

Berkhamsted's Secret Tunnels

REGULARLY I receive requests for information about the secret tunnels of Berkhamsted. The subject is not taken so seriously as it was in years gone by, but it would be a pity if our old legends ceased to arouse curiosity. And there is always a remote chance that a seemingly absurd story may have a basis of truth.

A few months ago I did, in fact, make the acquaintance of a secret tunnel of sorts—and it was one that wasn't even on the legendary map! Builders working at Haresfoot invited me to share their astonishment at the discovery of a passage under the drive leading to the rear of the former mansion. It was a short but wide 'underpass', well made and apparently not of great age. Why anyone ever wished to burrow under a road on high, level ground I cannot imagine, and to the extent that its purpose is unknown it may perhaps be called a secret tunnel. But it was hardly one of those spine-chilling hide-outs an historical novelist would write about.

Our forefathers, who loved to tell and embroider a good story, believed that subterranean passages were here, there and everywhere. Short tunnels were said to run from the crypt of St. Peter's Church to the cellars of old properties on the opposite side of the High Street, such as the Swan Hotel, Dean Incent's café, and Egerton House.

STUBBORN TRADITIONS

Not to be outdone, the good people of Northchurch thrilled their children and guests with stories of a secret tunnel between St. Mary's Church and the 'George and Dragon'. And Mr. Vicars Bell, in his splendid village history entitled 'Little Gaddesden', refers to a 'stubborn and unbreakable tradition' that a secret tunnel led from Ashridge monastery to St. Margaret's nunnery.

Our most widely known legend concerns a secret tunnel which would have been a remarkable engineering feat. It is said to have linked the Castle with Berkhamsted Place, but as the mansion was built after the Castle was ruined it is difficult to find even a silly reason for building a tunnel. It would not surprise me if the legend dates from the Civil War, when some of the people who lived at Berkhamsted Place were anything but popular. Idle gossip that an escape route might be useful to them

could have been blown up into a belief that they actually had a secret tunnel.

Some thirty years ago, when a new sewer was being laid in the Park, workmen came across some old masonry and what appeared to be a cavity underneath. This at once put some sparkle into the ancient legend; indeed, some people spread the news that the secret tunnel had been discovered. But it was not the first time too much had been assumed from the finding of an unsuspected piece of masonry. The discovery of an old drain has been sufficient to start a secret tunnel story.

LOOKING FOR CLUES

Many years ago, having heard that certain cellars opposite the church had features which looked suspiciously like the blocked-up entrances to tunnels, I embarked upon a little private detective work.

But first I consulted the late Mr. R. A. Norris, author of *Berkhamsted St. Peter*. He was as sceptical as I was of the existence of a tunnel linking the church crypt with the buildings opposite, saying that if one existed it would surely have been uncovered during the many deep excavations which have been made in the highway and footpaths.

The crypt, Mr. Norris added, was the traditional 'bone hole' into which bones dug up in the churchyard were placed until Dr. Robert Brabant, rector from 1681-1722, turned it into a burial vault. Then, in Victorian times, the vault was completely sealed up.

UNDERNEATH THE ARCHES

At the time of my enquiries (1936), Egerton House had yet to be replaced by the Rex Cinema, and it was logical to expect an ancient mansion with a ghost in the attics to possess a secret tunnel in the cellars. But my first trip into the Berkhamsted underworld did not produce a single clue.

I felt that I was 'getting warmer' when visiting an old house and shop, then the home of Mr. and Mrs. P. Dellar, directly opposite the Parish Church. The cellar burrows underneath the pavement, and two sides are a succession of massive brick archways. It almost looks as if several tunnels had been started and then bricked up.

For many years it has been thought that this and some neighbouring houses occupy the sites of former religious

buildings. Although no definite evidence has been forthcoming, I was interested to hear from the then owner of the house, Mrs. Shuffrey, of Oxford, who recalled that when a Victorian builder was repairing the cellars, he found a very thick wall which was difficult to penetrate, and thought it might have belonged to a monastic building.

A CHURCHWARDEN'S STORY

After publishing the fruitless results of my investigations, I had the good fortune to obtain some astonishing information from Mrs. Cook, an octogenarian who lived at Brockley, and was still proud to be called a Berkhamstedian. She belonged to the old local family of Compigne; her father was local surveyor at the time of the Common enclosure in 1866, and her grandfather was a churchwarden in 1822.

This is what Mrs. Cook told me: 'My grandfather and his family lived opposite the church, and your article recalled an incident often related to me by my father, who, I might point out, was not given to romancing or telling fairy tales.

'In the days of his boyhood the church was said to be haunted, and strange voices were heard during evening service. Now, my grandfather, as churchwarden, always showed his sons into their pews. One Sunday evening, hearing the strange voices and thinking there was something familiar about them, he went to look at his boys in the pews. They were not there!'

BRICKED UP

Mrs. Cook added that her grandfather went home, and, taking a cane, descended into the cellar. 'He found the way was open to the underground passage beneath the High Street and went through. There, running around the crypt, and making unearthly noises, were his sons. He stood by the entrance into the vaults and, as his sons came out, gave each one a thrashing, which, as my father said, they did not forget for many a day. The next day grandfather had the entrance bricked up.'

Many years later, Mrs. Cook went into the church with her mother and a cousin who was staying with them. A man who was repairing the floor of the centre aisle asked Mrs. Compigne if they would like to go down into the vaults. They were eager to do so, and after the workman had locked the church doors he led the three visitors into the vaults.

'I could see where my father had entered from his home,' said Mrs. Cook. Well, it's a good story. Can we accept it?'

'BEORCHAM'

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