

The Mystery Of Wellbrook House

Chapter one

It was not intentional but on every turn, the slightly misshapen wheel squeaked. Not a particularly loud, nor a fast squeak, just enough to indicate the old wooden wheelbarrow was in use.

The grounds man who spent many spare hours constructing it nearly seventy years before, certainly made the pushcart to last.

The quiet Surrey countryside was not acutely disturbed by the noise.

Although, not too far from Woking, the estate was tucked well away in a secluded spot along a narrow rough tarmac lane, used only by those who resided there.

Like so many other isolated properties in the area, grey lanes or bumpy sandy tracks originated from innocent openings in the hedgerow. Thick evergreen foliage disguised most of these homes from prying eyes.

That tarmac way had received so many repairs over the years, it resembled a patchwork quilt. Unfortunately, road covering had reached a stage of degeneration where one new single patch would be needed to cover the entire length.

At the far end, a single tyre track and footprints repeatedly scared the otherwise unblemished dew covered back lawn.

Joseph Chapel transported smaller items to stone storage barns at the edge of the property.

Now the main building was no longer a convent, secure areas needed to be found for the safe keeping all such sacred possessions. In the short term, the old stables were deemed suitable.

Course wooden beams lay on the floor with plywood sheets covering, offered a suspended base from the blue cobbled flooring. All in the hope that damp would not travel up from the uneven cobbled surface.

The slim male barrow pusher had ensured a healthy supply of straw from a nearby farm.

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Precious items of that value required plenty of packing material around them.

Save for chirping sparrows and the beautiful song of a thrush, which hopped from bush to bush, that part of the grounds were pleasantly quiet.

In complete contrast, the front side was a hive of activity.

Tall wooden signs towered above temporary metal fencing at the outer boundary. One old painted board, saw black lettering and insignia flaking off a fading white background. The words, 'Wellbrooke House Convent School, Sisters of the Sacred Heart and Mercy', were barely readable, due to letters missing and a thick coating of algae to the right side.

Another similar sized board declared the land for sale. However, a dark red diagonal 'SOLD' strip posted across it, contradicted that fact.

The last, a larger poster, contained a colourful impression of what the new hotel could look like. As always, a perfect romantic scene existed only in the artists mind. Reality rarely ever lived up to cartoon sketches.

Apart from wide open gates, the compound was well secured. Grill fencing stretched around the complete boundary.

To one quarter of the graveled parking area, a small group of builders were as busy as termites.

Four people of varying ages, man handled step ladders, different size levels and buckets of hand tools into the sand stone frontage.

A pair of light green and white company Volkswagen Caddy vans contained a fine supply of equipment.

Important tasks, such as carrying in the kettle, mugs and radio, were reserved for the youngest and most recent team manual worker.

A bright yellow eight cubic meter skip was being gently lowered from sturdy triangular arms of a delivery truck. Crunching shingle sounded as the metal container settled into position. A

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drop down access door ensured labourer's efforts were kept to a minimum when walking with armfuls of debris.

To the left of that, a three meter pile of building sand and a much, much larger heap of ballast for concreting.

On the lawns edge, a dark green Travis Perkins lorry was off loading several pallets of pre shrink wrapped cement bags, and one of concrete blocks. At a safe distance away from the heavy vehicle, the short tubby driver tried hard to activate the rear mounted Hi-Ab arm.

Stuttering hydraulic rams, juddered a huge extendable arm this way and that.

Weighty construction materials swayed aimlessly through the air, by use of his waist slung remote levers. Maneuvering large objects was not his strong point. He was never able to use those things confidently when people watched, without constantly mopping his bald head. A sudden ineptness bought on by anxiety, would flood over the poor aging man.

The reason for all the commotion was parked in the opposite corner, just inside the temporary steel framed gates.

A black Range Rover, belonging to the new owners of 'Wellbrooke House' and a silver Aston Martin, a recent purchase of their architect.

At auction, the brace of local property developers took a shine to the old convent and saw the opportunity to redevelop it into a high standard hotel. Scope was there, the brothers believed, to produce elite accommodation for which the wealthy would pay a handsome sum.

Which explained why the workforce appeared to be scuttling around on a sugar rush.

For some time, the two suited men had been inside with the plans creator. Sheets of drawings were rolled out in each room, discussing every fine detail expected of the finished project.

Brian and Maurice had a vast and impressive portfolio to their credit. As with most who get bitten by the renovation bug, they began with domestic properties before rapidly moving onto the commercial market.

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The majority of Maurice's youth was spent correcting the pronunciation of his name. What was important to him was to have the French tang applied, rather than sounding common like a British Leyland car.

His brother was much more down to earth, happily answering to Brian or Bri. However, 'Mr Hodges' always felt far too formal to the younger sibling.

