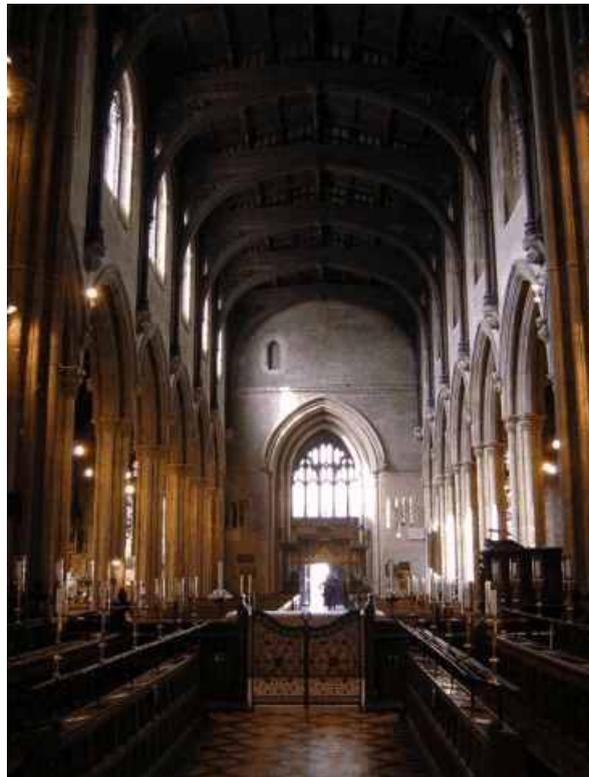


RELIGIOUS CROYDON

The Church was always been important in Croydon. The earliest Charter of Croydon, dating from AD 871, records land being exchanged between one Duke Aelfred and Archbishop Aethelred, showing that the Archbishops had held land here from Saxon times. An Anglo-Saxon will dating from around AD 960 gives one of the witnesses as Elfsies, 'priest of Croydon'. Very little is known about what sort of religious establishment may have stood on the site in those days. Then came the Norman Conquest, and in the Domesday book it is written that the Norman Archbishop of Canterbury, Lanfranc, held the land. The parish church was built in the 14-15th centuries under a number of archbishops. The long connection with the archbishops was interrupted briefly during the Civil War and its aftermath and only finally came to an end when they sold off Addington Palace.

For a long time church activities centred on Croydon's parish church and the archbishop's palace. It was not until the expansion in the population in the 19th century that more Anglican parishes were created. Other Christian denominations were then also allowed to build churches in town. By then the Church of England and institutionalized religion in general were losing some of their grip on the hearts and minds of the populace, but they had left a legacy of stories fit for *Strange Croydon*.



Croydon Parish Church

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CHURCH MYSTERIES

Many legends and customs are connected with the history of the Christian church in the borough. Some stories derive from beliefs and superstitions held by the religious folk of the day, some from the character of the cleric in question, and others from goodness knows what.

BOG ISLAND

The site of Croydon parish church was so boggy that it was known as Bog Island. It was dedicated to St John the Baptist, possibly because of the streams, which were used for baptism. Some writers have speculated that there were places of pagan worship on the site before that, as flowing water has an important place in many pre-Christian beliefs. Certainly, the early Church had a history of taking over pagan sites in the hope of taking over pagan hearts. The first written mention of its name didn't come till 1347, when a fishmonger, John de Croydon, left the 'church of St John de Croydon' a bequest in his will. The site later changed its name to Salem Place. The many streams emptied into ponds, one of which was the site of a mill from Norman times. Others were later used for farming fish. These streams fed the tributaries of the Wandle.

DA VINCI CONNECTION

Do we care? Apparently there's an episode in Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* that takes place at Biggin Hill, where a character lands his aeroplane. As I finalized this chapter in September 2005, the filmmakers were in talks with the Croydon Film Commission about using the Fairfield Hall and possibly other sites in Croydon for their planned blockbuster. The stars were named as Tom Hanks, Audrey Tatou and Sir Ian McKellen. The Bishop of Croydon, the

Rt Rev. Nick Baines, was reported as saying that he had read the book and it was fiction, so he was unconcerned. He claimed it was based on research that had been discredited 10 years ago and that no one should feel threatened by it. The parish council would be involved if there was an application to film in a church in Croydon. The Bishop said he wouldn't be against it, as it didn't purport to be telling the truth.

SPILT BLOOD

Blood was spilled in Croydon parish church on at least two occasions. In 1417 Archbishop Chicheley ordered the church and churchyard, 'lately polluted with blood', to be 'reconciled'. It is no longer known what happened, but tradition has it that a murder took place on the premises. Ducarel, writing in 1783, says reconciliation would take place if a church was 'polluted' by an accident.

The parish register records how in 1729 a young boy called James Marsh bled to death after pulling over the brass eagle lectern and cutting his hand. That lectern was later rescued from the flames that destroyed the church one snowy night in 1867. It still stands in the church but was damaged, this time without bloodshed, when a drunken man ran amok in the church in 2000, lighting a fire by the door, overturning tables and causing other damage. The *Croydon Advertiser* reported that the church was considering not repairing

the 19th century crucifix, but might leave it bent as a reminder that there are mentally ill people out there who need help.

THE WAILING WOMAN

According to the *Croydon Comet* of 31.10.1986, a wailing woman haunts the parish church. True to the tradition of attaching personal histories to vague reports of hauntings, she is said to be Elizabeth Finch (also seen as Fynch or Fynche), who married the Reverend Samuel Finch at 14. She died in 1589, aged 21, after bearing five children, and Lysons (1792) has her being buried in the Bishops' Chancel. There was once a brass of Elizabeth in the church, but it is now known only from brass rubbings.

Elizabeth's husband was present when workmen later found the bodies of three dead babies buried under the floorboards in the Mary Chapel. Is the newspaper trying to imply they secretly buried their dead children in the church? The Reverend Finch has another skeletal connection. He was employed by Archbishop Whitgift to oversee the construction of his almshouses. According to historian Ducarel, writing in 1783, skulls and bones were found in a trench on the site next to the George Inn. In his letter to Whitgift reporting the incident, Finch pointed out that locals remembered more remains being found when a maypole was constructed on the site. As recently as 1937, a skeleton was found outside NatWest when George Street was being remade.

CLEWER - ROGUE VICAR

In the 17th century Dr William Clewer was vicar of Croydon and not a particularly good advertisement for the church. He was taken to court by his parishioners, accused of theft of books from a bookshop, refusing to baptise

babies in the absence of the father, keeping a mistress, trying to ruin members of the parish, visiting bawdy houses, drunkenness, and reading out published sermons rather than writing his own. Despite the intervention of the King and the Archbishop of Canterbury, Clewer managed to hang on to the living, declaring that he intended to ruin the parish before he left it. He was buried in St Bride's church on 12 March 1702 and is named in the registry as 'Parson of Croydon'. In one famed episode from his life, told in several versions, he had a brush with a highwayman.

SAINT'S BONES DEPOSITED



Corfe Castle, Dorset

The bones of St Edward the Martyr were secretly housed for two years in the vaults of the Midland Bank in Croydon. Discovered by John Claridge in a leaden casket during excavations at Shaftesbury Abbey in 1931, the bones were moved to Croydon for safe keeping after Mr Claridge emigrated to

Malta. Then a mere king, Edward was assassinated in 978 at Corfe in Dorset while out riding, and a series of miracles led to his canonization. His remains disappeared from their shrine at Shaftesbury when Henry VIII dissolved the monasteries. They are now held by the Russian Orthodox Church of St Edward the Martyr in Woking, Surrey.

ECCLESIASTICAL FIXTURES AND FITTINGS

A survey of church ornaments was carried out during the reign of Edward VI. Under the entry for the parish church are listed a 'chalyce' lent to Thomas Heron, a prominent parishioner, another chalice 'with a Sen Johans hede' (presumably the image of the head of St John the Baptist, famously executed for Salome), and 'aulter clothes' given by Elys Davys, founder of one of Croydon's almshouses.

A brass of Thomas Heron, known only from brass rubbings, was reportedly stolen by workmen during restoration work in the 1850s. During this same restoration work a distemper painting believed to date from the 14th century was discovered on the south wall. According to a notice at the Museum of the Future Exhibition held in the Fairfield Halls in March 1992, it showed St George slaying the dragon and rescuing 'Ye Ladye Sabra'. However, J C Anderson, writing in his 1867 *Croydon Church*, describes it as showing a monk crossing a brook, among 'other figures'. Naturally, this was lost in the fire. Medieval paintings can still be found in Chaldon Church and St Lawrence's, Caterham.

The foundations of an earlier building were found during the rebuilding of the parish church that followed the fire, including fragments of Norman, early

English and Decorated periods. Several monuments survived the 1867 fire, but needed restoration. Lysons, writing in 1792, mentions that many inscriptions had already been lost by his day, probably destroyed by Bleese during the Civil War. Two of the finest include the tombs of Archbishop Sheldon and Archbishop Whitgift. Where larger structures are concerned, the vaulted south porch and massive tower are original. Before 1867 it had suffered storm damage in 1639 and an earlier fire in 1735.

Bleese is blamed for destroying the stained glass in Croydon parish church, but the glass seems to be plagued with bad luck and the replacement panes have been lost several times in the intervening years. The 19th century fire that destroyed much of the church resulted in the loss of whatever was put in to remedy Bleese's handiwork. The church was reconsecrated in 1870, and the stained glass artists followed medieval tradition in depicting the Gospel story. During World War 2 flying bombs landed in nearby roads, blowing out some of the windows. The West Window destroyed at this time had contained striking and irreplaceable modern French glass.

THE GAYNESFORD MONUMENT

Effigies of Nicholas Gaynesford, his wife Margaret and four sons appear on a monument in All Saints, Carshalton. This is the same monument used for the Easter Sepulchre. What is interesting is that the brass was engraved during Gaynesford's lifetime, i.e. 1480-90. No dates of death have been filled in. Nicholas served both Edward IV and Henry VII and was Sheriff of Surrey and Sussex and an MP at various times. In his will he desires to be buried beside

the high altar of Carshalton parish church, but he was buried somewhere else entirely and the monument remains incomplete to this day.

ON THE DOLE

In the 18th century Archbishop Herring gave 'dole' to ten poor people three times a week, distributed at the gates of the palace. It consisted of 'two pounds of beef, a pitcher of broth, a half-quartern loaf, and twopence' per person. He once sent a 'Yorkshire pye' and some wine to a regiment of Hessian soldiers stationed at Croydon and Bromley. *The Lords of Croydon Palace* describes this an example of his Hanoverian sympathies, and he is known to have occasionally been visited by one or other of the Georges.

