

Car-city to ghost-town

The winds of change swept through Coventry and took out volume car production.

No matter how viable the UK car industry is today, the unfortunate upshot from decades of industrial turmoil, was that Coventry lost out, big time. I hadn't visited Coventry Transport Museum for quite a few years, and when I eventually did, I was surprised to see the most up-to-date cars displayed within a dramatic 'Ghost-Town' theme. On the walls, floor to ceiling blowups of local newspapers charted the difficulties leading to the car industry's decline. Entering the area triggered The Specials' 1981 unemployment themed hit, 'Ghost Town'. It had impact, and at first you could think this is the wrong image to portray, but on reflection, it's probably just honest.



Hall of Fame – some past cars made in Car City. Plus two mighty icons from the glory days, the Mini and the E-Type Jaguar. Although the Mini was built elsewhere, there were historical connections with Coventry.



My father in the 1904 Siddeley. Parked next to him is the 234 Baby Sapphire, the model that proved to be the end of the line.

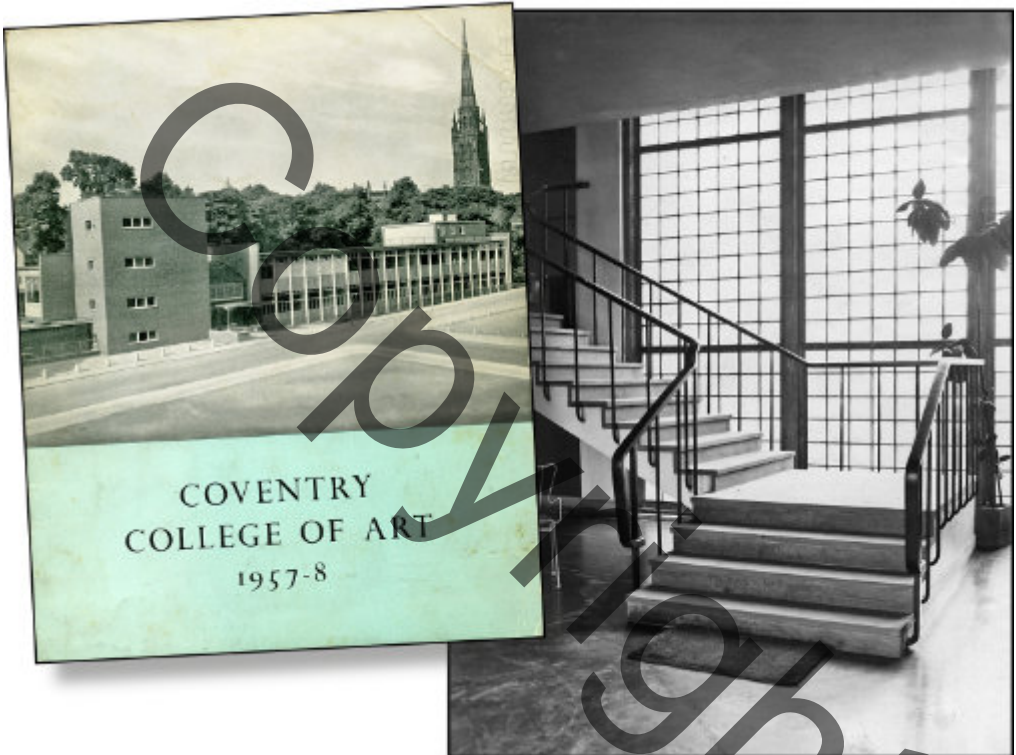
A year before the finish of car production, my father took part in the London to Brighton veteran car run driving a 1904 Siddeley which his department, Education and Training, maintained. As a postscript to car production ending, a special racing car had been built at Parkside for Tommy Sopwith junior – the son of the Hawker Siddeley owner. The 3.5 litre Sphinx was a massive departure from all that had gone before and was raced at Snetterton, Goodwood and Oulton Park, winning at the latter.



The end of car production at Siddeley would be a sad introduction to the list of local companies pulling out of production – before I was even aware of the trials and tribulations of industry.

Turning retro

Soon I would go out-and-about using my camera. Today the fashionable title is 'Street Photography'.



The 1957-8 college prospectus gives an early view of Cope Street. The spire of the cathedral shows how central to the city the college was. The architecture, inside and out, was pure 50s.

