

# BERKHAMSTED'S SECRET TUNNEL LEGENDS

By "BEORCHAM"

At one time or another every parishioner must have heard picturesque stories of the secret tunnels supposed to exist beneath the streets of Berkhamsted. The best known story concerns a mysterious subterranean passage from Berkhamsted Place to the Castle, alleged to have been used as a "hide-out" by the Black Prince—though it is a little disillusioning to find that the Prince had been dead for nearly 300 years when Berkhamsted Place was built. On various occasions it has been suggested that other secret tunnels link the Castle with Ashridge House, and the Parish Church with both Egerton House and Berkhamsted School. Incent's House (the Oasis Café) has also been credited with having underground connections with the School and Castle.

Of course, the most cocksure purveyor of these legends never claims to have seen the passages himself. Still, as one resourceful townsman once remarked, what would be the use of a secret tunnel if it wasn't secret?

There is only a one-in-a-million chance that these legends are anything more than "moonshine," but, as will be shown later in this article, strong evidence supports the view that a short tunnel runs from the crypt of the Parish Church to a building on the opposite side of the High Street.

Some years ago, in a none-too-serious effort to clear up some of these local mystery stories, I inspected the cellars of Incent's House and a number of other old buildings in the town, and although no startling discoveries were made, it was at least interesting to make the acquaintance of a fascinating "underworld" in Berkhamsted.

## The "Bone Hole"

There was one big disappointment at the start—the crypt of the Parish Church had been sealed up some 60 years ago. The late Mr. R. A. Norris, author of "The History of St. Peter's", told me that to the best of his knowledge no secret tunnel had ever been seen there, and he added that there was little to say about the crypt except that it was originally the traditional "bone hole" into which bones dug up in the churchyard were hurled. Towards the end of the 17th century it was turned into a burial vault by the rector, Dr. Brabant.

I made a little more headway on being told that the cellar of an old house and shop directly opposite the church was well worth investigating. Mr. P. Dellar, the tenant, kindly piloted me down the steps to one of the most curious cellars I have ever seen. It burrows under the pavement of the High Street as well as under the house itself, and two sides are a succession of massive brick archways. Here, in Berkhamsted's miniature Adelphi, it

looked as if three or four different tunnels had been started and then bricked up. Unfortunately, tapping on the walls did not produce the hoped-for hollow sound. The owner of the building afterwards wrote to me on the subject, stating that a blacksmith's shop stood on or near the site some 140 years ago, and that when repairs were being made to the cellar the workmen found a very thick wall which was difficult to penetrate. It was thought probable that the cellar belonged to some monastic building—perhaps one of the old hospitals known to have existed in Berkhamsted centuries ago. Incidentally, most of the houses nearby have curious old cellars, and there is a fine brick well in the middle of the kitchen floor of the shop adjoining Mr. Dellar's.

## A Schoolboys' Prank

A few weeks after inspecting these cellars I received a most interesting letter from an elderly lady who spent her childhood in Mr. Dellar's house and whose grandfather was a churchwarden over 100 years ago. She was quite certain that there was an underground passage from this house to the church vaults, and mentioned an occasion when her father and uncles, as very small boys, made their way through the tunnel during a service and tried to scare the congregation by making weird noises in the vaults. Her grandfather, who was among the worshippers, at once suspected the cause of the noises, and, sure enough, found his sons larking about in the tunnel. He gave them a thrashing straightaway and had the entrance bricked up to make doubly sure there would be no recurrence of those boyish pranks!

My informant supplemented this information by recalling a visit she paid to the church when the floor of the centre aisle was being repaired some 60 years ago. One of the workmen invited her to inspect the vaults, and she was able to see where her father and uncles had entered from their home opposite the church.

## The Ashridge "Underworld"

In this instance, then, it would appear that there really was a short "secret tunnel" to Berkhamsted Church. What purpose it served can only be left to conjecture. Other stories alleging the existence of much longer tunnels must be dismissed as nonsensical. No trace whatever of a secret tunnel was found when Egerton House was pulled down, and if there was ever one from Berkhamsted School to the Church or Incent's House, it would surely have been discovered by now. As for Berkhamsted Place and Ashridge having secret tunnel connections with the Castle, one can only say that such legends are too absurd to bear thinking about.

Ashridge, by the way, has a little "underworld" of its own, and its ancient vaulted crypt, nearly 70 ft. long, is one of the few relics of the old monastic building which were left untouched when Ashridge House was rebuilt on a grandiose scale 140 years ago. Through the centuries visitors have admired the cellars of Ashridge, and it was there, in 1681, that Thomas Baskerville's breath was taken away by a glimpse of the huge beer casks. "Some might vie with the Prince of Heidelberg's tuns, they look so big upon you," was his comment.

## HYMNS AND PSALMS FOR AUGUST

August 2nd, 10am. 320, 323, 178 (Pt. 1); 11am. 290, 181, 700, Psalm 46; 6.30pm. 269, 175, 360, 705, Psalm 48.

August 9th, 10am. 177 (2nd tune), 197, 182; 11am. 207, 657, 555, Psalm 53; 6.30pm. 240, 247, 217, 479, Psalm 54.

August 16th, 10am. 317, 316 (vv. 1—3), 316 (vv. 4—5); 11am. 540, 169, 172, Psalm 57; 6.30pm. 297, 277, 239, 31, Psalm 62.

August 23rd, 10am. 321, 315, 107; 11am. 164, 291, 298, Psalm 65; 6.30pm. 270, 679, 224, 436, Psalm 66.

August 30th, 10am. 319, 318, 324; 11am. 214, 187, 197, Psalm 67; 6.30pm. 22, 704, 257, 303 (vv. 1—3 and 6—8), Psalm 71.

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