

Central Civic Character Area

HLC Area 5

Location and Context

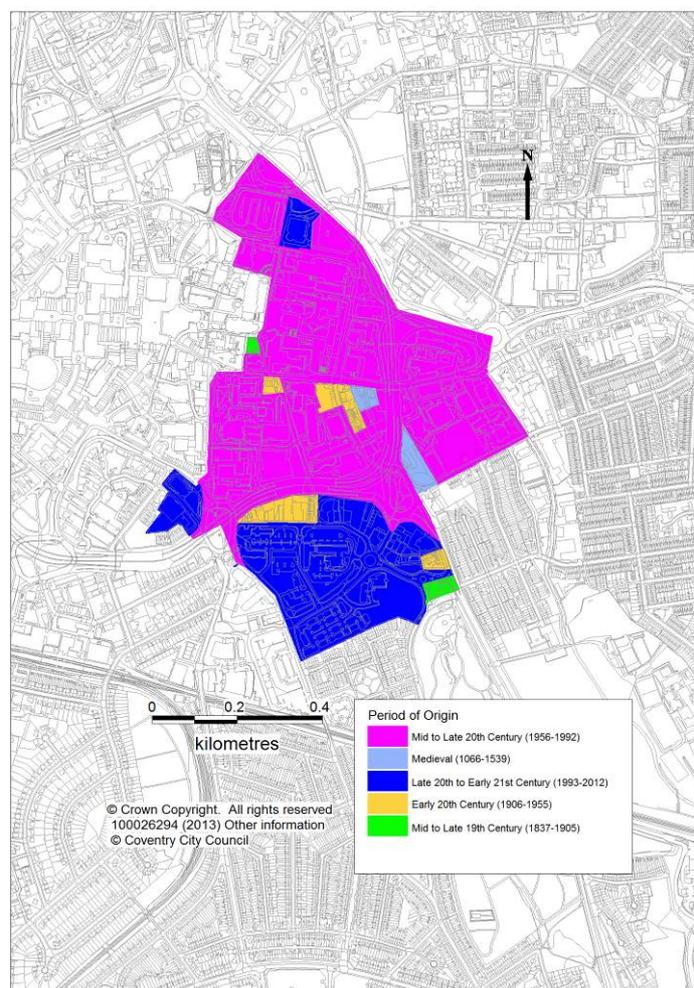
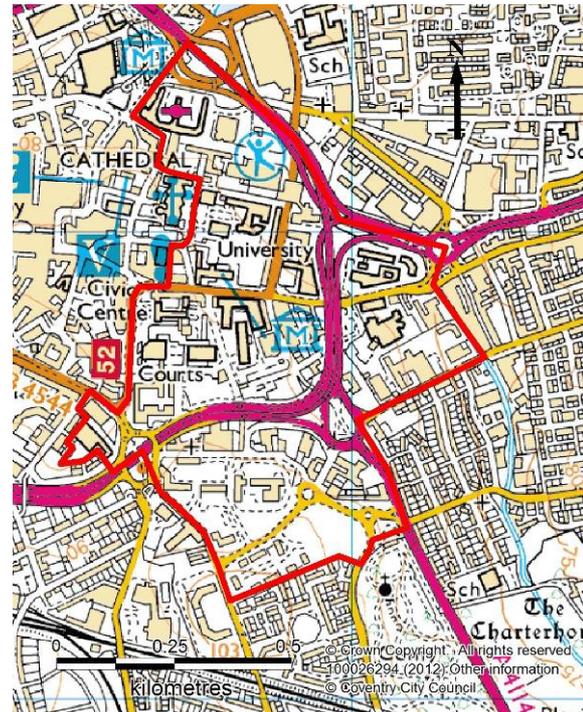
This covers the eastern section of the city centre which predominantly comprises Council offices and university buildings. The dominant feature in this Character Area is the ring road which has elevated sections at this location as well as junctions, associated flyovers and pedestrian subways. The Character Area is bordered by residential areas to the east and a central commercial area to the west.

