

## **Fortean Traveller Article about Williamson Tunnels**

**TITLE TBC**

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### **Introduction**

Fortean travellers are usually an intrepid lot, venturing across the globe to places like Santorini and Cambodia in search of the weird and the wonderful. Not me. Wielding my travel pass I crossed the River Mersey from the Wirral peninsula to Liverpool to visit a hidden gem tucked away behind Liverpool University. A 10-15 minute walk up Brownlow Hill from the famous Adelphi Hotel takes you past the Liverpool Metropolitan Cathedral (known locally as “Paddy’s Wigwam” because of its Catholic congregation of primarily Irish descent and its general resemblance to a Native American teepee) and the Victoria Building of Liverpool University which inspired the term “Red brick university” (because it was made with red bricks!). At the very top of Brownlow Hill there is a major road junction, but the road opposite is comparatively minor. This is Smithdown Lane, where set back behind some new houses opposite the police station you will find the Williamson Tunnels Heritage Centre.

Liverpool is one of the top tourist venues for people from the UK and abroad<sup>1,2</sup> who come for music, theatre, history and sport. Yet few of them realise that very near to the city centre is a subterranean world with a fascinating history. Opened in 2002, the Heritage Centre is run by the Joseph Williamson Society<sup>3</sup> (JWS) and is the entrance to the only publicly accessible passageways which have been excavated from a huge and elaborate underground labyrinth of tunnels, chambers and passageways, created by the wealthy businessman and philanthropist Joseph Williamson in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century. For a modest entrance fee you get a 40 minute guided tour, with (essential!) hard hat, which takes you through a circular route of a section of the network, with exhibits and displays which depict the life and times of that period and the man himself. The range of information and stories that relate to Williamson and the tunnels is so great that different guides can provide different emphases around the main script (for example, social versus construction aspects) and so people who revisit find that they may get plenty of new, additional insights.

What is important to note is that knowledge about the tunnels is continually evolving as new research and excavations are undertaken. The area covered by the tunnels is roughly that bounded by Paddington in the North, Grinfield Street in the South, Overton Street in the East, and Smithdown Lane (but possibly Old Crown Street) in the West; approximately 440 yards by 330 yards. The maximum depth below ground level for any of the tunnels is about 60 feet. The JWS estimates that less than 10% of the whole system is currently known for certain, and less than 5% is accessible. Other excavations are currently being undertaken in Mason Street and Paddington by The Friends of the Williamson Tunnels, which is a separate organisation to the JWS. The two work alongside one another to protect the Williamson legacy.

### **Geography and History**

Edge Hill is part of a North-South sandstone ridge about 1.5 miles from the River Mersey, which is surrounded by boulder clay. From the 18<sup>th</sup> Century it was looked after by the West Derby Wastelands Commission (WDWC), and as this name suggests it was poor ground with significant

marshland, parts of which flooded in winter to a depth of over 3 feet. Because it was common land people could help themselves to the sandstone, and so as Liverpool developed the demand for the sandstone for building purposes increased. It is now argued this resulted in wildcat sandstone slot quarries providing dimension stone for some of the grand buildings of the expanding and rich mercantile city. Williamson saw an opportunity to develop land on the hill by building a system of arches that covered the slots and then provided the foundation for urban housing. Therefore the tunnels are not actually tunnels, in the sense of being dug directly into the ground, but examples of the earliest and most profitable forms of quarry restorations<sup>4</sup>. Because some of the slots were so deep Williamson was forced to build multiple (support) arches above one another.

Williamson acquired his estate in 1806 and almost immediately started developments, building houses which covered many streets, primarily for rent, until 1840. There is no record of his ever employing an architect or engineer and so it is understood that he designed and managed the building of all the houses himself. Their design was somewhat bizarre<sup>5</sup> but none now exist. The underground complex included cellars for some of the houses and a range of chambers. His eccentricity earned him the nickname "The Mole of Edge Hill".

