



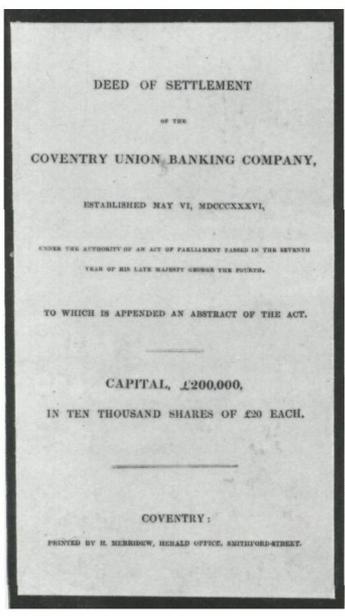
BUSINESS AND COMMUNITY

# THE COVENTRY UNION BANKING COMPANY 1836-1889



## THE 150TH ANNIVERSARY OF MIDLAND BANK'S FORERUNNERS IN COVENTRY

In 1986 Midland Bank celebrates the 150th anniversary of the Coventry Union Banking Company, Midland Bank's predecessor in Coventry. The Coventry Union was typical of the country banks which played a vital role in the business and industrial life of the Victorian Midlands, and its history illustrates some of the distinctive features of early banking business. The Coventry Union also has a special place in Midland Bank's own history: it was Midland's first major acquisition outside Birmingham, leading to the series of amalgamations which brought it into national prominence by the end of the 19th century.



Deed of settlement of the Coventry Union Banking Company, 1836. The first board of directors comprised:  
John Wyley, chairman, 'druggist'  
Captain Robert Bunney, banker  
Richard Hiorns, brewer  
Richard Warner, ribbon manufacturer  
Thomas Pepper, banker  
James Woolfenden, doctor  
Thomas Robinson, ribbon manufacturer.



Share certificate issued on the birthday of the Coventry Union Banking Company, 16th May 1836.



The Coventry Union Banking Company's headquarters on the corner of High Street and Little Park Street, seen here shortly before the old bank made way for the present Midland branch. The old bank had been used by Bunney and Co, bankers, before the Coventry Union was founded in 1836.

### Origins of the Coventry Union Banking Company

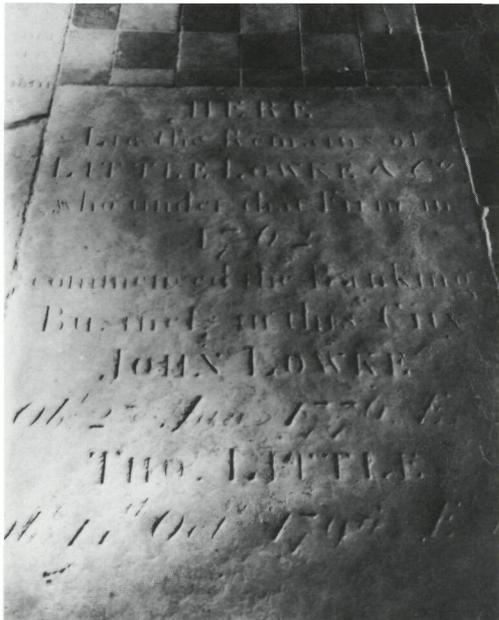
Until the mid-1820s country banking had been dominated by small private partnerships, many of which were fragile and restricted in their financial resources. In 1826, however, new legislation permitted the formation of 'joint stock' companies with large numbers of shareholders. Over the next ten years, scores of these companies were founded, and no less than 59 were promoted in the boom year of 1836. The Coventry Union was amongst the newcomers of 1836 and, while many of its contemporaries fell by the wayside, it enjoyed a long and busy career.

The new bank in Coventry was launched with the support of a wide range of local interests. Its first directors, for example, included a ribbon manufacturer, a maltster, a wine merchant and a London doctor. After a meeting of subscribers at the King's Head Hotel in March, rules for the operation of the new company were drawn up and a capital of over £50,000 was raised. On this basis the Coventry Union Banking Company opened for business – on the site of Midland's branch at 38 High Street – on Monday 16th May 1836.

## Pioneers of banking in Coventry

Banking in Coventry has a long and distinguished history. The firm of Little, Lowke and Co were acting as bankers in Coventry as early as 1762, three years before even Birmingham could claim a bank of its own. Later known as Little and Woodcock, this firm in 1865 became part of the Birmingham Banking Company (another of the constituent companies of the modern Midland).