Heritage Designations in the Area

Scheduled Ancient Monuments: 4
Archaeological Constraint Areas: 1
Listed Buildings: 10
Locally Listed Buildings: 7
Conservation Areas: 2
Registered Parks and Gardens: 1

Historic Development

The early development of this area of the city was centred along Earl Street, Jordan Well and Gosford Street which formed the main east to west route through the medieval city towards the River Sherbourne to the east. The name Gosford is derived from 'Goose Ford' where the road crossed the river. The earliest settlement appears to have been at the western, Earl Street end close to the Earl's castle and appears to have expanded eastwards with burgage plots lining the whole length of the street by the early 13th century. Coventry castle is believed to have stood to the north of Earl Street with the Earl's hunting park located to the south and separated from the town by the substantial



Hersum Ditch or Red Ditch. The park is thought to have been created in the late 11th century but by the mid-13th century the northern portion had been given over to accommodate the expanding city with the creation of Much Park Street and Little Park Street. The two streets seem to have begun as an industrial area before an increase of activity in the mid-14th century when it became one of the wealthiest neighbourhoods in the medieval city. The reason for this upturn in its fortunes is possibly the result of the main road to London being diverted to run down it. The reason for the diversion is thought to have been due to the establishment of the Carmelite Friary from 1342 whose precinct blocked the previous route along Whitefriars Lane. The Friary was dissolved in 1538 and was converted into a private house, remaining so until the early 19th century when the surviving buildings were used as a workhouse and then a Salvation Army Hostel. The only remaining buildings are the east range of the cloister and the Precinct gate on Much Park Street. Cox Street which runs north off Gosford Street is also of medieval origin and was previously called Earls Mill Lane. The mill is likely to have been in existence by the early 12th century and it is likely that the street also dates from this time.

Construction of Coventry's city wall was started at the London Road in the 1350s and would have formed the eastern boundary for much of the Character Area running east along Parkside and Gulson Road, before turning north along the River Sherbourne, crossing Gosford Street and heading northwest towards Fairfax Street and Pool Meadow. The complete circuit of the walls consisted of 3.6km of wall with an outer ditch, 12 gates, 20 towers which together enclosed an area similar that enclosed by the present ring-road. Much of the wall was demolished in the late 17th century onwards but its alignment remained an important topographical feature in the city until the late 19th century, delineating the area of settlement from the agricultural and common land beyond.

After the expansion of the 14th and 15th centuries the city stagnated in the early post-medieval period fossilising much of the city centre area with only some minor development on the former monastic sites. This picture remained largely unaltered until the 19th century when industries such as ribbon weaving led to a gradual increase in Coventry's population which was initially accommodated by the building of courts of houses in the medieval back plots along streets like Gosford Street, with only very little building of housing beyond the walled area until the late 19th century. The rapid industrial expansion of the late 19th and early 20th century centred on the bicycle and motor trades resulted in housing and industry being closely intermingled in the city centre so that by the Second World War the substantial factories of Triumph on Priory Street and Morris on Gosford Street sat cheek by jowl with the timber framed houses which still accommodated much of the population. Elsewhere, an area of gardens beyond the line of the city wall on Parkside, was gradually expanded over by motor works which eventually amalgamated into the giant Armstrong Siddeley works.

The presence of industry in the city centre resulted in extensive damage from the air raids of 1940-41, although much of the medieval and early post-medieval fabric of the area survived intact along the southern part Much Park Street and the eastern stretch of Gosford Street. Almost all pre-war buildings were removed as the Character Area was included in the land declared as an extensive area of war damage by the government. This designation gave the Council sweeping powers and funds for its acquisition and re-planning and it is shown as a Civic Area on the 1945 plan for the city centre with all industrial and residential uses removed. By the 1950s the area required for civic buildings was reduced to the area between Little Park Street and Much Park Street, while the remainder of the area was

