

Tunnel into Tenby's dark past

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Experts believe the two- metre-high, man-made tunnel - wide enough to drive a horse and cart through - was built before the 19th Century, and could lead to the nearby North Beach in Tenby.

But it is still unclear exactly when and why the secret underground passage, discovered by builders working on a new pharmacy, was created.

A smugglers' passage, an industrial tunnel and even a Civil War escape route have all been suggested as possible reasons for its existence.

Archaeologists, who are pondering the puzzle, will carry out further digs and research to solve the mystery.

"It's absolutely fascinating," said pharmacy owner Patrick Sutton yesterday.

"It's a very large tunnel - about the same size as the tunnel between Saundersfoot and Wiseman's Bridge. You can certainly walk through it and in places you could probably drive a horse and cart.

"There's been a lot of public interest but nobody has heard about it before."

The tunnel was discovered 10 days ago when workmen dug the foundations for a new pharmacy in Gas Lane.

After removing a 100-year- old derelict boat shed on the site, they started cutting into the cliff. But as their digger pulled back, part of the land collapsed to reveal the entrance to a gaping two-metre-wide hole.

Further exploration revealed a 40ft-long tunnel neatly cut through the rock and sloping towards the sea.

Evidence of fine sand grains on its floor suggests that its exit, now blocked, once opened on to the beach.

"It's certainly heading that way," said Mr Sutton. "It's difficult to tell when you're in it as you lose a sense of direction, but it appears to go under the Croft and I can't see where else it would go other than the beach."

Following the discovery, Mr Sutton and his wife Hilary called in archaeologists, who investigated the site and took away pieces of pottery and animal bones found in the tunnel's back fill, believed to have been put into the area when the earlier boat shed was built.

Louise Austin, head of the heritage management section at Cambria Archaeology, said the pottery was thought to come from the 18th or early 19th Century.

But the remains would only date the back fill not the tunnel itself, which would have been out of use by then and therefore older, she said.

"The tunnel is certainly earlier than the 19th Century, although how much earlier, I don't know," Ms Austin said. "Nor do we know yet what it was used for.

"Some people think it may have been a smugglers' tunnel, although there's no hard evidence for that at all.

"What we would like to do now is look into what the area around the tunnel was once used for. There's an idea that a nearby car park could have been a quarry, in which case the tunnel may have been used to transport stones to boats on the beach."

Royal escape

TENBY'S most famous tunnel is said to have played a key role in British history by helping the future Henry VII escape from his enemies.

In the 15th Century, during the War of the Roses between the houses of York and Lancaster, Tenby was coming to prominence as a major sea trading port.

It had a number of prosperous merchant families, whose vessels plied their trade between Wales and the continent. Among them were Thomas and John White, who were both mayors of the town.

After the Battle of Tewkesbury in 1471, the Earl of Pembroke, Jasper Tudor, who had been on the losing side, escaped to Tenby with his 14-year-old nephew Henry Tudor.

Thomas White, who lived at Jasperley House - now the site of high street chemist Boots - hid the fugitives in his cellar. The underground cavern runs in one direction towards the harbour.

It was from this tunnel that Henry Tudor was said to have been spirited away to the harbour and on to one of Thomas White's boats.

He returned 14 years later to defeat Richard III at the Battle of Bosworth in 1485 and claim the crown as Henry VII.