

# ELEMENTAL CROYDON FIRE, WATER, EARTH AND AIR

The elements from various esoteric and magical belief systems regularly cause problems for Croydon, ranging from rain washing out public events to fire destroying not only the parish church but also Crystal Palace. On other occasions water has been good to Croydon, being at the centre of the development of Old Town. Fire, too, has kept the town warned of invasion and been used in celebrations. The earth beneath our feet has preserved signs of our past, and some people look to the skies to see who's looking at us. Or perhaps to see whether a frog or block of ice is about to land.



A source of the Wandle, Morden Hall Park

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# FIRE

## BONFIRES AND BEACONS

**In many traditions fire is a symbol of the generative power of the sun. Fire ceremonies mainly derive from ancient Celtic festivals associated with the summer and winter solstices. Over in Germany bonfires are held at Easter time, and the word may be derived from the Saxon 'boon', meaning a sort of gift. We might think we have lost our Celtic rituals, but the Bonfire Night celebrations are, strangely enough, closely linked to the Celtic new year festival of Samhain, now more familiar to us as Hallowe'en. The dead were welcomed home by fires, but bonfires were used to keep demons away.**

### GUY FAWKES

All Saints' Day had already been moved in 835 to 1 November from 13 May (known as Walpurgis Night or the Witches' Sabbath in the old calendar). All Souls' Day had been moved to 2 November in 988 to take the place of the pagan Samhain. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century the Protestant King Henry VIII issued an edict banning the Catholic practice of vigils on All Saints' Eve (now better known to us as Hallowe'en), but this was an unpopular move as people were given holidays for vigils.

Because of the ban on celebrations viewed as Catholic and therefore suspect, it proved highly opportune when, in 1605, Guy Fawkes and his fellow Catholic conspirators tried to blow up the House of Lords with 36 barrels of gunpowder on the day of the State Opening of Parliament. The plot was uncovered the day before, when Fawkes was discovered in the cellar, and by 12 November all the main conspirators had been arrested or shot. Fawkes was by no means the chief conspirator. The ringleader, Robert Catesby, had fled to the Midlands, only to be shot there. One plotter, Thomas Percy, allegedly escaped south through

Croydon, stopping to ask directions at the George Inn. Archbishop Bancroft, in a letter to the Secretary of State, reports that Percy bandied words with 'one Matthew, host of the George'. However, as there were reports of his being spotted fleeing London in every conceivable direction, this can only be founded in disinformation or legend. He is more reliably reported to have changed horses at Warwick Castle in the Midlands, en route to a refuge in Wales. History records that he was shot dead with Catesby at Holbeach House in Staffordshire. Percy was the man who had leased the coal cellar under Parliament so that the conspirators could store their explosives there. The remaining conspirators were tried in January 1606, convicted of High Treason and sentenced to death.

People were given a day off by Act of Parliament as a day of thanksgiving to celebrate the foiling of the plot, and there were church services. This ended up being tantamount to a revival of many of the banned Hallowe'en practices and, since fireworks had been invented by then, they may well have been added at that time. Certainly fires and street festivities were recorded the

following year in London.

Guy Fawkes was hanged, drawn and quartered, but that inconvenient fact did not stop whole-body effigies being burned. Effigies are believed to have started out as a ritual figure, a scapegoat taking away all the bad luck, but that's by the by. By the 19<sup>th</sup> century the effigy was commonly dressed up to represent a figure of hate, whether political or religious.

The *Croydon Advertiser* in November 1935 reported that the origin of the word 'bonfire' and the tradition itself were obscure. The journalist wrote that they were thought to be symbols of the volcanic fire that was regarded by people who lived in volcanic areas as a manifestation of their gods.

Some towns, for instance Lewes in Sussex, retain associations dedicated to organizing huge processions and bonfires, and the guys dressed up by the 'Bonfire Boys' still poke fun at politicians. It's worth going along to watch the event in Lewes to get an idea of what our celebrations used to be like and breathe in the atmosphere of smoke and burning tar barrels. There is a reference to Croydon's own bonfire boys in the *Croydon Advertiser* of 9 November 1878. A journalist attending the bonfire at Duppas Hill heard people talking about putting a sack of potatoes in the embers as an impromptu meal for the 'bonfire boys', as it was such a cold night. The journalist was among those who left early because of the bitter cold.

In Croydon the bonfire celebrations used to include a procession through the streets, followed by the lighting of fires and fireworks. When the usual celebrations were banned in 1876, a riot followed on 6 November, with the

homes of prominent people and the police station stoned next day. The following year a bonfire was permitted on Duppas Hill, which has long been used for such events.

The *Croydon Advertiser* describes the 20-foot bonfire in 1878 as being constructed of logs and tar barrels. During the day a few guys had been on display in town, with a large one driven around on a cart, but no one could tell who they were meant to represent. Even back then making guys was becoming unpopular, as the public refused to give money to the men who made them. The crowds gathered early for the procession down North End. Someone let off 'crackers' in the crowd, and this was viewed as a welcome distraction by the bored people. Fewer health and safety considerations in those days, then. The crowd jeered at vehicles that tried to pass, and shopkeepers closed their shops early and boarded them up.