When I was 13, I was fortunate to win a scholarship to Coventry College of Art. The prospectus looks very formal now, as does the main entrance and staircase, however, art school was anything but. In the main it was easy-going and I felt at home from day one. The main building was right in the heart of the city, behind the old cathedral, but newcomers started in the junior art department, which was based in a splendid Victorian building situated a mile or so out of town. After two years of general foundation work, students chose their preferred area of study and moved to the main college full-time. By the time I moved to the main college, a tall new block, the Lanchester College, was dwarfing the surroundings. It interconnected with the art school and we used some of the facilities, so there must have been a master plan.



These cameras had two matched lenses, one above the other. The top lens was for viewing and composing the shot and the lower lens made the exposure onto the film. The only downside to this design became apparent when taking extreme close-ups because the image you viewed would be slightly different to the one you shot. In practice, though, extreme close-ups were rarely needed.

Because of the passage of time, these early shots have transformed into retro images by default, taking on a social history feel. I didn't plan it that way, I just took the shots on impulse. Some of this early work featured remaining wartime bomb sites where kids loved playing on old dumped cars.



Kids simply could not resist playing in old abandoned vehicles.

One place of interest was right on the doorstep. Mr Brown's corner shop, conveniently situated at the end of Alpha Road, was the very essence of what a corner shop should be. It looked excessively busy on the outside, with his obvious belief in letting no space go unused – a testament to the power of advertising. Inside he had created an Aladdin's Cave with newspapers, tobacco, sweets and stationery all displayed alluringly – it must have been a gold mine.

Hey Mister! Close to the shop, these two kids pestered me until I took their picture.



The lost city of Coventry

What would the city have looked like today if the bombing had not happened?

If you had been in the fine medieval City of Coventry on the morning of November 14th 1940, things would have seemed pretty normal, allowing for the fact that the country was at war. But if you had still been there later that evening, things were about to change, drastically. In Coventry, history and industry lived side-by-side, but from that evening onward the history bit would become history itself. It's difficult to imagine the moment on that cold November evening in 1940 when the air raid sirens began to wail.



The next morning the smouldering city centre lay completely ruined.

What followed was eight hours of incessant firebombing from the air, the first carpet bombing of Britain. It was total destruction, more than 500 dead and a city's historic central heartbeat wiped out of existence.

I've got another job

Is that the vibrant hum of heavy Industry I hear?

I didn't fall into my second job quite so easily because, unlike my first job, I had to make applications. But there were so many companies with so many jobs to choose from back then, it didn't take too long. I was offered two jobs at once. I had a choice: exhibition stand design or industrial photography. I think the design job would have opened more doors and been more challenging, but I reflected on it and felt the pressure would be too much for my condition. I decided to explore the other side of the coin and learn more



Wickman's factory was in an impressive, well-kept garden setting.

about industrial photography. Still in my awkward teen years, I felt I would never be as good with people as my ex boss Richard and that, for now, industry might suit me better. So I joined the photographic unit of AC Wickman. Wickman was a machine tool manufacturer based in one of the old war-time shadow factories that had been built on the outskirts of Coventry. Next door in another ex-shadow factory was the huge Massey Ferguson tractor plant. The Wickman's factory was big with an additional modern office

In at the deep-end

Now for self-employment. But not being in the rudest of rude health, and being new to the world of business, on paper you would perhaps give the venture three months.



In the 60s it could take months to get a phone connected – if you were lucky. No wonder I went slightly manic when the first call came through.

This was it then, in at the deep end, but the transition to working for myself felt right. Finding premises was the major hurdle, there wasn't much available due to the fact that business generally was thriving. There was also the thorny issue of what was affordable. Then we got lucky.

My girlfriend's mother spotted an empty chemist's shop close to the city end of Coventry's busy Foleshill Road, adjacent to Eagle Street. On viewing, the place seemed ideal. Downstairs there was room for a shop/reception,

dashboard. An onboard jukebox would have completed the look. Within a couple of years I would be taking my driving test in it – passing first time. What an amazing car after all.

