The Historical Development of Coventry

May 2009

Coventry City Council

Origins
The Saxon origins of Coventry are obscure but it is generally believed that the original settlement was founded in the 9th century. Although its name is thought to have evolved from "*Cofa's Treo*" ("*Cofa*" believed to be a person and "*treo*" the Anglo-Saxon word for "*tree*"), nothing is known about the person or their connection to the tree.

The influence of Religion
How and where the original settlement established and grew owes much to Leofric, the Saxon Earl of Mercia and his wife Godiva who in 1043 founded the Benedictine monastery of St Mary on the spur of high land overlooking the Sherbourne River (fig.1). Probably built on the site of a nunnery destroyed by the Danes in 1016 (St Osburg's), it was a location well suited for a monastery – there was a supply of fresh water, the rich soils enabled the monks to plant orchards & vineyards and Swanswell Pool allowed them to keep fish. It also benefited from good communications, with both Watling St and the Fosse Way running within a few miles of the spot.
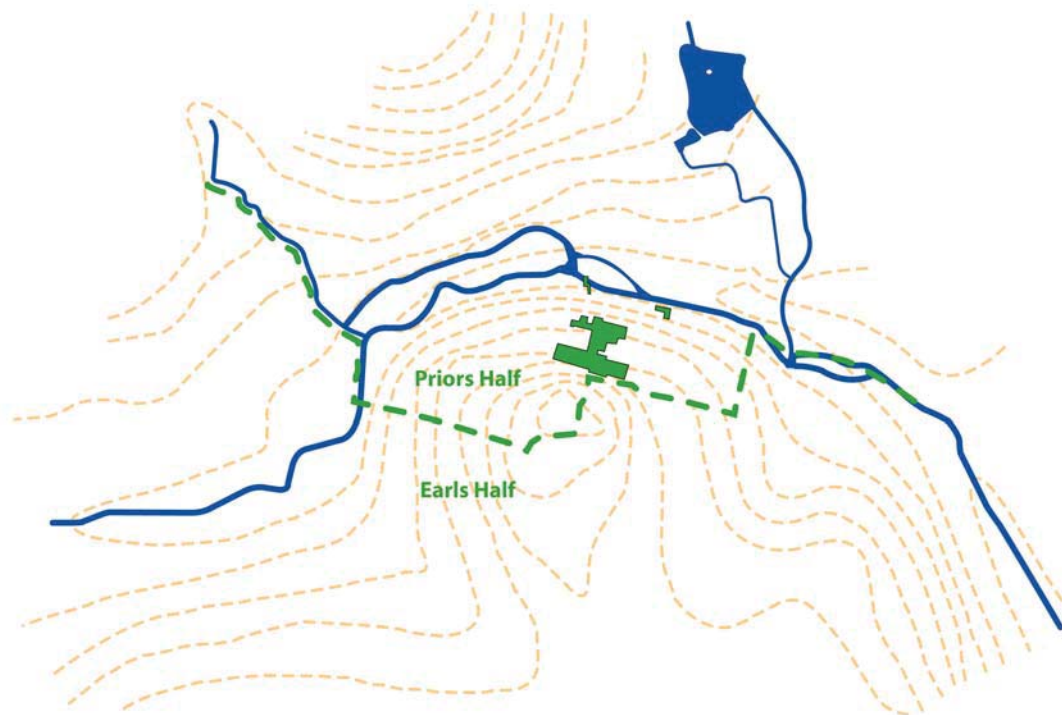

Fig.1 Early Growth – Benedictine Priory, The "Halfs", Topography & Watercourses

The monastery was to later become a Priory when, in the 11th Century, the Bishop of Chester moved his see to Coventry.

Although very little of the Priory survives, it was a complex of buildings of substantial size, the Cathedral Church, orientated on an east/west axis, measured 125m and was one of the largest in England (Fig.2 gives an impression of the scale of the Priory and Catherdral Church in comparison to the current context).
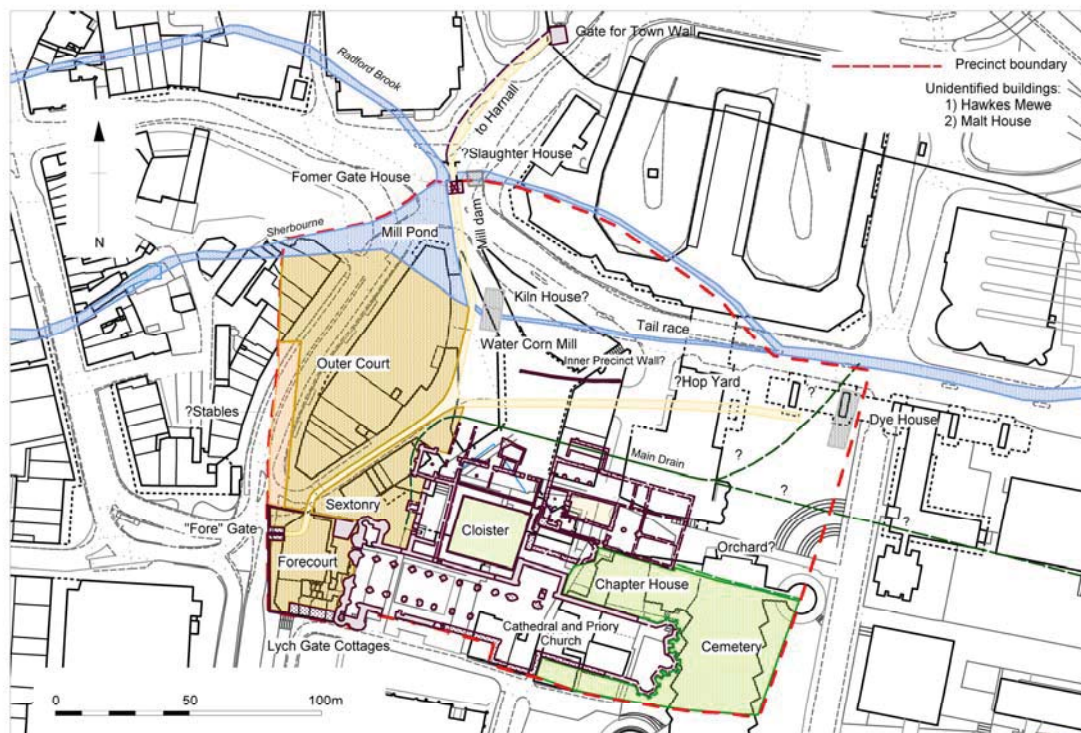
Fig.2 The Cathedral Church & Priory overlaid on the current O.S. Map

The Priory became a draw for merchants, craftsmen, pilgrims and inhabitants of the local countryside enabling Coventry to grow and establish itself as a market town.

At the same time that he founded the monastery, Leofric also endowed it with half of his land. The two half's were subsequently referred to as the "Priors Half" and the "Earl's Half" (fig.1) with the dividing line running through Broadgate. This division affected the development of the town for many centuries, the earls half grew faster than that of the Priors and competition between them led to two churches being built right next to each other, adjacent to the monastery - Holy Trinity (12th Century) for the tenants of the Priors Half and St Michael (12th Century) for the tenants of the Earls half (fig.3).

