





A room with a clue

Hidden behind concealed doors and brick walls, secret spaces in country houses continue to thrill and spook us in equal measure, finds
Deborah Nicholls-Lee

Illustrations by Oliver Preston

FRAMED by spiky palms and overlooking the teal expanse of the Salcombe estuary in Devon, Overbeck's, an Edwardian country house currently under renovation, harbours a secret that delighted me as a child. Amid the curiosities collected by its eccentric owner was a hidden door. I remember the excitement of hunting for it and entering the dimly lit space beyond: a room with wall-to-wall dolls' houses and petite proportions that were perfectly suited to a small child with a big imagination. Decades later, my own children ran their tiny hands over the same dark-wood panels beneath the stairs, letting out appreciative squeals when they made their discovery.

Our country houses are brimming with hidden spaces, quickening the pulse of all those who learn their secret. Chavenage House in Gloucestershire, subject of the YouTube channel *Life at the Manor*, has proved 'full of surprises,' notes James Lowsley-Williams, who inherited the Grade I-listed Elizabethan property in 2023. One day, in a passage leading to a library and billiard room, he noticed a groove in the panelling behind a large Jacobean chest. When he pushed the panel, 'it popped open' to reveal a heavy steel door and a hidden room beyond that couldn't be found on any of the plans.

'The library was actually the dining room for the original 500-year-old house,' he explains and, because in those days 'every meal was candelabras and silver cutlery', this windowless room was its silver safe. He had hoped to find 'mountains of gold' or some silverware at least, but he was met with dusty books and disused furnishings. ➔

The saint of secret spaces

Nicholas Owen, a diminutive Tudor carpenter from Oxford, lived a double life. Working under the alias 'Little John', he set up sham construction sites at great houses as he secretly engineered ingenious hiding places to conceal priests from the Reformation's ruthless agents. Owen's designs made use of false stairways, decoy joinery and hides within hides that appeared to give up their secret, but contained multiple layers. To sustain their occupant, air vents and small apertures, into which a drinking tube or feeding hatch could be inserted, were incorporated into decorative features.

His priest holes at Harvington Hall in Worcestershire—where the seven hides form Britain's largest surviving collection

—feature sliding floorboards, false fireplaces and rotating beams, as well as dead-end doorways about the house with the aim to disorientate and delay unwelcome visitors. One hide, accessed via a trapdoor in the garderobe, leads to a space in a chimney stack above a bread oven. Without the additional layer of earth, the priest would have been cooked.

Eventually, even Owen himself could not avoid detection and—refusing to give up the secrets of his life-saving craftsmanship—was tortured to death in the Tower of London. He was canonised by Pope Paul VI in 1970. Catholic stage magicians who perform 'gospel magic' went a step further, naming him the patron saint of illusionists and escapologists: a holy Houdini, no less.

His grandfather had more luck in the attic, where a hidden room contained designs signed by George IV for the remodelling of Windsor Castle. He sold them to the Crown and the proceeds paid for Chavenage's new roof.

Back in the 19th century, our fascination with the secrets hidden in country houses helped drive the trend for Gothic literature. As Allan Fea remarked in *Secret Chambers and Hiding Places* of about 1900: 'In exploring the gloomy hiding-holes, concealed apartments, passages, and staircases in our old halls and manor houses we probe, as it were, into the very groundwork of romance.' Edward Bulwer-Lytton, for example, drew on the trapdoors, hiding places and oubliettes of his ancestral home,

Knebworth House, Hertfordshire, in *The Haunted and the Haunters*, in which the strange supernatural energy in the house is orchestrated from a room hidden beneath

a hatch; whereas in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, the garret occupied by Mr Rochester's deranged first wife was inspired by the hidden attic room believed to have housed 'Mad Mary' at Norton Conyers in North Yorkshire (*Country-house treasures*, January 14).

Of course, in most country houses, hidden doors and secret passages served a primarily functional role. At Harlaxton Manor in Lincolnshire, a hefty jib door in the carved-oak panelling connects the great hall to the state dining room, allowing servants to move with discretion as they undertook their daily tasks. Such doors were also an aesthetic choice, preserving the symmetry of an ornate interior. Yet even practical features were sometimes imbued with a proprietor's sense

of fun. In a false bookcase in the library of Oxburgh Hall in Norfolk, for example, the 6th Baronet included a volume titled *La Porte*, hinting playfully at the room hidden beyond. At Hever Castle, the secrets are constantly evolving. A discreetly hinged wall panel with holly and oak marquetry once provided access to a turret to launch surprise attacks on assailants. When the luxury-loving Lord Astor purchased the Kent castle in 1903, he saw no need for a defensive tower and hid something else behind the door more suited to his lifestyle: a cocktail cabinet.