The procession to Duppas Hill was led by the fife and drum band of the Second Surrey Volunteers. The glare of the 300-400 torches carried by the crowd and the pitchy smoke they emitted produced a 'strange, weird effect'. There was no riot, and all went smoothly. The journalist remarks that the torches could have done a lot of damage if the mood of the crowd had changed. The bonfire burned for hours and there were also fireworks. The only damage was a piece of burnt turf and 'the good name of Croydon was not sullied'.

Although that event went off peacefully enough, apart from a few 'senseless roughs' and a 'well-known person in a cart [who] kept riding round the bonfire and throwing a whip about which might have injured some people', there was

another riot in 1879 when the people were stopped from holding a procession. Subsequently several fields were approved as sites for bonfires.

Edgar Browne, in *Phiz and Dickens*, describes Thornton Heath bonfire nights in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Guys were made of old clothes, but had purpose-made costumes and masks. They 'presented the appearance of human beings paralytic from drink'. Guys were carried around town on litters and burnt on bonfires after dark. The effigy would be made to look like a well-known and unpopular person, and once it was dressed as the pope. The processions were always accompanied by the traditional rhyme:

*'Remember, remember the 5th of  
November,  
Gunpowder, treason and plot.  
We see no reason  
Why Gunpowder treason  
Should ever be forgot',*

together with inarticulate shouting, beating of frying pans, drums and blowing of horns.

Croydon's 1878 celebrations may have passed without mishap, but that was not the case for Addington's Home Farm in 1877. This farm, part of the Addington Palace estate, stood opposite the Cricketers. A large fire on Bonfire Day caused damage to the farm buildings and crops.

It was acknowledged that there was a risk that bonfire celebrations would die out in some places, and in 1909 they were revived in Shirley by one E Mennels and others. The guy was drawn round the village on a cart pulled by hand, rather than horses, and the villagers followed in fancy dress. The

bonfire was lit in Windmill Field. The event was discontinued during World War I and wasn't revived again until 1948. The bonfire was then held on a site in the Addington Hills, with the permission of Croydon Corporation. A booklet entitled *Old Shirley Village Bonfire and Fireworks Celebrations* contains a published programme for the celebration, including an Order of Procession that listed the planned tableaux. These were to feature nursery rhyme characters such as the Three Bears and Goldy Locks [*sic*], and the Old Woman in a Shoe. There would be prizes for fancy dress and torches were to be carried. The assembled crowd would have to recite the 'Bonfire prayers', which were two verses of the traditional 'Remember, remember...' rhyme.

In 1935 a bonfire and firework display was provided on Riddlesdown by John Laing, the builders, as a 'manifestation of good fellowship' rather than a symbol of worship or warning. In 1991 the Rotary Club of Forest Hill and Sydenham organized London's largest firework display, held at Crystal Palace Park. It attracted a crowd of 17,000. The fireworks cost £8000 and it was hoped to pass £25,000 to local and national charities.

In 1991 a bonfire at the recreation ground in South Norwood ran out of control, leading Croydon Council to consider banning them. The Fire Brigade was reportedly relieved that the Council agreed in 1992 to continue public bonfires, as the increase in communal events had led to calls levelling off. However, the fire brigade would have preferred no bonfires at all. The London Fire Brigade provides information on the safe construction of bonfires.

In 1995 the police were warning householders about vandals who were throwing fireworks through letterboxes and open windows. A house in Shirley had a carpet set alight by a banger thrown through the open front door.

By the late 20<sup>th</sup> century the use of loud fireworks had spread from November to any celebration during the year, with people holding back stocks of fireworks to let off in the middle of night and scare their neighbours silly, not to mention wildlife and pets. As a backlash against irresponsible disturbance of the peace there have been calls for the sale of the noisier fireworks to be restricted to organizers of public events. Yobs plaguing their neighbours with fireworks can now be fined a measly £80 for throwing fireworks in public places or letting them off after 11 pm. But you have to catch them first.

## OTHER BONFIRES

Away from Guy Fawkes Night, bonfires and/or fireworks were a feature of many celebrations. In 1863 the Croydon Literary and Scientific Institution held a summer fete in July with a 'grand display of fireworks' by 'Mr Southby, Pyrotechnist to the Queen'. 1896 saw the opening of Croydon's third town hall, performed by the Prince of Wales. After darkness fell, the crowds watched a display of fireworks in Wandle Park, provided by the Brock company. Pollards Hill in Norbury was the site of a large bonfire in 1897 to celebrate Queen Victoria's Jubilee.

An annual bonfire at Duppas Hill was sponsored by town benefactor Alderman Sir Frederick Edridge in June. The fireworks came from Brock's, which had a factory near the brickworks in Woodside for some time until it closed in 1913 after a fatal explosion. Edridge

wanted the town's poor to be able to enjoy the sort of display given weekly by Brock's at Crystal Palace. Around 30,000 people attended the show in 1912, when Edridge's portrait was reproduced in fireworks. Other set pieces were described as a silver Niagara; Russian dancers; shields; sun, and spider wheels. There was a 'sky work display' of rockets and Roman candles, and Brock's new 'shimmer light' was reported to have been popular. In 1999 Millennium Commission funding was given to Bromley for a New Year celebration including fireworks at Crystal Palace Park and to Croydon for the 'Croydon - Forest of Fire' extravaganza fireworks in Lloyd Park. These two mentions are from the Millennium Commission website, and I don't remember seeing anything about them in the local papers.