These churches together with the Cathedral Church would have made for an impressive site, mounted atop the spur of high land they would have been seen from a considerable distance, as illustrated in fig4.

In the present day, despite the loss of the Cathedral Church, these two churches with their spires (St. Michael, 294 ft. high & Holy Trinity, 237 ft. high) along with the later built Christchurch (1360 and 211 ft. high) dominate the modern skyline and have given rise to the descriptive title of "The City of Three Spires".

The cathedral and churches formed the basis around which the town developed. The market place, located in Cross Cheaping, sat immediately to the west of the churches. The principle east/west route ran immediately to the south of the churches partly along the boundary between the half's, climbing up and over the spur of higher land, whilst the principle route in from the north opened into the market place (fig.3). The guilds that were to form later also located close to the churches.

Fig.3 Early Growth – The Churches of Holy Trinity (1) & St Michaels (2), Greyfriars (3), Whitefriars (4), Radial Routes (Grey) and Principle East/West Route & Northern Route (Dotted), Market Place (Dotted)
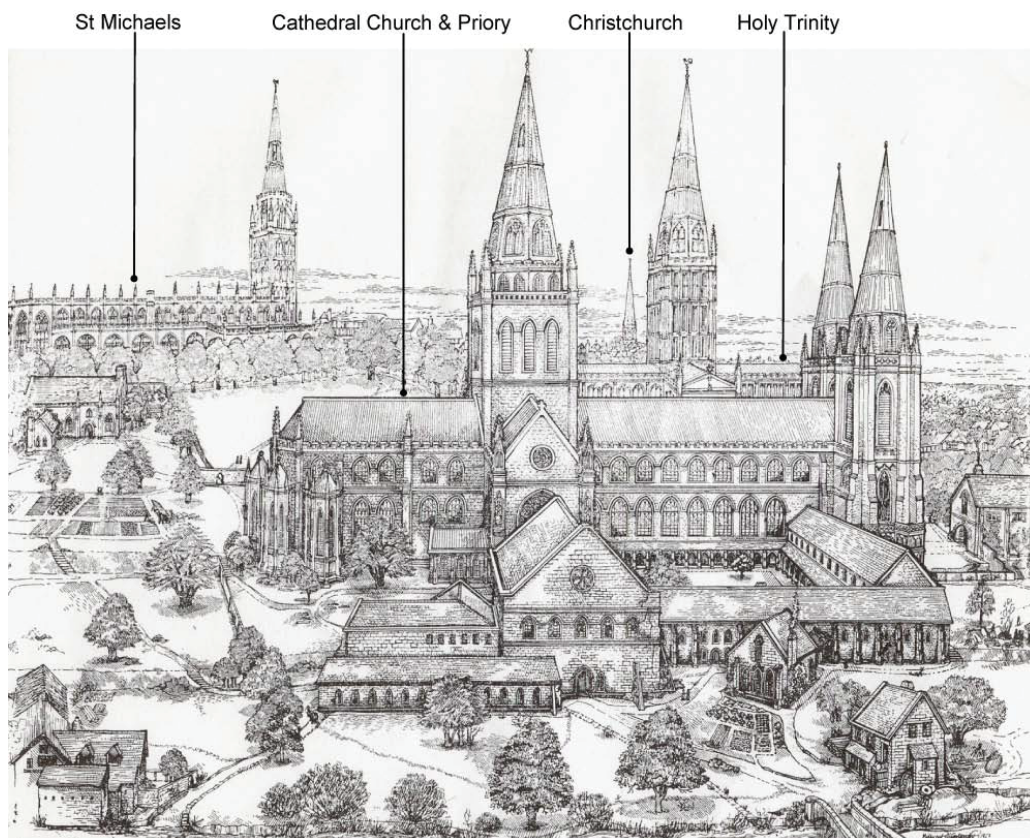

St Michaels   Cathedral Church & Priory   Christchurch   Holy Trinity

Fig.4 The Cathedral Church, Priory & Churches

The town experienced further growth when the Earls Half passed to the Earls of Chester whom encouraged greater economic development. They established markets, granted charters (in the 12th century) and permitted a fair (in 1217). The Earls also built a motte and bailey castle in the late 11th century (fig.5). The castle's life however, was short-lived, and it was gradually dismantled from the mid 12th century onwards and Cheylesmore Manor became the residence of later earls (fig.5). It is difficult to be sure where the castle stood although the names of Broadgate (main approach to the castle) and Bayley Lane are significant. Earl Street led from the castle to the castle ditch.

Fig.5 Early Growth – The Castle and Cheylesmore Manor (Red)

Prosperity and Growth
As the city's prosperity increased so did its population, the number of new timber houses multiplied and by 1337 there were over 5000 adult inhabitants. Coventry now ranked as one of the four largest towns outside London along with York, Bristol and Plymouth.

Merchant guilds became increasing influential in the life of the town, controlling economic life through conditions of sale and establishing standards of workmanship. Two guild buildings survive today. The magnificent St Mary's Hall which was completed in 1342 for the Merchant Guild of St. Mary & then enlarged (1394 – 1414) for the united Trinity Guild and Drapers Hall, which was originally built in 1637 and modified in 1775, but later totally rebuilt in 1831-32. The towns other guild, that of Corpus Christi and St Nicholas, had its guildhall in West Orchard.

By the 14th century Coventry had become a centre for the manufacture and trading of cloth. To celebrate its prosperity, an ambitious project to encircle the town with almost three miles of wall was begun. Built over a 180 year period from the mid 14th Century, the completed wall was 2.5 miles long, 8-9 feet thick, 12 feet high and included 32 towers and 12 gates (fig.6). Although it was built as a gesture of civic

pride, its defensive capabilities were put to good use during the civil war and as a result Charles II ordered its demolition in 1662. Despite this many of the gates and parts of the wall survived into the18th Century but the arrival of the stage coach and the increase in road traffic was to signal their death knell. The gates were designed to cope with pack horses, carts and wagons and so their small size rendered them an obstruction to the new forms of transportation. As a result most were demolished with only small portions of the wall and two gates surviving. It is worth noting that it was during the civil war that the phrase "Sent to Coventry" came into being with captured Royalists sent to Coventry and imprisoned at the Parliamentary Garrison.

Fig.6 Early Growth – The Town Wall

The early 1500's saw the decline of the cloth and wool industries in Coventry and economic stagnation set in. But prosperity was to return to the city in the form of new industries, which included ribbon and watch making and these grew during the 17th century. Much of the manufacturing took place in what were known as "top shops" or "middle shops" – three-storey terraces consisting of workshops with large windows and two floors of domestic accommodation. Isolated examples of these still remain in Hillfields, Chapelfields and Foleshill.

Further growth followed with the construction of the Coventry Canal, linked to the national system in 1769. Improvements were also carried out to the road pattern after the setting up in 1790 of Commissioners for street improvements and Hertford St was built in 1812 using Tolls collected under the Turnpike Act.