A Carshalton vestry book reveals that 'dole' was handed out to people described as 'passengers'. In 1696 an average of 30 people each month passed through. They were helped with small doles of money, average relief being a little more than 1d per person. This relief was in the hands of the Headborough, who acted for the Overseers of the Poor. Dole was also given to people who claimed to be sailors or survivors of shipwrecks. A surprising number of such people passed through Carshalton, despite its not being on the main road to London from the coast. It is speculated that some travellers used a sob story to win sympathy and take advantage of the parish's generosity.

Much stingier than dole handed out in the past, the Whitgift Foundation continues to provide an allowance to the residents of the Hospital of the Holy Trinity in George Street. This amounts to the princely sum of 65p for women and 70p for men. Do women's rights to

equal pay mean nothing in Croydon?

SHEEPISH DONATIONS

Sheep were so important to the people of Farthing Down and Happy Valley that the sheep farmers would make their donations to the nearby Chipstead Church in sheep.



That'll be one lamb, please

CHURCH ALE

Wine and ale flowed freely at banquets in the Great Hall of the Archbishop's Palace, which produced its own alcoholic beverages. Medieval records refer to a vineyard, and during the Tudor period a wine press was in regular use. Hyppocras was a popular spiced wine served warm in goblets or shallow bowls. In the Middle Ages there was one occasion when the wine supplies were insufficient for royal needs. Henry III, who often visited Croydon, ordered a further 756 gallons to be delivered. The king only stayed three days, so do the maths! An ancient vat still exists to provide tangible evidence of brewing. It is not on view, as it is under the floor of a room used by the school. The vat was later used for dyeing calico when the Palace changed hands. Shame!



A hop

DESECRATION OF GRAVES

The September 2002 parish magazine for St Mary's in Beddington mentioned that the month of June had seen some 'particularly distressing vandalism, involving the desecration of plots containing cremated remains'. This was not an isolated case. In 1995 St Peter's in South Croydon saw over 30 gravestones dating back to the 1700s knocked over or broken. Tiles were also thrown at the stained glass windows, one of which broke. Only gravestones with crosses were attacked. This suggested that the vandals may not be plain hooligans, but have something against the church. One cross was stuck into the ground upside-down, which would have required several people. The reporter in the *Croydon Advertiser* said that most of the families buried there had died out and the graveyard was no longer used. However, they were some of Croydon's oldest gravestones and the cost of repair was said to be huge. The police were called in, but they reckoned the perpetrators were vandals rather than 'devil worshippers'.

NOT IN MY BACKYARD!

In the 19th century the district of Woodside was growing rapidly, and so in 1870 the Ecclesiastical Commissioners ordered labourers to dig out the ground plan of the new church of St Luke opposite 'The Sycamores' on Woodside Green. The owner of that property objected and paid the men to shovel back the earth during the night. A compromise averted legal action and a new site was found on former waste ground at Spring Lane.

CHANTRIES

Chantries were done away with following the dissolution of the monasteries under Henry VIII, who appointed Commissioners to make a survey of the possessions, revenues and so on of the chantries.

While the 1349 will of 'stokfishmonger' Walter de Mourden makes provision for certain chantries in Croydon parish church, little is known of this. Croydon certainly had two chantries in the parish church: 'Cantaria Beate Marie Virginis' and 'Cantaria Saneti Nicholai'. The chantry dedicated to the Virgin Mary was founded around 1400 by Reginald de Cobham, Lord of Sterbergh and a founder knight of the Order of the Garter, while the one dedicated to St Nicholas was founded by John Stafford, then Bishop of Bath and Wells, and William Oliver, vicar of Croydon, during the reign of Henry VI. Surprisingly, most of the money forming the original endowment for the latter chantry came from the Crown Inn at the top of Crown Hill. Both chantries had been founded to maintain a priest to pray for the souls of the dead, but the Commissioners found that the incumbents had 'no lerninge nor other promocion'.

HAUNTED TOMB

Archbishop Sheldon's white marble tomb in Croydon parish church is decorated with baroque symbols of mortality and *vanitas*. He lived out his final years in Croydon, infirm and out of royal favour for criticizing Charles II's infamous liaison with Barbara Villiers and refusing him the sacrament. Diarist John Evelyn records that the tomb cost £700-800. It was badly damaged during the fire in 1867. It is said that Sheldon's



Sheldon's tomb

ghost walked (in one version, appearing nightly at 5.45 pm for about 100 years, wandering with his head hung in sorrow) until 1960, bemoaning the fate of his tomb. The restoration was completed in 1960, when he made his last appearance in order to check the repairs.

THE OMEN

William Laud, Archbishop of Canterbury from 1633 until his execution for treason in 1645, was a very superstitious man. Lightning struck the churches of Mitcham, Cheam and Stone in January 1639, and Laud recorded the catastrophes in Latin on a window in the Long Gallery at Croydon Palace, ending with the prayer 'God avert the omen'. In December 1639, during a storm over

Lambeth and Croydon, a falling pinnacle ripped through the church roof and sent Laud's coat of arms crashing to the floor. Shortly before his arrest in 1640 he found his portrait, painted by Van Dyck, lying face down at Lambeth Palace after the cord broke. Laud interpreted this as an omen. He was beheaded during the Civil War, accused of treason and 'popery'.

Laud reportedly used to haunt a room at the Old Palace. It is said that he used to prevent people from entering by forcing them back. He was apparently exorcised in 1923 by Rev F N Heazel, vicar of the church of St Michael and All Angels.

THE TREACLE BIBLE

The Hospital of the Holy Trinity, popularly referred to as the Whitgift Almshouses or the Whitgift Hospital, was built by Archbishop Whitgift in what is now Croydon town centre. It opened in 1599 and houses one of three extant copies of the Treacle Bible. The name derives from a mistranslation of a word in the Old Testament. The offending passage is found in the Book of Jeremiah, Chapter 8, Verse 22, with 'treacle' substituted for 'balm', where the prophet is bewailing the people's sins. This is how it reads in the translation authorized by King James:

*Is there no balm in Gilead; is there no
physician there?
why then is not the health of the
daughter of my people recovered?*

FLOWERS IN CHURCH

Mother's Day is the one Sunday in Lent on which flowers are to be found in church. To mark Mothering Sunday in 1996, all women going to church services at St George the Martyr, in Elstan Way, Shirley, were presented

with a small bunch of daffodils.

WEDDING RITUAL

Not exactly the religious side of a wedding, but I've nowhere else to put it! A wedding custom from Shirley, recorded by WH Mills, was for men and boys to gather and blow horns and drainpipes and shake tin cans containing stones. The din of the rough music would continue until the bridegroom or his friends would give them beer or money to stop and go away.

ST JAMES THE TROUBLED

This Addiscombe church had a tough life. Even at its consecration by Archbishop Howley there was an angry protest by people protesting against Catholic emancipation. It became the place of worship for the East India Company, but many of the past cadets ended up in the graveyard or commemorated with memorials inside after being killed in India. There was also the grave of a man squashed to death by a 2-ton roller used to flatten the college grounds. The church had a reputation for being haunted, and a tunnel was rumoured to run to the Gothic Cottage over the road. The church was closed. It stood vandalized and derelict before conversion to flats in 1985.

THE WHITE GIFT

From today's perspective, Archbishop Whitgift seems like a mass of contradictions for a pious churchman. He was wealthy, noted for his hospitality and generosity. His closest friends included old pupils from Cambridge and his chaplains. He would dine with them at Croydon and Lambeth and welcomed them to the almshouses when he was living there in 'simplicity and

contemplation'. He was a great favourite of Elizabeth I, who called him her 'little black husband' or 'white gift'. He kept open house at Christmas and yet sometimes required to be attended with bended knee. He employed a jester or fool, Ned, who went under the title of 'my Lord of Canterbury's fool', possibly more for entertaining guests. He had a private fighting force of 100 foot and 50 horse, held in readiness at the time of the Spanish Armada. He is said to have died of 'chagrin'.

LYCH GATES

A number of lych gates can be found outside churches around Croydon, both ancient and modern. The word 'lych' derives from the Saxon word for 'corpse'. The traditional structure resembles a gateway with a roof. It was here that the coffin, carried on its bier, was traditionally set down prior to being taken into the church for the first part of the burial service.

St John's in Old Coulsdon dates in part from 1260 and has a lych gate, as do St Mary's in Beddington, St Mary's in Purley, and Chelsham church. No doubt there are many others, and I shall try to record them in future.

KNIGHT TEMPLAR

There is a tradition that the grave of a Knight Templar, a casualty of a battle between Henry III's army and Simon de Montfort's troupes, lies near the parish church. The site was once marked by an elm tree, now replaced by a war memorial. On 14 May 1264 the king did battle with de Montfort at Lewes in Sussex. The story goes that a band of Londoners fleeing from Lewes was attacked by the king's men near George Street. Other victims were buried on site and found three centuries later when the foundations of the Whitgift Hospital

were being dug.

A PLAGUE ON US

Not exactly a mystery, more serial misfortune. Many church records were lost when Archbishop Kilwardby took them to Rome, where he may have been murdered by a poisoner. But would he have been any safer in Croydon? *Lords of Croydon Palace* records the events that overtook even the most privileged personages. The Black Death came, and many parishes were abandoned by their clergy. The absence of records concerning visits to Croydon by the four archbishops who succeeded Reynolds in the 14th century may be due to the plague. Archbishop Bradwardine died of it, and for a while it was hard to fill the post of archbishop. His successor, Archbishop Islip, was third choice, with the two preferred candidates dying of the plague before they could be consecrated.

CHURCH CARVINGS

Gargoyles were added to churches by medieval stonemasons and probably reflect the continuing memory of old beliefs. While the masons were perfectly capable of producing elegant carvings of angels and church benefactors, they seem to have taken pleasure in decorating churches with little monsters, grotesques, mythical creatures and satirical representations of drunkenness and other common human failings. Some authorities believe the figures reflect the idea of the conflict between good and evil.

While some areas of Britain have far more of these splendid carvings, Croydon does have a few. Although the interior of the parish church of St John the Baptist in Old Town was largely destroyed by fire in 1867, some precious carvings survived. The outer walls of the church have a number of gargoyles, traditionally winged and horned creatures. However, many of the corbels inside the church were destroyed. According to J C Anderson, these had featured grotesque heads, which also decorated the octagonal font.



