

TUNNEL under HIGH STREET – GRAMMAR SCHOOL to PARISH CHURCH

[Jill Waller, CLHS, Sep 2022]

I have been unable to find any definitive evidence of a tunnel, or first-hand accounts, only hearsay. – JW

Cheltenham Chronicle, Sat 27 Nov 1948 – LETTER TO THE EDITOR

TO THE EDITOR**Cheltenham in 1740**

Sir.—I was pleased to see the reproduction, in last week's "Chronicle," of the river flowing down the High Street. That the Chelt was the river concerned has always been a matter of doubt for the reason that the High Street is on a higher level than the present river. Tradition asserts that the Chelt at Barrett's Mill formed a part of this stream, into which flowed one or two small streams near by.

Besides stepping-stones to help people across the stream there were planks for elderly people and baby carriages. Incidentally, there was extant a bar table in a local inn made from such planks, but I have not yet been able to locate the particular inn.

What is more interesting is the fact that a subway was made between the Grammar School and the Parish Church for the boys of that school to go to church on Corpus Christi festival. One can imagine a number of boys stepping across a stream on stones!

This tunnel was filled in when there was no need for the cleansing of the High Street. This occurred when a sewerage system was installed.

F. CRAVEN BROAD.
64, Naunton Lane,
Cheltenham.

There is no doubt that the River Chelt was diverted down the High Street, despite Broad's doubts – it was recorded in the Cheltenham Manor Court Books for centuries. I believe it was diverted via a sluice and channel further up the Chelt, above Barrett's Mill towards London Road.

The water ceased being diverted down the High Street in the early 1820s, and the main sewer was laid along the High Street in the 1840s-50s. F. Craven Broad has made an assumption that the arrival of the sewers meant there was no need to clean the High Street using Chelt water. In actual fact the two (cleansing and waste removal) were always separate issues. Water carts were used to clean the High Street, which became easier as improved road surfaces came into use. Crushed and compacted stone, which was dusty in dry weather and muddy when wet, was gradually replaced with paving, tar macadam, etc. The sewers were for removing foul waste from properties, with storm drains for periods of heavy rain.

Brothers Buried The Gibbet

DARK PAGE IN LOCAL HISTORY

RECALLED

ONE of the last public executions to take place in the town; the tunnel connecting the Grammar School with the Parish Church; and a debatable point about the River Chelt were discussed with authority by a Cheltonian who knows his town, in an informative address punctuated with characteristic shafts of humour, at yesterday's luncheon meeting of Cheltenham Rotary Club.

The speaker was Mr. F. Craven Broad, whose family association with the town goes back a long time.

In 1826, he said, at which time it was customary to hang men and even women for offences which to-day would be thought merely "disgraceful," a man was "hung, drawn, and quartered" for the crime of larceny as a servant.

DECENT BURIAL

A wealthy lady resident of Dunalley, who had been losing pieces of her jewellery, set a watch for the thief, and it was discovered that the butler was the culprit.

After the execution, which took place in Marsh-lane, a cul de sac on the Swindon-road, three brothers took home the remains of the body to ensure a decent burial.

"They went a stage further," continued Mr. Broad, "they took down the gibbet and buried it in their back garden.

"Those three brothers were my grandfather and his two brothers. A reward of £10 was afterwards offered for anyone giving information which would lead to the identification of the miscreants who had stolen the gibbet, but the secret was closely kept.

"Nobody ever knew—until my father told me all about it many years later.

"Those three brothers, incidentally, were very musical; they made their own violins and 'cellos, and were the instrumental trio which led the singing at the Parish Church before the present organ was installed."

COURSE OF THE CHELT

The River Chelt, it was held by the speaker, did not run down the High-street 200 years ago, as is commonly held by authorities on old Cheltenham.

At that period the street, instead of being convex, was concave, with the drain in the middle. There was no artificial sanitation and no water supply laid on.

As the River Chelt flowed at another level, the idea of harnessing subsidiary streamlets which fed it at Barratt's Mill was put into effect, and these were made to flow down the High-street to clear deposits to the lower part of the town.

This waterway flowed down Ambrose-street and through the locale of St. James's Station to join the Chelt at Ailstone.

IN THE TUNNEL

When the Grammar School boys of an earlier day went, by custom, from the school to the Parish Church at Corpus Christi, there was wont to be a certain liveliness en route, revealed Mr. Broad, who has been associated with the school for 60 years.

Some boys used to end up in the waterway running down the street. The governors, therefore, had a tunnel built underneath the stream, and the journey was made through the tunnel.

He recalled his initiation as a Grammarian when he was pushed through the steel door which was the entrance to the tunnel "to see the tomb of Richard Pitt!"