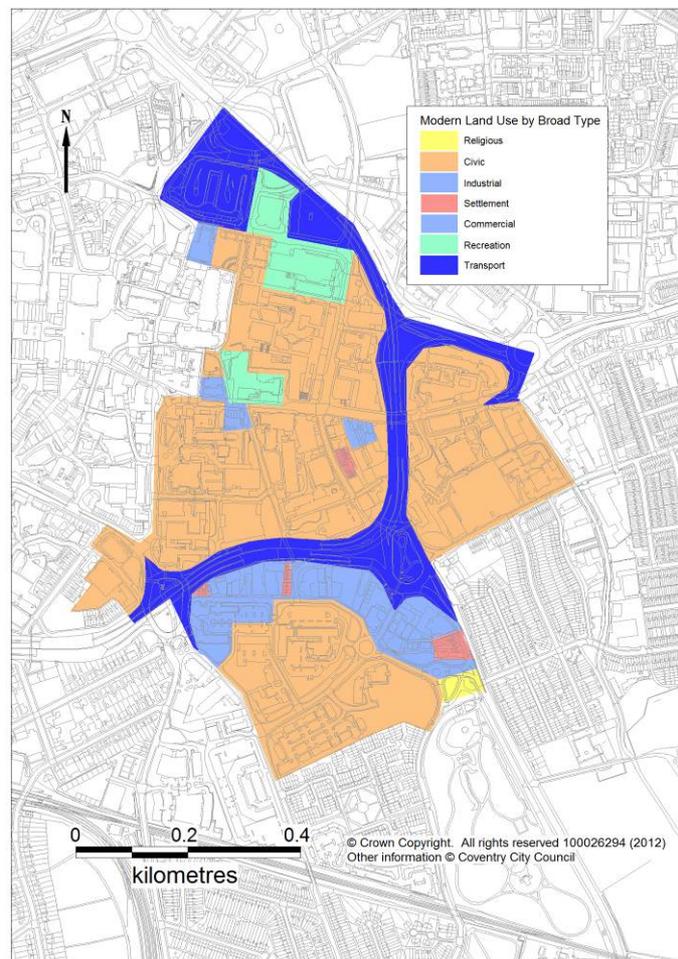
allocated for the development of the Lanchester College of Technology and the Coventry College of Art which eventually became Coventry University. Work on the ring-road started at the south of the area in 1959 and was completed in the early 1970s.

Modern Character

The basic street plan of the medieval city still survives although almost all evidence for the buildings of the pre-war city has been removed. A group of medieval and later buildings survive on the southern side of Gosford Street and this is the only place where the layout of the medieval burgrave plots are still discernible. The surviving range of buildings from the Carmelite Friary remain adjacent to the ring-road with its gate on Much Park Street, while lengths of the city wall remain along Gulson Road and close to Cox Street. Some early 20th century terraced housing survives on Whitefriars Street while the former Morris engine factory on Gosford Street is the only survivor of the pre-war factories having been converted by Coventry University in the 1990s.

The area is dominated by civic buildings and the buildings of Coventry University. The buildings are in a range of scales, styles and materials ranging from the 1950s, three storey, brick-built 'Festival of Britain' style Council offices on Earl Street, to the brutalist concrete, multi-storey tower block of Priory Hall. The diverse range of buildings is surrounded by generous areas of landscaping which helps them to sit comfortably together. The ring-road with its elevated sections, fly-overs, roundabouts and pedestrian walk ways dominates the northern and eastern edges of the character area. The elevated sections give little visibility to the areas beyond the city centre and create a series of dark, inaccessible spaces below and adjacent to them that are used as surface car parks.

The former Armstrong and Siddeley and latterly Rolls Royce works on Parkside closed in the 1990s and have been demolished and replaced by Coventry University's Technology Park. This consists of a series of four storey brick built blocks set amongst areas of soft landscaping and surface car parks.



Geology and Topography

This is an area of high ground overlooking the valley of the River Sherbourne which runs around the north edge of the area before turning south. The geology consists of sandstone overlain in places by mudstone.



Jordan Well, looking east towards Gosford Street