At the end of World War 2, VE (Victory in Europe) Day was celebrated all over Croydon with bonfires. The district of Shirley lit bonfires in the streets on the Wednesday, but a 'well-known police inspector' came along and stopped them. This led to resentment, as bonfires were going ahead in other areas of town. Waddon and South Croydon had even held 'dress rehearsals' on the Monday, but they had not been stopped from lighting bonfires in the middle of the road.

Norwood had been in Doodle Bug Alley and had been viciously bombed during the Blitz. Effigies of defeated Nazi leader Adolf Hitler were burned on many bonfires in Woodside, including one of him dressed as a painter and decorator (presumably mocking his failed artistic pretensions). South Norwood saw him incinerated on funeral pyres, and a huge swastika was also burned. To mark the 50th anniversary of VE Day in 1995 the

events were due to include a jamboree on 8 May at Purley Way West, culminating in a bonfire with a firework display.

the Millennium, and so on.

## BEACONS

Another traditional use of bonfires is as a warning. Beacons as a hill-top early-warning system seem to date from the 14<sup>th</sup> century, during the conflict between Edward II and his queen. By the reign of Henry VIII they had become a sophisticated system enabling thousands of men to be mustered in defence of the country.

Originally just large bonfires, beacons developed into tall oak posts with an iron fire basket and ladder. They were filled with flammable material, including furze. Visitors to Britain in the 16<sup>th</sup> century were reportedly impressed, such beacons being unique to Britain (at least in the visitors' experience). Watchers were employed - this was a boring job except in times of conflict. There were false alarms due to forest and furze fires, mistaken identification of friendly shipping, and so on.

Beacons were lit on hills such as Riddlesdown to warn of the danger posed by the Spanish Armada in the English Channel in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and Napoleon in the 19<sup>th</sup>, when his forces were positioned in Boulogne, ready to strike. Beckenshaw at Woodmansterne in the Croydon Hundred was recorded as 'Beaconsfield' in 1580.

Beacons continued to be used until around the Civil War, when the maintenance of a standing army made them redundant. Nowadays beacons are lit to mark events such as royal jubilees, the anniversary of the VE Day celebrations marking the end of hostilities in Europe after World War 2,

# WATER

## RIVERS, WELLS AND SPRINGS

**In some belief-systems water represents the Great Mother and is associated with birth and initiation, the feminine principle, the universal womb and the fountain of life. Water was used as a symbol of purification in many religions at a very early date. The Celts believed that waters, lakes, wells and so forth had magical properties and were the dwelling places of supernatural beings. Wells often contained waters with powers of healing and wish-fulfilment. In Christian symbolism, water represents regeneration, salvation and purification. The living spring is also said to represent the Blessed Virgin Mary, the womb of creation, while Jesus Christ is seen as the fountain of life. It is also one of life's essentials, for without water there is no life.**

### THE WANDLE

Croydon, built on the Wandle, had a very watery site. Indeed, one of the interpretations of its name, 'Valley of the Crocus', is taken by historian Yvonne Walker as implying that the land was well watered, although most saffron today is produced in famously dry places such as Spain and the Middle East. Indeed, the International Symposium on Saffron Biology and Biotechnology reported that it was a popular field crop in Khorasan, Iran, precisely due to its low water requirement. The Romans are also believed to have had a settlement near the present parish church, exploiting the abundant streams for food (trout) and transport.

The Domesday Book (1086/87) records that 'Croindene manor', which included a mill, was held by Archbishop Lanfranc. This would have been served by the Wandle and Scarbrook, now largely underground. A large water wheel was later built in the inner courtyard when the site was sold off for industrial use, and this was fed by a manmade stream

from Laud's Pond (also known as My Lord's Pond or the Great Palace Pond and later as an 'abominable nuisance').

The site of the Old Archbishop's Palace was so wet that there were ponds for growing fish for the table. Roman Way now stands over the site of the old mill pond and part of the site of Laud's Pond is under Rylands House, whose foundations rest on a raft-like structure because of the marshy ground.

The many springs and tributaries were canalized in the 19<sup>th</sup> century due to epidemics of water-borne diseases such as typhoid and cholera after the streams had become little better than open sewers. All sorts of waste used to be dumped in Laud's Pond and Scarbrook Pond, including material from the slaughterhouses. The Board of Health cleaned things up, culverting streams and draining ditches. It's hard to believe that the water had once been so pure that the Old Palace could be used for calico bleaching.

Street names such as Scarbrook Hill still

show where these streams once flowed. Pump Pail refers to another source of water for the Old Town's inhabitants. In the courtyard of the Whitgift Almshouses are planters showing the sites of old wells, and the different style of brick on part of the George Street wall is said to show another.

The Wandle also made it possible to provide Carew Manor in Beddington with a moat, something rare north of the Downs. It was not drained until the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The site of the manor was pretty wet. When the final Carew (Charles Hallowell Hallowell Carew) died bankrupt after a life of betting debts in 1872, he was buried in the Carew



Oh well! - a planter in the Whitgift Almshouses

chapel vault. The Reverend Bridges ordered the vault to be sealed off by pouring liquid concrete into the cavities, as the chamber was partially waterlogged.