The maps of Speed (1610), Bradford (1748), Sharp (1807) (figs.7-13)
These maps give an interesting insight into Coventry's past. Speed's map of 1610 shows a compact settlement with large areas of land within the city wall still undeveloped. This was probably due to the influence of the cloth and wool industries as large areas of land were given over to 'tenters' – cloth stretching frames, which initially prevented back land development.

Speed's map also shows that the bulk of the populous lived in the 'Earls Half'. The large hole left in the fabric of the town by the dismantling of the priory is also evident as are the extensive garden plots that existed to serve the inhabitants and the narrow building plots that created a fine urban grain.
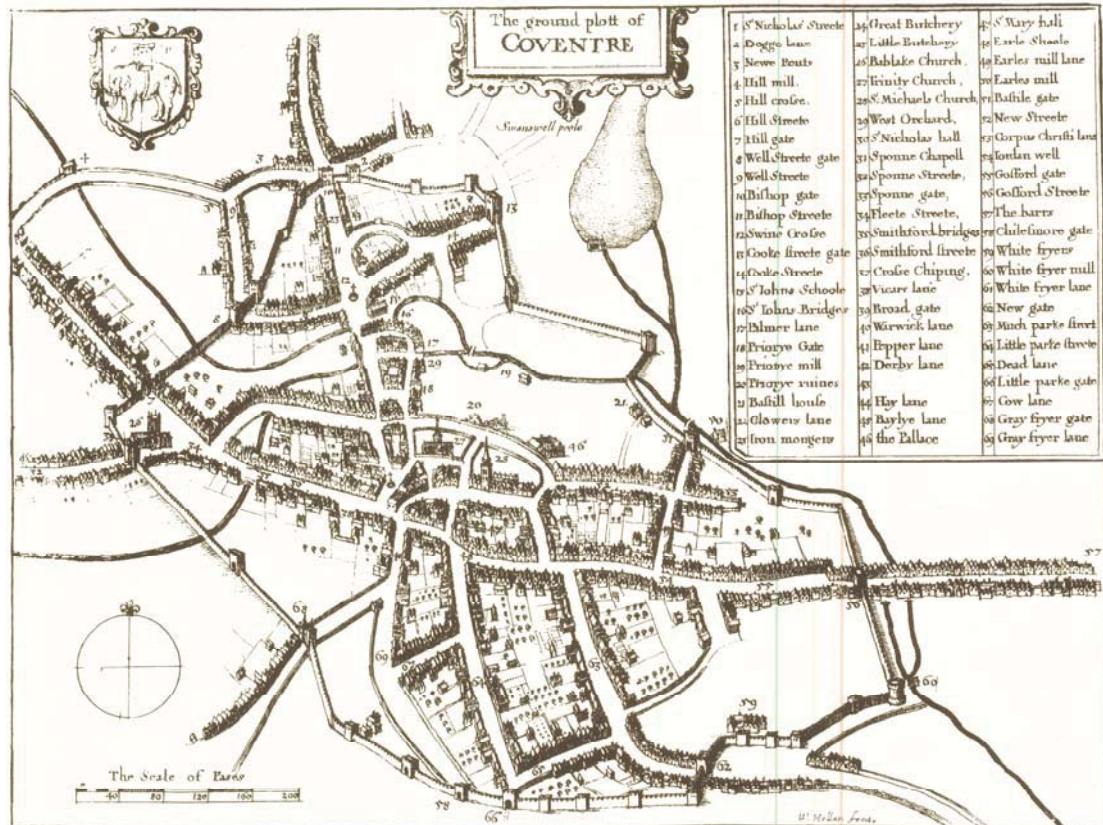

Fig.7 Speed (1610)

What is most interesting however is that the Bradford and Sharp maps that followed Speed's (figs. 8 – 11) show almost exactly the same – in the 200 year period in which these surveys were carried out, apart from the construction of the Coventry Canal & Basin and the military barracks, virtually no growth occurred, the street pattern, the long narrow garden plots remained the same. Any change within the town took place on the existing plots – as illustrated by fig.12 which overlays the two maps.
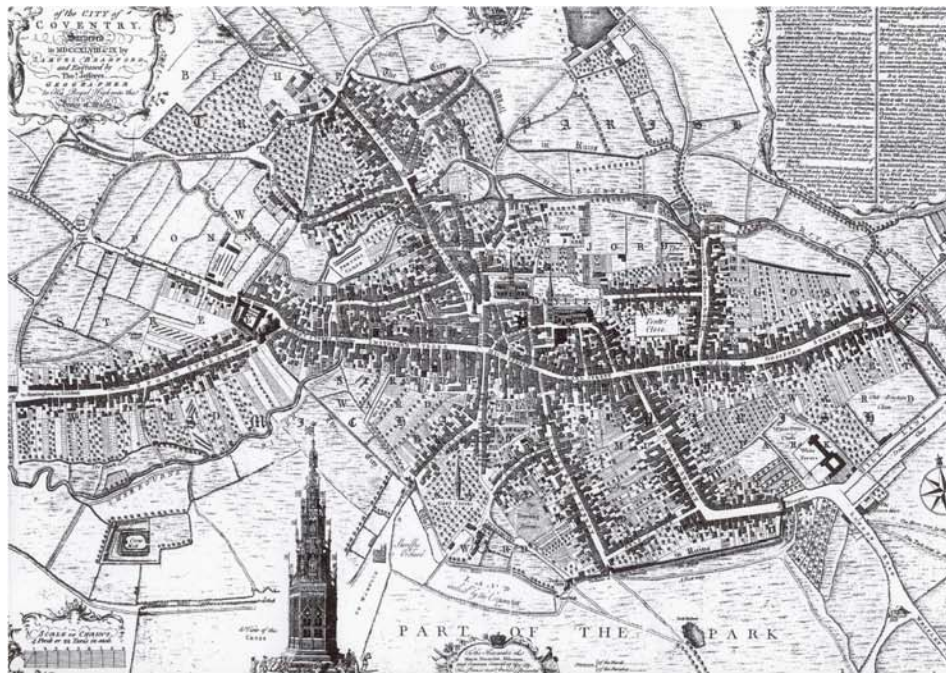
Fig.8 Bradford (1748)
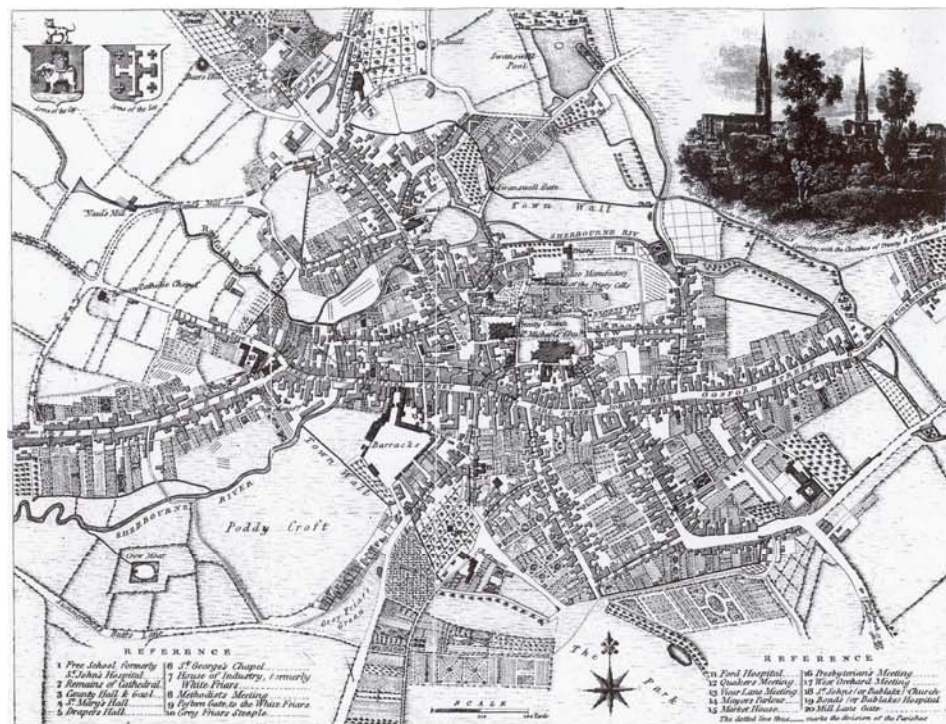