By the time all initial equipment was taken inside, the owners were in the final room, beside the main entrance.

Further inside the tiny labyrinth, past two more dark stained paneled doors, a makeshift reception area and an open cupboard, the short entrance passage emerged into the Great Hall. Stacked to his right were several refectory style tables, twice as many benches, book cases bureaus, glass fronted display cabinets, the list was endless. Short and tall, all that furniture was ready for removal.

Bright light shone in through colourful stain glass windows which adorned that multipurpose area. It was the only room that did not suffer from dark and dinginess. Corridors bereft of natural daylight were blessed with a twenty five watt light bulb. Likely as not, original bulbs had been in sockets for so long, rust would have secured them there.

Leading even further back to the accommodation wing, was the mouth of one of these gloomy passageways.

Plaster cast representations of Christ hung from sections of otherwise bare walls. Although the main figures were extremely pale, several splashes of colour were enough to give them a feel of life.

Joseph was going to need help removing those.

Even with a bare floor, it was easy to imagine nuns adorned in black with white, milling around this building.

An envious dog leg staircase, with newel posts and balustrades painstakingly carved from

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seasoned oak, spewed into the herringbone patterned floor tiling from on the left side.

Around that and beyond more storage, sectioned off by a pair of full length navy blue velvet curtains, was another aisle. It was from here faint echoed voices could be heard.

Two chambers on the right along that shadowy walkway, revealed where the sound emulated from.

A basic bare room, with merely a Belfast sink and aging tap. What appeared to be a pair of homemade trestles supporting an old wooden paneled door, stood against the wall to the right. It was on that makeshift table where the builder's mugs and small white plastic electric urn had been placed. A long extension lead connected the Russell Hobbs item to a red and chromed Honda generator in the back garden.

Light struggled through a very dirty timber framed window and the open doorway, normally sealed by a solid timber barrier.

Attempting to force an early lunch, the team gathered like vultures.

Fighting Sandy's young hands away from the kettle switch was task enough for the foreman, but keeping him busy until the paymasters had left, was something else.

Eventually conceding, the time came when the yellow hi-viz jacket and steel toed boot wearing crew could enjoy a well-earned cuppa.

"Well", the more senior builder began. "We've got our work cut out for this week". Slumping his rather rotund figure down on a vacant upturned black bucket, Charlie Garner continued.

"Roofers are already down the far end sorting that leak out"

The resident Bricklayer and Carpenter were handed a mug of tea each before Sandy nestled himself into an armchair fashioned from cement bags.

"..... Oi! Where's mine?!", barked the man, trying to find some comfort as his buttocks devoured the unfortunate plastic container.

Thompkins may well have been new to the team, but he rapidly learned not to leave out the

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Foreman at break time. Swiftly leaping to his feet, he set about correcting that oversight.

“Thank you. If you want to survive here, you’ll have my drink ready first”.

Although the stocky cup emblazoned with, ‘Kiss Me I’m Horny’, was received with a grin, Garner expected priority never the less.

“Sorry gov”, claimed the tall boney lad returning to his seat.

“Now. No groaning. Our workload may look heavy, but it’s not as bad as it sounds”. It was then, as Charlie leaned back against the wall, when one side of the straining bucket crumpled, split and skidded out from under him. Pride was the only thing damaged in that incident that saw him collapse on the red quarry tiled floor. Cursing, which oozed from his mouth, was mostly concealed by the others laughter. “Oh, for Christ sake”, was how the vulgar profanity concluded. A moment was taken to scramble to his feet.

“You mustn’t swear in here, gov”. Sandy showed genuine concern while sliding an unopened cardboard box of sealant tubes for the complaining man to sit on.

“What the hell are you talking about?”, Charlie enquired with a bark, while precariously planting himself on the box, just in case.

“This building A convent Religious, churchy place”, muttered the concerned youth, glancing cautiously around at the ceiling.

Glancing at the teenager, Charlie smiled “As much as I admire your respect which, incidentally, is sadly missing in the world, I do have to say sometimes ... you can be a real twat”

Echoed laughter rattled around the almost empty room.

“No. Don’t. It will bring us bad luck”

“Don’t be such a bloody arse”, chuckled the one in charge.

“It’s just a building”, added Terry Rainer, the Brickie. “Brick, stone, hard stuff, that’s all it is.

Nothing holy about building materials. Perhaps if Jesus was a bricklayer instead of working

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with timber, things may have been different” That masonry tradesman was a distinct stranger to the inside of a church. Even the marriage to his patient wife, was in a Registry Office. That’s not entirely true. Their wonderful nuptials, were carried out at a village hotel with special license.

No one appeared to support the labourer’s views. Poor lad was on his own.

Just as the gaiety died down, a red faced Sandy asked with some seriousness, “Doesn’t it have to be Circumcised or something?”