Following the Napoleonic wars there were huge numbers of de-mobbed soldiers returning home to swell the ranks of the poor and unemployed of Liverpool. Williamson employed hundreds of these men to build his tunnels and houses. When work dipped, rather than lay off workers, he required them to undertake tasks which served no useful purpose so he could pay them for putting in effort. These included pumping water (to run away), turning a grindstone (with nothing to grind) and moving stones. When there were insufficient locally-made bricks available, he got two teams of bricklayers to each dig a hole; he then got them to fill in the other team's hole. Maybe he inspired Keynes<sup>6</sup>?

In the early 1830s it was decided to drive a tunnel from Edge Hill station, the then terminus for the Liverpool-Manchester Railway, through to what became Lime Street station. The railway navvies were digging 12 metres below ground when a large hole appeared in the tunnel floor. Seeing dark figures moving, they thought that they had broken through to the Underworld and disturbed the Devil, and so they fled. In fact they had broken into one of Williamson's active tunnels. The upshot was that George Stephenson (of "The Rocket" fame<sup>7</sup>), who was responsible for the project, was so impressed with the workmanship in the tunnels that he employed some of Williamson's men on the remainder of the railway tunnel<sup>5</sup>.

Following Williamson's death in 1840 much of his property was taken over by the Army. The 1860s saw important general sewers developments in Liverpool, but prior to this the residents of the houses in Edge Hill, which was by then a densely populated district, seemed content to have the drains of their privies and water-closets carried directly into the tunnels situated beneath their homes, together with other household detritus. Given the capacities of the tunnels it took time before they filled, and in 1867 the Liverpool Medical Officer of Health brought the health hazards, and the "abominable smells", to the attention of the city's Health Committee for action<sup>8,9</sup>. This resulted in Liverpool City Council and the WDWC filling up the tunnels with ash, demolition rubble and other inert materials, to make them safe, cover the filth and remove access. In the 1880s the extension of the Edge Hill railway tunnel into a 4-track cutting meant further waste was put in the tunnels, followed either side of WWI with more demolition rubble from slum clearance. In the 1950s

blitz rubble from WWII and further slum clearance was added. The tunnels had evidently become a waste management version of Dr Who's TARDIS.

Interest in the tunnels resurrected in the 1990s with the founding of the JWS, and there are now good links with the City Council Planning Department and various university and professional archaeological organisations to ensure proper surveys are undertaken when new tracts are discovered, for example during housing development.

### **Joseph Williamson**

Comparatively little is known about Williamson, but recent research indicates that he was born in Yorkshire in 1769. He arrived in Liverpool at the age of 11 or 12 and went to work for Mr Tate, a tobacco merchant family. He was successful and progressed through the company, as well as being a merchant in his own right. He married Elizabeth Tate, the boss's daughter in 1802. The story goes that straight after the ceremony Williamson sent his new wife home whilst he went riding with the Liverpool Hunt. When someone commented that he looked particularly well-dressed he replied that "A man should look smart on his wedding day!" Responding to a query about his wife's whereabouts he stated "She's at home, to be sure, where all good wives ought to be – getting ready her husband's dinner"<sup>5</sup>. Clearly this was before Women's Lib!

There is some mystery and conjecture about events just before the turn of the century, when he is thought to have been tipped off by the notorious Banastre Tarleton<sup>10</sup>, MP for Liverpool, that the United States was about to introduce an embargo or trade tariff on certain goods, probably tobacco. Whatever the detail, Williamson appears to have "made a killing", so that he was able to purchase the Tate tobacco business in 1803 from his brother-in-law. When he retired at the age of 49 years his wealth was £450,000 – the equivalent of nearly £30 million today.

The main source about Williamson is Stonehouse<sup>5</sup>, but the veracity of some details are open to question, given limited corroborative evidence. What cannot be denied is that he was a beneficent and peculiar philanthropist.

### **Tunnels**

There are a number of tunnels and features relating to the Heritage Centre's public tour. Most of their names are modern, attributed by the JWS:

**The Corner Tunnel:** This was one of two tunnels visible above ground in the corner of the stable yard. Excavation established that other Williamson tunnels lay beneath the surface.

