

Old Town's tunnel that never was

Victorian engineers started digging an underground link from Queen's Park to Old Town in 1896. FRANCES BEVAN visits the couple who built a dream home where there should have been a tunnel

There is no chance that Richard and Jan Lay's beautiful Tunnel House in Hunt Street will slip down the hill – they've made pretty sure of that.

But a series of landslips in 1982 saw back gardens in Hunt Street slide into the wooded area of Queen's Park.

In May of the following year, further slips put Victoria Road under threat, and the entire road was sealed off. With an initial £2million estimate to halt the slide, the land was officially classed as derelict.

The subsidence was initially blamed on a rising water table, natural springs and even Thomas Turner's worked-out brickmaking site, but the most obvious cause was an ambitious Victorian plan by the Swindon, Marlborough and Andover Railway to tunnel beneath Old Town.

In 1872, Swindon solicitor James Copleston Townsend got the ball rolling on a new north-south railway that would extend the existing Marlborough branch line to Swindon, continuing southwards to Andover to connect with the London and South Western Railway.

The obvious and easiest route for the new line would have been across Goddard land at The Lawn and past the old Holy Rood churchyard.

But Ambrose Lethbridge Goddard, incumbent Lord of the Manor, was having none of that.

Then someone came up with a cunning plan – to excavate an 800-yard long tunnel near the foot of Belle Vue Road. The proposed route would take the railway line beneath what is now Queen's Park, ►

From page 45

Prospect Place, Devizes Road and Newport Street, with a station built at the lower end of Butt's Field.

Originally called the Swindon, Marlborough and Andover Railway, it was absorbed into the Midland and South Western Junction Railway, which itself eventually became part of the GWR.

The proposed tunnel was deemed "a costly blunder" even before work began, but a substantial cutting was made through Queen's Park, ready for tunnelling to begin at its head.

The railway's first ceremonial sod was cut on July 28, 1875, in Cold Harbour Meadow, Marlborough, by Lord Bruce, chairman of the new railway company. And it was full steam ahead – until the excavators hit Swindon Hill.

The original contractor William Wright quickly handed over the job of digging through the twisted bands of Portland stone to Mr Young of Leicestershire, and work began on the tunnel on October 13, 1875. A large crowd turned up to watch Mr E Sheppard, landlord at the Goddard Arms, remove the first shovelful of soil, and by lunchtime a considerable hole had been dug.

But then things started to go wrong.

The tunnel kept flooding and the workings collapsed, and eventually Mr Young handed the project back to William Wright – and presumably went home to Leicestershire.

Work came to a standstill in December, and with no-one else prepared to take on the project, the railway company was forced to proceed with the work themselves.

A year after work had begun on the tunnel, the company had to admit defeat and the site was abandoned, with a new route found around the western slopes of the hill at Rushey Platt.

According to one historian, the collapsed workings remained exposed for around 30 years.

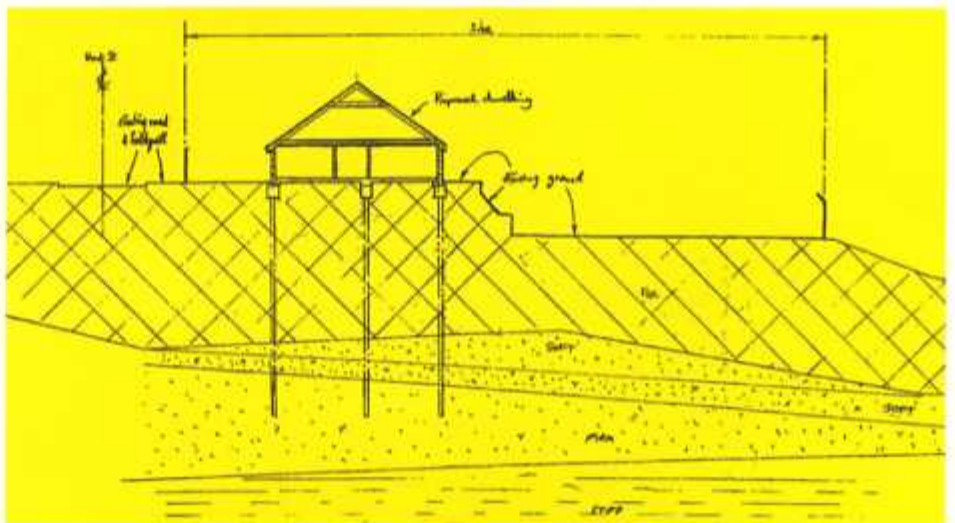
However, building work on Hunt Street began less than 20 years after the failed tunnel project. By 1894 James Hinton had built two properties, a stable and a coach house on a road constructed over the old railway tunnel cutting, and was later named after William Hunt, a foreman in the GWR Works.

By 1999, the plot attached to 3 Hunt Street was part garden and part builder's yard, with a few lock-up garages and even – at the bottom of the garden – a shed full of sheep.

Richard Lay bought this unpromising, problematic parcel of land and spent 17 months waiting for Swindon Borough Council to grant him planning permission.



Top: Tunnel house.
Left: Richard and Jan Lay with the clock tower and (inset) its plaque. Below: a cross section showing how the house is supported.
(Map and drawing courtesy of Richard Lay)



Work on the house began in April 2001 with the sinking of 27 18m-long piles and 10m of backfill.

Just eight months later, Richard and his wife Jan moved in.

Today the former tunnel entrance site has been transformed into a magnificent home with sweeping gardens cascading down to the Queen's Park boundary, and the garden is visited by foxes and a family of 11 badgers.

