

GRAHAM GREENE BIRTHPLACE TRUST

The Trust promotes the appreciation and study of the works of Graham Greene

For more information see
www.grahamgreenebt.org

Activities include

Annual Festival on or near 2nd October each year,
www.grahamgreenefestival.org

Publications

Newsletters
Occasional papers

If you would like further information or wish to become a Friend of the Trust please write to:

The Secretary, Graham Greene Birthplace Trust
9 Briar Way, Berkhamsted Herts HP4 2JJ

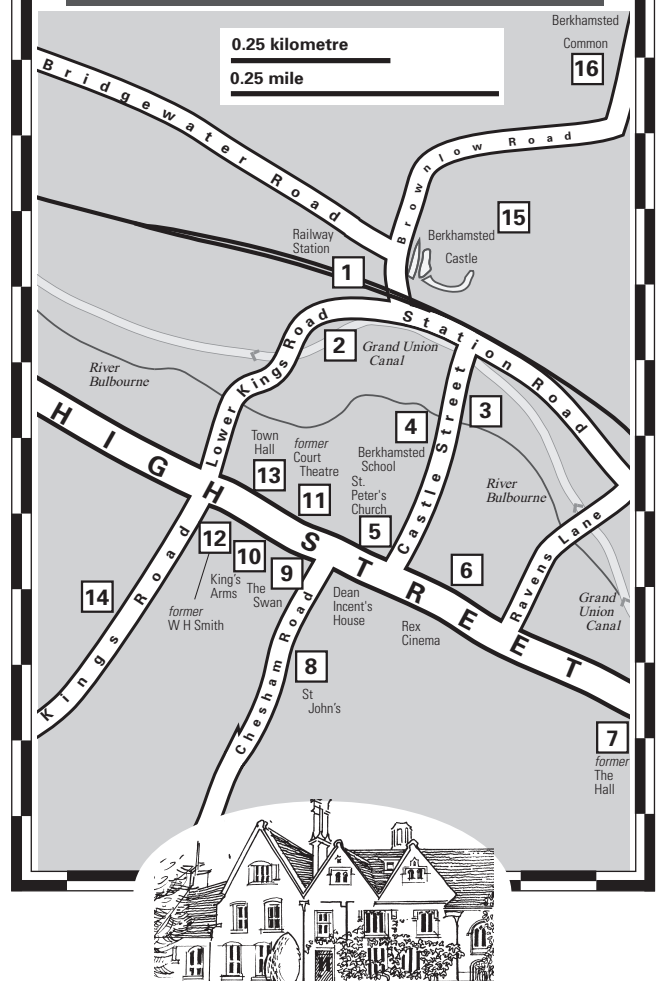
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GRAHAM GREENE BIRTHPLACE TRUST

THE GRAHAM GREENE TRAIL

BERKHAMSTED



THE GRAHAM GREENE TRAIL

Second Edition 2012

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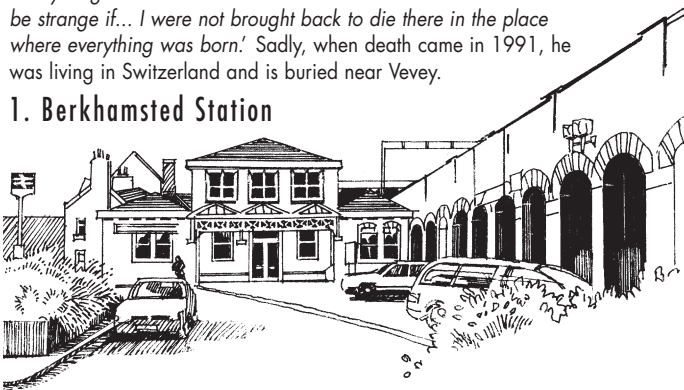
Visitors interested in Berkhamsted's links with Graham Greene, one of the twentieth century's greatest writers, may like to follow the trail set out in the map overleaf. The author was born in Berkhamsted in 1904 and lived here until he went to Balliol College, Oxford, in 1922. The map marks the main places in the centre of Berkhamsted with which Graham Greene was associated and around which settings were created in several of his works, particularly **The Human Factor**, **The Captain and the Enemy**, **The Innocent**, and **Doctor Crombie**, though the town was sometimes given a different name. Those who would venture beyond the town will find the beautiful countryside of Berkhamsted Common, Ashridge and Ivinghoe, for which Greene says he 'began to develop a love...which never left [him]' (**A Sort of Life**).

