

THE HERMITAGE TUNNELS

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The old Hermitage House, demolished in the mid 1930's, was thought to have been built on the site of a 14th century Hermitage.



There are, as far as I know, no 'caves' in Woking, but there are a number of alleged tunnels, although again from what I can gather none have ever been proved to be anything other than old cellars, ice houses or places for storing water. Back in 1964 members of the Chelsea Spelaeological Society (apparently our 'local' caving club) investigated the 'Hermitage Tunnels' at St Johns, that some had claimed dated back to the time when a hermit actually lived at the site in the 14th century.

The story was that the saucy monk tunnelled his way to the nunnery at St Catherine's in Guildford – almost eight miles away with at least a couple of streams in between. An equally unlikely tale is that it linked the Hermitage to Newark Priory – almost as far as St Catherine's, with just as

many streams, but perhaps not quite the same incentive!

A third theory hit upon by the press at the time was that it could have been used as an escape route and hide-out for highwaymen who roamed nearby Bagshot Heath in the 18th century. To back this up they claimed that the name Dick Turpin had been found scratched into a wall of the old Hermitage House with the date 1783 next to it. The only problem with that story is that there is little evidence the notorious highwayman ever visited this area, and certainly not forty-four years after he was hanged in 1739.

Some suggest that the tunnels went to the Nunnery at St Catherine's in Guildford (below left), whilst others claim they headed to Newark Priory (below right).





Another explanation is that they were escape tunnels to the Hermitage from what became Inkerman Barracks.

The final alternative story was that the tunnels dated from the late 19th century and were not actually tunnels from the Hermitage, but tunnels to it, from the prison across the road. The problem with that story is that the inmates at Woking Prison were all disabled, and the thought of them having the ability to dig their way out seems pretty far-fetched (although some did manage to escape, notably one who hid in a local delivery van that was visiting the site).

Of course it is possible that it wasn't the men from the Woking Invalid Convict Prison who constructed them, but the women of the slightly later Female Prison on the site, or even some of the soldiers who occupied the buildings when they were converted into Inkerman Barracks in the 1890's! But why they would go to the trouble of neatly lining their escape route with mortared bricks is not explained.

The tunnels at the Hermitage were first discovered in the mid 1930's when the old Hermitage House was demolished and replaced by the houses of Oakway and Batten Avenue. At that time it is said that workmen discovered an entrance under a stone slab in the fireplace – behind which a portrait of a pig-faced women was also found.

The entrance was then covered up and forgotten about until 1964 when a large hole appeared in one of the gardens in Oakway, and the 'Chelsea' cavers were called in. They discovered three brick-lined branches of what they identified as a probable reservoir or 'level well', possibly built when the Hermitage House was constructed in the late 17th or early 18th century. One branch (A) appears to have connected the well with the cellar of the house, whilst branch B (a feeder tunnel) headed towards the Basingstoke Canal (in the direction of St Catherine's at Guildford), whilst branch C went in the direction of Inkerman. The 'Canal' tunnel gradually diminished in height and became impassable, but some claim the 'Inkerman' branch could be followed for a hundred yards or more before it was blocked by digging a sewer in the 1930's.

According to the cavers, branch 'A' was about six feet high, three feet wide with a vaulted roof, the top of which was just a couple of feet below ground level. Branch B was similar, but branch 'C' became 'egg-shaped' and only about four foot by two foot six inches near the end. At the junction of the tunnels was the well, with the water-table at that time just below the tunnel floor. Their report makes fascinating reading, although not, I am afraid, quite as romantic as those reported in the local press at the time.

One of the members of the Chelsea Spelaeological Society, John Henderson, investigated the tunnels and drew this plan of his findings.

