

The Blue Tunnel

Whenever we delve into the history of a particular place, there are always stories of legends or mystical events, ghost stories or talks of secret underground passages and tunnels which are common in local folklore. Well, Whitchurch is no different!

There has long been talk of an underground tunnel which stretches between the The Black Lion Pub and St Nicholas Church and has also been noted that it may also continue beyond the Church and as far as Lyons Court Farm. Of course, without any other information it's easy to get carried away with thoughts of smugglers, witches, ghosts, cults, miners of precious minerals or all manners of lucid goings on. After all, tunnels are great places to hide the passage of people or precious items/cargo or commit acts out of sight.

Without direct access to these tunnels or first-hand knowledge that they exist, it's extremely difficult to go any further. However, it appears that people did find it.

Our first real evidence of such a place comes in the form of three newspaper articles from June 1935.

WILL SECRET OF WHITCHURCH CAVE BE SOLVED ?

Workmen Find Long Hidden Passage

IS IT a subterranean cave used by monks; a secret tunnel made by some religious sect; a passage leading to the grounds of a church or an underground waterway.

These were just a few of the questions to be heard in the yard of the Black Lion Hotel, Whitchurch, near Bristol, yesterday, writes a 'Press and Mirror' reporter.

The cause of all the excitement was a mysterious, gaping hole, studded with vari-coloured stalactites and leading into the bowels of the earth.

Excavations are being carried out behind the hotel by Messrs T. Weeks and Sons, building contractors, as a new hotel is to be erected there for Messrs George's Brewery.

The workmen were digging a deep pit for the cellars when they accidentally discovered the secret tunnel. A wedge which had been placed in position to widen a crack suddenly disappeared from view. The surprised men got to work with picks and shovels to recover the wedge and broke through a thin crust of stone into what appeared to be a cave.

Pitch Darkness

With an electric light bulb on the end of a pole several of the men gingerly lowered themselves into the pitch darkness of the hole.

They found themselves in a long, underground passage apparently hewn out of the peculiar blue coloured stone of the district.

At one end they discovered a large cavern while the other part of the tunnel led underneath the Black Lion. After scrambling over the rock strewn floor for about 40 yards they were forced to abandon the exploration trip, as the electric flex was too short.

They said the tunnel extended much farther than they had been able to go and the roof was covered with stalactites of a deep red colour about three to four inches long.

The entrance to the tunnel is being widened and a hole is being dug through the roof of the cavern. In the next day or two the secret of the tunnel and cavern may be revealed.

CAVE DISCOVERED AT WHITCHURCH

On Saturday workmen employed by Messrs T. Weeks and Sons, building contractors, of Bristol, in preparing the foundations of the new hotel in place of the Black Lion, Whitchurch, at a depth of about 12 feet came across an old cave.

It is thought that the cave must lead to the old parish church of St. Nicholas and on to the old Lion's Court Farm, Church Road, Whitchurch.

WORKMEN'S FIND Old Cave Revealed On Site of New Hotel

Whitchurch was full of excitement on Saturday when it became known that the workmen employed by Mr. T. Weeks and Sons, building contractors, of Bristol, in preparing the foundations for the new large hotel in the place of the Black Lion, Whitchurch, had come across a very old cave at a depth of about 12ft.

It is believed that the cave leads to the Parish Church of St. Nicholas and on to the old Lion's Court Farm, in Church Road.

The other part of the cave seems to run into a very large cavity under the spot on which the foundation has been prepared to start building the new hotel.

A large number of villagers visited the place during the week-end.



The Black Lion Hotel - 1938

The articles describe a cave and tunnel formed from blue stone with coloured stalactites on the ceiling. It may have a cavern at one end and may also continue for some way towards St Nicholas Church and in one article, further on to Lyons Court Farm.

Certainly, from the description of the workers at the time, the cave and tunnel appears more natural in construction and not a typical purpose built tunnel lined with brick or stone. So why is it there?

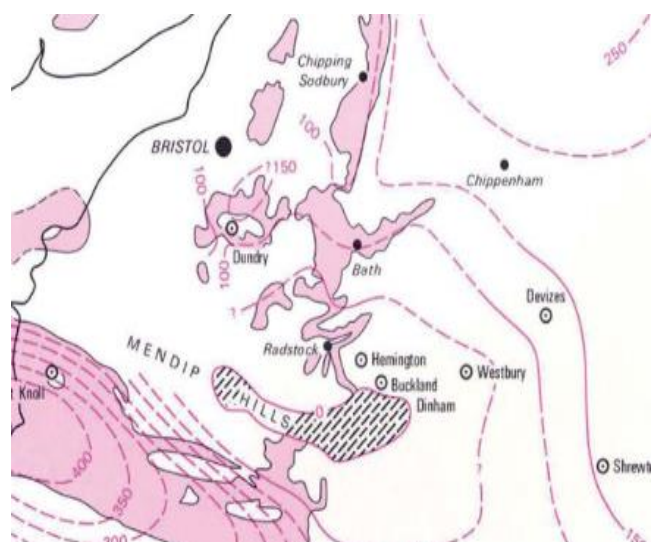
Indeed, the description of a local blue stone itself could be a clue to the origin of the tunnel:

“The **Blue Lias** is a geological formation in southern, eastern and western England and parts of South Wales, part of the Lias Group. The Blue Lias consists of a sequence of limestone and shale layers, laid down in latest Triassic and early Jurassic times, between 195 and 200 million years ago. The Blue Lias is famous for its fossils, especially ammonites”.