In 1890 the Corporation laid out land at Frog's Mead and Stubb's Mead, Pitlake, as Wandle Park. There was a boating lake fed by local springs and ice skating was a popular. The lake frequently dried up in the 20<sup>th</sup> century due to the falling

water table, and the river was eventually diverted and the lake filled in. A heritage trail in Waddon that received a Council grant in 1995 was due to take in Waddon Ponds and the river Wandle.

In 2004 an environmental charity called JetSet was reported to be working with local schools such as the Old Palace School, Sutton Grammar School and St Philomena's to restock the Wandle with trout. Conservationists hoped a viable breeding population would develop in the next five years from the 400 trout fry released.

Recent attempts to bring the river to the surface again have failed, filling the newspapers with squabbles about developers, contamination, destruction of ancient sites and public benefits. The planning blueprint of Croydon Council and the Mayor's London Plan wanted to use developments such as the one on the former British Gas site on Purley Way to open river channels, improve wildlife habitats and public accessibility. The Mayor's report included the option of bringing the Wandle back to the surface, and it was suggested that diverting sections of the river through landscaped areas could be financed by intensifying the development, but ProLogis, the company behind the development, believed digging the river out from its drain would be too expensive. A subsequent public enquiry ruled that the river plan would have made the warehouse development unviable.

The newspapers reported in 2003 that Mark Palmer, a developer, wanted to use a site he owned on the corner of Croydon Road and the Purley Way for storing skips. Local historian Raymond Hague claimed the yard would

'devastate local ecology and destroy an area of archaeological value' by draining damaging Waddon Ponds through seepage of chemicals. The site's development had ceased in the 1930s because of fears that the foundations of a planned estate would disturb the underground stream. The Environment Agency searched hydrographical maps to pinpoint the stream. A resident had dug up flint tools in 1996 when burying a cat and these were dated to 1400 BC by the Museum of London, making it a Bronze Age site. Local residents got a petition together in 2003 in an attempt to stop the development.

## WOE WATERS

The name Woe Waters is derived from the disastrous events taking place whenever the Bourne, an occasional spring and one of the sources of the Wandle, rose after heavy rains. It gave rise to epidemics of typhus and 'Croydon fever'.

Historically, the rising of the Bourne has foretold disaster for the country, the first 'ill omen' being recorded by the Master of Peterhouse, Cambridge, in 1473. People have said that its rising foretold events such as World War I and the execution of Charles I. A talk on this subject was given at the Purley Natural History and Scientific Society in 1929 by J Howard Brown. He said the Bourne appeared before the great plagues and before the Restoration in 1660 (was this a bad thing in his mind?). A study by Baldwin Latham apparently gives the earliest reference to the ill omens as being in Warkworth's Chronicle, which covered the first 13 years of the reign of Edward IV. The Camden Society's 'Britannia' (1586) says that the Vandal (an old name of the Wandle) was augmented by a small river rising in Croydon: 'For the torrent that the vulgar

affirm to rise here sometimes and to presage dearth and pestilence; it seems hardly worth so much as mentioning, tho' perhaps it may have something of truth in it'. The saying goes that 'When Croydon Bourne doth upwards ryse, Disaster Dyre before us lyes. Surry woe water - ill-omened stream' (reproduced in the *Croydon Advertiser* in 1995).

The Bourne flows along the foot of Riddlesdown and even now it intermittently causes mayhem to the inhabitants of Kenley. In the past it would appear after a succession of wet seasons, flooding the older, low-lying parts of town. It would last for five or six weeks, bringing fever and death, but when it rose in 1903 it had flowed for 198 days. There was so much water in the 1920s that teachers from Warlingham School used to take boats out at Wapses Corner, Caterham.

Reports in the *Croydon Guardian* in 2004 said that Sutton and East Surrey Water were to convert the old Bourne View allotments into a permanent flood meadow with a dam to reduce the risk of flooding from the Bourne in Kenley. In late 2000 the Environment Agency had issued flood warnings for the Bourne and the Wandle, telling people to move stuff out of their cellars. By then the Woe Waters hadn't risen since 1995, which in turn had been only the second time in 20 years.

The Environment Agency had got it right. Heavy rain in winter 2000 did lead to the stream's bursting its banks and flooding the Godstone Road. Whyteleafe and Kenley were affected for three weeks. The floodwater had to be pumped away into roadside channels. Gardens and cellars flooded, shops were boarded up and there was a 'sea of sandbags'. In January 2001



Grey heron paddling in the Wandle

Thames Water was still sucking sewage from gardens, and there were fears that allotment holders might not be allowed back as the land had been contaminated.

Local MPs talked about the resilience of the locals and the Battle of Britain spirit, but the locals were furious about how the problem had been allowed to drag on before any action was taken. The drains and sewers proved inadequate and there were fears that the treatment works at Kenley would flood, contaminating drinking water. A complaint about Thames Water was lodged with Ofwat, but the company denied legal responsibility for the river's bursting its banks. Thames Water subsequently spent £1 million to ensure groundwater would not enter its sewage system.