The Lays are fiercely proud of Swindon's heritage in general and their small piece of it in particular, so have

created three tributes to the ambitious Victorians who would have given Swindon its railway tunnel.

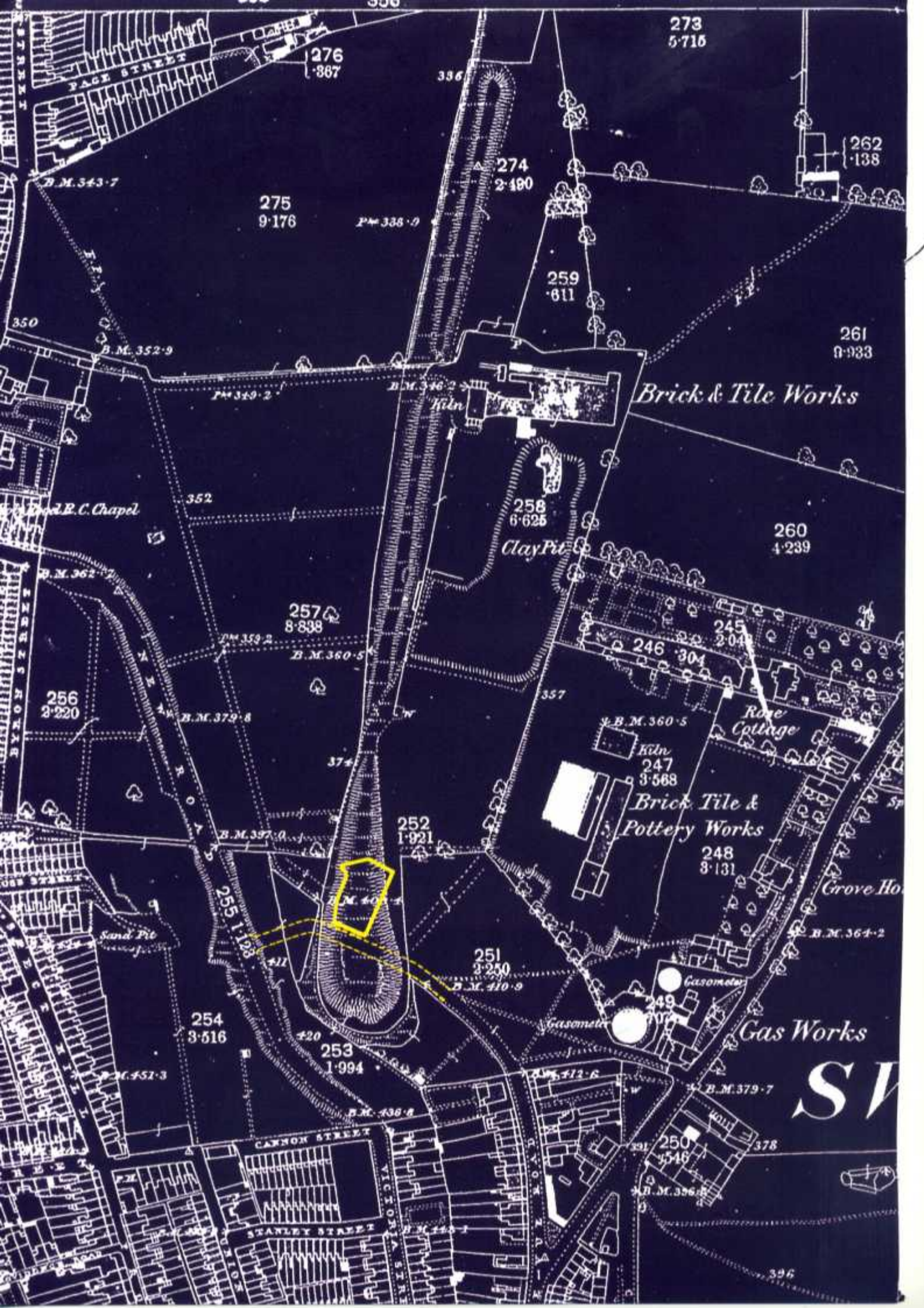
They named their magnificent home Tunnel House and in 2003 marked the position of the original cutting with a clock tower, complete with memorial plaque.

There is also a website that tells the story of the house and some fascinating details about the tunnel project. See www.tunnelhouse.co.uk.

So do Richard and Jan have any concerns about any future landslips? Not at all.

Their home is as safe as houses!

Opposite: a map from 1896 showing how the cutting had already been made through Queen's Park. Tunnelling began from the head of this cutting. The route of what was to be Hunt Street and the current location of Tunnel House are superimposed in yellow.



273
5.716

276
1.867

336

274
2.490

262
138

275
9.176

P.M. 338.0

259
811

261
0.933

350

B.M. 352.9

B.M. 346.2

Brick & Tile Works

352

P.M. 349.2

258
6.625

Clay Pit

260
4.239

257
8.838

P.M. 359.2

B.M. 360.5

246
304

245
2.048

256
2.220

B.M. 379.8

374

252
1.921

B.M. 397.0

B.M. 360.5

Kiln
247
3.568

Brick Tile & Pottery Works

248
3.131

Rose Cottage

Grove Ho

B.M. 364.2

Sand Pit

255
1.128

B.M. 400.0

251
3.250

B.M. 410.9

Gasometer

249
707

Gas Works

254
3.516

253
1.994

B.M. 436.8

P.M. 412.6

B.M. 379.7

S

CANNON STREET

STANLEY STREET

VICTOR STREET

250
3.546

B.M. 396.8

378

396