

A Concrete Jungle?

Largely demolished by the Luftwaffe in 1940, then devastated by 50's and 60's concrete prefab architecture. The home of taking the idea of bareback horse riding literally. The city that, like a phoenix, rose from the flames (into fifteen-storey tower blocks). Haitham Razagui discovers whether the Sky Blue City of Coventry really became (HEADLINE)

Finding myself on Coventry's ring road, I begin to wonder if this was a test run for Spaghetti Junction. The person who designed this must have had two documents on their desk; one to be signed and one on which to design a ring road. I came to the conclusion that from a helicopter over Coventry, you could see the road designer's signature encircling the city centre.

After negotiating my way off the ring road and parking outside Coventry University, I felt as though I'd stumbled through the crisp, sunny morning into a time machine that had somehow gone wrong. I found myself suddenly transported from a modern University campus to a cobbled lane, home to buildings circa 1400, isolated from the modern world. That is, until I heard the rumble of four pneumatic tyres on the stony, uneven road surface. Hardly the horse and cart I expected to find here, an ultra modern micro-city car drove by.

Considering I was almost at the heart of a bustling city centre, the serenity of my surroundings was rather unnerving. The area behind Coventry's impressive

modern cathedral, and its war torn forefather is takes you on a weird and wonderful journey, like reading the pages of a history book in no particular order. The tower on the ruined (courtesy of the Luftwaffe) cathedral doesn't seem to realise it is missing anything, or refuses to accept it, like a dog, which has lost a leg yet still tries to scratch its ear with it. The tower is in impeccable condition, with its bell tolling solemnly the hour.

Looking around area, I found the oddly named Newt and Cucumber pub, with a modern, yet retro look. Built in 1990 from the same reddish sandstone as the cathedral, it stands on what was the site of St Michaels Baptist Church from 1856 to 1940 (Probably that fateful 14th November). Facing is the 16th century Golden Cross Inn, which, legend has it, used to be the site of the Coventry Mint during the reign of Edward IV. I almost felt tempted to go in and order a scruffy person, in response to a sign claiming that it has been serving "food, drink and scruffy people since 1536". In the same cobbled area of street, I found Edwardian and Georgian style houses.

A plaque on the County Hall, built 1783 informs me that the last execution in Coventry took place here. This building stands out as it is made of white stone, unlike any of the other buildings here and the architecture is Georgian with Roman Ionic overtones. I noticed laughter and looked round to find a bunch of tourists trying to post their postcards into a sealed letterbox set into the wall of this building. It transpired that the Victorian letterbox had been sealed since 1880.

A large church "The Holy Trinity", with its spire covered in scaffolding, dates back to the late 1300s and runs alongside another cobbled lane which leads to an ugly, austere example of 50's and 60's prefab, post-war regeneration architecture. There is a relatively modern shopping area called Cathedral Lanes, constructed of pale, yellowish bricks. In front of this is a statue of Lady Godiva upon a horse, underneath what appears to be a large tent or canopy. This area appears to be a popular meeting place for people who do not fit into the "mainstream". Groups of men speaking in foreign languages, and youngsters wearing Marilyn Manson shirts populate the area surrounding the statue.

As the hour tolls on a clock built onto the side of what seems to be offices above shops, a little mechanical cartoon of Lady Godiva being pursued by the Peeping Tom is displayed at the base of the clock. How quaint! At the same time, but slightly out of synchronisation I hear the Cathedral bell tolling again with an allure I cannot resist. I make my way out of modernity back towards the collection of old buildings. On my way back I notice a large, wonderfully restored Tudor wood framed building. Now home to a popular chain pub, it looks old though it stands on the site of an even older priory, which I later found to have been rather large.

Making my way back past the Holy Trinity Church, I am faced with the contrasting ruins of the old cathedral and Sir Basil Spence's modern

replacement and counterpart. The construction is a greater spectacle than the Millennium Dome and attracts a great many more visitors. Across the path is a replica of the Coventry Cross, a monument that was originally demolished in 1771 but dated back to 1541. Walking to the side of the new cathedral, I approached some red brick Edwardian and Georgian style houses. These turned out to be of that era and were also built on the site of the same priory as the Flying Standard Pub. A plaque on the wall states that in the cellars of these houses, remains of the priory can be found. This proved the Priory must have been rather large, as the Flying Standard is around 150 yards from these houses. The house closest to the Cathedral is most impressive; the plaque describes it as “a grand early 18th Century townhouse with a stone front dressing in roman ionic style.”

Exhausted by the diversity of eras featured in such a small area, I make my way back to the Golden Cross, contemplating ordering a scruffy person. I feared that this would neither quench my thirst nor taste very nice. Just before I entered the building I looked over my shoulder to be greeted by the beauty of the different buildings in the square behind me. Shame that Coventry University's Halls of Residence, a large tower block, literally reared its ugly concrete head above the cathedral. This was indeed a beauty spot, a clearing inside a concrete jungle.

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