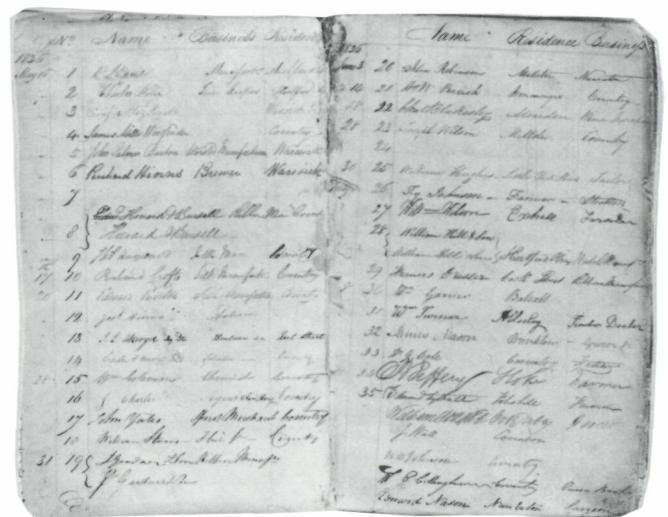
Other pioneers of Coventry banking included the firm of Wyatt, Inge and Lant, which had been established in about 1790. George Lant, one of the partners in this firm, later entered partnership with the Bunney family. Both the bank house and the business of Bunney and Co were acquired by the Coventry Union Banking Company during 1836; the cost of this acquisition was approximately £5,000. The two surviving partners in Bunney and Co, Captain Robert Bunney and Thomas Pepper, both joined the board of directors of the Coventry Union.



Tablet in the Mercers' Chapel of Coventry Cathedral recording the origins of Little, Lowke and Co, Coventry's first bank, in 1762: 'HERE Lie the Remains of LITTLE LOWKE & C<sup>o</sup> who under that Firm in 1762 commenced the Banking Business in this City. JOHN LOWKE obt 23 Jan 1776 aet 82. THO. LITTLE obt 14 Oct 1790 aet 57'.



A £5 note and deposit receipt issued by Little and Woodcock.



First deposit account signature book of the Coventry Union Banking Company.



£100 note of the Coventry Union Banking Company, 1883.

## Banking in Victorian Coventry

Although Coventry's traditional silk trade was in decline during the 19th century, the city's involvement in precision metalwork and engineering heralded the rapid growth of the cycle industry, machine tool manufacturing and the nascent motor industry at the end of the century. The Coventry Union's business reflected these fundamental changes in the life of the city, and between 1840 and 1889 the bank's deposits grew from less than £130,000 to about £420,000. In addition the bank continued to issue its own bank notes. These large and colourful designs remained part of the Coventry business scene until the bank amalgamated with Midland in 1889.

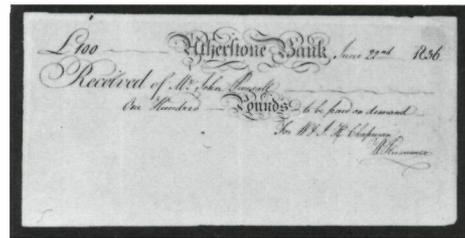
## The Coventry Union's branch banks

On 3rd June 1836, barely two weeks after the new bank had opened, the Coventry Union's directors decided to establish a branch at Coleshill. This branch, the predecessor of Midland's office in Coleshill, was also licensed for the issue of its own series of bank notes. Over the next fifty years the Coleshill branch made a valuable contribution to the growth of the Coventry Union's business, particularly in its link with local agriculture.

The extension to Coleshill was originally part of a large plan for branch offices of the new bank. Later in June 1836, on the advice of the Birmingham Banking Company, the Coventry Union offered £4,250 for the business and goodwill of Chapman and Co, a private bank in Atherstone which had been founded in about 1790. The offer was accepted, and Chapman's bank became the Atherstone branch of the Coventry Union. This experiment lasted only until 1845, however, when the Coventry Union sold the branch to the Leicestershire Banking Company for £6,000 (the Atherstone connection eventually became part of Midland when the Leicestershire Bank in turn amalgamated with Midland in 1900).



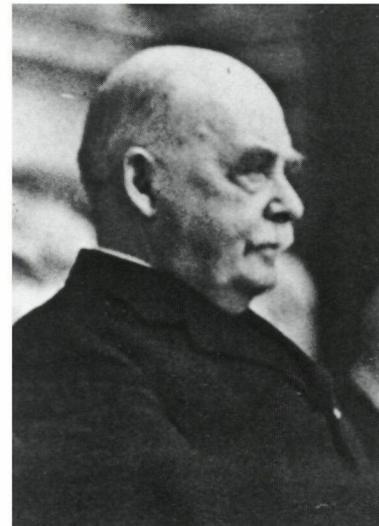
*Coleshill branch after rebuilding shortly before the First World War.*



*Deposit receipt for £100 issued by Chapman and Co, the 'Atherstone Bank', in June 1836: Chapman and Co was acquired by the Coventry Union in the same month.*



