

## Whatever happened to Mother Redcap's Treasure? Pirate's Gold and Smugglers' Tunnels.

*We've all heard rumours of Wirral's piratical past and its connection with smuggling in the eighteenth century. Many have heard of Mother Redcap and the legendary smugglers' tunnels beneath Wallasey. Mother Redcap's death, however, enshrines a mystery; a £50, 000 privateers' prize had been entrusted to her care, but after she died it was never seen again. Whatever happened to Mother Redcap's treasure? Was it spirited away into the labyrinth of tunnels riddling Wallasey's bedrock? GAVIN CHAPPELL reports on what little is known of the lost treasure of Mother Redcap...*

### **Part One – Mother Redcap's Treasure**

In the eighteenth and early nineteenth century Wallasey gained a reputation as a haunt of smugglers and pirates. The centre of local smuggling was Mother Redcap's, a tavern that once stood on what is now Egremont Promenade. It was nicknamed Mother Redcap's after its proprietor, an elderly lady called Poll Jones, who always wore a red cap or bonnet. Mother Redcap was a great friend to smugglers and privateers, gaining a reputation as the "foster mother of wild spirits." The tavern was rebuilt as both a hiding place for smuggled goods, and a potential death-trap for unwary customs men.

Mother Redcap herself was very likeable, and assisted sailors by acting as a banker, minding their earnings while they were at sea. Many of the clientele came from the crews of privateers who anchored at Red Bets, the anchorage just opposite the tavern. Mother Redcap's was built of red free-stone, and the walls were practically three feet thick. Smugglers hid contraband in the walls and ceilings of lower rooms.

The walls were covered by thick planks of wood from wrecked ships. There was a front door made of five inch thick oak, studded with iron nails, and seems to have had several sliding bars across the inside. Just inside the door was a trapdoor leading down to the cellar under the north room, a rough wooden lid with hinges and shackles. If an intruder forced the front door this would withdraw the bolt of the trapdoor, precipitating the unwelcome visitor into the cellar, eight or nine feet below. It was also used for the more mundane purpose of depositing goods.

If a visitor had successfully negotiated this initial obstacle, they would have the options of entering a room to the north or another to the south (although this entrance would be covered by the open front door), or going straight up a staircase directly ahead of the door. The main entrance into the cellar was behind this staircase, where seven or eight steps led down. At the top of the cellar steps, a narrow doorway led out into the yard at the back.

The beams in the two main rooms of the house were made of oak, and the chimney breasts were very large inside. There were cavities near the ceiling, over the oak beams that had removable entrances from the top of the chimney breasts inside the flues. In the south room was a small cavity, just large enough to conceal a small man. In the wall were other smaller cavities where Mother Redcap kept the earnings and prize money of privateer crews while they were at sea.

In the yard was a well, twelve foot deep, dry and partly filled in with earth. On the west side of the wall of the well (facing inland) there was a hole that seemed to lead into the garden but probably led to a mysterious passage.

At the south end of the house there was another cave or cellar, and a mosaic was placed over sandstone flags that covered this cavity. A square hole with steps, made to look like a dry pit well, was the entrance to this cellar. Much of the yard

seems to have been hollow, flagstones on beams covering a large subterranean space. A manure heap and a stock of coal were piled on top of it; the coal was brought in small boats called “flats” and Mother Redcap sold it to the people of Liscard. When contraband was concealed inside the cave, the coal and barrels were moved to cover the entrance.

At the end of the cave was the mysterious passage mentioned above. Some sources state that it led to the Yellow Noses, over a mile away in what is now New Brighton, and also that another passage went to Birkenhead Priory. More conservative accounts say that it led to an opening in a ditch that led to a pit about halfway up what is now Lincoln Drive, in the direction of Liscard. On the edge of this pit grew a willow tree which was used as a lookout post from which one of Mother Redcap’s confederates could survey the whole entrance to the Mersey.