The influences of Graham Greene's early life in Berkhamsted, which moulded his character, his emotions and his memories, are reflected in much of his writing. His official biographer, Norman Sherry, referring to Graham Greene's personal map, says it is 'a map not simply of physical features but one on which were traced emotional and psychological contours mapping his development from childhood to adolescence and forming a personal historical addition to the history of the town.'

It was in Berkhamsted and other parts of Hertfordshire that Greene first ventured in disguise with his friend Claud Cockburn. Years later, in an interview with Norman Sherry, Cockburn said: '...we hired a barrel-organ and disguised ourselves as sort of tinkers...we went all round the school, the school gates and the gates of various Houses...nobody recognised us'. Graham's essay on their experiences appeared in *The Times* in 1928. Their journey had involved masks – false faces in which Greene made his first attempt at 'obtaining a knowledge of the lives of others'.

In his first autobiographical work **A Sort of Life**, Graham writes: 'Everything one was to become must have been there... I feel it would be strange if... I were not brought back to die there in the place where everything was born.' Sadly, when death came in 1991, he was living in Switzerland and is buried near Vevey.

1. Berkhamsted Station



In **The Human Factor** Graham Greene portrays Castle's journey home by train from work in London to Berkhamsted Station, and his bicycle ride 'the longer way home...across the canal bridge, past the Tudor school, into the High Street, past the grey flint parish church... then up the slope of the Chilterns towards his small semi-detached house in King's Road'. In **The Captain and the Enemy** it was at the station that the Captain 'had no difficulty at all in producing the cash for my ticket'. In **Yours etc.**, a selection of Graham's letters to the Press, Graham's brother Hugh, using the pseudonym Sebastian Eleigh, won a Spectator competition for part of a story in the style of Graham Greene: 'At Berkhamsted Station, he walked rapidly along the tiled passage smelling of urine, like an elongated public lavatory ...' (The tiles are still there but no longer visible.)

2. Grand Union Canal

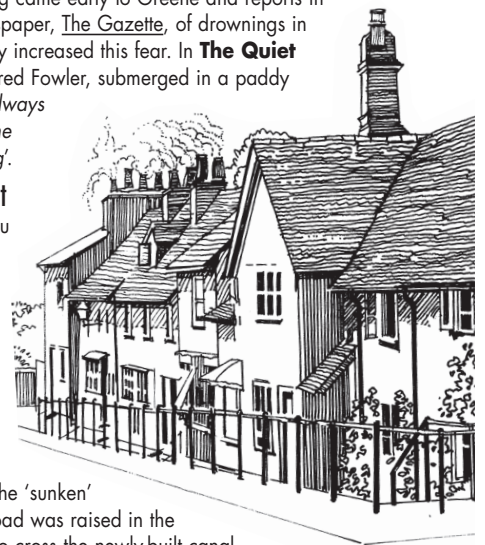
In **A Sort of Life** Greene recalls that the family nursemaids would not take the Greene children for a walk 'along the towing path by the canal' because of the bad language directed at them by the bargees and their children, something he remembered and used in **The Captain and the Enemy**. Further childhood memories are recalled in **The Innocent** by 'the smell of wet leaves and canal water', the grain warehouses and the sandheap – '(when I was three I remember thinking it was what other people meant by the seaside)'. Also one summer Graham used to 'meet...in secret' some 'working-class' boys to play cricket near the canal. (**A Sort of Life**).

The Captain refreshed himself at the Swiss Cottage pub on the canal bank, in reality the Crystal Palace, while Baxter 'loitered by a timber yard...and stared at the green weeds of the canal'. The timber yard was until recently located by the totem pole just over the hump-backed bridge over the canal.

Fear of drowning came early to Greene and reports in Berkhamsted's newspaper, *The Gazette*, of drownings in the canal apparently increased this fear. In **The Quiet American** the injured Fowler, submerged in a paddy field, says: 'I had always hated and feared the thought of drowning'.

3. Castle Street

On your right as you cross the hump-backed bridge into Castle Street, small cottages were originally to be found where the School's art and design centre now stands. These became known as the 'sunken' cottages after the road was raised in the eighteenth century to cross the newly-built canal. Greene refers to them in **The Innocent** as 'ugly almshouses, little grey stone boxes', though as far as is known they were



never alms-houses. It was outside one of these cottages that Graham, aged about five, saw a man run 'into the house. I was told he was going to cut his throat,' (**A Sort of Life**) – which he did.

Castle Street became the centre of Graham Greene's childhood from the age of six, when his father was appointed Headmaster of Berkhamsted School.

