

Corah's St Margaret's Works

Some of you will have followed the recent planning decision to redevelop the Corah buildings at the St Margaret's Works, off Burleys Way. Many organisations, including the Victorian Society, the 20th Century Society and Leicester Civic Society - who campaigned against the plans - advised that the buildings were part of Leicester's heritage and should be preserved and re-purposed rather than demolished. More than 70 objections to the proposed plans were received, but the plans to demolish almost all the buildings on the site are to go ahead.

Regarding the Victorian buildings on the site, most have been lost due to fires over recent years. At the time of writing, the facade of the original 1865 building will be retained, which, given the state of the rest of the building, is probably as much as could be hoped for. The remaining buildings are twentieth century and will be demolished. This [BBC article from September 2025](#) summarises the plans for the site.

In 2018 Colin Hyde had a look at what remained after one of several fires, and before the area was fenced off. As the photos show, there is very little of the site's Victorian history left.



The facade of the 1865 building will remain. Photo: Peter Ellis.



Looking towards the original 1865 building from the canal after the debris from a fire had been cleared, 2018. Photo: Colin Hyde.



This 1886 foundation stone was left after the debris had been cleared. Photo: Colin Hyde.

Corah was established by Nathaniel Corah, who was born in Barlestone in 1777 and started buying and selling hosiery in 1815. Nathaniel died in 1831, but his sons continued to expand the company. The foundation stone for the St Margaret's Works was laid in 1865 on a four-acre site. The St Margaret trademark was registered in 1875, and the first of several extensions to the works was in 1882 when electric lighting was installed.

Corah became a huge company, employed thousands of people, and produced millions of items of clothing, especially for Marks & Spencer. Many Leicester people worked at Corah or were trained there and went onto work elsewhere. The company lasted until the 1990s when it was broken up and more than 100 years of manufacturing on the site came to an end.

For those of you who are interested in learning more about Corah there is a large amount of information online. For a summary of its history have a look at the [Knitting Together](#) or the [Story of Leicester](#) websites. For photos, documents, maps, newsletters, and recorded memories have a look at the University of Leicester's [Special Collections Online](#) (search for Corah).

Recent Leicester Group Activities

Edwardian Houses and Gardens at Leicester University Botanic Gardens

On Tuesday 4th November, Rowan Roenisch gave a fascinating and detailed talk about the buildings at the University of Leicester's botanic gardens in Oadby. Using some excellent archive photographs Rowan took us through Hastings House, Middlemede, Southmede, and the Knoll. The architects for the first three were Stockdale Harrison (Hastings House) and his son Shirley Harrison (Middlemede and Southmede), both talented architects who created a lot of high quality architecture in Leicester (among their many buildings, Shirley Harrison designed De Montfort Hall).

Rowan highlighted various aspects of the design of the houses and the architectural details, noting the influence of the revivals in traditional style at the end of the 19th century and how these blended into an eclectic mix that was evident in these houses. This was illustrated very well, but perhaps the most revealing part of the talk was the research that showed the links between the owners and the architects, particularly at The Knoll.

The Knoll was built by WH Winterton whose two sons married into families which included both the Birmingham architect WH Bidlake and GP Bankart, a talented decorative lead and plaster worker. Rowan convincingly illustrated the importance of both these figures. Bidlake's reputation is well-established, but Rowan noted that the talented GP Bankart is barely known in his hometown of Leicester. He was articled to Isaac Barradale (1845-1892) in Leicester 1883 and attended both Leicester School of Art and the Technical College in Leicester. During this period he met Ernest Gimson (1864-1919) with whom he struck up a lifelong friendship. It was at Bankart's father's house that Gimson was first introduced to William Morris. From the 1890s onwards Bankart became one of the most renowned exponents of the craft of decorative plasterwork. Some forty examples of his work as a plasterer are illustrated in 'The Studio Yearbook of Decorative Art' between 1906 and 1917.

At the time of writing Hastings House is for sale and the future of the other houses and the gardens is not certain. This fascinating talk gave ample reasons for all concerned citizens of Leicester to keep an eye on what is happening to the botanic gardens and to press the University not to ruin what is one of the jewels in Leicester's crown.