Fig.9 Bradford Figure/Ground

Fig.10 Sharp (1807)

Fig.11 Sharp Figure/Ground

Fig.12 Bradford & Sharp Overlaid

This lack of changes owes much to the stagnation that set in during this period and also to a small degree due to the Civil War which saw the retrenchment of some of the extra mural suburbs for defensive purposes. It is also in part due to the constraints of the common land, known as Lammas and Michaelmas Land, which tightly encircled most of the city. Common rights were not revoked on parts of this land to the south of the town centre until 1860 and 1875 preventing the growth of the town beyond its walls.

New development quickly followed the revocation – as illustrated on the 1903 figure/ground map (fig.13). However many of what are now suburbs of the city such as Radford, Foleshill, Whitley and Earlsdon were still separate villages. Allesley and Tile Hill remained so until the 1930's.

Fig.13 1903 Figure/Ground

The Manufacturing Boom

Although the onset of the Industrial Revolution during the 19th century was not felt as greatly in Coventry as elsewhere (mostly due to a lack of raw materials and sources of power) the city was soon to become a major base for manufacturing and engineering, firstly through the manufacturing of cycle components and sewing machines (initially in the top shops and laterly in purpose built factories) and then through the production of motor vehicles and other components. This led to the city developing a world wide engineering reputation for quality and mass production of vehicles, engines, machine tools and electronic equipment.

This boom saw the population between 1919 and 1939 increased rapidly and the city underwent a rapid suburban expansion (fig.14). As a result outlying villages such as Earlsdon became subsumed as part of the city.

Further factories were built on the outskirts of the city by the Government and they were used during the Second World War for aircraft production. Following the war their use for manufacturing purposes continued and this gave rise to a pronounced pattern of peripheral industry.

Despite this rapid growth Coventry's historic heart remained largely untouched up until the 1930's and the mediaeval street pattern remained virtually intact (figs. 15 & 16). But the city's increasing prosperity lead to development pressures and some of the oldest and most picturesque streets – Palmer Lane, Ironmonger Row, Little Butcher Row, The Bull Ring, Butcher Row and Trinity Church yard – were cleared to make way for Trinity St. The south side of High Street was widened into Broadgate and the City Council acquired and cleared 85 houses, 6 inns, 7 factories and 27 shops to build Corporation St. The number of factories within the city centre also increased. Fig.17 highlights these changes on the 1936 map.

In spite of this however much of the mediaeval form still remained. The historic east/west route comprised of Far Gosford St, Gosford St, Jordan Well, Earl St, High St, Smithford St, Fleet St and Spon St was still intact as were the north/south routes (as illustrated on figs.15 & 16).
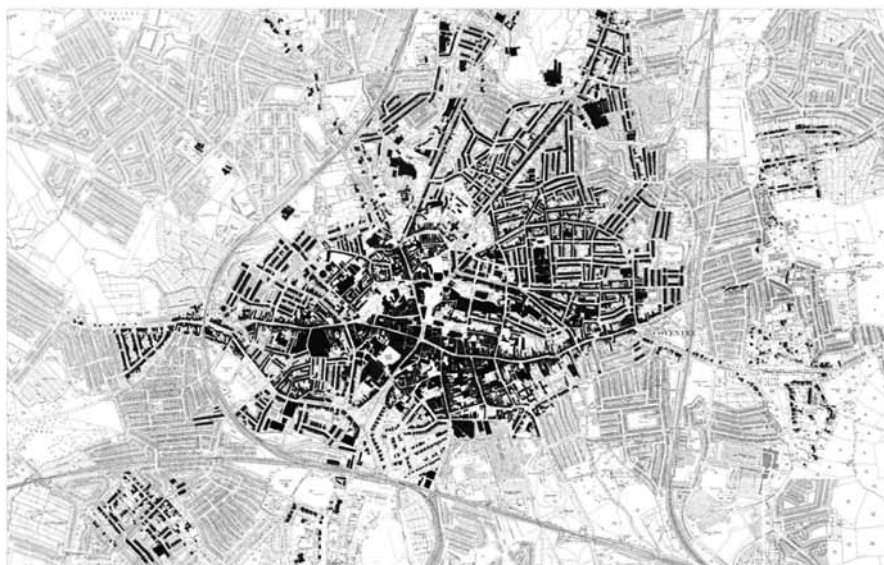
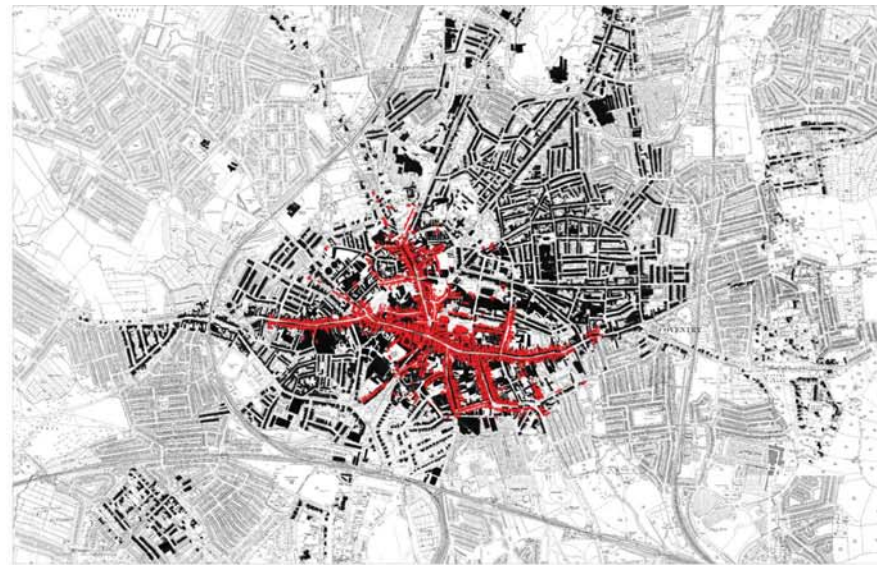Fig.14 1936 Map with 1903 figure ground over-laid. The rapid growth of the city is clearly evident
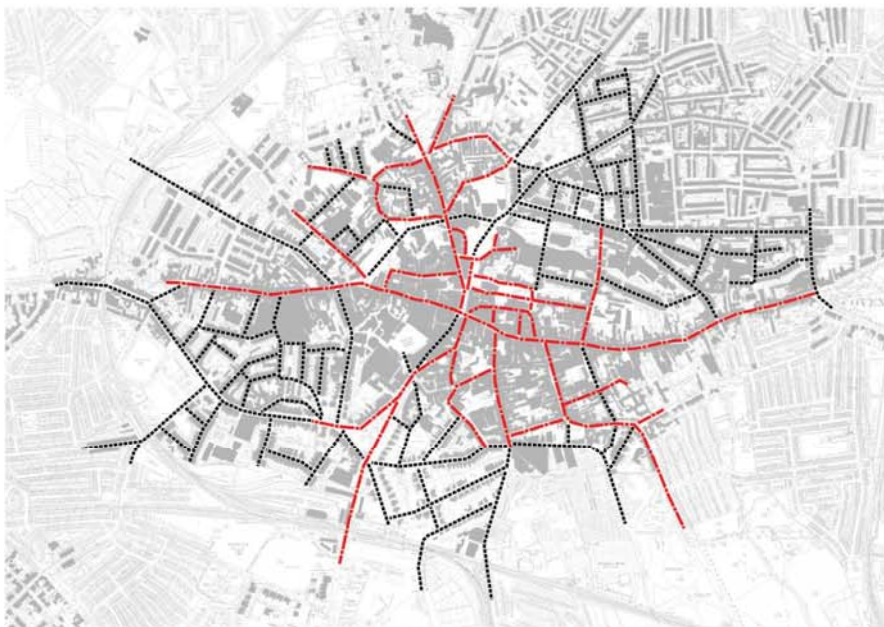

