



# HIDDEN GEMS

Once one of the country's medieval highlights, Coventry now has just a few medieval gems, one of which is getting a makeover. **Adrienne Margolis** reports

It is difficult to imagine Coventry looking like York. But that's how it would have looked, had its city centre not been devastated in the Second World War. What had been considered a prime medieval city is now associated with postwar architecture.

"Coventry would have taken a different direction with a greater emphasis on tourism," Andy Duncan, team leader for environmental regeneration at the council, believes.

One area – Far Gosford Street, just outside the centre – did survive the bombing. There are now plans to turn it into an economic and visitor hub.

"It is a medieval suburb, not in the modern sense of semi-detached houses but in the sense of being extramural, beyond the city wall," George Demidowicz, the council's conservation officer, explains: "Gosford Street and Far Gosford Street were split by the River Sherbourne. In the 15th century, a wall was built there and a gate. Most of the area within the walls was badly damaged in the Second World War, including Gosford Street. But Far Gosford Street escaped by sheer chance."

The devastation meant that the city centre had to be redeveloped on a massive scale, but Far Gosford Street gives us a great illustration of what the streets looked like. After the war, the Far Gosford Street area prospered as a shopping district, but it fell into decline when Sky Blue Way – the main road out of the city to Rugby and Leicester – cut it off from the centre.

It was declared a conservation area in 1992. Now, a £20 million five-year project is under way to restore listed buildings, add new office buildings and a hotel, and convert an industrial estate into a creative village.

"We have been concentrating on significant groups of listed buildings, including medieval timber-framed buildings," Demidowicz says. "A lot of the heritage was hidden because many



of the buildings have been re-fronted. But we now have Heritage Lottery funding and matched funding from Europe to restore historic buildings and improve the district.”

Demidowicz has researched how Far Gosford Street was formed in medieval times and discovered that the plot sizes are almost unchanged. “They are still small-scale because they were on the outskirts of the city,” he says. “We discovered that, by looking at the buildings, we could tell where the historic boundaries were. You can do this almost the whole length of the street, and we are considering putting plaques along the street so that people are able to identify the original plots.”

The records discovered in the council archives allow us to identify who owned and occupied each property in the street from medieval times onwards. They are some of the most complete records of property ownership available in the region, Ian Harrabin of Complex Development Projects (CDP) points out. CDP is a specialist developer, working with the council on the restoration project. Harrabin is from the area, and his company has been working on plans to regenerate Far Gosford Street for ten years.

Many buildings in the street were given new facades in the 1920s, but surprisingly still have timber buildings set behind them. “If the street had been part of the city’s 1960s and 1970s growth, most of the buildings in the street would have been demolished,” Harrabin says.

One reason it has taken so long to comprehensively regenerate Far Gosford Street is because of the huge number of individual ownerships. With lottery funding, the project has been designated a Townscape Heritage Initiative, providing the funding to enable the holistic restoration of the conservation area.

“We have to make sure that listed buildings



**ABOVE:**

Detailed plans for Far Gosford Street’s Sky Blue Way elevation.

**LEFT AND BELOW:**

Much of the original timber framework is hidden from view.



are restored and shopfronts are returned to their historic state,” Harrabin explains.

With so many properties involved, the project has taken a huge amount of council management time. “Because of the number of ownerships it’s been difficult to secure the land for any new development,” Duncan admits.

“The street needs comprehensive regeneration and to achieve this we’ve had to take out a compulsory purchase order (CPO) involving about 40 different ownerships as a last resort. Although I hope many of the owners will work with us without the need for CPO.”

Architectural practice PCPT has been brought in to advise people who want to develop →

**“In order to totally restore the 16th century timber-framed buildings, we had to bring in traditional craftsmen and use green oak”**



**“We have to make sure that listed buildings are restored and shopfronts are returned to their historic state”**

**BELOW:**  
Many of the shop fronts are in need of redevelopment.

projects and to advise on planning applications. “We have been implementing the plan for about a year. We are also working with the council on public spaces and art features,” David Mahony, managing director of PCPT says.

He agrees that multiple ownership is a fundamental problem with developing the area. “We spend a lot of time on the land registry. It may mean serving notice on eight or nine people because of the long narrow plots for one planning application.”

Work in the area started in earnest in 2009. The flagship project is a group of listed timber-framed buildings. Another group of early 19th century buildings are also being restored.

“In order to totally restore the 16th century timber-framed buildings, we had to bring in traditional craftsmen and use green oak,” Demidowicz says. “A lot of the skills are being lost and we are trying to maintain them. There are timber-framed buildings in rural areas and a surge in new timber framed building using green oak, so hopefully these skills can still be used. We are also proposing to create a new

building in the street using green oak.”

An arts and crafts building has also been refurbished. “The brick and stone detailing on it make it special,” Demidowicz says.

The aim is not just to restore buildings as a reminder of the city’s heritage. “One of the council’s priorities is to generate employment in the creative industries to counteract the decline of the car industry,” Duncan says. “The Far Gosford Street area has a new vibrancy, due to an increasing number of students in the area. It means we can designate a creative and business quarter near the city centre with quirky historic buildings in it, which is unusual for Coventry.”

It is also an opportunity to add new buildings. CDP has brought in architects Bryant Priest Newman to refurbish the buildings on Far Gosford Street Industrial Estate. A creative village, including a market, independent retail, artists’ studios, a gallery, a live music venue, a bar and a performance space, is planned. The development, to be called FarGo, is a joint venture between Advantage West Midlands and CDP intended to boost the local economy.

The concept is based on Truman’s Brewery in London’s Brick Lane and The Forum in Devonshire Street in Sheffield.

“We already have the university’s Institute for Creative Enterprise onboard and see creative industries as an important factor contributing to economic growth,” Duncan says.

A second phase of Far Gosford Street’s redevelopment in 2010 will include building office space and a hotel close to the site of the old Gosford Gate. The latter will change the road layout. “There will be a reduction in road space which creates a site for a new hotel. This will repair the damage that was caused when the ring road was built,” Harrabin says.

A lot of money is also being spent on improving public spaces. “We are trying to concentrate on creating courtyards that are accessed through the old alleyways. We are also creating a public space at the bottom of the street where the old gate was, and we want to make a reference to that,” Mahony says.

The entire project has required a huge amount of consultation with both businesses and local people. Regular meetings are held with a business forum and a community forum. “The plan has generally been well received and the response has been very positive, especially since it will tackle key things like crime and rubbish clearance,” Harrabin says.

Cost and complexity make restoration of this type unusual. But it offers great advantages. “Long-term, if it can be financed and you have the tenacity to see it through, you have something more sustainable,” Duncan believes. “If we can create an attractive area, we hope that in the future it will draw in visitors, as well as being somewhere businesses can thrive.” □