4. Berkhamsted School Castle Street Campus

This school was formed in September 1996 by the coming together of Berkhamsted School, founded here in 1541 to educate boys, and Berkhamsted School for Girls, founded in 1888. Charles Greene, Graham's father, taught at the Boys' School for many years before being appointed Headmaster in 1910. He retired in 1927. From 1910, he and his family lived in School House, the original Tudor building facing the church. As a six-year-old, Graham's impressions



were of 'the long path from the street to the front door' and only a flower-bed between him and 'the old disused churchyard' (**A Sort of Life**). Graham was baptised in the School Chapel in November 1904, and was a pupil of the school for ten years from the age of seven.

The family home in School House was separated from the boys' boarding quarters by the 'green baize door,' which is mentioned in Greene's short story **The Basement Room**. This door was to become representative in his mind of the very narrow dividing line between love and security and the traumas and uncertainties which faced him in the outside world. The significance of a door, green-baized or otherwise, can be traced through many of his stories.

The Ministry of Fear, The Captain and the Enemy, The Human Factor and **Doctor Crombie** all have aspects of the school and school-life within their tales, from which perhaps the reader may divine Graham's own feelings during his time here. He certainly seemed to find his position of Headmaster's son an invidious one, feeling that he was regarded as a spy, though this may have been due to his lively imagination and extra sensitivity, as his brothers and cousins who attended the school did not have the same problem.

5. Parish Church of St Peter

The building of the Church began at the east end c.1220. As part of the school community, the Greene family would usually have attended services in the School Chapel rather than the Parish Church.

Nevertheless, Graham was familiar with the Church, and refers sometimes in his stories as in **The Human Factor** to the helmet belonging to a crusader – 'Then a sonic boom... rattled the crusader's helmet' on its pillar. However R.A.Norris, in his history of the Church, states that it was the funeral helmet of Sir Adolphus Cary, Knight,

who died in 1609. It was stolen in the 1970s and has not yet been recovered.



6. High Street

Graham Greene's use of Berkhamsted as a setting in several of his works makes the High Street central to these descriptions. In **The Innocent**, his main character says: 'We passed the school, the church, and came round into the old wide High Street and the sense of the first twelve years...the smell of innocence', and it would have been in the High Street that, at the age of six, rather than going to London with the rest of the family, he chose to watch the local procession on the day of King George V's coronation, as he would then be allowed 'to choose a toy from the toy-shop' (**A Sort of Life**).

7. The Hall

This Georgian mansion was sited close to Swing Gate Lane at the East end of the High Street. The Hall was occupied by Graham Greene's uncle, Edward Greene, whose initials can be seen on the shops opposite the Primary School. The family were known as the 'rich' Greenses, as opposed to Graham's family, the 'intellectual' Greenses. Graham talks of his cousins' family in **A Sort of Life** – 'the whole family had an intimidatingly exotic air' and it was with one of them, Barbara, that he says he made 'the rather foolhardy journey through Liberia', recorded in his **Journey Without Maps**.

8. St John's, Chesham Road

Built in 1890, St. John's was one of the boys' boarding houses of Berkhamsted School. It is now a girls' boarding house for Berkhamsted School. Here, on the 2nd October 1904, Graham was born. His father, Charles Greene, was the Housemaster at the time, and Second Master of the School, having first joined the staff as a temporary Classics master in 1889. The family remained at St. John's until 1910, when they moved to School House. One of Graham's early happy memories of living at St. John's is of 'the extra piece of garden we had across the road' (later known as Incent's Lawn) where the family would play 'with the exciting sense of travelling abroad'. He later thought 'of the two gardens as resembling England and France with the Channel [Chesham Road] between'...

Graham was to return to St. John's as a boarder in the autumn of 1918, just before his fourteenth birthday. To him his time there appears to have been a nightmare, launching him from his sheltered, privileged home into a feared, untrusting outer world, with

devastating psychological effects. Greene says: 'Unhappiness in a child accumulates because he sees no end to the dark tunnel'. Whether it was his 'loneliness...conflicting loyalties', lack of privacy, or his sense of 'great betrayal' that caused the unhappiness, even he seems to have been at a loss to explain. However, his experiences as he went through the senior school helped him to create some of his most realistic literary characters, such as Minty, 'the seedy, unscrupulous journalist' in **England Made Me**, and 'a priest, a policeman and a Judas figure' in **The Power and the Glory**.

9. The Swan

'And now for a good lunch at *The Swan*', which Baxter thoroughly enjoyed and for which the Captain failed to pay. It is no longer an inn, but now houses the Swan Youth Project.