Fig.15 The Mediaeval form remained largely intact

Fig.16 The pre-war city built on the radial street pattern of the Mediaeval settlement

Fig.17 Clearances for Corporation St & Trinity Street, note the increase in City Centre Factories

Ambitions for Change

The confines of the mediaeval core on Coventry's growth gave rise to plans for a radical transformation of the city centre. The City Engineer Ernest Ford and City Architect Donald Gibson (later Sir) were instructed to work together to produce a masterplan. Both however drafted separate plans with Ford's largely following the mediaeval street plan (fig.18) whilst Gibson's was far more ambitious. He proposed a near complete clearance the city centre and the imposition of a new street pattern (fig.19). Fearing that Ford's proposal would not address the rising problems of congestion the City Council favoured that of Gibson's and so his became the basis upon which the new city would be built.

Fig.18 Ford's Masterplan

Fig.19 Gibson's Masterplan
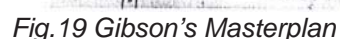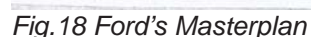
The ambition for change was given further impetus by the bombing raids carried out on 14th November 1940 (the biggest and most destructive) and 8th and 10th April 1941 during the Second World War under which the city suffered extensive damage. The Cathedral suffered a direct hit and was gutted by fire, over 50,000 houses were damaged and of 1,000 city centre properties, only a few were intact (fig.20 & 21). As a result the City Council took control of much of the city centre under post war legislation, a City Redevelopment Committee was established, the Gibson plan was adopted as a basis for redevelopment, and the rebuilding programme began in earnest.
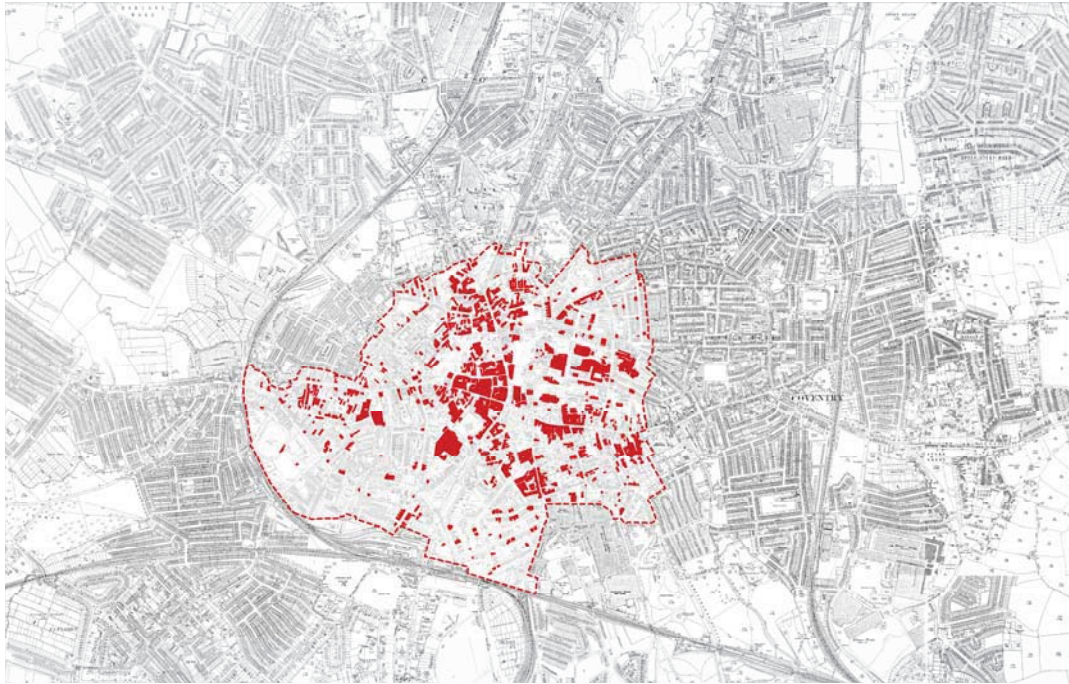

Fig.20 WWII Bomb Damage – Buildings in red were virtually destroyed, almost all buildings within red dotted area were damaged

