

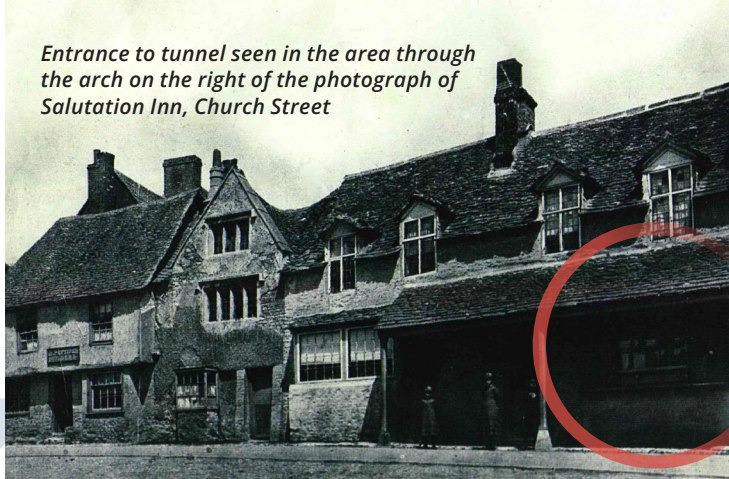


The Faringdon Tunnels

AN INTRIGUING POSSIBILITY

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Entrance to tunnel seen in the area through the arch on the right of the photograph of Salutation Inn, Church Street



I have always believed that there is more to Faringdon than meets the eye, so when I heard rumours of a subterranean aspect to the town, I was eager to investigate. The hunt has proved tricky, as evidence is slim, but I have gathered what I can in the hope that further information and investigations may allow the full story to come to light.

The Monk's Tale

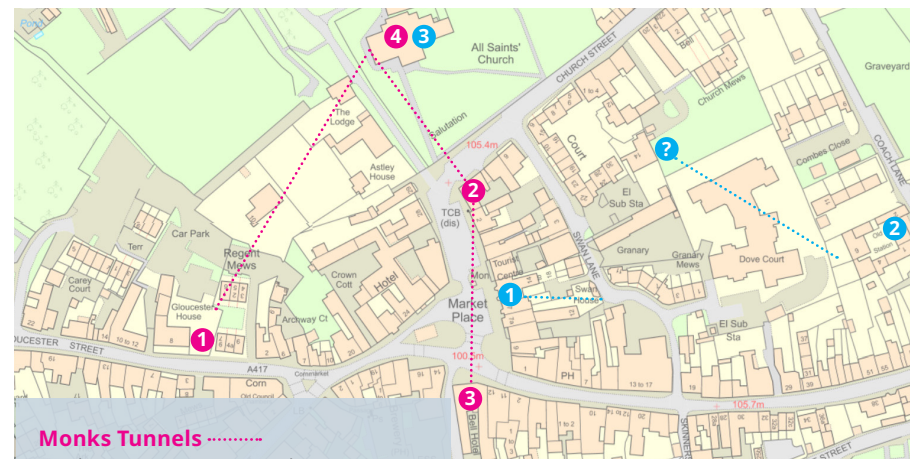
The town that we know today has a very different aspect from that of its past self. In the thirteenth century, which is the era in which our story begins, there was a stream running through Cornmarket, dividing the town into two tithings: Port to the east and Westbrook to the west. The profit of the tithes went to the Cistercian monks, whose order had been granted the Manor of Faringdon by King John in 1203. It was intended that an abbey, or perhaps a monastery, would be built here but this came to naught. However, a cell of the monks, affiliated to Beaulieu Abbey, did have a thriving community in Faringdon until the sixteenth century and the sites of some of their buildings are still accessible today, though many are altered in form. One central place which would

be somewhat recognisable to the monks is All Saints' Church which was built on the site of a Saxon place of worship in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. This was the hub of their life and the destination point for all of the tunnels.

Across from the church the Salutation Inn served as a lodging house for the monks and their guests. In the 1970s, when excavation work beneath the stables was being carried out by the owners of the building, the Bilbe family, the opening to a tunnel was seen. It is likely that this tunnel interconnected with the one between The Bell and the church.