So that you know where to avoid during torrential rain, the Bourne usually rises near the railway viaduct over Woldingham Road or near Wapses roundabout, running through Whyteleafe, down Eastbourne Road,

joining the Merstham branch near the Tesco store at Purley. From there it goes down Brighton Road, through Royal Oak pond, past the Swan and Sugar Loaf, then alongside Southbridge Road to join the Wandle at Wandle Park. I'm indebted to the *Croydon Advertiser* for that information.

## BEULAH SPA

The healing properties of the local water in Norwood led to the building of Beulah Spa. Unfortunately, this came towards the end of the period when spas were popular attractions for the fashionable, wealthy middle classes.

The Beulah area was largely uninhabited and undeveloped until the 1790s, when the open and common fields on the hill began to be enclosed. This means that no traces of ancient buildings or churches have been found in the area. The Golden Age of Norwood came with the development of the spa.

The water had a local reputation in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, and the inhabitants used it to cure their lesser ailments. Legend has it that an old horse due to be sent to the knacker's yard was left in the field where the water bubbled up. It drank from the pool and became sleek and fit. Another version with a few more details says that John Davidson Smith, who owned part of the Manor of Whitehorse, rescued a horse from the knacker's yard and turned it loose to graze. It drank water from the spring and its strength returned.

Architect Decimus Burton was called in and Bewley Farm was converted into a spa. It opened on 1 August 1831, covering 30 acres on the slopes of the hill between what are now Grange Road and Spa Hill. Stage coaches left three times a day from near Charing Cross in London. People came from all over the country to drink or bathe. The waters were said to cure all sorts of illnesses, but the spa was also a Victorian pleasure garden, with a pump room, camera obscura, circus ring, maze, lake and archery butts. There were also minstrels, a military band for dancing, fortune-tellers and firework displays. A 'Grand Fete al Fresco' was held in August 1836 with grotesque dancers and an Old English Maypole morris dance. The writer Thackeray visited the spa and wrote a skit about a *nouveau riche* hairdresser emulating the fashionable life and visiting the spa.

The 12-foot deep magnesium well was enclosed within a thatched cottage shaped like a wigwam. Its water was analysed by Michael Faraday and described as pure and strongly saline. Its chief component was Epsom salts or magnesium sulphate, so it was chiefly purgative. It was reckoned to be as fine as the water from Bath or Cheltenham. 'Beulah Saline Water' was delivered frozen to the big houses in London and was said to be distinctly bitter but not disagreeable. The same water is said to have fed the wells at Streatham.

The name 'Beulah' is supposed by some to be an allusion to the land of Beulah in the Old Testament (Isaiah, 62, 4), emphasizing the beauty of the locality and perhaps suggested by the area's old name of 'Bewley Farm' or 'Bewlands', from the farm that had been there since the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

The spa closed in 1858 (some sources say 1854, others 1855), as it could not compete with the Crystal Palace, erected nearby in 1854. Most of the buildings were demolished in 1876. The Beulah Spa Hotel kept going until its demolition in 1937. Only the old ticket office at the top of Spa Hill, Tivoli Lodge, remains. Much of the grounds now form part of The Lawns. The well is said to exist still, covered by boards on the site of the All Nations Bible College. There is also a Beulah Hill Pond, described in *Croydon's Parks - An illustrated history* as having been a watering place for horses and cattle. The locals called it the Big Pond, and it was used for skating when it froze in winter. Maybe it has the same healing waters.

## CHURCHES AND BOGS

Some Croydon churches seem to have been deliberately built on wet ground. Croydon parish church, dedicated to St John the Baptist, was built on a piece of ground surrounded by the tributary streams of the Wandle, which now rise further north. There was enough water to feed large ponds. The church that burned down in 1867 was probably built in the 14-15<sup>th</sup> centuries by Archbishop Courtney and Archbishop Chicheley, whose arms were on the north door and west door respectively. Ironically, the church had been on an island surrounded by water until about 1849. When the church was cleaned in 1844 distemper painting was found on the South Wall showing a monk crossing a brook.

Some writers have speculated that the Christian church replaced a pagan temple on the site, since water was important to our Celtic and Anglo-Saxon forbears. Others have suggested that the wet site was picked because of the

custom of baptism by full-body immersion, and the dedication to St John the Baptist could be seen as supporting this theory.

King Coenwulf of Mercia and his council met at the manor of Croydon in 809, when Croydon was described as a 'monasterium', which would suggest that the archbishop, Wulfred, had some substantial buildings around a church staffed by priests. The Archbishops of Canterbury owned the manor by Archbishop Aethelred's day (870-888), and it seems to have passed directly into the hands of the now Norman-led church after the Conquest. However, the Domesday Book is quiet on this. In an Anglo-Saxon will made by Beorhtric and Elfswyth around AD 960 a witness is named as Elfsies, 'the priest of Croydon', which implies there was a place of worship where he officiated, but the earliest mention of the name of St John is in 1347, in a bequest made by John of Croydon, a fishmonger.