Fig.21 Destroyed sites in the central area

Under the guidance of successive City Architects and Planning Officers – initially Donald Gibson, then Arthur Ling (fig.22) and Terrence Gregory (fig.23), a programme of ambitious and vast rebuilding took place that went far beyond the areas damaged during the war. Whilst some mediaeval streets, such as Spon St, Cook St and Bayley Lane survived, together with some other half timbered and period buildings, the city was to become almost completely unrecognisable from its mediaeval past (figs.24-32 chart the redevelopment process).
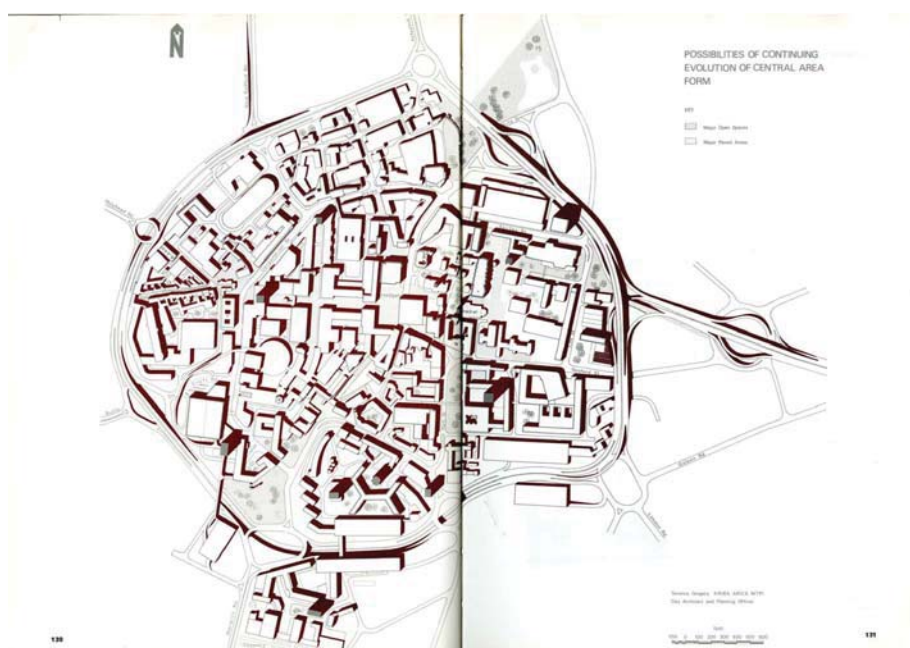

Fig.22 Ling's Masterplan

Fig.23 Gregory's Masterplan

By the end of the 1960's much of the rebuilding work had taken place. Coventry now had, amongst other developments, a new Cathedral, designed by Basil Spence (soon to be Sir) to replace St Michael's (which suffered a direct hit during the war and was badly damaged) and a pioneering new shopping area in the form of the Upper and Lower Precincts. Designed by Donald Gibson, with a 'Festival of Britain' palette of warm brick and stone, the precincts were the first of their kind in the country. They were seen as iconic & revolutionary and they drew accolades from across the globe. Today they are considered as exemplars of their time encapsulating in their architectural style the social optimism, appetite for change and belief in modernity that was prevalent in the nation in the post war period.

In addition to the Cathedral and precincts other developments included City Arcade, the round indoor market, Bull Yard and Hertford St, each reflecting the evolving architectural tastes of the post war decades. Coventry also boasted a new theatre, swimming baths and mainline railway station, all of which are now listed. It also benefited from a new polytechnic (now Coventry University) housed in a 'campus' of purpose built buildings immediately to the east of the Cathedrals. Much of the ring road had been constructed and was completed during the 1970's. The remaining decades of the 20th century saw the development of the West Orchard and Cathedral Lanes shopping centres along with several other city centre schemes.

The first decade of the 21st century has seen some major redevelopment work undertaken within the city centre. The Lower Precinct has had a complete multi-million pound refurbishment, and now boasts a glass roof under which a pleasant and attractive space has been created around the iconic rotunda café. The Phoenix Initiative has transformed a large area of land adjacent to the Cathedrals into an attractive mixed use development. New buildings occupied by bars, cafes, apartments and commercial uses frame attractive new squares that form a new link between the Cathedral area and a recently refurbished Transport Museum.

Other new developments include Electric Wharf, a renovation and conversion of Coventry's first power station into a new residential and live/work community. This careful and considered restoration scheme with its integrated pubic art has given this development an exciting and eclectic quality transforming the once redundant buildings into city landmarks. The Belgrade Theatre has been restored and extended as has the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum. A city centre IKEA has been built and new major office developments are under-construction, including offices for the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority and an Operations Centre for Severn Trent Water.

The legacy of post-war master-planning continues into the new century with the publication of the Urban Design Frame Work (fig.33). Although it covers a much larger area and is not as prescriptive as those that went before it, the aspiration to provide overarching guidance for development within the city centre still remains.

Fig.24 Post War Construction - Surviving Buildings of Note
(white plots denote buildings virtually destroyed)
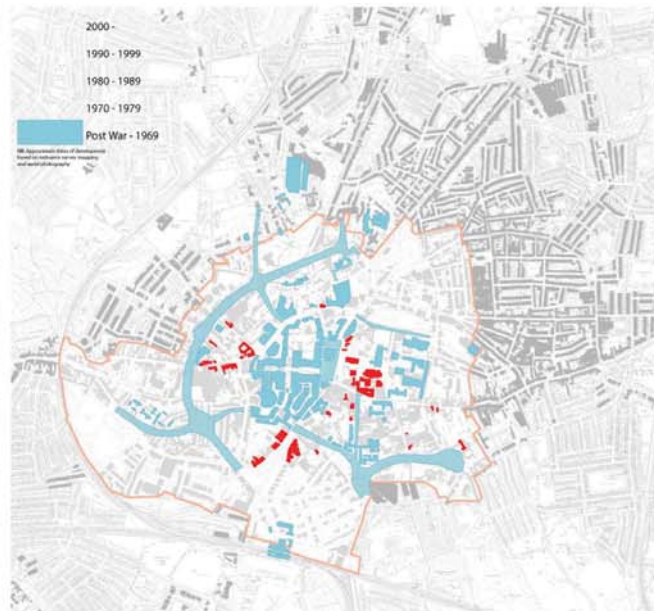