Blue Lias is still mined today and is used in walls or as paving slabs and it is interesting to note that due the abundance of ammonites, they are also often used as features in the houses that are built where Lias is used in the construction. Evidence of which can be seen throughout the village.



Example: Blue Lias Stone Wall



Lias outcrops

Another clue could be the stalactites. Stalactites formed from limestone grow very slowly, usually less than 10cm every thousand years. The articles mention an approximate size of 3 to 4 inches, so it's relatively safe to say that they have been there for a considerable amount of time and could possibly pre-date the tunnel to both the original Black Lion Inn and maybe even the current church.

So, is the tunnel and cave natural or man-made? Our next piece of evidence comes from a discovery of a tunnel entrance by Mr George of Lyons Court Farm in 1958.

Secret passage found at Whitchurch

ANYONE with a lively imagination must have dreamed (at the age) of finding a secret passage. Few of us ever actually experience this thrill, least of all our own homes.

But Mr E. W. George, who lives at Lyons Court Farm, Whitchurch, has recently done this. He may recall that in July last year this paper published details of finds made by Mr George when interior decorations were being carried out.

He went along to the farm yesterday morning and found that he had made yet more discoveries, a passage among them.

What rain!

This passage emerges from under a wall into what is now an outhouse adjoining Mr George's home. He has had part of the wall taken down and the floor dug away... but the wet summer, which has ruined so many things, has also ruined this piece of exploration.

A yard or so of tunnel was dug out, but it immediately filled with water so that no more progress could be made. Traces of the tunnel have been found in the orchard outside, however, and Mr George hopes to follow its course when he has the opportunity.

One original theory was that it led to an old stone-lined well which is some yards out in the orchard, but it looks as if this is wrong. Amateur archaeologists have removed several hundredweight of rubbish from the disused well, tracing the still intact stonework down 30 feet or more beyond the reach of their ladder).

But they have not encountered the tunnel, nor have they found any water—and that's life if you like.

To the church

That well-informed local archaeologist, Mr Frederick C. Jones, says that this farm building is the ancient courthouse of the Keynsham Abbots and Lyons family. So the current theory that the subterranean passage leads to the parish church which lies about a quarter of a mile away, (in the direction the tunnel takes), seems a very feasible one to me.

But it looks as though it will be next summer at least before we know for certain.

An incredible discovery which led to a local archaeologist investigating and ruling out a passageway to the well in the Orchard and concluding that it may have originated from an ancient Courthouse of the Keynsham Abbots and that it goes to the parish church. As we know from the 1935 discovery, it may even continue beyond the church and into a cavern below what is now the cellar of the Black Lion. We should also consider that the two could may not be connected at all and that the cavern is a natural feature.

In any case, it should be safe to say the discovery of a possible tunnel entrance at Lyons Court may in fact suggest that end of the tunnel is man-made.

We will investigate further into the Keynsham Abbots and their relationship with the history at Lyons Court Farm. Could they be responsible for digging the tunnel themselves or was it already there? Are the tunnel and cave connected or are their existence close to each other a coincidence?

If we were to pursue the theory further, perhaps we need to look back even further.....nearly 2000 years. Who had a presence in the area and also the manpower to dig a fairly extensive tunnel and cave and extract its resources? We know that there could have been a Roman Villa or at least a substantial building in that area. The discovery of two stone lined coffins, a coin hoard and later coin moulds suggest that Romans settled on the land that is now Lyons Court Farm and minted coins.

Could the Romans have also mined here? It is known that the Romans did construct Villas using the Blue Lias stone and there are other examples in Somerset. They also used the blue limestone as tesserae in their mosaics. It would have been an important resource.



Example: Blue Lias in mosaic



Example: Dolaucothi Roman Gold Mine - Wales

As the cavern at the Black Lion Hotel was reasonably close to the surface (close enough to be found whilst digging a pit for a cellar for the pub) then the stone could have been quarried more safely from the surface down rather than dug through a dangerous tunnelling system. Alternatively, this may also add weight to the hypothesis that the tunnel originates from the slightly elevated position and location of an earlier Roman building at Lyons Court as a mine entrance which led them down naturally into what is now the centre of the village and mined into a cavern.

If we can find more evidence of Roman occupation within the parish and help to identify their relationship with the area it could add weight to the hypothesis and warrant further archaeological investigation or ground survey.

It's a fascinating idea that has the potential to help connect the Romans and later the Keynsham Abbots to the area.

We hope to investigate further.