Being mobile raised our game and more and more work started knocking on our door. Originally we were mainly working for companies in Coventry but we now had clients in Birmingham and other once faraway places. The work was very varied, comprising industrial, commercial, a bit of fashion, public relations, assorted events, black and white darkroom services and my newest activity – aerial photography. Things were humming and we met a lot of interesting people. We hadn't considered employing anyone until a lady walked in off the street and asked if we had any part-time darkroom jobs. Not wanting to miss a possible opportunity we thought it was worth a gamble. She agreed to work for an hour or so to show us what she could do. We sorted out a few pending jobs and left her to it. She proved to be a skilled photographic printer and we agreed a part-time deal with her on the spot. She worked for us for quite a few years and her work never missed a beat – it was our first foray into taking on staff.



With more than a hint of Batmobile about it, our red '64 Capri was not without its American-style charms – but for me, not a car to crave for.

Pure Theatre

We may have been busy, but it wasn't all work and no play for us – or Coventry's workforce.



Nightfall at Coventry's Belgrade Theatre. A shot taken in the early 60s.

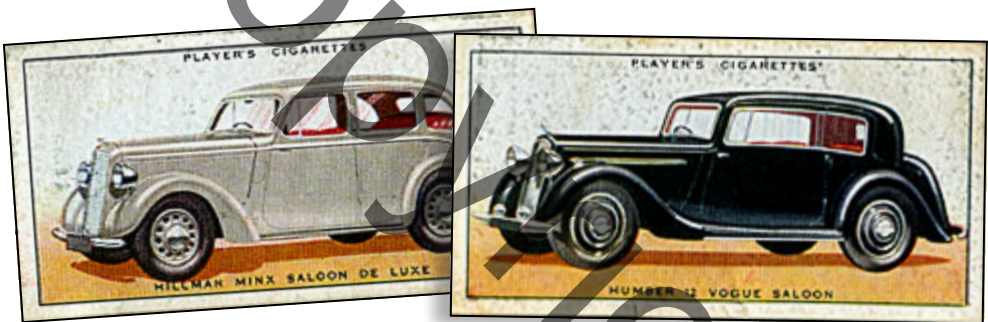
During these years we always seemed to be at the Belgrade – attending a photo-call, photographing a show or making a delivery of prints. I loved the place. I liked the understated but plush ambience, the thick carpet, the whole darn thing. I also loved their restaurant – it was the place to be. Much like the Fonz had Arnold's in Happy Days, we lesser mortals had the StageBite. It was fast food with style, better by miles than any American burger chain that would later dominate our high streets.

The Belgrade Theatre opened in 1958. It was named after the capital of Serbia, in honour of a gift of timber offered by the Yugoslav Ambassador when he visited Coventry in 1953.

Back to our Rootes

The Rootes Group were renowned British car makers famous for the Hillman and Humber marques. They were also responsible for getting me into aerial photography.

My first job for the Rootes Company would also be my last job for them. By the mid 1960s, when they commissioned me to take aerial shots of the Ryton plant, they were in trouble. Fortunately, I was unaware of this fact. Within a matter of months they were taken over by Chrysler of the USA and I guess these aerial images were for their use. The writing was already on the wall.



The Rootes motoring empire was an important employer in Coventry.

William Rootes headed the Rootes Group. They produced solid, reliable mid range cars such as the Hillman Minx, Hillman Hunter, Humber Super Snipe and Sunbeam Alpine. There was also a range of substantial commercial vehicles. In the lead-up to war in the late 30s they had become involved in the production of armaments, as did many car companies. In 1940, as part of the government's shadow factory scheme, Rootes built the massive assembly plant at Ryton-on-Dunsmore on the outskirts of Coventry.

Shadow factories were built on the outskirts of many of our towns in the hope of avoiding any bombing. At Ryton, they initially produced aircraft for the war effort, such as the Handley Page Halifax heavy bomber. Aircraft were also built at a shadow factory near Liverpool. In addition, Rootes produced a range of military vehicles based on existing Humber and Commer designs. It was later revealed that the company had made one in every seven bombers produced



This piece of fairground art highlights speed and movement in the pursuit of thrills. The frieze shows how much-loved British bikes were embedded into the national psyche in those days. The complete design features marques such as BSA and Triumph.