Other churches in Croydon have soggy connections. St Oswald's in Norbury was built on ground so swampy that a boy was fishing there when the Archbishop of Canterbury went along to inspect the planned site. The foundation stone was laid in 1933. The locals referred to the site as 'stink pond'. St Luke's at Woodside was built on waste ground on Spring Lane. It had been intended to build the church on Woodside Green, opposite The Sycamores, but progress made by the builders during the day was sabotaged so often at night that a less picturesque site had to be used. Spring Lane got its name from a stream that is now culverted, so it wasn't actually boggy when the church was constructed.

The site of Croydon's first non-

conformist church, Pump Pail Chapel on Bog Island, built in 1729, was so prone to flooding that coffins floated off when the Bourne rose and gravediggers had to force the coffins under the water while they shovelled earth on top. In 1866 the chapel moved to a drier site in Tamworth Road, where it still stands as the Baptist Chapel.

The banks of the Wandle had already been used for cemeteries in the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries, serving the settlements in Croydon, Beddington and Mitcham.

## UNHOLY WELL

A spring-fed pond in Carshalton sometimes masquerades as a holy well. It is variously known as St Margaret's Well or Pool, or alternatively Lady Margaret's Well or Pool. However, its origins are much more prosaic. According to the Honeywood Heritage Centre, an official plaque on the site and an inscribed stone, John Ruskin campaigned to clean up the village's springs and ponds. He brought rocks from Coniston in the Lake District to surround the spring, which now only flows after heavy rainfall in winter. It had no name until Ruskin restored it in the 1870s and named it simply Margaret's Pond, after his Carshalton-born mother. In the 1920s it was known as Ruskin's Pool locally.

Over in Beddington, the name Hallowell crops up in some place names and sets researchers' pulses racing. However, it's taken from the family name of a distant branch of the Carew family from Canada who took over the estate in Beddington when the locals died out.

# EARTH

## THE WORLD BENEATH US

The earth beneath our feet has long been home to legends of other worlds. In Celtic lore it was the realm of the fairy folk, under their various names. Humans would be enticed to this underground world, spending what seemed a short time there. On emerging they would find that the world had moved on without them and friends and family were dead. Maybe stories of the hidden fairy world prompted some tales of secret tunnels. However, in *Tales of Old Surrey* Matthew Alexander says that typical legends tell of tunnels between castles and the local monastery. Rumours of disreputable goings-on were put about during the Reformation to discredit the old church and its ways. In areas without castles or monasteries, local manor houses and churches had to be substituted. This seems to be the case in Croydon.

### RUMOURS OF TUNNELS

Some tunnels are of an improbable length. While Henry VIII courted Anne Boleyn in a tunnel just half a mile long (albeit a very steep one), a 17-mile tunnel is said to connect Carshalton to Albury Park. A short tunnel was indeed dug through a hillside in the grounds of this estate as part of John Evelyn's



Gothic Cottage, Addiscombe

landscaped garden, but legend has considerably added to its length. It has also been claimed that a whole army once marched through it.

A short passage is rumoured to link the early 19<sup>th</sup> century St James's Church in Addiscombe, just north of East Croydon station, to the even more recent 'Gothic Cottage' opposite. According to Alan Hardcastle's *The Death of a Parish*, the tunnel was discovered by the Reverend Carr but found to be blocked when explored from the cottage side. When the church was later converted into housing, nothing was found apart from some 'irregularity in the brickwork'. The foundations of the south side of the church are, however, very deep. As none of the past occupants of the cottage are believed to have had connections with the church, why should people believe there is a tunnel?.

In the Old Manor House (now demolished) and St Lawrence's Church, Caterham had an example of a connection between a manor house and parish church. A Chelsea Speleological

Society report from the 1960s says a local woman claimed that, as a girl, she was shown the entrance to the tunnel at the Old Manor House, but was not allowed to enter as it was 'too damp'. The top of a brick vault was discovered at the nearby Old Court Lodge during building work, but it was not explored and was later covered over.

A tunnel is also alleged to run from near the caretaker's office at the Archbishop's Palace, now Old Palace School, in Croydon, to an unknown destination. One of the Palace guides speculates that it was turned into the sewer - but could it be that it was the discovery of the old sewer that sparked the original legend?

Perhaps the most outlandish claim is for a tunnel from 'Robbers' Cave' in Beddington all the way to Brighton. Allegedly used by smugglers for transporting booty from the coast to Surrey and London, the tunnel was said to start near the Plough Inn. An old pub sign commemorating its discovery depicted a man with a plough, who fell into the smugglers' den while ploughing. The legend is confused, and a story published in 1862 says that a Mr Plowman discovered a passage during the construction of a well for a gamekeeper's cottage. He followed the tunnel for some distance before coming to water. Paper Jack is also said to have slept in Beddington Cave, while Elizabeth I features in a legend connected with a murderous collier.