"I was shoved down the stair into outer darkness," he said, "and spent the lunch-hour there in solitude right under the High-street until the others returned, bringing cakes and pies by way of repentance."

Attention was drawn by the speaker to two brass discs on a footpath which leads from the High-street to the Parish Church.

"There used to be five," he revealed, "but only the first and fifth remain. My great-grandfather had rope walks going down the High-street; if there was ever any dispute about the length of the rope from the High-street up to Swindon-road, the rope was taken to the Parish Church and measured—under the

shadow of the Church of God
—in these brass discs.
“They were divisions of a
chain—22 yards,” he added.

IMPROVEMENTS

To conclude his address,
Mr. Broad made some sug-
gestions for the improvement
of the town in view of next
year's Festival of Britain.

These included the clearing
up of Lance's site, more uni-
lateral parking of cars, the en-
forcement of by-laws dealing
with perambulators and dogs,
and synchronisation of all the
public clocks.

Coun. T. K. Waite, senior
vice-president of the Club, was
in the chair, in the absence of
Mr. G. M. Locke, the presi-
dent. Mr. Eric Foice thanked
the speaker.

(Newspaper cuttings courtesy of the British Newspaper Archive)

1855-57 Cheltenham Old Town Survey:



--- most direct route for a tunnel

_____ line of main sewer, centre of High Street

REASONS A TUNNEL IS UNLIKELY

- The Parish Church, now the Minster, and churchyard have been extensively studied by historians, archaeologists, etc., over the years, and no evidence has been found of the 'other' end of the tunnel.
- A look at the map shows that the old Grammar School was NOT opposite the Minster, and any tunnel would have had to be dug diagonally under the High Street and houses, many of which would have had cellars – not easily possible as the tunnel would have had to be very deep to counter these.
- The original grammar school of **1574** was replaced with a Victorian building, designed by Knight & Chatters, in **1888** – no mention of a tunnel at the time.
- There is no indication of a tunnel on any of the Cheltenham maps.
- Would anybody really have gone to the expense, in terms of time and manual labour, to dig a tunnel simply to keep schoolboys dry?

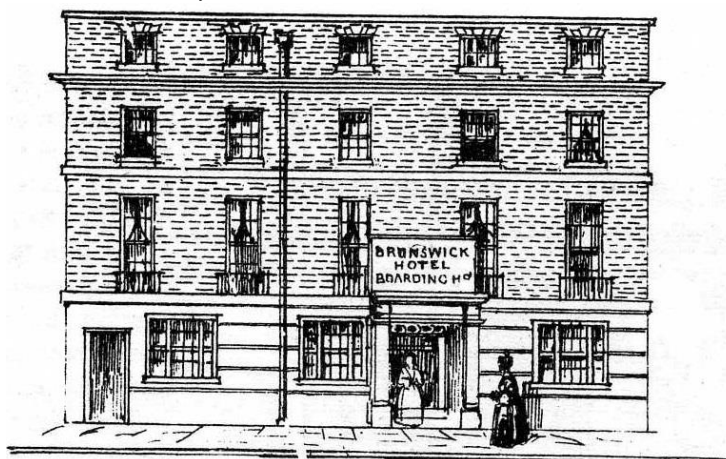
HOW THE URBAN LEGEND AROSE – SUGGESTIONS

Cellars in Cheltenham were often built out under the road, so this could give rise to the tunnel theory. None of the 'hearsay, actually describes anybody going all the way along the tunnel to reach the Minster. (Of course, if the tunnel did exist it may have been truncated when the sewer was built along the High Street.)

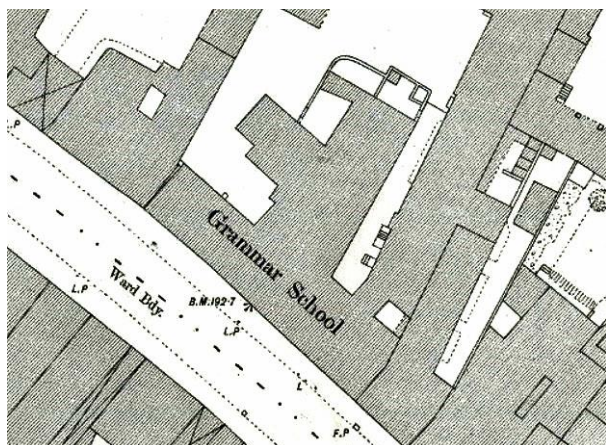
There was a large hotel beside the Grammar School, at **No. 156 High Street** (old numbering) – Yearsley's Hotel & Boarding House, later the *Brunswick Hotel* & Boarding House. Hotels like this would have required extensive cellars to provide cool storage for food and drink, before the invention of refrigeration.