This appetite for whimsy is still alive and well. Andrew Tolochko of Solid Carpentry, which creates bespoke designs for clients

in the London area, has noted an increase in requests for hidden features. 'For many, it's their dream from childhood,' he tells me, whereas others are inspired by James Bond. Projects include a mirror concealing a home office and a hinged bookcase opening onto a lift to private apartments. 'When the door is closed, you'd never guess there is something behind it,' he says. Some clients have security in mind and request hidden panic rooms or vaults. 'It elevates the interior, but it also has a function,' explains Mr Tolochko, who believes that a hidden space helps a property stand out to buyers and can even increase its value.

Witley Park in Surrey is one such unforgettable property, its secret a testimony to the extraordinary imagination of its flamboyant former owner, the mining speculator and financier James Whitaker Wright. Beneath its lake, a glazed tunnel leads to a glass-domed underwater ballroom (now derelict),

‘He saw no need for a defensive tower and hid something else: a cocktail cabinet’



its apex marked by a statue of Neptune rising from the water. 'Outside the clear crystal glass is a curtain of green water, and goldfish come and press their noses against the glass,' reported the *Royal Magazine* in 1903.

Hidden spaces serving to save lives rather than impress visitors were no less creative. Baddesley Clinton in Warwickshire, where Anne Vaux and her sister Eleanor ran a safe house for Jesuits during the Reformation, has three priest hides or holes (*see box, above*): in the roof, behind wood panelling and in a shaft leading to the sewers accessible only by rope. The cleverly hidden spaces outsmarted the persecutors, who, she says, 'behaved like a lot of boys playing blind man's bluff, who, in their wild rush, bang into tables and chairs and walls and yet haven't the slightest suspicion that their playfellows are right on top of them and almost touching them'. During Oliver Cromwell's pursuit of Royalists, these hides found a second life. At Boscobel House, Shropshire, Charles II sought refuge in one beneath the attic stairs



Fantasy made real: the underwater ballroom of Witley Park, Surrey, revealed the creatures of the lake through a glass dome

—only fractionally more comfortable than the oak tree he famously hid in on the estate.

In times of conflict, knowing the secrets of a country house—its underground passages and hidden stairways—gave the owner power over their visitors. In some cases, that extended to eavesdropping on guests, particularly political rivals. In the Great Hall of Edinburgh Castle, a metal grill to the right of a colonnaded fireplace is the only clue to a secret chamber beyond known as a ‘laird’s lug’ (lord’s ear), where James IV once listened in on his subjects. Centuries later, in 1984, this primitive wiretap would unsettle the KGB, who insisted it be bricked up when Soviet leader-to-be Mikhail Gorbachev visited.

There are some secluded spaces, however, that you’d rather not know about. ‘Horrific’ and ‘terrifying’ are the words Mr Lowsley-Williams uses to describe a tiny room up

A royal retreat

British aristocrats are not the only ones with concealed spaces in their homes. A careful inspection of the gilded wall hangings of Marie Antoinette’s bedchamber at Versailles reveals a hidden door to her private apartments. It was perhaps thanks to this entrance, and the network of secret staircases and corridors beyond it, that the ill-fated Queen of France was able to conduct her alleged affair with the Swedish count Axel von Fersen. The secret door—one of many hidden exits and tunnels—certainly extended her life. When a revolutionary mob stormed her bed chamber in October 1789, she escaped through this passage into the private apartment of Louis XVI, where she was reunited with her husband and children.

a stone stairway discovered by his grandfather: a prison cell, with a stone seat and barred window, and reportedly haunted. The discovery of a disused boiler room was also inauspicious. ‘We cracked the padlock and went down and then found a mountainful of asbestos, so that wasn’t ideal,’ he admits.

For better or for worse, heritage properties continue to give up secrets that are sometimes centuries old. In 2023, conservation work at Johnstown Castle in Co Wexford,

Ireland, revealed a mysterious circular room hidden behind a bricked-up wall in a tower and accessible only by boat. It may be ‘a small turret bedroom’, the castle manager told the BBC. ‘We will need to investigate this further.’ Meanwhile, in the Cotswolds, Mr Lowsley-Williams’s latest find in his 50-room home has also left him perplexed. ‘The question’s still out there,’ he tells me. ‘What do you do with an unused vault by your library? If any of our readers have any ideas, let me know.’ 🐉