Further out is The Bell Hotel, which served as a hospice for those in the care of the monks. There are reported to be traces of a tunnel entrance beneath the building.

Cover image: Cistercian monks at work, 13th century. Source: *Expositio en Apocalypsim* (University Library Cambridge Ms. mm 5.31. fol. 113) by Alexander of Bremen



Monks Tunnels

- 1 Gloucester House (Monks' Priory)
- 2 Salutation Inn (Monks' Lodging House)
- 3 The Bell Hotel (Monks' Hospice)
- 4 All Saints church

Medieval Tunnels / Streets

- 1 6/7 Market Place
- 2 Old Police Station
- 3 All Saints' Church
- ? Suspected tunnel

Medieval Street

Crossing a time line with the monks' occupation of Faringdon, though probably not built by them, is a large tunnel which can still be accessed today, through an opening at the back of 7a Market Place. This contains medieval shops and a well. There is evidence of a tunnel running from here towards Swan Lane and a suggestion that it is, in turn, connected to a tunnel, which was discovered in the 1960s, running from the back of the Old Police Station in Coach Lane in the direction of the church.

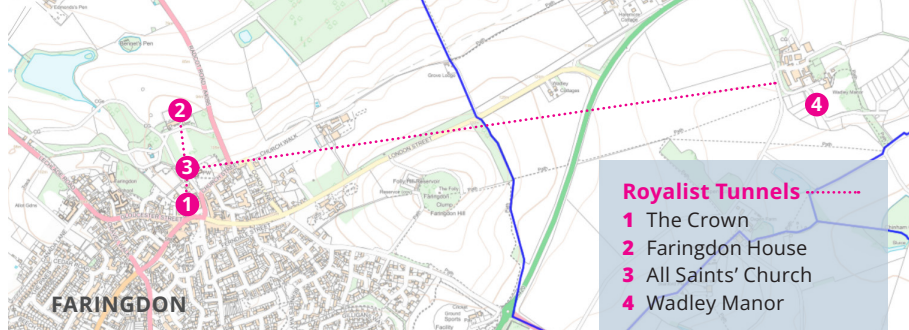
The main accommodation for the monks was their priory, housed in a manor on the site of Gloucester House and Gloucester Street car park. A tunnel is said to run from there to the church; the path above it was long known as Monks' Walk.

The Purpose

So why would the monks need this network of tunnels? It is suggested that some may have given access to water supplies or allowed a cool place for the sick to be isolated in times of sickness. There is also the possibility that the monks valued the privacy offered by the tunnels, and, more urgently, they allowed them greater safety of movement during times of persecution.



The medieval street beneath 7a Market Place



Royalist Tunnels

- 1 The Crown
- 2 Faringdon House
- 3 All Saints' Church
- 4 Wadley Manor

Royalist Tunnels

Faringdon was an important place during the Civil War of the seventeenth century, being the penultimate town to succumb to Parliamentary forces, after a year's siege and a bitter battle. Royalist officers were stationed at the Old Crown Coaching Inn and sought to defend Faringdon House, then owned by Sir Robert Pye.



Above: A possible tunnel entrance in the snug of The Old Crown Coaching Inn, which deserves further investigation

There is evidence of a tunnel entrance beneath the Inn which supposedly leads towards Faringdon House and the church; in the latter case this may be thanks to the earlier work of the monks but it seems likely that the soldiers saw the tunnels as useful escape routes.

There is also a suggestion that a tunnel was created between Faringdon House and Wadley Manor at this time. Certainly, Wadley Manor was an important refuge for the Royalists but I find it incredible that a tunnel of nearly a mile and half could be accomplished.

So, there are reports of tunnels in various sources (please see the bibliography) and some physical evidence. To take the project forward we would need to employ modern technology in the form of Ground Penetrating Radar to unlock the hidden evidence. Should this become possible further reports will be made.

Bibliography

'Faringdon History Walk' – a leaflet available at The Tourist Information Centre

'Faringdon – A Short History of Wessex Town' by Robert Phillips

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