At the bottom of such legends of nefarious goings-on lie anything from mines to vast Tudor drains. The London Speleological Society investigated the Beddington tunnels in 1940 and judged them to be old sand mines. They found a manhole cover in Queen Elizabeth's Walk that led down to the tunnels, but

were not given permission to enter. Very few traces remained of the mines when the Chelsea Speleological Society examined the site in 1968. Also in Beddington, there is a legend of two tunnels leading from the old Cheam Court, demolished to make way for Station Road. Tradition has it that one tunnel connected with the Carews' house, while the other went to the Tudor palace of Nonsuch a mile away. The passage to Nonsuch is also said to have connected with Whitehall in Malden Road, but according to our Chelsea cavers excavations in 1958 showed these were palace sewers. A publication from 1921, quoted as 'Mem. Geol. Surv. N.S. 270' by the Chelsea team, says that Thanet Sand was long dug out for use in construction and many disused caves and tunnels still existed in Ewell, Cheam and Beddington.

Carshalton Park has some interesting constructions, recently renovated to some extent. In addition to the depressions called the Hogpit and the Frying Pan, which are believed to have served as fish ponds to the estate, there is a brick construction that is known as the Grotto. A 1924 publication by J M Hobson called *The Book of the Wandle* is quoted by the Chelsea Speleological Society. It says that there is a small tunnel at the south end of an artificial canal in Ruskin Road beneath an 'obvious grotto'. It was possible to crawl through the water in the brick-arched tunnel to a domed chamber where it was possible to stand up. A hole in the roof of the chamber led to a second chamber. There was a locked door 'behind which a flight of stairs ascends, but on the surface there was no sign of the steps.

Caterham and Godstone caves were described as 'the most extensive labyrinth of old-time mines and quarries'

by James Geary Gardner of the Speleological Society. Although the main entrances are near Godstone, the workings extend for miles beneath Caterham. A rumour circulated during World War 2 that a German spy was hiding in a section of the mine called Baldwin's Folly. Despite an extensive search, nobody was found.



Grotto, Carshalton

Other mining activity may also help shape legends. Underground chalk was used as a soil conditioner, so deneholes were dug widely in the Middle Ages to get at this material. They consisted of a narrow shaft with steps leading down into a mine comprising a number of chambers. In most cases only shallow depressions can now be seen, but if subsidence causes the shaft to collapse, the remains may give rise to legends of tunnels. Some authorities have recognized deneholes in Devilsden Woods, Warlingham, Coombe Farm, Hagglers Dean and the Chaldon area. In later centuries chalk wells with a wider opening were also dug. Surprisingly, they were cruder than the medieval structures and tended to collapse more readily. According to a 1994 report from the Bourne Society, a possible chalk well opened up 'a few years ago' in a field opposite the pond at Slines Green near Chelsham. Army

personnel are believed to have inspected the hole with remote cameras, reporting chambers at the base, suggesting this was indeed a chalk well.

Early graffiti in soot and chalk from the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries were discovered some years ago in the Chaldon firestone quarries, some dating from after the mines closed. Several examples of mystical symbols such as curved swastikas and Cretan labyrinths were found in Chaldon Bottom. Researcher Andrew Collins was invited to inspect them as part of the 'Cairdroia Project'. According to his *ASSAP News* report in 1982, 'one maze and swastika appeared above an altar-like stone'. Red ochre hinted at a ceremonial purpose, but there were few indications of ritual use. Masonic letter 'W's' were noted, along with 'other markings often found on the walls of churches and cathedrals'. Andy believed the caves had been used by individuals familiar with mystical symbolism, either for magical purposes or just for 'fun'. The maze design suggested a 'symbolic allusion to the labyrinth-like shafts ... and tunnels of the mine system'.

A huge new tunnel that might puzzle our descendants a long time from now is the 10km tunnel to be known as the Croydon Cable Tunnel. It will house power lines. The 3m wide tunnel is planned to run from Beddington substation to Rowdown substation in New Addington at a depth of 40m below ground. Work is due to last from 2006 to 2008, but the cable won't be installed until 2010. In central Croydon the tunnel will run under Il Ponte Italian restaurant near the flyover. The *Croydon Advertiser* reported that most of the excavation would take place without anyone noticing. The National Grid planned to build two maintenance

buildings disguised as private housing at Lloyd Park and Kent Gate Way.

## WADDON CAVES

While Croydon abounds in dene holes dug to extract chalk for agriculture, there is another site where digging was carried out for an entirely different, albeit unknown, purpose.

In June 1902 subterranean chambers were found during the construction of sewers under the lawn near Waddon House. The excavations were led by George Clinch, FGS, who discovered three chambers cut into a bed of compact sand and extending into the hillside. The floor was about 15' below ground level and was made of compact sand. Resembling beehives in shape, the chambers measured about 7' in height with a diameter of no more than 12'. The only means of access was an oval-shaped opening. Their regular shape was felt to have resulted from the excavator's position in the centre of his originally roughly shaped creation; he would then have scraped away at the walls with a wooden tool.

A fourth cave was found in October 1953 after heavy rain led to subsidence in a garden on Alton Road, Waddon. Unfortunately the site had to be filled in quickly for safety's sake, but not before a brief excavation. Pottery and sheep's teeth were found, but only 40% of the ground could be examined in the time available.

The 'Waddon Caves' are believed to date from the late Neolithic period, but were clearly used for some purpose over a long period of time. Evidence of later disturbance includes fragments of pottery from the Iron Age, Romano-British and Saxon periods and possibly medieval scratchings on the curved roof depicting a bird, animal and boat.