A great many ancient tombs were also destroyed in the blaze, but two in particular were able to be restored: that of Archbishop Sheldon and that

of Croydon's great benefactor, Archbishop Whitgift. These two tombs differ in style: Sheldon's white marble tomb has his effigy leaning on his elbow, looking towards the viewer, while Whitgift's richly carved tomb shows him lying flat on his back with his hands clasped in prayer. He is dressed in sumptuous red robes, lying on two rich, red cushions. However, both

archbishops are surrounded by emblems of the 17th century Baroque concept of 'vanitas', reminders of the fleeting nature of life and invitations to the onlooker to contemplate his or her mortality. Whitgift is watched over by a cherub carrying a spade and another using a golden stick to lean on a skull. The bottom of Sheldon's tomb has skulls, bones and egg-timers.



While the Puritans destroyed what they regarded as idolatrous objects in churches, the purely secular often escaped unharmed. Stained glass in the parish church was

smashed during the Civil War by a man named Bleese (or Blease or Blese), who was paid 2/6d a day for his trouble, but the beaming little horned monsters survived.

One of the oldest churches in the area is St Lawrence's in Caterham, with the earliest part dating from 1095. What are believed to be Crusaders' Crosses are scratched into the stonework of the easterly pier of the blocked archway to the chapel. It also has two fine examples of carvings. One can be interpreted as a face in leaves. It is believed to date from

around 1200 and decorates the carved pier-cap of the blocked arch in the chancel. The figure of the Green Man was very popular in pre-Christian times, with primitive versions reportedly going back 20,000 years, but artists are still inspired by the concept in these modern times. The foliate face, sprouting greenery from a number of orifices, was a symbol of vegetative fertility, but the origins and precise meaning are lost in time. Some may represent an aspect of the Forest God, while others depict the spirit of the woods, the woodwose.

rather more detailed. It is a grotesque mask set in a spandrel of the north arcade of the nave. The semi-human face has pointed ears and a flat head. Its wide-open mouth has enormous teeth, while long, narrow hands at the end of arms that originate from the back of the head pull the mouth open. It is positioned opposite the main entrance to the church. It is believed by some that this carving may have been paid for with money raised by a medieval festival called 'church ales' and is intended to represent one of the 'seven deadly sins'.



Carved head, St Lawrence's, Caterham

The carving is said to be similar to one in Chalk, near Gravesend in Kent, which is known to have originated this way. The festival was administered by responsible members of the parish under the patronage of the clergy. Subscriptions in money or kind were collected and cakes and ale distributed either on the village green or in the churchyard. The drinking was accompanied by rustic games, music and dancing.

All this merriment may well have led to unseemly scenes, but as they were successful in raising money for the church these abuses were apparently overlooked. No doubt the figures then carved with the proceeds represented gluttony, one of the 'seven deadly sins', and overindulgence in strong drink. 'Church ales' carried on at least until the Reformation.

Rather more elaborate versions of this design, some associated with legends, are found elsewhere in Britain. Good secular examples of the style decorate Wrencote, a building in Croydon High Street rebuilt around 1715 but believed to be somewhat older. Wrencote was named by English Heritage in 1995 as being in need of repair and at risk of being lost to future generations, but the building has now been restored and looks splendid again.

The other example at St Lawrence's also dates from the 13th century, but is

PILGRIMS

The Church played a major part in the development of Croydon, especially in the days when the town was dominated by the Archbishop's Palace, now a girls' school. Many important churchmen stayed here, and the young Thomas à Becket, a future Archbishop of Canterbury himself, is known to have spent time in Croydon as a clerk in the household of Archbishop Theobald around 1145. Pilgrims later passed through Croydon on the way to the murdered priest's shrine in Canterbury.

Archbishop Becket entertained over 1000 knight crusaders at the Old Palace before they left to join in the mayhem in the Holy Land. Following the martyrdom of Becket in Canterbury Cathedral, after he had crossed the King once too often, pilgrims began to make their way to his shrine there.

Pilgrim's Way, marked on Ordnance Survey maps as running south of Croydon and passing near the War Coppice at Caterham, is now believed by most researchers to be the product of antiquarians' romantic cravings in the early Victorian period.



X marks the spot? Possible Templar grave

Matthew Alexander in *Tales of Old Surrey* says that the concept of the pilgrims' way from Winchester to Canterbury is based on interpretations of place names by antiquarian Kenneth Way. This was accepted by the Ordnance Survey and Royal Engineer map maker Edward Renouard James, who surveyed Surrey in the 1860s. He was enthusiastic about the pilgrim theory and traced what he thought would have been its course on maps and in 1871 published a booklet going into even greater detail. The fact that different authors have proposed different routes bolsters the claim that there was no continuous track. Wilfrid Hooper points out in SAC Vol. 44 that east of Guildford the road becomes a hillside track shunning all towns and most villages, crossing rivers by ferry or ford. In view of favourable estimates of 100,000 pilgrims a year, they should have left some sort of mark in the villages along the route. According to Hooper, the feast of Becket's 'translation' was on 7 July and did not coincide with any of the feasts held along the claimed pilgrims' route. He suggests that Bunyon's *The Pilgrim's Progress* is the source of the legend. This appeared in 1698, and readers linked all sorts of sites to references in the book.

While the route seems to have been important in prehistoric times and to local Romans, it may never have been used by massed medieval pilgrims. This does not diminish the strong tradition that pilgrims travelled from London to Canterbury via Croydon. Just ten miles from the capital, Croydon was a market town with inns, and it was used by the archbishops as they moved with their followers from palace to palace down through Kent to their centre of power in Canterbury. An attractive pond in Sanderstead Plantation is also said to have been used by pilgrims, according to a report in the *Croydon Guardian* from 1995, but I don't know where this information is taken from.

Offered up as good evidence for the presence of pilgrims in Croydon is the



The Catherine Wheel

old Catherine Wheel inn. According to a legend that was unknown before the 10th century, St Catherine of Alexandria was condemned to be broken on a wheel in the 4th century for criticising the Roman emperor Maxentius for his persecution of Christians. The wheel broke as if by a miracle, so she was beheaded instead. Nevertheless, it was the 'Catherine Wheel' that became the symbol used by pilgrims. Not to mention fireworks manufacturers. She was a very popular saint in the Middle Ages, and also the patron saint of wheelwrights. As her story is now believed to be purely legendary, her feast day has been removed from the Roman Catholic calendar. And her pub changed into the Crown and Pepper in December 2001. Today's inn stands on the opposite side of the road from the original, which had an unsavoury reputation by the time it was demolished in 1760.

The Chequer is also quoted as evidence for the movement of foreign pilgrims through Croydon. The inn was purchased by Archbishop Whitgift in the 16th century and demolished to make way for his almshouses. It had stood for 300 years, the site revealing buried skeletons and weapons. In its time it is believed to have acted as a place where pilgrims from the continent, travelling up from the ports of Hampshire, could exchange money. French pilgrims are believed to have landed at Southampton and travelled via Winchester, Guildford, Dorking and along the Downs to Canterbury. According to an article in the *Croydon Guardian* in 1998, the Chequer was the rowdiest of the new inns that sprang up with the coming of Croydon's fairs and markets. There were lots of brawls, with people being killed on the doorstep of the inn. It had an imposing position at

the crossroads and was the first port of call for travellers going east to west or north to south.

The three fairs and markets established in 1273-1343 are also said to have been too many to serve just Croydon's needs. It has been suggested that a wooden Anglo-Saxon manor house may have stood near the original Croydon church. Although no traces remain, the Domesday Book of 1086 says that Croydon manor belonged to Archbishop Lanfranc. He is recorded as a great builder on the archiepiscopal estates, and traces of a Norman manor house still remain near the 12th century undercroft. In the Middle Ages the manor would have provided a haven for pilgrims.

Pilgrim's Well in the grounds of Coombe House, a private building, stood closer to the track before the route of the latter was changed by the landowner. It is over 145 feet deep and may have been dug for a building that stood just to the south-west of Coombe House. It is possible that it may have been a grange, i.e. a residence belonging to a religious order. It was restored in 1897 by Frank Lloyd after having been covered by a slab for half of the 19th century, and a photograph from 1910 shows a very ornate construction of stone and what looks like cast iron. There is a tradition that pilgrims would stop to drink at the well on their way to the shrine at Canterbury. 'Pilgrim' also occurs in a street names in the neighbourhood.

The heritage trail set up in Waddon in 1995 with funding from Croydon Council mentions that Coldharbour Lane takes its name from a place used by medieval pilgrims on their way to Canterbury.

In Caterham markings believed to represent Crusaders' Crosses have been scratched on the stonework of the church of St Lawrence.

More recent pilgrimages by Croydonians include a trip to Padua by parishioners of St Andrew's in Thornton Heath as part of the celebrations of the church's centenary in 2005.

HEALING

Away from the National Health Service, BUPA and the like, healing is offered by a whole range of practitioners. Many of these work within recognized religions, while many other forms of alternative and unorthodox healing are now divorced from religion for the patients but did once belong to a body of beliefs. Advertisements for shiatsu, massage, hypnotherapy, acupuncture and many other forms of treatment are published in the local papers every week, and demonstrations are sometimes given in the town centre or at events held in the Fairfield Halls. Even seemingly staid pharmacies sell essential oils and homoeopathic remedies. Mind you, offers of healing weren't always met with open wallets. Sometimes you might have found yourself up before the law.

PILLORIED FOR HEALING

Croydon's stocks once stood in front of the Three Tuns, an inn on Surrey Street. JC Anderson, in *Parish of Croydon*, tells the tale of Grig, a Surrey poulterer, who in 1550 was set on the scaffold in Croydon for 'deceitful and hypocritical dealings', i.e. he cured disease by words and prayers, but took no money for it. This was apparently done on the orders of the Earl of Warwick and the other members of the King's Council. As if the stocks were not enough, Grig was later put on the pillory in Southwark at Lady Day Fair.

FAIRY CURES

According to Matthew Alexander's *Tales of Old Surrey*, back in the 16th century an unnamed vicar of Warlingham kept a notebook of dozens of medicinal recipes that involved the use of herbs. He claimed that he had been taught them by fairies. He also used Christian rhymes as healing charms, for example to stop bleeding, toothache and hair loss. Who taught him the power of the charm is anyone's guess.

SPIRIT HEALING?

Frances Stewart, in her ghost book *Around Haunted Croydon*, tells a tale that possibly straddles this chapter and my ghost chapter. Before its recent demolition, Croydon General Hospital stood just north of the town centre on the London Road. During one night shift (on an unspecified date) an unnamed nurse heard a trolley being wheeled in and out of the ward. Then she heard noises of cups and water in the kitchen. She looked round the ward and saw that all the patients were asleep except for one man whose illness was giving cause for concern. She offered him a cup of tea, but he told her the night nurse had just brought him one. He died next morning. Maybe not healing, then, but just comfort.