Mother Redcap had hiding places for any number of fugitive sailors, and of course she also acted as a banker, keeping the men’s earnings and prize-money concealed about the building, and it was said that she had enormous amounts of money concealed, but its location was never revealed. It is said that shortly before her death a privateer ship came into port in Liverpool with a fabulously rich prize that had given the crew at least £1, 000 (£50, 000 in today’s money) each. Mother Redcap’s was “swarming” with sailors from this ship, and she received a great deal of the prize-money for safekeeping. She died soon after, and little property was found in her possession. The location of the privateers’ prize money remains a mystery to this day.

After Mother Redcap’s death the tavern continued to be an important landmark, even after it had had its license revoked. A retired solicitor called Joseph Kitchingham bought it in 1888, restoring and renovating the building, adding a turret attic, a further wing and various enlargements and alterations, including a date plate

inscribed with the legend 1595 – 1889. The property was sold after Kitchingham's death when it was bought by Robert Myles who opened it as a café, named Mother Redcap's Café.

By the 1950s the house had come into the possession of the Grimshaw family, whose son Wolfgang was a childhood friend of local historian Joseph "Pepe" Ruiz. In the latter's book "Beachcombers, Buttercreams and Smuggler's Caves" he relates his experiences of the building in its later years. Digging in the south west corner the two boys got down no more than a foot before their spades met a large sandstone slab, which further excavations revealed to be part of a set of steps leading downwards.

Mother Redcap's was never a success as a café. It also failed as a nightclub – the aptly-named Galleon Club -- and closed in 1960, falling into ruin before being demolished in October 1974. Joseph Ruiz records that during the demolition a bulldozer fell through a hole in the ground, revealing a large well with an entrance door part of the way down. The workers recognised this as the famous "smugglers' well" and one man suggested his mates lower him down to the door and they inform the museum authorities. The foreman, however, insisted that the well be filled in, and threatened instant dismissal to anyone contacting the museum. Mother Redcap's secrets were finally buried. Soon after, a nursing home was built on the site, and it still stands today.

## **Part Two – Smugglers' Tunnels**

A 1974 article in the Wirral News stated that the developers found no trace of tunnels while building the nursing home on the site of Mother Redcap's. However, Joan McCool of Rivington Road, who had worked at the Galleon Club in the fifties, said

that behind the bar there had been a large bank with several tunnels that had been partially filled in with beer bottles. To the left of the bar there was a large slit, which would go unnoticed unless drawn to a visitor's attention. This could be entered sideways, and led to a black, damp tunnel running behind the bar and seeming to go on much further.

Inga Kneale, the Galleon Club's former proprietor, said that although she had never found tunnels "of any length" she was sure that they existed, and had always felt that someone was watching her. A previous owner had excavated the dance floor while searching for the passages, but had been unsuccessful. A geo-physical survey in the mid seventies by Ezekiel Palmer of the Proudman Institute also failed to reveal any sign of tunnels.

However, a letter from Marion Fisher, former owner of an hotel in Wellington Road, mentioned a long stay resident, a builder, who had been working on Mother Redcap's. Part of his work had been to fill in the well, which this account describes as "square and situated at the front of the house." He told Mrs Fisher that down the well were three entrances to tunnels. Some of the tunnels had caved in, but the one that ran to St Hilary's was intact. Another ran "under some nearby cottages" while the third was "believed to run somewhere via the docks to an old Birkenhead church, possibly the priory".

The nineteenth century writer James Stonehouse recorded having "been up the tunnels or caves at the Red and White Noses many a time for great distances," and how he "once ... went up the caves for at least a mile, and could have gone further." He believed that they were "excavated by smugglers in part, and partly natural cavities of the earth." Elsewhere he records the tradition that "the caves at the Red Noses communicated in some way and somewhere with Mother Redcap's." Other

accounts say that a second tunnel led from the Priory to Mother Redcap's. In 1897, "an old man who had explored them in his youth" was living at Wallasey,

The most famous of the caves, known as the Wormhole, lies beneath Rock Villa. The sea entrance was blocked off after the construction of the Promenade, but until recently it could be entered via a manhole and a vertical ladder from the garden of the house. Formerly opened each year for charity, the cave consists of a narrow tunnel on a north-south axis which opens out into a main cavern containing a well, and a bricked-up tunnel on the east wall. Several dates are carved on the walls, including one as early as 1619. The air is said to be fresh, even at the southern end, so there must be an outlet. Recent rumours, however, suggest that the owner has barred off the entrance.