10. The King's Arms

Graham and his brother, Sir Hugh Carleton Greene, came to the King's Hall – once the inn's stables – in August 1974 at the invitation of the Berkhamsted Citizens Association to talk about their childhood in the town. In **The Ministry of Fear**, one of the characters talks of 'the main street of a small country town... outside the inn yard of the King's Arms and... the barn in which dances were held', which also is mentioned in **The Captain and the Enemy**.

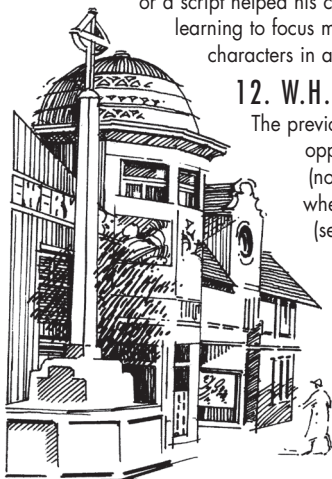
11. The Court Theatre (sited where Tesco now stands)

Named after the Inns of Court Officers' Training Corps whose soldiers were billeted in Berkhamsted throughout World War I, this cinema was known unofficially as the New Cinema – see the opening of Greene's **A Sort of Life** – and had an unusual Moorish dome which Graham described as an abuse to the dignity of the High Street.

Greene enjoyed the cinema from a young age and often visited the Court. Later in his life he was to become a respected film critic for The Spectator, a way of life which in **Ways of Escape** he says he 'adopted quite voluntarily from a sense of fun'. In the same autobiographical work he talks of how his writing of a play or a script helped his characterisation in his books, through learning to focus more sharply on a limited number of characters in a particular situation.

12. W.H. Smith

The previous site of this store was almost opposite in the double-fronted building (now a hairdressing salon) and this was where Graham's 'smell of innocence' (see Section 6) once deserted him. He tells us of one or more occasions when his 'purpose was to steal something to read from the local W.H. Smith's' including The Abbess of Vlaye and The Railway Magazine.



Titles by Graham Greene mentioned in this leaflet:

Collected Short Stories:

Doctor Crombie

The Basement Room

The Innocent

England Made Me

It's a Battlefield

The Captain and the Enemy

The Human Factor

The Ministry of Fear

The Power and the Glory

The Quiet American

Yours etc. Letters to the Press 1945-1989 – Selected and edited by

Christopher Hawtree

Reflections - Essays and reviews - selected and introduced by

Judith Adamson

Travel Journey Without Maps

Autobiography A Sort of Life; Ways of Escape

Biography Norman Sherry: The Life of Graham Greene Volume One 1904-1939 Paul Hogarth R.A.: Graham Greene Country

Other titles used and of background interest

Percy Birtchnell: A Short History of Berkhamsted

Percy Birtchnell: Bygone Berkhamsted

John Wolstenholme Cobb: Two Lectures on the History and Antiquities of Berkhamsted

B.H. Garnons Williams: A History of Berkhamsted School 1541-1972

The Gazette

R.A. Norris: The Parish Church of Berkhamsted St. Peter Herfordshire

15. Berkhamsted Castle

Greene mentioned this local landmark frequently when using Berkhamsted as a setting, and no doubt he must have been in the crowd who rushed to see '*Gamma, an Army dirigible*' piloted by an Old Boy of Berkhamsted School, which landed in the castle grounds in 1913. As he says in **A Sort of Life**: '*It was long before I saw another airship.*' In **Doctor Crombie**, in which Bankstead represents Berkhamsted, the narrator and the old school doctor '*sometimes on a summer's day... took a picnic-lunch and sat on the green mound of Bankstead Castle*' from which vantage point they enjoyed trainspotting.

16. Berkhamsted Common, Frithsden Beeches, Ashridge and Coldharbour

'On the wide stretches of Berkhamsted Common,...and in the Ashridge beechwoods beyond, I could dramatize my loneliness...'

If you have the opportunity to explore the area above the town, you will recognise the woods to which Jules took Kay in **It's a Battlefield**, where '*The leaves crackled on the ground and a rabbit's tail flashed like a match under a bank of ferns and disappeared... it seemed to them both ... that they had never heard so deep a silence*'. Graham often found solace in walking across the Common and through these beautiful woods. It was also an area in which he spent some of his darker moments – when he ran away, and when, on the first of several attempts to fight '*the life-long war against boredom*', he played Russian roulette at Coldharbour and miraculously survived. Nevertheless, the beauty, the peace, the sounds of nature, which he absorbed in his happier moments, remained with him and have been given back to us through the descriptions he painted in words. Those who know his work, and the area which gave it birth, can only be enriched by his perception.



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