

The Lovett and, later, Shirley families at Astwell had remained Catholics after the Reformation – during the 1588 Armada period they are listed as “suspect” in county records. They had their own chapel within the “mansion”, and Wappenham a priest in Thomas Benbow who’d been a child trained at Towcester Chantry before the Henrician Reformation. It should be no surprise that Wappenham Church has bells in its tower which date from the 1570s onwards, or even a very unusual early 17th Century church clock ... England under Elizabeth I has been described as akin to a police state. Everyone needed a certificate of conformity to the state church, the Church of England, of which the Queen was the Head; (both Catholicism and Puritanism involved allegiance to foreign leaders). This “conformity” involved somewhat irregular attendance plus the partaking of communion only three or four times a year – Easter, Whitsun, and Christmas, with in some places the Patron Saint’s anniversary – *but it had to be attested by the parish priest*. In Wappenham, with Thomas Benbow and at Astwell, in his parish, with the Lovett, then Shirley families, it was very much a case of “if you scratch my back, I’ll scratch yours”! Clearly, a “secret” entrance or exit to the Church or its grounds could have been very useful during the hundred years or so 1540-1650, as were the “priestholes” for hiding itinerant catholic priests, and also, at times such other non-conformists to the Church of England as the Anabaptists! One such priesthole was found, I’ve been told, in Abthorpe in the 1950s; a family named Lawrence, of Slapton, were “presumed Anabaptists” c1605 in parish registers and I am certain there would have been priestholes at both Astwell mansion and Astwell Park – their location just off the Northampton – Oxford – Leicester – Welsh Lane – Watling Street road complexes would be too important for there not to be.

There were, in my childhood, two stories concerning Astwell besides that of the tunnel. One concerned the ghostly apparition of a team of runaway horses and a carriage with a lady screaming inside “coming thundering down the hill and the carriage finally overturning”. This one was told to me by Mr. Roberts, who farmed at Astwell Castle during the 1940s into the 50s, and kept a Youth Hostel in the Tower. It was probably a regular party piece of his. I don’t remember too many of the details, even the direction it was supposed to be coming from – “down the hill” could have been from Wappenham, Syresham, Falcutt, Helmdon or even Weston or Weedon – all I still retain is the impression of speed and noise. Whether it was an accident that really happened is unknown to me – its possible. “The Mansion” at Astwell, built through the 1500s, had many rooms – the Castle today is only a very poor shadow of its splendour – and, until the mid 1700s, many important visitors. It was one of the largest “houses” for miles around. During its heyday there were enough “troubled times” to provide many opportunities for precipitous flight as well as the “normal” accident risks. Since I first heard the story, the area around the Castle, Mill, ponds and Park have always felt “spooky”, though curiously *not* the area near Old Mountains or the Roman Villa/Inn. These are merely “magical”!

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