**The Pit:** This is 30 feet high but was previously filled to within 8 feet of the roof with ash and demolition rubble which had been tipped thereto bury organic material, which had been dumped from the cellar of the house above via a chute on the east wall.

**Biddulph's Cellar:** This served one of Williamson's houses, but by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century the house and cellar were part of Biddulph's confectionary works. This was a rich source of period jam jars and sweet jar lids.

**The Pyramid Tunnel:** This was given its name due to the striking similarity between its shape and the Grand Gallery in the Great Pyramid of Cheops at Giza.

**Double Tunnel:** This was one of the few remains that was visible above ground. It was so named because it consists of an arch within an arch. More recent excavations revealed the remains of a third arch, which had collapsed upon itself many years before.

**Kebab Tunnel:** This was penetrated by two boreholes during the construction of student accommodation above in 1999. Concrete poured into these holes to form foundation piles leaked over the ash and rubble infill forming a layer 12 inches thick. Following excavation of the infill and removal of much concrete, one of the two piles was left looking like kebab meat rotating on a spit!

**Link Tunnel:** This was constructed in 2001 to connect the Kebab and Double Tunnels and form a circular route for public tour.

In addition, work is currently taking place on the **Triple Decker (North)**, which is only triple for part of its length. It was rediscovered in 2003 during exploratory work to find the **Great Tunnel** which lies beneath Magnet Kitchen's warehouse on Mason Street, and is believed to be one of Williamson's largest constructions with a span of 50 feet. The name "Great Tunnel" was first used in the 1850s, and plans drawn up by the Army in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century suggest that it was partially if not wholly collapsed and filled in. A feature known as **The Banqueting Hall** is not accessible to the public. A local video in the 1980s caused confusion by implying that Williamson held a banquet underground in this room, when records<sup>4</sup> are clear that it took place in his house, but the name stuck. Finally, the **Well Tunnel** is visible, but it is not strictly a tunnel as it consists of three vaulted chambers, with the name arising from the arched niche in the sandstone block wall being reminiscent of a well.

There are primarily three main types of tunnel construction: brick; sandstone blocks; and a composite of brick and sandstone blocks. The commonest used was brick, which were hand-made locally using boulder clay. Only one section has sandstone above, below and to the sides.

### Events

The Heritage Centre hosts a range of events on an occasional basis, involving music, theatre, and poetry & book readings. The horror authors James Herbert and Ramsey Campbell were there in "Terror in the Tunnels" as part of Liverpool's "In Other Words" literary festival in April 2013<sup>11</sup>. At Christmas there are special decorations, and yes some people have organised ghost tours.

It would be reasonable to assume that such a unique labyrinth would attract strange stories over the years, but there are very few. *Most Haunted* initially approached the JWS with a view to doing a programme in the tunnels, but did not proceed when it was realised that the 200 capacity of the Heritage Centre was insufficient for its audience. Derek Acorah visited the tunnels as part of an Irish TV show and apparently sensed a trapped woman, but could not link with her.....

However, on one occasion a guide was taking a group of about 10 people through the tunnels when a young boy asked "what is that man doing"? The guide responded that the figure was a mannequin dressed up as a worker of the time. The boy said that he did not mean the mannequin and pointed up to the ceiling saying he was on about "that man hanging by his neck". Everyone looked up but could see nothing, although the boy said that he could still see him.....

### What are they about?

The Williamson tunnels have been described as probably the largest underground folly in the world<sup>12</sup>, but it will be gleaned that they were not a folly but a practical means to level the land for building development. This does not diminish their interest: How far do they fully extend? What is waiting to be discovered? What were all the facts and the motives? There are so many unknowns and things that are open to interpretation, and more is being discovered as time goes by. Therefore there is much for the fortune visitor, and as the JWS is primarily dependent on visitor income and donations<sup>13</sup>, you know that your money will be going directly to support further exploration.

2,402 words

### **Acknowledgements**

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11 <http://www.williamsontunnels.co.uk/view.php?page=news>

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13 Fortean visitors who cannot get to Liverpool and the tunnels can make a donation if they so wish through Paypal on <http://www.williamsontunnels.co.uk/view.php?page=about>