BEULAH'S HEALING WATERS

Before the waters at Beulah were turned into a spa in the 19th century, they had long enjoyed an excellent reputation as healing waters, and not just for old nags. JC Anderson records that, even before the spa opened, people were charged sixpence a glass. The locals used the bubbling spring to cure their 'lesser maladies'. Thousands of people

took the waters at the spa once it had become a fashionable pleasure ground.

THE LOST PRINCE

In 2003 the *Croydon Guardian* investigated a local Norwood legend following a television series on Prince John, son of George V and Queen Mary. The belief that the prince visited Norwood is supported by a Shirley woman called Christine Smith, who claims that members of the Royal Family regularly visited a local masseur in the early 1900s. Ms Smith was home help for the daughter of a German masseur called Ziter from Alsace, who massaged King George for a number of years from his home in Maberley Road. Sometimes Queen Mary would accompany the King. The suggestion is that during these trips they took Prince John to see a doctor in Norwood, as he was epileptic and autistic. The masseur died in 1954 and the daughter, Mrs Ziter-Harris in 1982.

HEALING HERBS

Even after the Croydon saffron fields had been consigned to history, herbs were still grown in and around Croydon. This heritage is reflected in the name of one of the Tramlink stops, Therapia Lane. Lavender has long been known as a healing herb, perfume, insect repellent, food flavouring, etc, and has made a comeback with the popularity of essential oils. It is no longer restricted to sachets in Auntie Maureen's corset draw. According to an article in the *Croydon Guardian* in 2000, cultivation of lavender began commercially in 1749 with the founding of Potter & Moore, who produced the famous Mitcham Lavender Water. Cultivation spread from the beginnings in Mitcham to Croydon, Beddington, Wallington, Cheam, Carshalton and Sutton. The industry declined in the 1920s and

1930s when market gardening gave higher returns. Lavender growing is now being revived by a Carshalton-based environmental group called BioRegional. They are reported to be working with Downview prison in Sutton, where 25,000 bushes have been planted.

KILL OR CURE

The Morland Road NHS practice will do its utmost to cure you of your ailments. And if it fails, the appointment card handily has the details of Croydon funeral directors, J B Shakespeare Ltd, on the reverse. The cards had thoughtfully been provided by the surgery's pharmaceutical reps and were only used as a stop-gap when stocks of the normal appointment cards ran out. The practice staff hadn't realized it might cause offence and told reporters from the *Croydon Advertiser* in summer 2005 that they had had no complaints. Five people that the newspaper interviewed agreed that it was not in the best possible taste.

SPIRITUAL HEALING

Since 1984 the Croydon Healing Clinic has worked out of the Friends Meeting House near the Fairfield Halls. They soon became one of the earliest NFSH (National Federation of Spiritual Healers) Centres. In 1992 they started healing animals every Monday at their Pets Clinic in St Augustine's Centre, south Croydon. However, in 1995 they took the decision that they would no longer act as a branch of the NFSH because of the bureaucracy that diverted too much energy from their 'prime spiritual function'. The report in the *Healing Review* in 1997 left a little confusion over current activities. The healers said they were concentrating on distant healing, but that little had changed as far as patients and the local

public were concerned. Weekly healing lists arrived from Head Office along with referrals for those looking for contact healing in the area.

Then came another article in 2004 in the *Croydon Advertiser*, showing that they were still going strong. The number of people attending the Tuesday sessions reportedly varied from week to week, with more on miserable grey days. Piped music was played to soothe people while they waited. Patients could tell the healer what the problem was, but the healer could also work without knowing. The journalist told her healer

healing and curing were not the same: healing helped you change your attitude and solve problems. It altered the way people regarded difficult situations and helped them come to terms with things they could not change. The healers acted as channels for a healing energy that came from a source outside them. Where it came from depended on your beliefs. The healers regarded it as a complementary therapy and did not discourage patients from seeing their doctors. Later in 2004 healers from the Croydon Healing Centre held a Healathon in the Whitgift Centre to mark their 20th anniversary. There was a long queue of shoppers waiting for spiritual healing, and for many of these it was their first experience. And now in 2005 there are plans for a 21-hour Healathon to mark the 21st anniversary.



Croydon Spiritualist Church, Chatsworth Road

about some recent problems and starting crying - a box of tissues was produced instantly. Gradually the tension left her body over the 15 minutes of healing. There was no charge for healing, but donations helped pay the rent. The healer pointed out that

A feature on healing, published in the *Croydon Guardian* in 1996, featured the Rainbow Healing College in Norbury. The college was affiliated to the Surrey Spiritual Healers Association and was offering healing and mediumship classes for people who want to get in touch with their 'intuitive selves'. The 24-week healing course was said to lead to probationary registration with the Surrey association and the mediumship course prepared you for registration with the British Astrological and Psychic Society (BAPS). The college, a registered charity, also ran other courses and a healing sanctuary.

MIRACLE HEALING

Healing sessions by evangelical churches have included a 1996 event

held in Davidson Junior School by the House of Judah Praise Ministries International. They placed an advertisement in the *Croydon Post* for a two-day 'miracle healing crusade' with speakers from the USA.

FOOL FOR FENG SHUI

In 1993 a Croydon woman jettisoned her bookcases in favour of piles of books on the floor. The woman had called in a feng shui expert to organize her home and banish negative energy. The expert made her move almost every item and abandon the bookcases. He explained that every room could be split into nine areas according to the Ba Gua grid and it was 'fatal' to have one area representing one aspect of life cluttered. Call me a cynic, but aren't piles of books more clutter than bookcases?

HINDU PRAYERS

In 2004 a spectacular Hindu chariot was at the centre of a procession held by the Sivaskanthagiri Murugan Temple of Thornton Heath. The chariot was laden with statues of Hindu gods as part of a ceremony to bless and bring good health to Croydon's sick and infirm.

POWER OF PRAYER

Someone who would agree with claims that prayer can work wonders is Uri Geller. In 1998 he appeared at the Clocktower complex to promote his new novel. He is reported to have stunned his audience by making radish seed sprout before their eyes. He also said that he had recently been talking more about the healing that he carried out, and his main message was the power of prayer. The journalists reporting on this in the *Croydon Post* and *Croydon Guardian* didn't give any further details.

MIND OVER MATTER

Dentist Dr Marylyn Poynter reportedly uses hypnotism to calm her patients. She works in Harley Street and at her private clinic for dental phobics in Purley, but charges are quite steep. The *Croydon Advertiser* said they were about £300 an hour in 2000.

In 1995 Paul McKenna, a hypnotist known widely for his TV and stage appearances and self-help tapes, was called in to help the Crystal Palace footballers improve their results. Crystal Palace also has a chaplain, Rev. Nigel Sands, who was originally invited to provide pastoral care when the club suffered relegation in the mid-1970s. He doubles as the club historian.

Another local hypnotist, Ian Tonothy, offers hypnosis as a way of managing stress and improving health. His leaflet gives a list of the conditions that can be treated by hypnosis, apparently including learning difficulties.

Back in 1994 Croydon hypnotists were in trouble, according to the *Croydon Advertiser*, accused of planting memories of sexual abuse during hypnotherapy sessions. In summer 2005 another feature on hypnosis and hypnotic regression in the *Croydon Advertiser* described how one particular hypnotist was taking people back to past lives in order to effect a cure for problems in the current life. She blamed the antics of stage hypnotists for scaring people away from real hypnotists who could help them with their problems, such as having been a murderer in a past life.

This is just my view, but I fail to see what help it can be to tell a troubled person that he or she was once a murderer. Hypnosis is a complex tool

and in the wrong hands it can be damaging. There is no scientific evidence that 'experiences' dredged up from the depths of the mind under hypnosis have anything to do with the truth. Many researchers who have investigated hypnotic regression (both theory and practice) will say that fantasy and cryptomnesia have a lot to do with the outcome - a hypnotised person brings a whole lifetime of impressions with him to a session, whether from books, films, real life or school history lessons. All sorts of half-forgotten things can be accessed by the memory under hypnosis and stuck together with a bit of fantasy and leading questions to form a superficially cogent story. Be warned!

If that's not ringing alarm bells, let me remind you of the danger of overcomplicating matters. Back in 1938 the *Croydon Advertiser* reported on the Fielding case in Thornton Heath. It revisited the events in 1992 for a new readership. Investigated by Nandor Fodor, it started as a poltergeist case with apports among the phenomena reported. Things got more complicated when Fodor and his fellow investigators decided to try hypnotic regression again, after Mrs Fielding hadn't responded the first time. She was already a very disturbed woman and would reportedly prick her finger and not find blood 'because she was dead'. Under hypnosis she could hear lots of voices, not just Fodor's. As a child in Thornton Heath, she had had a ghostly experience with a man who 'came out' of a cupboard door. She had always been 'drawn to' ghostly experiences, passing out and getting messages. She'd had a lot of illnesses, a number of suicide attempts and hysterical blindness. Fodor felt the clue to it was her conviction that there were many personalities inside her.

On a drive she asked them to stop outside Ye Old Fox in Coulsdon. She told them that, as a man of the nearby church in a past life, she had been hung from a tree on the green for interfering with little children. She was now obsessed with gravestones and churchyards, and Fodor wanted to find out what caused the morbid fascination with death. She had told them that a huge black arm had tried to strangle her in bed when she was six, maybe trying to silence her. Everything pointed to her neck, which tied in with a vision she'd had and a feeling of falling into a dark pit. Fodor believed in the end that she had been abused as a child, keeping the terror to herself and secretly wishing to see the man punished. This destructive force took over her life until, in her mind, she felt she had killed him. She needed to assure herself he was dead by finding his grave. Then her mind slipped and caused disturbances. However, it has to be said that the memory of the rape never surfaced under hypnosis - Fodor believed that it was impossible for the mind to expunge such a thing under hypnosis and believed that the rape and abuse had taken place in an earlier life lived by Mrs Fielding and that she was the man hanged for child abuse.

If you take part in a hypnotic regression session, keep your own beliefs outside the experiment. At best they could interfere with any genuine past life evidence, at worst they could contribute to the mental suffering of the person being hypnotised. Even a volunteer in a research group may have painful memories they could replay under hypnosis, but you will never be certain which are real and which you have played a part in creating.

DEATH AND BURIAL

Death and what lies beyond it fascinate some and frighten others. People have built up strange and complex rituals to cope with the problem of not knowing, or fearing, the afterlife. Many ways of disposing of bodies have been recorded in Croydon. These range from prehistoric rituals that can only be guessed at, to the odd practices carried out in Carshalton at a more recent family vault. And Croydon must surely hold the record for the number of archbishops of Canterbury buried in its soil. We have six in the parish church and another X in St Mary's, Addington village.