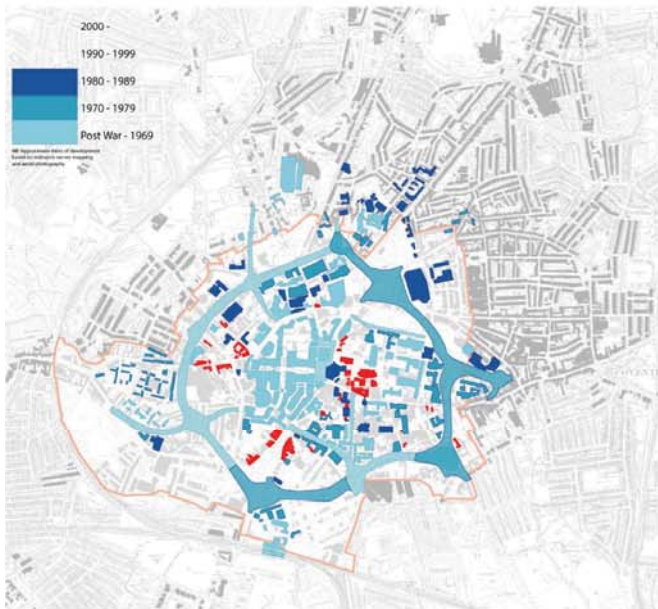Fig.25 Post War to 1969

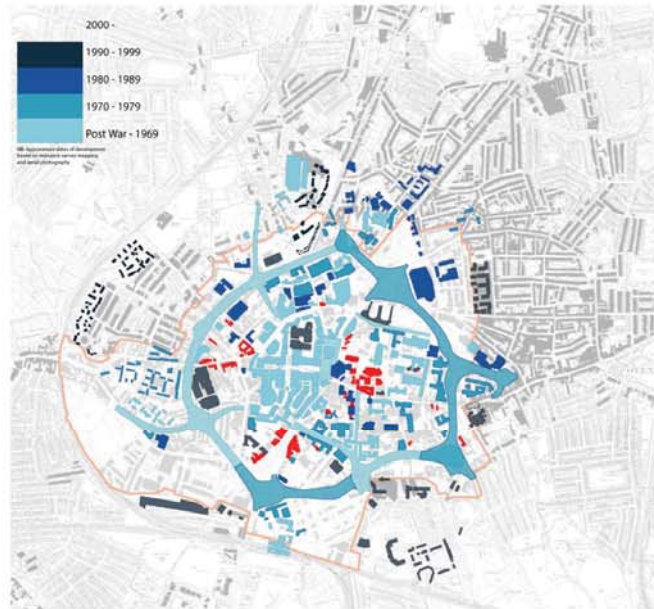Fig.25 1970 - 1979

Fig.27 1980 - 1989
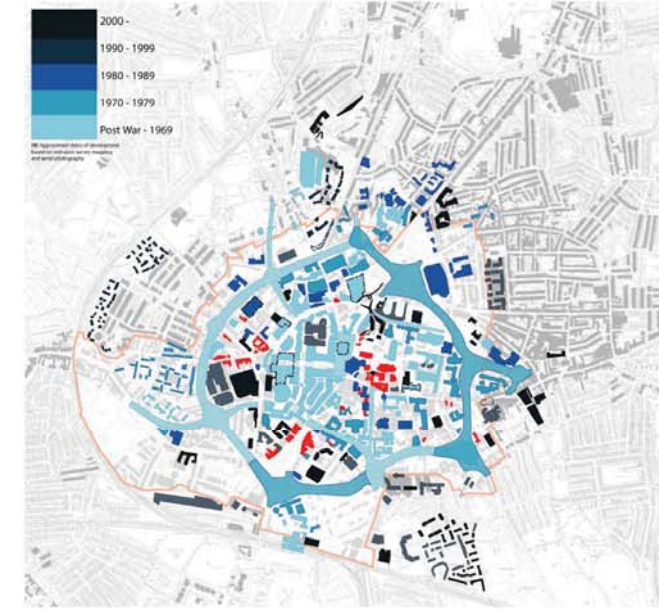

Fig.28 1990 - 1999
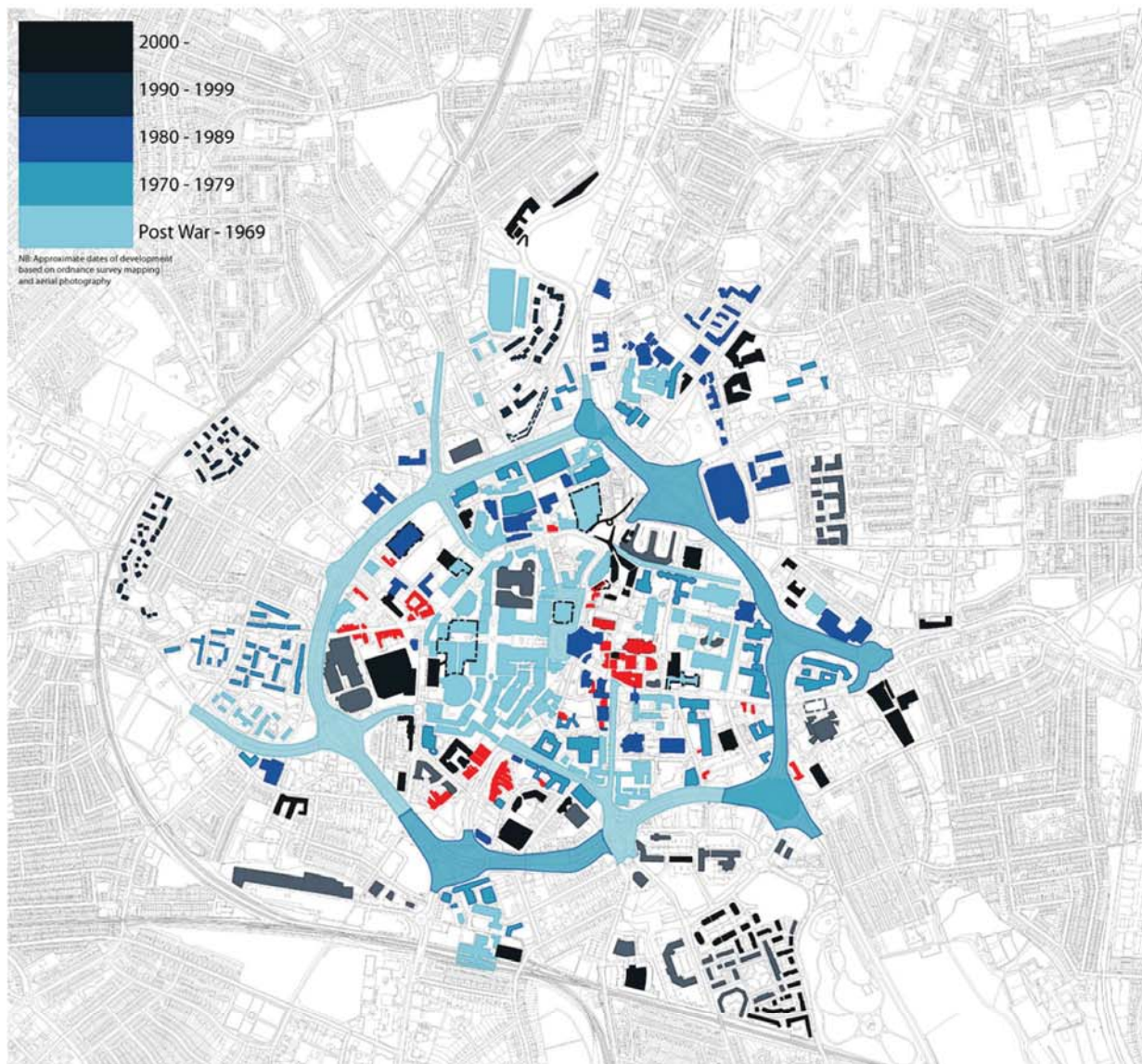

Fig.29 2000 onwards
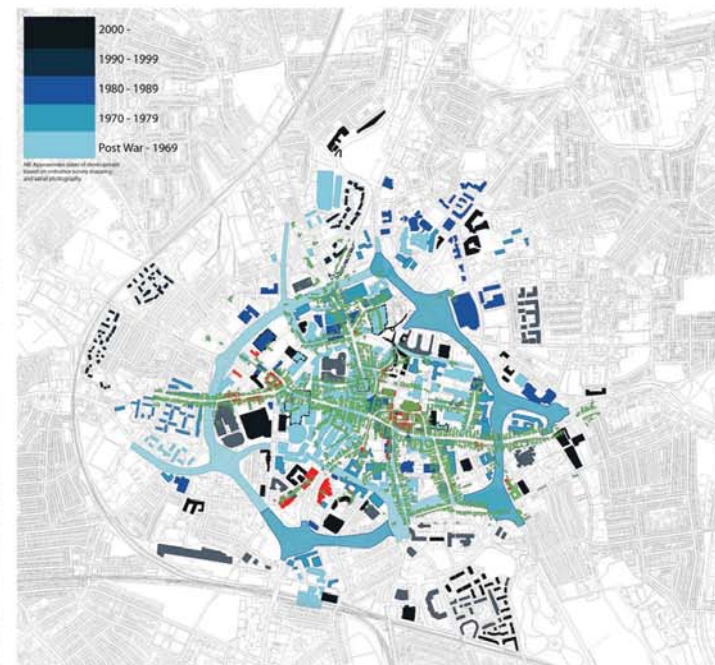
Fig.30 The Post War City overlaid on current O.S. Map