Victorian Christmases in Leicester

On Tuesday 2nd December Cynthia Brown gave a seasonal talk on Victorian Christmases in Leicester. Through the use of newspaper and journal archives, both local and national, Cynthia started by looking at how some of the traditions we associate with Christmas started e.g. Christmas cards, trees, seasonal foods etc. Activities particularly associated with Leicester included the Ragged Robin breakfasts and the Town Waits, who played music in the town centre. Although the Waits officially ended in 1945, members of the audience recalled them still playing in the 1950s. The addition of mince pies and refreshments made this an ideal way to start the festive season!

Winter/Spring Programme of Talks

All talks take place at the Friends Meeting House, 16 Queens Rd, Leicester LE2 1WP at 7.30pm. Our talks are open to all, but we will ask all attendees to register in order to comply with fire regulations. There will be a charge of £3 towards the cost of room hire and other expenses (if you would bring the exact change we would be grateful). There is car parking at the Meeting House and on the adjoining roads.

Tuesday 3rd February 2026
Leicester's Board Schools
AGM and a talk by Neil Crutchley

Please note that this meeting will start with the Annual General Meeting. Members of the national Victorian Society have voting rights at AGMs, so please feel free to come and contribute to the meeting.

The Education Act of 1870 was the first piece of legislation to deal specifically with the provision of education in Britain. It enabled rapidly expanding towns and cities to provide schools in areas where none existed and allowed for the setting-up of school Boards to build and manage these new schools. Leicester acted quickly and by January 1871 the Leicester School Board was in operation, its members drawn from local residents, civic figures and clergy. The Board lasted for thirty-three years. Its success in providing mass education for Victorian Leicester was remarkable and evidence of its work is still visible in the city today. This illustrated talk looks at the Board's personalities, its workings, and its architectural legacy.

Tuesday 3rd March 2026
The History of Brookfield
A talk by Emma Probert

Brookfield has a rich history firstly as one of the foremost fashionable houses showcasing one of the first instances of the Tudor revival in Leicester in the Victorian era, turned home to the first Bishop of Leicester since the 9th Century, then becoming the UK's largest Red Cross packaging site for POWs, then being transformed into a nursing school, and lastly – coming full circle – into the hands of the University of Leicester's School of Business. Join us to learn about Brookfield's last 150 years as the home to Thomas Fielding Johnson (one of the University's most prominent founders) and its long legacy after his death.

Tuesday 7th April 2026
Industry and ardour – a brief history of allotments in Leicester
A talk by Cynthia Brown

Allotments are now more popular than ever – but there has always been more to them than producing food or flowers. This talk will look at their origins in Leicester to rescue working men from 'the deadly fountain of poverty', through to 'back to the land' movements in the later 19th century, and their crucial role in digging for victory in both World Wars. It will also consider the role of allotment societies, their social aspects, and some of the challenges they have faced – rabbits not least among them.

In addition to these talks we hope to announce some walks for the summer and will include details of these in the next newsletter.

Other News and Events

This spring there is a conference about '*The Rev. Henry Alford, A.W.N. Pugin and the Restoration of St Mary's Church, Wymeswold: ecclesiology & architecture in 19th-century Leicestershire.*' This is on Saturday 11th April 2026 from 10am to 4.30pm St Mary's Church, Wymeswold, Leicestershire. The call for papers can be found on various websites including the [Royal Historical Society](#).

The Victorian Society has opened a call for nominations for the Top Ten Endangered Buildings 2026. More detail on the [Victorian Society website](#).

Are you interested in contributing to the publication of a Historic Map of Leicester? The Historic Towns Trust is partnering with the Centre for Urban History at the University of

Leicester to create a Historic Map of Leicester that will illustrate the city's historical evolution from the Roman period to the 20th century.

The Trust is keen to work with local historians and archaeologists in developing the map and collaborating in fundraising and outreach activities. To find out more about the Trust's activities and the maps that they have produced so far, please see the website: <https://www.historictownstrust.uk/>

The Trust is holding a meeting on Tuesday 10 March 2026 at 5.00pm in Attenborough 101 on the main University of Leicester campus in order to discuss their plans. If you are interested in attending, please email Roey Sweet at rhs4@leicester.ac.uk by Tuesday 24 Feb 2026 (for catering purposes).

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The view expressed in this newsletter are those of the contributors and do not necessarily represent those of the Editor or the Victorian Society.

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