Triumph Motorcycles are the largest surviving British manufacturer. The original company did go into receivership in 1983, but was rescued by Englishman John Bloor, a wealthy property developer and builder. Manufacture continued under licence for a few years until Bloor was able to re-establish Triumph's enviable record of motorcycle production which dates back to 1902. Many of the group's former designers were re-employed and the team visited Japan to adopt their production philosophy and techniques. It just goes to show what determination and one man's vision can do. And the good news is that, today, Triumph is once again one of the world's major motorcycle manufacturers, and some other famous marques are in the process of being revived.

In recent years I've helped out in a small way with the production of some vintage Triumph videos and helped with a website promoting them, but that was as close as it ever got for me with motorcycles.

Lost in space

Did Britain's space endeavours peak too early? Or is it that we've done it and don't need to prove anything?

Following the technical developments and inventions spurred by the second world war – radar, early computing and the jet engine to mention just a few – postwar Britain carried on with its wave of inspiration into the 50s and 60s.

Local hero, Coventry born Frank Whittle, had been responsible for inventing and developing the all-important jet engine that would make so many iconic aircraft possible. He was hailed as the father of jet propulsion, a truly fitting accolade for an inventor who changed the world.



Genius at work, fellow Coventry Kid Sir Frank Whittle.

A display at the Royal Air Force Museum Cosford. Olympus jet engines powered the TSR-2 fighter, and Concorde.

On our drawing boards were some of the most creative ideas of the day; ideas that would give birth to big improvements in aircraft design, kick-start our very own space race and even inspire new forms of transportation such as the hovercraft.

Advanced aircraft, such as the world's first commercial jet airliner, the de Havilland Comet; the TSR-2 advanced fighter; Concorde; and the Harrier jump jet embodied the

From BMC to oblivion - Part One

*The massive British Motor Corporation metamorphosed over time into **British Leyland** who eventually metamorphosed into virtual thin air.*



The BMC logo and an Earls Court promo at the Motor Show circa 1960.

It seems a million years ago, but it wasn't.

In the mid 1950s the British Motor Corporation had been formed, creating the biggest UK car company of the age. Initially it encompassed several important marques: Austin, Austin Healey, Morris, MG, Wolseley, and Riley. There was also a range of commercial vehicles and agricultural tractors. In later years, as British Leyland, it would also include many other famous manufacturers such as Rover, Daimler, Jaguar, Land Rover, and Triumph.

Back in the game

After six years, back to a more structured business and the pioneering early days of video production.



Not only a colour lab, but, more to my liking, in at the beginnings of 'industrial and corporate' video production.

The years working from home, the rather relaxed bumbling along, had to eventually end. It's difficult to say why, other than a feeling that the time was right. Some of the anguish from the earlier business conflict had faded a little, but starting another limited company was definitely not on the cards.

A fair amount of colour laboratory equipment had been amassed in my friend's garage and the decision was made to look for premises. Finding suitable commercial lettings in the early eighties was still quite a task as rents remained high, but we eventually managed to find an empty building in an older part of Coventry that looked promising.

Coombe Street was about a mile of so out of town in the Stoke area. The premises were set back from the main Binley road, behind an open leafy green area, and there were plenty of all-important parking spaces right outside the door. We made a rental offer which was accepted and there was a counter offer made for us to purchase outright which was unexpected. The price, as they say, was right and to top that we managed to get a mortgage using the building as collateral. This was a sign of the times with borrowing now having swung the other way and become unbelievably easy.



All the used equipment that we had stored in the garage proved to be fully functional and we were up and running within a very short time. The building consisted of just under 2000 square feet, with the colour laboratory taking up the whole of the ground floor. Upstairs we had a photographic studio and various offices. We kept the business formalities as simple as possible – no accountants would be coming anywhere near these arrangements.

How not to be a Movie Mogul

Lights, camera, action – but where do we go from here?

Both of my grandfathers worked in the burgeoning film industry of the early 1900s, unfortunately I would never know either of them. However, it's easy to see why there would be a connection of sorts.

In Coventry, my grandfather on my dad's side was a song and dance man, working with his brother in early silent movies that were being produced in the Birmingham area. All we have left from that time is his silver-top cane and not much else. The film company eventually upped sticks and moved to America but my granddad refused to go. If he had, I might be penning this from the sunnier climes of Palm Springs.



One of few snapshots of my grandfather. We still have his walking cane from the early days of British silent movies.