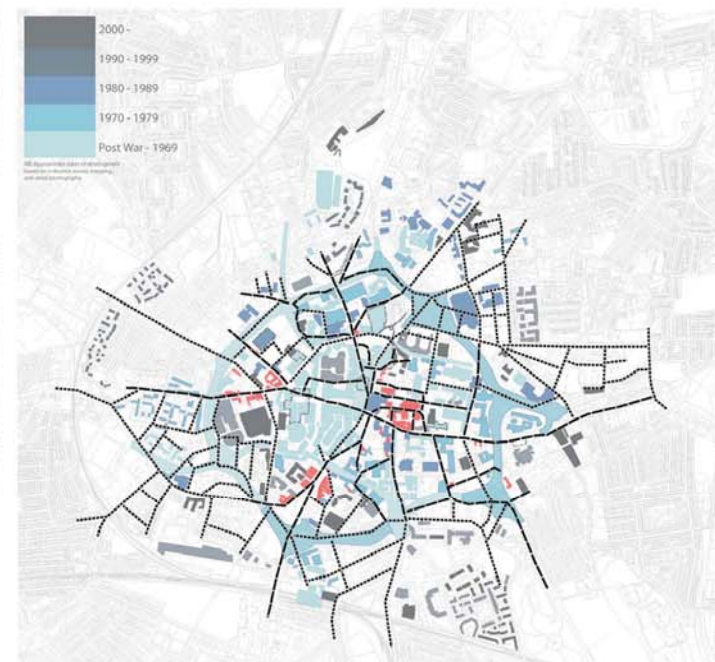Fig.31 The Mediaeval Settlement Overlaid on the Post War City

Fig.32 The Pre-War Street Pattern Overlaid on the Post War City

Legend (Fig.30 and Fig.31):
- 2000 -
- 1990 - 1999
- 1980 - 1989
- 1970 - 1979
- Post War - 1969

NB: Approximate dates of development based on ordnance survey mapping and aerial photography

Legend:
- ▶ Key pedestrian routes
- ○ Ring Road crossing improvements
- ▬ Ring Road underpass improvements
- ▬ Regeneration sites

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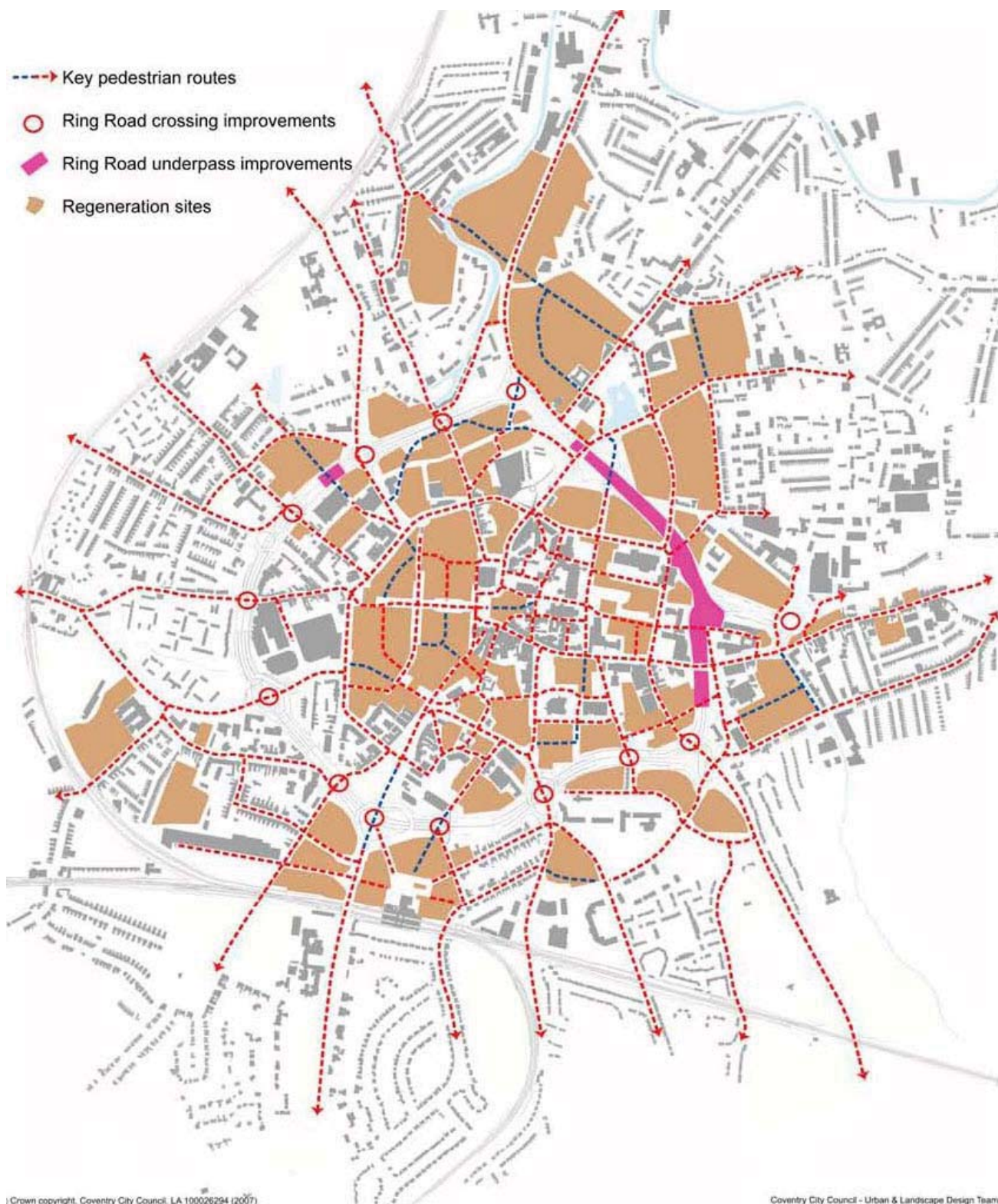
Coventry City Council - Urban & Landscape Design Team

Fig.33 Extract from the Urban Design Framework (2009)