STONE AGE

Remains from the Mesolithic (i.e. middle Stone Age) period were excavated at Croham Hurst in 1968 by the Croydon Natural History and Scientific Society. These were huts, and I found no mention of burials and grave goods. Neolithic (i.e. New Stone Age) remains have reportedly been found dotted around Croydon, including under the Clocktower Complex, but again with no mentions of burials.

BRONZE AGE

Bronze Age people are known to have been religious, as they built such monuments as Stonehenge (although its precise use is still disputed). They often buried their dead in mounds, as seen at Croham Hurst. A plaque on the hilltop marks the site of this Scheduled Ancient Monument, which would otherwise be difficult to make out. It is a small bowl barrow, around 40' in diameter and just 18" high. There is no visible trace of an outer bank or ditch. However, evidence for the mound's being a barrow rather than just a residual mass of the local ferruginous conglomerate (the alternative explanation for this mound) include the finding of a round scraper and a chopping tool, the latter discovered during excavations in 1968.

ROMAN

Moving a little closer to our times, Romans occupied the site of Beddington Sewage Farm, where a villa was discovered as recently as 1871. Finds from the villa included coins, pottery, hypocaust tiles, oyster shells and the bones of various small animals and birds, but also sepulchral urns with fragments of calcined bones, skeletons with iron spearheads and bosses of shields, which were usually buried with their warriors. A lead coffin from this site is now in St Mary's, Beddington, while a stone coffin is on view in the dovecote at Carew Manor.

The site of a Romano-British farmstead and cemetery was found on the northern side of Kingswood (also known as Kings Wood) and partially excavated in 1955 and 1959. R I Little describes the 1959 excavation, saying that the burial ground contained the internments of five babies and children. The adults' burial ground was never found. The occupants are believed to have belonged to a small farming community from around AD 30-160, whose way of life would have been left largely unaffected by the first century of Roman occupation. The 1959 dig is also reported to have unearthed a Roman burial urn. What this implies, I do not

know.

ANGLO-SAXON

The Anglo-Saxons succeeded the Romans and occupied parts of Croydon. A cemetery has been discovered in the same field as the Roman villa at Beddington. As it contained armour, sepulchral urns marked with elegant patterns, daggers and shield bosses, it dates from before the Anglo-Saxons were converted to Christianity and were no longer permitted to bury such objects. The people were not wealthy, as no jewellery was found in the graves. Cremations were carried out by the Germanic tribes to release the soul from the body. As they were worried about hauntings, some cremation urns had little windows to allow the soul to come and go. However, some inhumations were also found, which is common in areas where Saxons lived alongside Roman sites.

The Second Public Symposium on Archaeology in Croydon (1972) discussed the riparian cemeteries along the Wandle, dating from the 5th and 6th centuries. These served the settlements in Croydon, Beddington and Mitcham. There were also smaller groups of burials from a later date in Purley, Sanderstead and Riddlesdown. The burials at Purley were reported to be 'gigantic skeletons', but there were no grave goods to date them by. Sanderstead had three knives and a pot, while Riddlesdown had one knife.

The 1970 Symposium suggested that the Wandle Valley burials were of invaders, including a strong Frankish contingent, who advanced towards the Upper Thames while Croydon was a 'no man's land between secure Roman and unambiguous Saxon'. Only the Mitcham site has been adequately excavated.

In 2004 a man from Shirley was digging in his garden to make a paddling pool and came across a skull missing its jaw bone and face. He only recognized it as human remains once he had washed the soil off. A police forensic team arrived and sealed off the garden, and the skull was taken to the coroner's office in Guildford for analysis. It turned out to be a 1500-year-old Anglo-Saxon relic, belonging to one of the earliest such settlers in England. The man is reportedly no longer keen on digging, particularly since being advised that his garden might be on top of a burial area.

What is believed to be one of the most significant archaeological sites ever found in Croydon has now been built on. The site is at 82-90 Park Lane, central Croydon, and approval for building flats on the site was given by Croydon Council in 2002, subject to conditions guaranteeing the protection of the site, which is regarded as being of 'European strategic importance'. The announcement that the developers could go ahead, published in the *Croydon Advertiser* in 2002, came as a big surprise to the CNHSS. They claimed they were not told about the plans. The society contacted Dr Martin Welch from University College London, who had studied the site in the early 1990s, and he said he would also be seeking clarification of the situation. English Heritage's Robert Whitehead said legal agreements would ensure the site would be carefully monitored by structural engineers.

When I took photos of the site in 2005 the buildings were nearing completion. The new development forms part of Croydon's 20/20 Vision scheme to revamp the town centre, to which the developers agreed to contribute £20,000. At the request of the Council

and English Heritage, a concrete cover has been placed over the site, and equipment will continue to monitor it, so the site will be 'preserved'.

The site was only ever excavated in part, with the Museum of London discovering seven cremation pots, five grave sites and two spearheads. As a result of a small dig, commissioned by English Heritage in 1992 following demolition of the houses on the site, construction of the planned multistorey office block had been postponed. The cost of a full excavation seemed to be a stumbling block, and in 1995 the developers accused Croydon Council of dragging its feet over planning permission.



Park Lane - Saxon burial ground

The appeal dragged on. The volume of information presented meant that the court hearing overran. The Council, Anglo-Saxon scholars led by Dr Welch and the British Museum argued for full excavation, while Equity and Law, English Heritage and government policy wanted the site preserved *in situ* for excavation at a future date when

techniques had advanced. There was no dispute that the site was of national importance. Things got messy, with the counsel for Equity and Law claiming that experts were subjecting council members to an orchestrated campaign to persuade them to ignore advice from their own planning officers, archaeological advisers and English Heritage. One accusation was that the academics were trying to make more research material available so as to promote their own careers. English Heritage claimed the preservation method that involved using a metal grid and a polythene membrane would ensure the site did not deteriorate. The Council argued that there was no guarantee that the preservation technique would work. Dr Welch said the site might shed light on a 'crucial' phase in our history, i.e. the beginning of the process of creating England from Britain.

In 1995 the Department of the Environment stepped in, granting the developers permission to start work, preserving the site in accordance with guidance from the government and English Heritage. What happened between 1995 and 2002 is a mystery to me.

The Park Lane site backs onto Edridge Road and is attached to the cemetery discovered on the site of The Elms in 1893-94 during road building. Included among the hoard from this 5th or 6th century burial ground were imported Saxon glass, Frankish pottery from the Meuse-Seine area and battle harpoons. The graves are believed to have been

dug by the Germanic tribes initially invited to England to bolster its defences when the Romans pulled out. Bannerman, writing in the 1930s, reported that the skeleton of an Anglo-Saxon warrior had been found there. The burial ground included members of the entire community, rich and poor, of both sexes. Burnt and unburnt burials were discovered, a francisca or throwing axe and a whetstone were recorded, but some articles are believed to have been taken by workmen. Other goods are said to have been divided between the British Museum and the Grange Wood Museum in Thornton Heath, now lost. Some pieces are believed to be held by Croydon Town Hall, including the bronze disk on which the CNHSS based its emblem.

Most sites excavated are in the countryside, where accessibility is easier. There used to be about 25 burial mounds on Thunderfield Common, on the top of Spout Hill in Addington. Two tumuli still remain at the golf course. The others were largely destroyed when Archbishop Howley decided he wanted a pinetum. One grave on Farthing Down contained a woman's body, contorted as if she had been buried alive. This is likely as women, often slaves, were sometimes killed to accompany a man in the afterlife.

Around 30 burial mounds have been found at Farthing Down, believed to date from the 6th or 7th centuries. The graves were cut into solid chalk and are less than 3' deep. Previous inhabitants of the area had farmed on the thin soils on top of the down, but the Saxons' superior ploughs meant they could cultivate the lower land and keep the top for burials. The site is small and was probably the burial ground for just one family and its retainers. The mounds

were excavated from 1770 to 1948. Some daggers and a drinking vessel made of staves of wood bound together with serpents made of bronze were found, along with silver pins to hold clothing together. The bodies were buried without cremation, then covered with a low mound. The fact that the skeletons face west and there is no trace of funeral or cremation pottery does not mean they were Christian. This position was the most common one found in Saxon cemeteries, but many other positions were frequent. It has been suggested that one of the barrows is the grave of the chieftain Cuthred, who gave his name to Cuthred's Down (now Coulsdon). Cuthred, son of the second Christian king of Wessex, was baptised by Byrinus at Dorchester in 639.

Headless burials also featured among the forms of Saxon burial around Croydon. Some of these were found at the Cane Hill site, excavated around 1912-1915. The suggestion is that heads were taken as war trophies, and some warrior burials at Riddlesdown even included extra skulls. However, some bodies were deliberately decapitated, the skull being placed elsewhere in the grave. This may have been an attempt to prevent the spirit of the dead from disturbing the living. A skull from the Cane Hill site is now held by the Horniman Museum. The Cane Hill graves contained no grave goods other than knives. The shallow graves and wooden coffins mean that the skeletons were generally not well preserved. There was an example of cross-legged burial at Cane Hill, which may or may not be significant. Making a difficult situation more complicated is the fact that the findings from this site were mixed up with those from Riddlesdown and Farthing Down. The

findings were split between museums and private collections, so no one knows what was excavated when and where, nor where it went to.

THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

Sir Walter Raleigh married Elizabeth Throckmorton, daughter of Sir Francis Carew of Beddington. Raleigh was out of royal favour on return from his last



Raleigh - attached to his head

expedition and was taken straight to the Tower of London from Plymouth. He was examined at Westminster Palace. *The Carews of Beddington* says that all that the devoted Bess could obtain was the promise that she could have Raleigh's body when he was executed. Next day he was put to death by two blows of the axe. The head was placed in a red leather bag and wrapped in Raleigh's velvet cloak. The headless corpse was carried to St Margaret's, while the head was handed into the

mourning coach, where Bess was probably sitting. It is believed by some that Bess managed to take the body away and have it buried in the Carew family vault in Beddington. The head in the bag never left her side. She had it embalmed and it became 'her constant bedfellow'. Bess spent much of the rest of her life in litigation over aspects of Raleigh's estate. She is believed to have left the head to her son, Carew Raleigh. He died in 1680, and tradition says that his father's head was laid in the grave with him.

THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

'Within this Tomb lyes the Remains of James Gibson Esq. and family Late Merchant and Citizen of London To whose Memory this Tomb was erected 1777'.