Remains of mammals, but not of the human variety, were found in the sand filling up the lateral avenues. These include bone fragments of *Bos longifrons*, a bovine animal related to domestic cattle, but extinct in Britain by the 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> century AD.

By contrast with dene holes, the caves had no perpendicular shaft and were dug out of sand. They were said to resemble tomb chambers found in Palmella (Portugal) and La Tourelle (Brittany, France), although the French tombs come from a later period. The design is said to be similar to that of dwellings found rather closer to home, on hillsides at Croham Hurst, Shirley Hills and West Wickham. Some writers note a resemblance to chambered barrows, in which case the lateral passages may imitate the doorway of Neolithic habitations. The custom of burying the dead within a house-like receptacle survived during the Bronze Age, when 'hut urns' continued to be used after cremation had been introduced.

A thorough excavation of the site in 1902 or 1953 might well have produced more evidence of the caves' original purpose.

# AIR LIGHTS IN THE SKY

**Croydon newspapers have contained very few reports of UFOs since I moved here in 1986 - maybe the city lights make it difficult to make anything out clearly, even aircraft heading to London's various airports, but it has to be said that Halley's comet was easy to see a few years ago. Maybe our skies genuinely present nothing that cannot be explained.**

The archives at the Local Studies Library include a report from the *Croydon Advertiser* in April 1964 of sightings on a Sunday night of a glowing 'star-like object' in the sky over South Norwood. It was spotted by teenager Lee Turner, who ran to get his uncle, an amateur astronomer. Lee is reported as saying 'It was like a star in the first magnitude moving north/north-east'. It was watched by several people as it moved slowly past the ITV transmitter at Beulah Hill. Mr Gittens, Lee's uncle, was reported as saying he had been sceptical about UFOs, assuming the ones his nephew told him about were meteorites, but now he had changed his mind. From their vantage point the object took four minutes to move across the sky before vanishing below the horizon.

In the next edition a woman who reported watching a UFO over Crystal Palace Parade from her flat in Shirley on the previous Sunday night said it was a large, red glowing object. She also described it as a brilliant light like a star, but definitely not an aeroplane, balloon or star. It took an hour to move across the sky in the direction of London Airport (now better known as Heathrow). She had seen an aeroplane circling it at one stage. Her husband and son also saw it, and they saw it again on the Monday.

What were they looking at? Was it the same Sunday night? The MOD had received no reports of unidentified sightings from the area and the



An alien from the Clocktower

spokesman is reported as saying they had no 'experimental craft' flying in the area as far as he knew. The newspaper also printed a letter from a D M E Wilson suggesting that the object was ECHO II, an American satellite. He said it had been visible each evening for some time and gave the timings and positions for that Sunday night.

In May young Lee the UFO-enthusiast and his friend Keith King, calling themselves the 'Bureau for the

Investigation and Co-ordination of Ufological Information', conducted a poll of 170 shoppers in Church Street one Saturday. This showed that 69% of the people questioned thought they would be 'ridiculed if they told people they had seen a flying saucer'. Nearly 70% of respondents believed that life existed on other planets. Ten percent of the shoppers had either seen a UFO or had friends who had seen one. Other explanations put forward for lights in the sky, known as LITS by ufologists today, included 'earth projects, alien spacecraft and unrestful souls'. Forty years on, I wonder if Lee and Keith are still interested in ufology? Their 'bureau' seems to have been short-lived.

Moving swiftly forward to July 1993, a reader wrote in to the *Croydon Advertiser* asking for more witnesses to strange lights seen in the sky over South Norwood. A reply came a couple of weeks later that the lights were a police helicopter's searchlights.

In 1995 searchlights at Crystal Palace National Sports Centre were mistaken for mysterious lights in the sky by a Thornton Heath resident. The witness was reassured that this was the explanation by the police. Also during 1995, John Rimmer of the magazine *Magonia* gave a talk on the film industry's handling of UFO stories at the Clocktower as part of 'Screening Visions II', an afternoon of talks presented by *Talking Pictures* magazine.

In a cutting from 1999 a New Addington man reported seeing a cluster of half a dozen lights from his bedroom window at 3.20 one Monday morning. The lights were white and yellow and static. He reportedly could not make out any structure or fuselage and could not hear anything, although his window was open. He is reported as saying the UFO

hovered in the sky over the New Addington or Featherbed Lane area, then faded and flew off. He had no idea what the lights were, but found the whole thing 'very, very scary'. Biggin Hill airport, the police and the Civil Aviation Authority said they had had no other sightings reported to them and had no explanation. An MOD spokesman suggested shooting stars as one of the explanations for bright lights in the sky.

Residents of Crystal Palace also reported sightings in February 1999, as described in the *Croydon Guardian*. They saw a triangle-shaped object hovering over houses. However, South Norwood Police had a record of an airship passing over at around the same time. Ufologist Gloria Dixon suggested the sightings might have been of prototype craft, as were being reported from all over the country at that time.

It's hard to judge from these few clippings, but the reports seem to suggest that the people of Croydon assume the lights represent nuts-and-bolts spacecraft. The sample is, of course, self-selected - many people witnessing lights in the sky will assume they are just lights in the sky. And these days, most people don't even lift their eyes to the heavens to see what's normally there.