. Visitors are advised to check times of opening prior to their visit.*

The excavation of the 13th century refectory of St. Mary's priory, the first of Coventry's three cathedrals, revealed an extraordinary well- preserved set of encaustic floor tiles. The layout is intact with a recognisable group of over thirty tiles. They appear to be fourteenth century and were manufactured locally at Stoke, Coventry. The date is arrived at by the depiction on one tile of the armorial arms of Sir Thomas Beauchamp, Earl of Warwick, 1360. Numerous other tiles were also excavated from around the site of the priory all of which were typical of the period.

**(18) Coventry Cathedral, Priory Street (1951-62, Grade I Listed).**

*Chapel of Unity*



We end our trail at the truly awe-inspiring connection between the old Coventry and the new. Designed by Sir Basil Spence, the Cathedral was ten years from conception to completion. It has, from its beginning, been a symbol of peace and reconciliation after the inhuman evils of the wars of the 20th century. The first ever city 'twinning' was between Coventry and Stalingrad (now Volgograd) in 1944. Other twinings followed and the links between Coventry and the wartime bombed city of Dresden in Germany have remained

strong to this day. In the time between 1962 and today the sandstone exterior of the cathedral has weathered to match the ancient stonework of the old building.

Leading from the North Aisle is the Chapel of Unity with its elaborate marble mosaic floor by Einar Forseth of Sweden (1892-1988). This floor can be considered as a modern take on the 13th Century Cosmati pavement in Westminster Abbey recalling the wide variety of coloured marbles and abstract designs. The floor is dished in the centre so that round objects will roll to the centre to symbolise peace and unity between peoples. Mosaicist Trata Maria Drescha completed the cutting and laying of the marble pieces over a period of six months.

From the baptistry down the South Aisle is the Chapel of Gethsemane decorated with a beautiful mosaic, The Angel of Agony, by Steven Sykes. It is designed to be viewed through a wrought iron Crown of Thorns which was designed by Spence.

Steven Sykes (1914 – 1999) was active in the British desert camouflage unit during WWII and was responsible for the large-scale military deception in the defence of Tobruk in 1942. He was described as "an excellent camouflage officer technically, and one who thinks about camouflage in terms of battle." One can imagine that following his war time experiences the commission to work in Coventry Cathedral would have been especially poignant.

*Chapel of Gethsemane*



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**Photo Credits:** Lesley Durbin: *The Aztec Panel; Hertford Street Panels; the Headley Lewis Mosaics; Coventry Mural, Lower Precinct; Belgrade Theatre; Lady Godiva café; Ellen Terry Building; Holy Trinity Church; Gethsemane Chapel* (with permission of Coventry Cathedral). Rob Higgins: *City Library, Godiva Clock, Coventry Martyrs Mural*. Coventry City Council: *St Mary's Guildhall, Chapel of Unity* (Graham Tait/CCC with permission of Coventry Cathedral). Herbert Art Gallery & Museum/ Coventry City Council: *'Loopy King' tile*. Penny Beckett: *Exterior view of Cathedral*.

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