This inscription is borne by a Portland stone mausoleum in the churchyard of St Nicholas' at Carshalton. In accordance with the will of James Gibson's eldest daughter, Mary, a unique public ceremony was carried out in the evening of 12 August every year from 1794 to 1988. Since then the ceremony has been held in private. She left instructions for the vault to be opened for inspection and left £5000 to the governors of Christ's Hospital, Newgate Street, London, to ensure that the tomb was kept in good repair. The legacy was to be transferred to the governors of the Foundling Hospital if any damage was not repaired within three months.

The rector and churchwardens still survey the vault and monument, but the sermon once given was replaced in 1966 by a short address and prayers. A notice is now put on the door of the

mausoleum, certifying that the inspection has been carried out. Photographs from the 1957/58 processions, which formed part of an exhibition at the Carshalton Heritage Centre in 1992, show choirboys holding candles and the key being presented on a velvet cushion to the rector.

James Gibson was a Yorkshireman and, although he never lived in Carshalton, eleven Gibson-related burials are recorded in the parish register for the period 1736 to 1793. Mary is known to have been eccentric, and two unfounded stories about her have grown up. One states that when the last member of the Gibson family died, the tomb was to be locked and the key thrown in the River Jordan. However, Mary was to be the last Gibson placed in the mausoleum and the key would have been needed for the inspection. The other theory was that the annual inspection was to avoid body-snatching. However, there was a gap of eight months between Mary's burial and the first inspection, so the corpse's disappearance would not have been spotted and any later thief would have come away with a body well past its prime.

In 2001 workers digging foundations for a preparatory school unearthed two skulls and other bones. The CID closed off the area and sent the skulls for analysis. Subsequently the remains of nine bodies dating back to the 19th century were found at the site near Old Palace School, which is believed to be part of an old graveyard. The sex and age of the deceased are not known. A further seven skulls were found as work recommenced. Other finds included bones, part of a ceramic pot, shroud nails and coffin handles. The more recent graveyard is believed to have

been built on top of a medieval burial site that was part of the former archbishops' palace, as the remains were found close to the graveyard of the parish church. The headstone nearest to where the bones were found was dated 1797 and suggested that the graveyard once extended further than it does today. The plans were to rebury the bodies on the land, which was consecrated, although the coroner's office said the bones were so old that they were no longer officially considered a body.

AND TO BRING US UP TO DATE

It is only in recent years that horse-drawn funerals have ceased to be the norm, but some funeral homes will still arrange them for mourners. In 1992 the *Croydon Post* published a photograph of what they thought was the last horse-drawn funeral by Rowland Brothers, back in 1933. However, their readers knew better - one had seen an identical coach drawn by two black horses just weeks beforehand, also organized by Rowland Brothers. And in 2005 Jack Hogg, the longest-serving stallholder at Surrey Street market and a Crystal Palace supporter and bagpipe fan, had a horse-drawn funeral when he was buried at Bandon Hill cemetery in Beddington.

JB Wilson writing in *The Story of Norwood* describes how an account of each funeral would be written up in a book in the 1880s. This, of course, provides researchers such as Mr Wilson with valuable information on how things used to be done. Funerals used to be very formal affairs, involving the hiring of 'mutes'. These men, usually two in number, were dressed in black, with black silk hat-bands tied round their top hats, the ends hanging down the back.

They wore a black silk sash over the shoulder and held a mute's pole draped with black crepe. The mutes would stand outside the house for an hour before the funeral, then lead the procession to the cemetery. The coffin-bearers would walk beside the hearse, carrying short oak staffs with brass ends, and a page with a wand walked beside each carriage to fend off nosey crowds. The horses wore black plumes. The coffins were draped with black cloth and were decorated with patterns of rows of brass nails.



Graveyard, St Mary's, Addington Village

Rowland Brothers funeral directors have contracts with several insurance companies to go to airports and pick up the bodies of people who have died abroad. In 2004 they went to Heathrow Airport and collected the body of the highly respected DJ John Peel, who died on a working holiday in Peru.

An increasingly common feature of funerals held by a number of religions (I've counted Christian and Hindu so far) is the use of white doves to symbolize the release of the soul or mark the

number of years lived by the person being buried or cremated. So look out for an increase in white pigeons in Croydon, unless they've been trained as homing pigeons.

Cemeteries aren't visited as regularly as they once were and quickly become overgrown. Tumbledown gravestones covered in ivy can look picturesque, and such cemeteries provide much-needed habitat for wildlife in an otherwise urban setting. The concept of the public cemetery originated in Victorian times as a way of preventing the health risks of overcrowded churchyards. At that time bodies were even being buried in shallow pits under chapel floorboards. The landscaped cemetery was influenced by similar establishments on the continent, with vistas and trees. A book by J C Loundon published in 1843 also led to the improved design of churchyards, with more planting and the construction of new lych gates. Churches in and around Croydon for which I've seen a mention of lych gates include St John's at Old Coulsdon, St Mary's in Purley, St Mary's in Beddington, St Peter's at Woodmansterne, the parish church at West Wickham, but some predate the Victorian period. The practice of cremation wasn't ruled legal in the UK until 1884.

Action to deal with broken old gravestones at Croydon Cemetery hit the headlines in 2005, when a grieving father saw a pile of old stones left in a mound. The *Croydon Advertiser* reported that some stones were from as recently as 1982, but the Council claimed they were mainly over 75 years

old and attempts to contact relatives had drawn a blank. The broken stones were being held in a screened part of the cemetery not in sight of most visitors, and relatives were being given 12 months to respond to advertisements about clearance. Records of the information on the gravestones being removed were being logged on a database at the cemetery. The stones would subsequently be taken away for crushing.

Space for new burials is very much an issue, even though the Council says that around 90% of funerals are now cremations. Exclusive rights to a burial site could be bought, but lapsed after 50 years.

Another issue is what some families want to do to their gravestones. A gravestone can be a very impersonal slab of rock, so some families want to give them a friendlier look, with a jolly and heartfelt message. And, if the family member buried there is a child, the site might be decorated with toys. This risks the wrath of the cemetery authorities, for lowering the tone of the cemetery for others who prefer a more restrained expression of grief.

In 1995 Croydon Council announced it would hold an open day at the crematorium to dispel the myths associated with this method of disposal. It was due to take place in 1996 after four new cremators had been installed. I didn't spot any further notice of these visits, so I don't know how many people took them up on the offer. In 2004 Croydon Crematorium ran a seminar called 'Know your funeral rights (rites)' aimed at the general public and professionals dealing with bereavement issues. They planned to show environmentally friendly coffin options

such as papier mâché 'ecopods' in the shape of your body, wicker, pure wool shrouds, and coffins lined with duck feathers.

WITCHCRAFT AND WICCA

There is said to be no evidence of witch hunts in Croydon, so it looks as if our forbears were not bitten by the witch-burning bug that afflicted some parts of the country. Centuries on, Croydon is a focus for Wicca, a modern-day religion that brings together ritual and beliefs from all sorts of magical heritages. And that has brought out the bigots who just can't stand by and watch people doing things differently.

BELLARMINE JARS

Although we may not have had witch hunts, we did have witches. Evidence of this is provided by items such as Bellarmine jars. One was unearthed in 1968 during repairs to the chimney of a cottage called Heronscroft in Addiscombe Road, built in 1493. According to the *Croydon Advertiser*, experts decided that the jar had been made in Fulham in 1600 and would have been used in witchcraft rites as a protective device. The jar would have been filled with human hair and nail clippings and buried under the hearth. A picture of a Bellarmine jar is on display in the 'Museum without Walls' at tram stops in Croydon.

Huge numbers of these jars were made in the Rhine valley in about 1500-1700 and exported down the Rhine to Holland and England. These brown cologne stoneware jars are known as Bellarmine jars, Beardman jugs, Bartmanns, and greybeards because of the bearded male figures portrayed on the jar necks. Sometimes the decoration also included flowers and leaves, and the face could appear in triplicate.

One of the names commemorates the Jesuit Cardinal Bellarmine (1542-1621). Bellarmine was frequently unpopular; he was a theologian and one of the leaders of the Counter Reformation during a

period of religious upheaval and schism. He famously had a run-in with Galileo over the astronomer's discoveries about the position of our planet in the solar system. He was canonized in 1930, long after his caricature had been immortalized in these pot-bellied jugs.

As the popularity of the jugs spread, the quality of the moulded elements declined and the facial features became less clear. However, the beard features strongly, as implied by the alternative names. True Beardman jugs were produced from the 12th century onwards, thus predating Bellarmine. The Cologne potteries' tradition of drinking jugs with faces goes back to Roman times, when the face is believed to have represented the Horned God. While Dutch ships used large numbers of these jars for storing liquids, as shown by the finds from the wrecks of a number of vessels, others used them for bottle magic.

OLD MOTHER HOTWATER

Old Mother Hotwater, who is rumoured to have exercised her murderous trade from her inn on George Street, is frequently described as a witch. However, there's no evidence she ever existed, so there's also no evidence that she practised any sort of rites or rituals. She is said to have had a special cupboard where she would put dirty crockery and clothes. Next day it would

be clean, washed by unseen hands. Bannerman, writing around the middle of the 20th century, says that there was a needlewoman's saying from around the turn of the century when they were busy: 'I wish we had Mother Hotwater's Closet'. Another tradition attached to her was a prophecy that, when she had been dead 100 years, she would rise from her grave. No one knows when she died, but it is certain that the anniversary has now passed.

PROTECTION AGAINST WITCHCRAFT

Just across the borough border in Beddington, the late Norman font in St Mary's church shows marks left by locks used to fasten the lid down. The font, dating from the late 12th century, is believed to have needed to be secured because of the fear that people would use it for magic and cures. The official guide explained that, by the time a new



Font, Beddington

lid was fitted in the Jacobean period, locks were no longer required. He suggested that either people no longer believed in the power of witches, or the holy water was removed from the font when the church was left empty.

ALMSHOUSE RULES

Archbishop Whitgift's Hospital of the Holy Trinity on George Street was completed in 1599. The archbishops of Canterbury were appointed visitors (i.e. inspectors) and also selected the poor to live there - they had to be at least 60 years old and preferably live in Croydon or Lambeth. They could be expelled for heresy, casting charms and witchcraft.

WICCA

Back in 1996, Dawn Dubois, the High Priestess of a coven meeting in South Norwood, made a very good case for Wicca in an interview in the *Croydon Advertiser*. She explained that her coven was dedicated to 'white magic' and the healing arts. Wicca was a religion based on the belief that there was an energy force binding all matter, that could be used to improve and heal oneself and others. The religion had a variety of male and female deities, and individuals or covens picked the ones that were the most appropriate to them. Her coven followed the triple-aspect goddess representing the maiden, the mother and the old crone or wise woman. Their potions were made from herbs. She explained how traditional fear of witches stemmed from their persecution and demonization. One of their cardinal laws was not to harm others. The 'law of threefold return' stated that any harm done by a witch would be revisited on them threefold, which was similar to the Buddhist concept of karma. The healing process worked in much the same way as psychic healing, with laying on of hands

and absent healing, but also healing potions.