*Midland's branch at Coventry High Street, seen here in 1965. The present building was constructed in the mid-1890s, replacing the old headquarters of the Coventry Union Banking Company on the same site.*



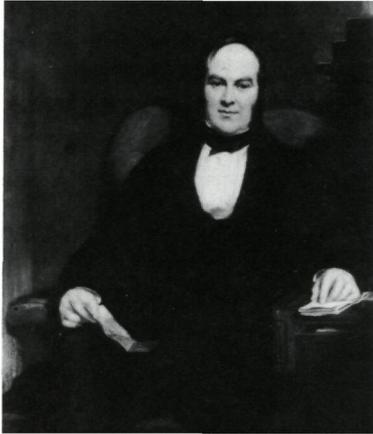
*William F Wyley, managing director of the Coventry Union between 1881 and the amalgamation with Midland in 1889. The Wyley family had been closely involved in the bank since its foundation. After the amalgamation William Wyley (later Colonel Sir William Wyley) joined Midland's board and continued as a director until his death in 1940. His fifty years as a director is still a Midland record.*

## Coventry Banking

The Coventry Union Banking Company, after its extensions to Coleshill and Atherstone, made no further efforts to develop a branch network. Instead, it overhauled and expanded its Coventry business. The bank successfully withstood the severe crisis which afflicted the banking world in the 1860s and 1870s, and by the 1880s the business was outgrowing the old premises acquired from Bunney and Co in 1836. After 1879 the Coventry Union was the only purely 'local' bank left in the city, and this distinction no doubt contributed to the bank's continued success in the 1880s.

## Joining the Midland

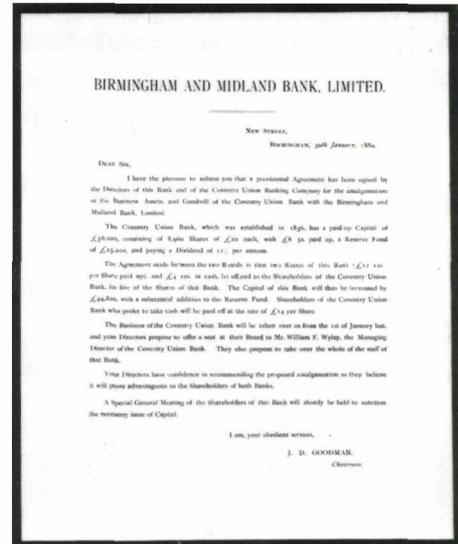
By the late 1880s the 'amalgamation movement' in banking was gathering pace. It was increasingly difficult for relatively small banks such as the Coventry Union to compete with their larger rivals. The expansion of Coventry's new metal and engineering industries meant that the bank's customers needed much larger facilities. Early in 1889, the directors and shareholders therefore agreed to an offer to amalgamate with Midland (then known as the Birmingham and Midland Bank). The offer was worth approximately £125,000 by an exchange of shares. The agreement included the appointment of W F Wyley, then the Coventry Union's managing director, to Midland's own board of directors. Wyley was to become a long-standing and influential director of Midland, continuing on the board until his death in 1940.



*Charles Geach, founder and first manager of Midland in 1836. He was also MP for Coventry from 1851 until his sudden death in 1854. Portrait by J Partridge.*



*Edward Holden in the 1880s. Holden assisted Christie in the acquisition of the Coventry Union in 1889 and was later responsible for the massive growth of Midland between 1898 and 1918. The outstanding banker of his generation, he was Midland's chairman and managing director between 1908 and 1919.*



*Circular to Midland Bank shareholders announcing the amalgamation with the Coventry Union, January 1889.*



*John Christie, Midland's general manager between 1887 and 1897, who negotiated the amalgamation with the Coventry Union in 1889.*

Midland was an exact contemporary of the Coventry Union, having been established in Birmingham in August 1836. It also shared an important link with Coventry in that Charles Geach, the remarkable banker who had founded Midland, had been a popular MP for the city of Coventry between 1851 and his sudden death in 1854.

By the late 1880s Midland was growing rapidly, both through local amalgamations and by opening new branches. The acquisition of the Coventry Union was nevertheless Midland's first large investment in a banking company outside Birmingham, and it was followed by a series of amalgamations which promoted Midland to being one of the largest banks in the country by 1900. This rise to prominence was largely the work of Edward Holden, who with John Christie had negotiated the Coventry merger and was later to become Midland's chairman and managing director.

After the amalgamation in 1889, the offices and staff of the Coventry Union became part of the much larger Midland branch network. As a result the business established in Coventry 150 years ago now plays its part in offering a range of banking services which was undreamed of by the founders of the Coventry Union Banking Company. In Midland's own 150th anniversary year, the heirs of the Coventry Union continue their tradition since 1836 of making bank services easily and widely available in their local community.