It is said that the tunnel is linked with others in a cavern underneath the Palace Amusement Arcade in New Brighton. Tradition maintains that smugglers and wreckers concealed their booty in the cavern, which is sadly no longer accessible. The tunnels are believed to lead to Bidston, Mother Redcap's (from which another tunnel is supposed to lead to Birkenhead Priory), St Hilary's Church and Fort Perch Rock. The existence of the Fort Perch Rock tunnel itself was confirmed by a geo-physical survey carried out in the mid-seventies, (at the same time as the one at Mother Redcap's) and it has been suggested that it was built as an escape route for the fort in case of attack. The cellars of the Palace itself consist of an extensive warren of tunnels that predate the current building by a substantial if uncertain period, being lined with handmade brick joined with cement rather than mortar.

The Old Palace and the Floral Pavilion were built in 1880, opening on Whit Monday the next year. It included an aquarium, baths, a theatre, a ballroom said to have been the finest in England, an aviary, and a zoo. During the construction of the

original building a pit was discovered which “revealed evidence that it had been used by smugglers and wreckers for the purpose of concealing their goods” and that possibly it hid something more sinister. A “sickening” stench emanated from the pit, and only the liberal use of disinfectants could eventually remove the contents so work could continue. According to local traditions, this is connected with the wreck of the Pelican in 1793. The cavern was transformed into an underground waterway known as The Grotto, where small boats could sail past illuminated caves. It extended for over 250 metres, and is said to have ended beneath the bottom of Rowson Street.

The passages are said to extend as far as St Hilary’s, Leasowe Castle, and even Chester Castle. Although the latter seems highly, it is possible that the tunnel leading to St Hilary’s joins up with one of the tunnels from beneath the Palace. Perhaps they are one and the same tunnel.

No tunnels are currently accessible from St Hilary’s at the present date, and the vault beneath the old tower was covered by a tiled floor in the late nineteenth century. But according to the rector, Canon Paul Robinson, one of the parishioners remembers going down a tunnel in the thirties, below Swinton Old Hall, the site of the modern rectory, a few hundred years away from the old tower. Joseph Ruiz says that a well exists beneath the front sitting room of the old rectory, fifteen feet wide and 350 feet deep, and it is believed to lead to a tunnel; this is also mentioned in an article in the Wirral News. The article refers to a legend that says an underground passage leads from the rectory to the church (presumably the old tower) and then on to Mother Redcap’s. According to legend, Mother Redcap’s treasure – the missing prize money of the privateers - lies somewhere in this tangled labyrinth. But what happened to it? Is it lost forever? It is possible that some of the treasure has been found over the years.

Mother Redcap's death appears to have been during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. In about 1850, a "quantity of Spade Ace guineas was found in a cavity by the shore," which is the origin of the name Guinea Gap. The money dated from the late seventeenth to mid eighteenth century (William and Mary, George I and George II), and was found with a sword and a skeleton.

According to Joseph Ruiz, a man named Morty Brightmore was employed by the Pioneer Corps in 1942. One of his duties was to dig sand out of the Red Noses caves for use in sandbags. While so engaged, he found an old leather purse filled with gold coins, which he reported to the officer in charge of the operation. It is said that the officer gave the coins to a jeweller to be melted down to make a bracelet for his daughter.

In 1979, Bob Wadsworth, owner of the end house in Seymour Street, was clearing out his cellar when he found the entrance to a large tunnel beneath some bricks. The tunnel led in the direction of the sea. Investigating the tunnel, Bob found an old, rotten bag of silver coins, which he sold to local antique dealer Frank Upton for £3 and two packets of cigarettes. As is so often the case, the council later filled in the tunnel.

The current writer frequently found himself up against a brick wall – sometimes literally – as he struggled to uncover the truth behind these rumours. Tunnels had been blocked up as soon as they were discovered; the publication of Joseph Ruiz's book apparently resulted in the blocking of all the Red Noses tunnel entrances; documents had mysteriously vanished from the reference sections of libraries whose staff were oddly brusque and unhelpful: finally, the writer was warned that all information on the subject had been suppressed by the local authority.

It remains an enigma.