WITCHFEST

Croydon counts enough witches among its population to warrant an annual Witchfest at the Fairfield Halls in November, organized by the Children of Artemis. It attracts huge numbers of visitors and a lively dose of protests and counter-protests in the media and on the streets.

After the 2004 event someone writing to the *Croydon Advertiser's* letters page pointed out quite rightly that Wicca was being 'picked on' by the media in a way that wouldn't happen to Islam, Judaism, Mormonism or Buddhism. This came in response to a poll about whether witches should be allowed to celebrate their beliefs in Croydon. A witch also wrote to the *Croydon Advertiser* to register her disappointment at seeing the change in wording in the poll. In 2003 the question had been 'Do you approve of plans to hold a witchcraft festival at Wild Hunt Bedlam Morris in North End Fairfield?' and in 2004 it was

'Do you think a witch festival should be held in Croydon?'. In 2003 83.33% did not approve. The witch said they had the right to their opinion, but witches also had the right to practise their own spiritual beliefs. The discrimination would be blatantly obvious if the words 'Christian' or 'Islamic' were substituted.

Protests and open hostility have dogged Witchfest. Several people described as 'concerned churchgoers' told the *Croydon Guardian* that they had attended Witchfest 2002 and been stunned by 'the open sale of ouija

boards and young children dressed in black clothing'. A resident writing to the same newspaper described it as a 'satanic convention' and was shocked that parents were 'dabbling with the devil' and had their children with them. In response, a reader from Wigan pointed out that entrance to Witchfest was by ticket only. The children dressed in black were members of the Wild Hunt Bedlam Morris, a long-established local folk dance troupe there to entertain in the hall. Members of the public who happened to be in the Fairfield Halls for a promenade concert had also enjoyed the performance. She pointed out that



Wild Hunt Bedlam Morris in North End

the devil was a Christian archetype that represented evil and had no place in witchcraft. Witches worshipped their god and goddess by celebrating the cycle of they year and the phases of the moon. They did not seek out converts, believing that everyone had their own spiritual path to follow. She asked the protesters to take a leaf out of their founders' book and 'Love thy neighbour as thyself'.

The protesters came back the following year for Witchfest 2003. Four street preachers from the USA protested

outside, brandishing red and black banners with words such as 'sin' and 'death'. The event organizers sent out Morris dancers to distract from the commotion they were making with their megaphones. The protesters were eventually moved on by the police. Other protests included a woman and son handing out Bible readings. The *Croydon Advertiser* quoted one of the pair as declaring 'I'm a Christian for a start and I don't agree with it'.

The protests did not put the attendees off. There were 4800 tickets sold in advance, with more people paying on the door. Large contingents came from the USA, France and Russia. Over 40 speakers held talks and workshops, with entertainment from the Mediaeval Babes and Inkubus Sukkubus.

Before the 2003 event Inbaal, a witch from Croydon, had spoken to the newspapers to clarify a few points for their readers. She explained that witches came from all walks of life, but often kept their activity quiet for fear of losing their jobs. She did not like the term 'white witch', as there was no such thing as 'black witchcraft'. Her coven met to celebrate Hallowe'en, Wicca's eight seasons, and the full moon. They also regularly cast spells, often for healing. Some spells were as simple as giving someone a crystal that acted like a big cuddle and made them feel better. The general pagan blessing was 'blessed be'. She said she was proud to talk about paganism and casting spells, hoping to change people's attitudes to Wiccans. Her advice was that people who didn't like them should leave them alone. Inbaal was applauded at the event for giving witches a good name in recent newspaper articles.

Witchfest 2004 was a two-day event

that attracted 6500 visitors. Again Inbaal spoke to the press beforehand, explaining that people had nothing to fear from Wicca, a gentle religion about empowerment and celebrating nature. I saw just a handful of protesters half-heartedly handing out leaflets when I dropped by on the Saturday morning. In one leaflet New Zealander 'Amy' told the story of how she had drifted from the church, fallen in with a bad crowd that meddled in all sorts of non-Christian stuff such as tarot and mediums, only to be saved by the church. I didn't see any of the fire and brimstone crowd of previous years.

Tickets for Witchfest 2004 cost £20 on the door for non-members of the Children of Artemis. The fee covered all the lectures, workshops, a late-night concert by the Medieval Babes, and so on. There were stalls selling robes, wands, crystals, artwork, jewellery, pots and pans, remedies, joss sticks, music, books, all sorts of magical paraphernalia. Many of the attendees eschewed civvies, the male minority largely wearing flattering black, while the women had gone to town to express their personalities in vibrant velvet gowns and jewellery. I attended a lecture on how to ensure your spell worked, which emphasized preparation as the key. A spell worthy of the name required a huge amount of knowledge of a whole array of gods, astrology, herbs, colour associations, relaxation and concentration techniques and interactions between all those aspects. It was not something to be dashed off in five minutes or copied from 'Wicca in five easy lessons'. I came away with feeling that Wicca is something you needed to study thoroughly and truly devote yourself to. It is not a subject for dabblers.

There was a notice on the entrance warning people that the Discovery Channel was due to be filming for a show to be presented by Anthony Stewart Head (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer's* Giles, a leading contender in the world's sexiest librarian stakes). Unfortunately, I had another engagement and couldn't stay around till the crew arrived.

Croydon's witches are active at many times of the year, marking the seasons. In 2005 the Children of Artemis held an 'open ritual' at the end of July at the Fairfield Halls to celebrate Lammas. The team performed a Wiccan ritual and the participants shared a meal. As I put this edition of 'Strange Croydon' to bed at the end of summer 2005, the next event being advertised on their website at www.witchfest.net was described as the world's largest witchcraft festival in recorded history. Witchfest International 2005 was expected to sell out, just like its predecessors, with attractions including musicians, speakers, workshops and sundry stalls.

PAGANS IN CROYDON

Croydon is also home to the annual conference of the Pagan Federation, held at around the same time as Witchfest. In 2002 the newspapers reported a minor spat between the organizers over the dates and attempts to keep the events further apart, in order to maximise audiences. But this turned out to be a storm in the proverbial teacup, and both events continued to sell out.

In 1999 the Pagan Federation organized a day-long Pagan Conference expected to draw witches, shamans and druids. The events included lectures on pagan parenting, witchcraft for the Millennium,

tarot workshops, getting the most out of magic, and so on.

Advertisements for the 1999 event sparked concern among some of Croydon's Christians, who described themselves as being appalled at the existence of a witches' coven in the borough. Croydon was apparently chosen as a venue because of its low cost and good disabled access. The president of the Pagan Federation and High Gothi of the Odinshof organization said that most people were accepting of witches, but some fundamentalists tried to ban them. He explained that pagans were tolerant, and it was a pity that Christians couldn't reciprocate. A spokeswoman for Croydon Christian Concern was quoted in the *Croydon Guardian* as saying that there was a lot of witch activity in Shirley. They were monitoring the growth of psychic fairs, and she felt sad and appalled that the event was coming to Croydon.

In 2002 Christian demonstrators staged a prayer protest in torrential rain outside the pagan conference. The organizers took pity on them and supplied them with cups of tea. A protester quoted in the *Croydon Guardian* after that year's Witchfest hoped several hundred protesters would be present outside the Pagan Federation conference to hand out Bible tracts urging people to turn their backs on paganism. The Federation countered by saying that Christianity was the only religion protesting against them. They described paganism as a 'traditional indigenous religion of this country'. Pagans had a regard and respect for nature. It was a peaceful and fun event being held in a multi-faith society and had been supported by the Fairfield for many years.

A pagan minister from the USA explained his standpoint in the *Croydon Guardian*, informing readers that he was recognized as such by the State. He was appalled that Christians had sunk to the level of Barbarians and bigots and wondered whether Christians had a mind of their own or just believed what they were told as fact. Like the witches I've already quoted, he emphasized that pagans did not believe in Satan, who was a Christian concept. He claimed that a lot of Christian sects had forgotten Christ's teachings. He had been raised a Catholic but had left the Church because of the hypocrisy. Christians only showed the peace and love they preached towards other Christians.

Some of the points raised by the American pagan minister were reiterated by a Christian minister after the 2002 conference. While he was aware of the dangers of ouija boards and other 'black' practices and had seen some 'tragic results of their use', he admitted that in all branches of the Christian church what they 'promote ..is actually designed to suit our own wants' rather than God's will. He said that if Christians allowed the God of love to show through their own lives the way that Jesus did, all this protesting would not be so necessary.

The *Croydon Advertiser* published photos from the 2004 conference, which attracted around 1200 pagans. Their AGM included a talk on whether Jesus Christ was a 'warlock or a showman'. One of the demonstrators who gathered outside included a Church of England priest who told the newspaper that he was taking it as an opportunity 'to present the Gospel' rather than attack or pick on the pagans. Talks at the conference reportedly included subjects

such as the spirituality of Pakistani women, voodoo and African-American witchcraft. Prior to the event the organizers claimed that 98% of people were happy to have pagans around. They said pagans acknowledged God, but not in the Christian sense. Their conference would be one of the largest pagan markets in Europe and the event had been staged in Croydon for the previous six years. The Bishop of Croydon, the Right Rev. Nick Baines, said that what people were looking for in paganism (i.e. the truth about God and life) was to be found in Jesus Christ. He said their question about Jesus Christ was 'misleading' and wondered what material they were looking at.

THE COUNCIL AND PAGANISM

A protester quoted in the *Croydon Advertiser* in 2003 said that Christian campaigners had complained to the Council that it was 'inappropriate' for 'satanic witches and pagan worshippers' to use the Fairfield Halls. The Fairfield's chief executive responded that Witchfest 2002 and the Pagan Federation's conference might be offensive to some, but the Federation was a perfectly legitimate body and had been coming there for five years. There had been no other protests. The chief executive pointed out positive aspects of paganism, such as Stonehenge and morris dancing, and that the organizers were based in Croydon: 'It is something Croydon is doing and we support it'. He acknowledged that people had a right to protest, but the Fairfield would not allow protesters in the forecourt, as they had a responsibility to protect their customers. He had contacted Hugh Malyan, leader of the Council, who was 'launching an inquiry'. The Council confirmed to the *Croydon Advertiser* that Mr Malyan had asked the director of

cultural services to look into the complaint, but he pointed out that the events at the Fairfield Halls were not organized or sponsored by the Council. Their responsibility was to ensure an event was lawful.