In 1851 the Grammar School required more room, and took on the former *Brunswick Hotel* premises to provide boarding accommodation – the existence of wine vaults and cellars may have given rise to the tunnel story.

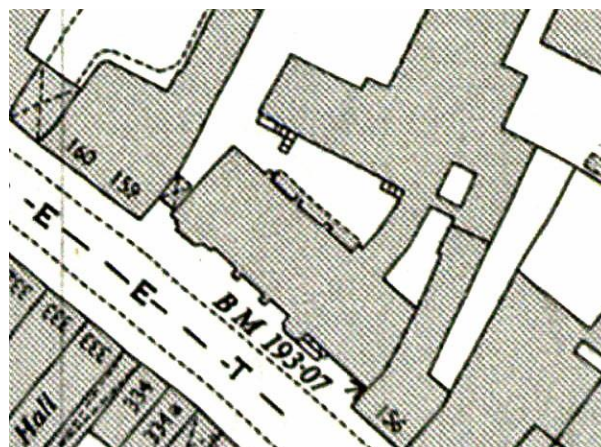
Rowe's Illustrated Cheltenham Guide, 1845:



Another possibility – The Victorian replacement building was set further back from the pavement than the original building. The cellars, if any, of the original Grammar School may well have been retained. – Compare maps:

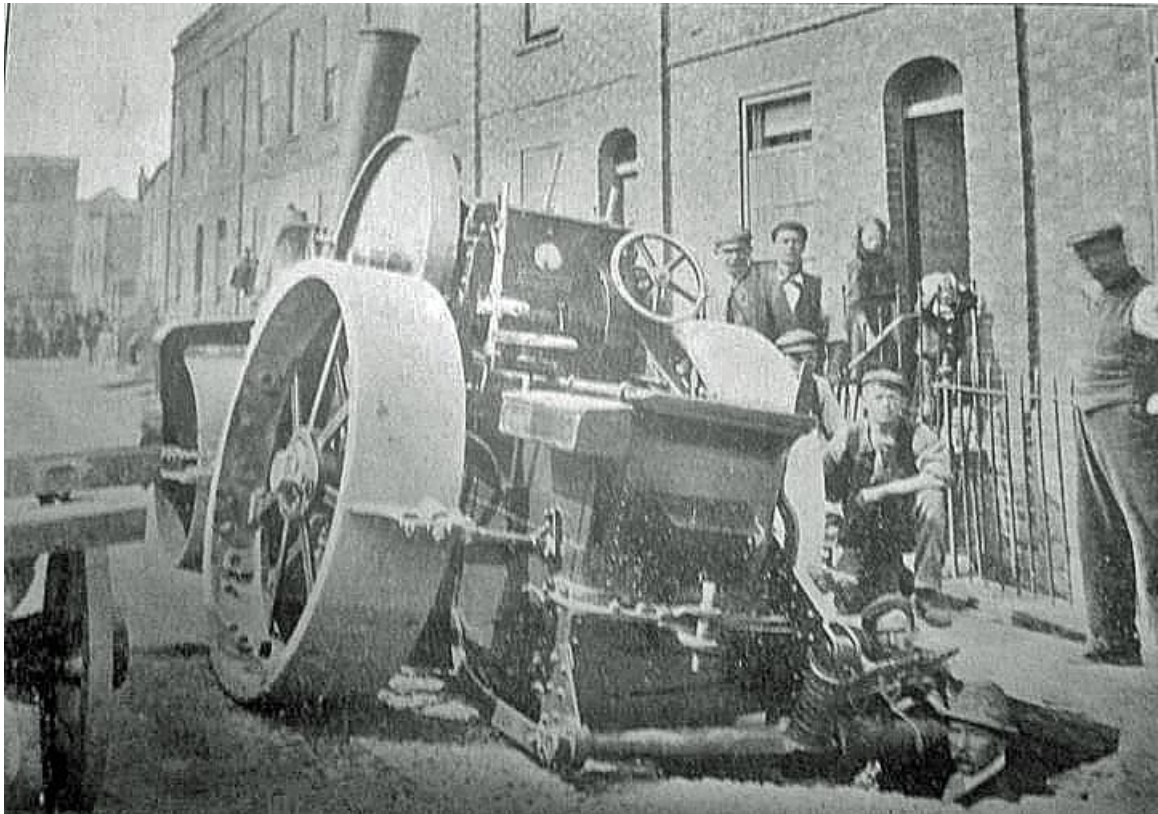


1855 OS map – original school building



1965 OS map – Victorian replacement

A huge number of buildings in Cheltenham had cellars that went out under the street:



St. Paul's Street South, 1908.