

It started off with us being aware of the rumours that the local community wanted us to investigate, but no real idea of where to start. We could have asked for everyone's stories of the tunnels, because let's face it, most people have heard of them through their families while growing up here. In the end it was decided to do a documents search in Wisbech and Fenland Museum to see what transpired. We started with the Corporation Records, that is to say 'the minutes' of Corporation meetings going way-back in the Town's history. We were looking for purchases of large quantities of bricks and/or any reference to the building of tunnels. Apart from a reference to a culvert and grating in Ship Lane (now Hill Street), there was nothing to give any indication of subterranean activity.

At that stage, all we knew was that there were supposed to be tunnels below the town but had no hard evidence to support the rumours. It occurred to us that following the dreadful cholera outbreaks in Wisbech during the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, better sewers could have been constructed that have since been superseded by sewer pipes, leaving the old brick-built sewers to be found and misinterpreted as 'tunnels'. One imagines that if this had been the case, we would have noticed requests for bricks in the Corporation Records during that period – and there were none.

Two things happened more or less simultaneously at this point. First we were advised that if we were looking for sewers we needed to be trawling through the 'Commission of Sewers Acts and Ordinances' which were the minutes of meeting held in Wisbech to oversee and organise the building and repair of drains, sewers and sluices with regard to draining rainwater from the surrounding fenland. Secondly, we were told of a local shopkeeper who was aware of bricked-up doorways in his cellars that were historically reputed to have been 'Curfew Tunnels' constructed during the 'Protectorate Government' of Oliver Cromwell. I visited the person in question and was pleasantly surprised by his open and honest attitude to such a 'dubious' story. I soon realised that all he was doing was passing on a story that had been told to him by the widow of a previous owner of the shop. She had wanted the story to 'have life' after her death as she was one of the few people who knew of it. She had been born in the late 1800s and remembered her Grandfather earnestly relaying the story her. He would have been born in the early 1800s which was perhaps only 170 years after the events. It was family history that each generation had passed it on. The story told how the tunnels had been used to avoid the constrictions of the Puritan laws in force at that time. People had to be off the streets by the time of the Curfew Bell (8 pm) and simple pleasures like drinking and excessive laughter were frowned upon by the authorities.

The same shopkeeper surprised me by saying that he had seen into the tunnels despite the entrances in his cellars having been bricked-up prior to him purchasing the premises. He recalled how, not long after buying the shop, a heavy vehicle breached the road surface outside and had to be 'recovered' with assistance. The hole left in the road clearly revealed a brick built tunnel, about five feet high and the width of a broad man. There was wet silt in the bottom of it. Shining a flashlight up and down the length of the tunnel revealed that there had obviously been previous breaches which had been back-filled with brick-rubble and capped with concrete before the road surface was 'made good'.

It's hard to 'buy-into' the Curfew Tunnel scenario because tunnels in those days would have been created using the 'cut and cover' method, where a trench is dug deep enough to secrete the tunnel. Brick walls would then be built to shoulder-height before arch-formers were put in place to support the barrel-roof structure until it was ready to take the weight

of the earth above it. The arch-formers would then be moved ready for the next section of tunnel to be roofed. How would you hide your tunnelling activities from the authorities?

We researched the mid 1600s to satisfy ourselves that we weren't leaving any stone unturned. It threw-up a couple of interesting facts. In 1655 Wisbech was inundated by water yet again and even lost its wooden bridge (The Great Bridge) in this event. Also John Thurloe, soon to be Secretary of State for the Protectorate Government under Cromwell acquired the Wisbech Castle site with the intention of building a mansion. The existing Bishop's Palace was torn-down and history does not recall what happened to the tens of thousands of bricks that this produced. The lime mortar used in the late medieval / Tudor period when it was built would have been relatively easy to remove, making the bricks available for other projects. We know that Thurloe and the Wisbech Corporation got on well, Did Thurloe make the bricks available to Wisbech for much needed drainage tunnels? I am unaware of anything like that being formally recorded in the Corporation minutes.

The Commission of Sewers Acts and Ordinances were finally consulted and we started with the oldest available (some not being in a good enough condition to handle due to water damage and bookworm). We started at 1660 and read through, photographing each folio with a 'tunnel' reference until the early 1700s. We recorded more than 50 tunnels being built or maintained in the Wisbech neighbourhood. These were all water management tunnels and fell very much into the category of those seen under Wisbech roads.

If these were drainage tunnels, what were they doing under Wisbech? We concluded that before the mid 1600s, Wisbech had been a relatively small town with its buildings and road structure spread fairly evenly alongside the banks of the Wisbech River. It was only when commerce and trade rocketed about this time that the large drainage ditches taking rain water off the land and into the river, got in the way of expanding buildings and connecting roadways. To overcome this problem the large drains were 'culverted' and built over. It was only after the fens had been successfully drained that these tunnels became more or less redundant. They would have been useful for quite some time but eventually carried too little water for people to bother maintaining them. They would have simply been forgotten.

As to whether they were later used by innovative people for other uses is another matter.

Just recently we have launched an appeal via two local Facebook pages; Wisbech Pictures Old and New, and Wisbech and Surrounding Villages Old Photo's to get the community to tell us of their 'tunnel' stories. The appeal was very successful but a lot of tunnels mentioned could not be considered as water management tunnels. This has raised further questions and it is at this point that we find ourselves now. We still have other ideas that we are following up and the search is far from over.

We recently met with the professional archaeologists assigned to this project. They have ideas of how they can help the community to appreciate the cellars and vaults under Wisbech but until we can track down and gain access to the tunnel system we are at a loss as to how we can utilise the knowledge of their existence.

We have a way to go yet before we can put this subject 'to bed' but it will not be for the want of trying...

Andy Ketley, October 2017