In 2004 the *Croydon Advertiser* covered the latest complaints to the Fairfield Halls. A Baptist minister from South Croydon had criticized the management for agreeing to host the world's largest witch festival, saying that he knew families that had been torn apart by involvement in witchcraft. He claimed that many churches he was in touch with were disturbed by the recurrence of Witchfest and the increasing prominence given to Hallowe'en. He quoted Inbaal's comment about self-empowerment and celebrating nature, saying this was delusion or outright deception. He accused the Fairfield management of being irresponsible, quoting the Bible which said that witchcraft exposed people to evil. He said it messed up people's lives and was a drain on the public purse. The Fairfield Halls management responded by reiterating the legality of the event - it wasn't their business to interfere in people's religions. Quite right, too.

SUPERSTITIONS, HOAXES AND CURSES

Are certain items and events intrinsically unlucky, or can we blame wish-fulfilment and self-fulfilling prophecies? Some hoaxes are mildly humorous, others criminal, but would you be caught out believing any of the superstitions and hoaxes below or be worried that someone had cursed you?

CROYDON SUPERSTITIONS

Folklorists Iona Opie and Moira Tatem have collected a wealth of British superstitions, but down-to-earth Croydon folk feature in few reports. A boy in 1953 believed it was lucky 'if a bird dirt on you' and also said coins with a hole in them were lucky. A Coulsdon girl in 1960 believed you would have three years' bad luck if you talked while walking past a monkey puzzle tree. Back in 1853 it was said that an image of an oak tree could be seen if you cut a fern root slantwise, 'the more perfect, the luckier chance for you'.

FRIDAY 13TH

In 1996 the *Croydon Post* reported that Croydon Council's Road Safety Department had deliberately picked Friday 13th to promote 'Croydon Road Crash Free Day', because 'traditionally many people are more aware of the day because of its association with bad luck'. They hoped this would help them get across the message about careful driving and intended to monitor the number of accidents compared with previous years.

However, if you read your *Fortean Times*, you will be aware that this date is only a recent addition to the canon of superstitions. It seems to have spread

from the USA, home of so many strange beliefs, after a book was published linking the date to disastrous stock market performance. Before that it was the number 13 itself that had the unlucky associations.

OH, LAUD - AN OMEN

Tortoise-loving Archbishop Laud was insecure, superstitious and suffered from troubling dreams. In January 1639 lightning struck the churches of Mitcham, Cheam and Stone: Laud recorded the catastrophes in Latin on a window in the Long Gallery at Croydon Palace, ending with the prayer 'God



Lambeth Palace

avert the omen'. This piece of glass was removed by Archbishop Wake in the 18th century and is reportedly preserved in a 'shagreen' case at Lambeth Palace.

Shagreen, by the way, is defined on the internet as either shark or ray skin, untanned leather originating in Persia or a type of silk - take your pick. Just before Laud was arrested for treason during the Commonwealth, the Archbishop entered his study at Lambeth and found his portrait by Van Dyck lying face down after the cord had broken. The political unrest in England soon boiled over into revolution, and Laud was arrested in 1640 after the House of Commons voted him a traitor. He was beheaded aged 71 on Tower Hill.

UNLUCKY OAK

It used to be considered unlucky to cut the wood of an oak. In the 17th century the antiquary John Aubrey described a series of disasters befalling men who cut mistletoe from an oak tree in the Great North Wood. One fell lame, each of the others lost the sight of an eye and the man who cut down the tree broke a leg. There was a legend that a falling oak would groan or scream as it fell, and Aubrey described it as 'a strange noise ... so loud as to be heard at half a mile distant'. Another source has Aubrey quoting a mile, and yet another has him writing in 1719, long after his death. A collection of his works was published as 'Natural History and Antiquities of Surrey' in 1719, which probably explains his apparent post-mortem penmanship.

Sir Francis Drake's Golden Hind was built from timber from the Great North Wood, more specifically from the Great Stake Pit Coppice which used to lie in the hollow between Beulah Hill, Central Hill and Church Road. An oak still standing at least until a few years ago at the bottom of the dip in Hermitage Road is said to be the last surviving companion of these trees. Is it still

there?

Drake's flagship Revenge, which I have seen described as 'perhaps the most famous of the ships to fight in the Spanish wars', was built in 1577 from timber cut from the area later covered by Crystal Palace. It met its end in 1591 after a long battle against the Spaniards. It was commanded by Sir Richard Grenville, who was mortally wounded by musket shot. Grenville ordered his men to blow up the ship rather than let the Spanish take it as a prize. But the Spanish did take it after fourteen hours of battle. They sailed off to rendezvous with the rest of their fleet, but the 120 ships were overtaken by a huge storm and the Revenge perished along with fifteen Spanish warships. It was by all accounts a handsome ship, one of the first galleons, and had three masts and upperparts painted green and white in a harlequin pattern.

As a postscript to this passage, my earlier version of this story was picked up by The Black Vault, a conspiracy website that seems to be based in the USA and describes itself as the 'largest online military and government research center'. I think the Spanish wars are over, chaps.

WOEFUL OMEN

In autumn 2000 the Environment Agency issued flood warnings for the Bourne and the Wandle. They were on the lowest warning, 'Flood Watch', but people with stuff in their cellars were warned to move it. 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. It had last flooded in 1995.

LOVETT THE COLLECTOR

The *Croydon Guardian* in 1998 gave the history of Edward Lovett (1852-1933), who collected London magic, talismans, spells, charms and unique keepsakes. Most of his collection is now at the Cuming Museum of Southwark History on Walworth Road in London, but Lovett lived on Outram Road, Croydon, and later on Godstone Road, Caterham. He worked in a City bank, buying objects from people in the slums of Edwardian London at night. His 1925 book, *Magic in Modern London*, was packed with folklore and magic beliefs from London in the early 20th century. Many of the superstitions were collected at Billingsgate and from soldiers of the Great War. He labelled the items and packed them into boxes that filled three rooms in his house. His wife left him, taking their two sons - possibly pushed out by his mania.

CHARMING

The Norwood Gypsies were so famous that their book of charms came out in several editions. Croydon Library in the Clocktower complex holds a copy of it in the Local Studies Library. The *New Norwood Gipsy Fortune Teller*, unfortunately without a date or author, tells the art of fortune telling by cards and moles (concentrations of the pigment melanin, rather than the lawn-digging mammal); how to choose a husband by his hair, conduct or physiognomy or by the tea or coffee grounds; and various charms and ceremonies that have nothing to do with Norwood. The original edition had been written by a member of the Cooper family.

KNOW YOUR ONIONS

In 2004 a Croydon man was approached in Mitcham Road by two

men offering him a brand new laptop for £250. They gave him a lift home, showed him the computer and he paid. When he got into the house he found the computer bag contained a bag of onions. He told the *Croydon Advertiser* he thought it might be a case of black magic, but he was too embarrassed to report it to the police. A police spokesman thought it was just a con trick. The article called him superstitious, but said he accepted he might have been ripped off: 'Maybe it was black magic at work. Something changed the laptop. I am afraid to keep the onions in the house'.

LUCKY PANTS

In 2004 superstitious supporters of Croydon FC in the Ryman League put on 'lucky' red pants to help their team. It backfired when they lost 5-1 to Hastings United, which had lost its previous three games.

GET WELL SOON

This true story is well on its way to becoming a proper urban legend. Little Craig Shergold had cancer of the brain and spine as a child. He was a very sick little boy indeed and needed a boost. The doctor half jokingly suggested it would be nice to try to beat the record for the greatest number of 'get well' cards received. The local newspapers were full of his story, and cards started to pour in. The attempt on the record was picked up by newspapers all round the world, and cards came by the sackful.

The trouble is that the cards never stopped coming, despite many pleas for people to stop sending them after the record had been achieved in 1990. The record is no longer included in the Guinness Book of Records, so some people think Craig is still working

towards it. There have also been hoax campaigns using chain letters, with Craig's surname going through all sorts of variations. This is just one of several similar hoaxes denounced by the Make-A-Wish Foundation. He's not sick little Craig anymore. In 2005 he was 26 and fully recovered. By July 2005 he had received 350 **MILLION** cards. **PLEASE STOP! SAVE A FOREST!** Craig's story was made into a TV movie in the USA and screened in 2001. There is a quote from Robert Woods, one of the film's producers, is quoted on the website www.urbanlegends.about.com as saying that he hoped the film would 'finally stem the tide of unwanted mail once and for all'. It obviously didn't work.

CROC ALERT

In 2003 a rumour circulated about escaped crocodiles in Croydon, fed by pictures published by internet pranksters on www.jackguest.com, described in the *Croydon Advertiser* as a site with a 'quirky view' of news from Croydon. Mocked-up photos show the crocodile catching a tram, in a town hall photo shoot and sitting in the cab of a refuse vehicle. Hoax Council signs appeared at Millers Pond, Shirley, but were exposed by the Council as a joke. Visitors to Jack Guest's site posted silly hints about how to deal with crocodiles.

THE DIVINE STEVE COPPELL

Hoax or miracle? In 2000 the *Croydon Post* reported that an aerial photography site on the internet seemed to show an image resembling the Turin Shroud on Crystal Palace's pitch at Selhurst Park. Canadian fan Les Butler recreated the effect with a picture of former Crystal Palace boss Steve Coppell and posted this on the fans' bulletin board.

GOLDEN GIFTS

In 1999 all three local papers picked up the story that worshippers at the Folly's End church were claiming that God had turned their fillings to gold. This bizarre phenomenon was apparently first experienced in Toronto airport in fulfilment of a biblical prophecy - Psalm 81, Verse 10 'Open thy mouth wide and I will fill it'. The Toronto Airport church had reportedly posted photos of the fillings on its website.

A parishioner told the Christian internet magazine 'Ship of Fools' that she felt humbled that God had purified her mouth. A man in front of her had received a gold crown, while some church members were claiming they were showered in gold dust. Folly's End senior pastor Dave Markee bought a dental mirror to check out parishioners' mouths and confirmed that church members had gold fillings. He was reported to be asking for verifications by dentists. The story in the *Croydon Guardian* said that Toronto reported cross-shaped fillings and sprinklings of gold on hands and faces, but conceded that some of the fillings turned out to have been made by dentists rather than God.

UNLUCKY LESOTHO

The *Croydon Advertiser* ran a story in 1997 about an ivory paperknife that a man had been given by a witch doctor in Lesotho. He reported that it had brought him bad luck since he found it broken into three pieces on his return to the UK. The only incidents referred to were leaving his umbrella and Filofax in a phone booth. Sounds more like forgetfulness to me.