

Katja Dell leads us down the rabbit hole as she investigates Lewis Carroll's Brighton.

Alice in BRIGHTON

WORDS AND ILLUSTRATIONS: KATJA DELL

Between the not so distant 1874 and 1887 one of my notorious neighbours would have been the witty mathematician, amateur inventor, gadget-maker, photographer and author of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.

Lewis Carroll (Reverend Charles Lutwidge Dodgson) resided in Oxford where he lectured in mathematics at the prestigious Christ Church College. During his eventful life Carroll made several trips to the Sussex coast to alleviate his bronchial infections and chronic insomnia.

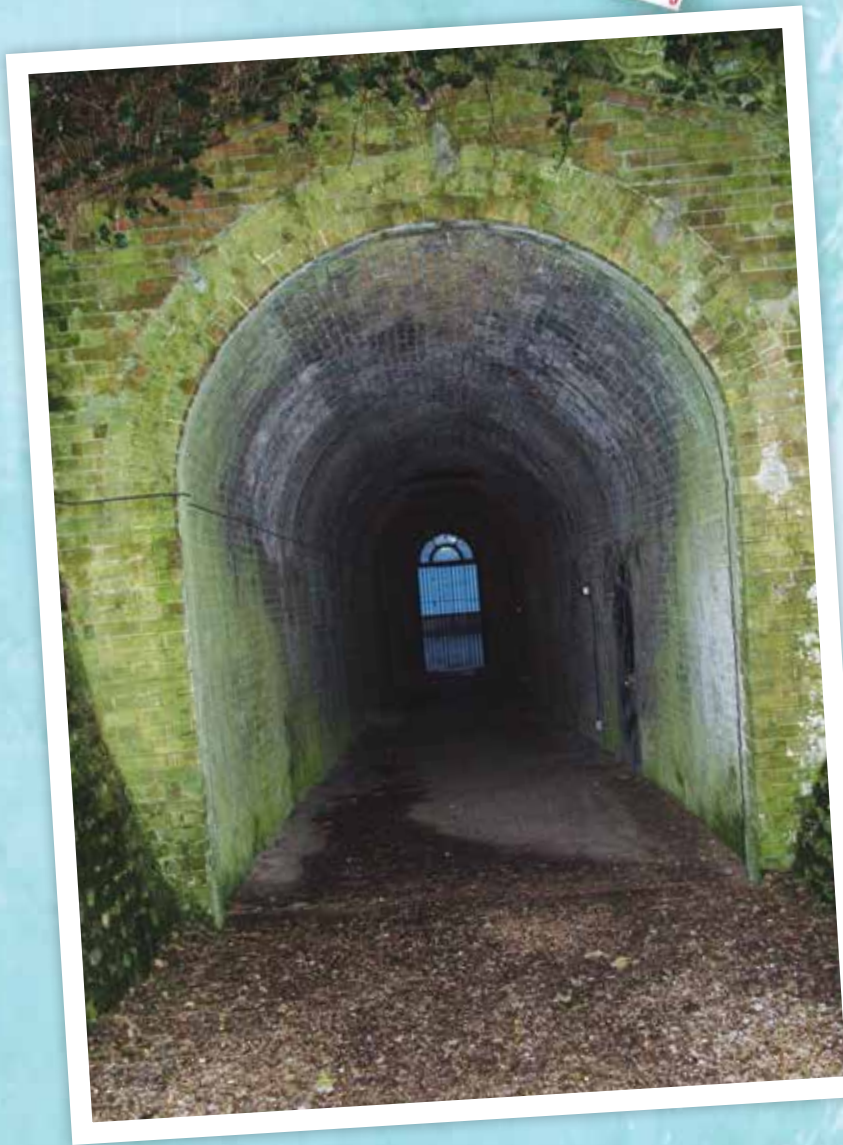
Very little information survives or has been published about Carroll's visits to Brighton. This has given rise to speculation about an illicit liaison or possibly even the wish for discretion regarding his photography of semi-nude or nude young girls.

Charles was often in the company of his sister Henrietta, an eccentric spinster who moved to Brighton and lived at Park Crescent with a menagerie of cats. She was known to take her alarm clock to mass, and travelled with a portable stove on which she could bake her beloved sausages. In 1887 Charles and Henrietta watched a stage production of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* at the Theatre Royal in New Road.

Carroll also made yearly visits to 11 Russell Square, the home of the Reverend Henry Barclay, an old friend he met at Christ Church. A plaque at this house commemorates Carroll's frequent visits. Carroll could enjoy morning promenades in the secluded private gardens, created for the residents of the square and the adjacent Lewes Crescent.

Brightonians are adamant that the narrow tunnel connecting the gardens and the seafront was the inspiration for Alice's rabbit-hole. Although there is heated debate amongst puzzled researchers, the "The Brighton Theory" is unlikely, as it is known that Carroll came up with the idea for "*Alice's Adventures Under Ground*" (the initial title) during his younger days in Oxford, allegedly after taking a boat trip on the River Isis, where he was accompanied by the three young daughters of Dean Henry Liddell. His favourite "ideal child friend", Alice Liddell, begged him to write the story for her.

Most of the characters in the book are caricatures



of Carroll's colleagues and friends and the rabbit-hole is reputedly the narrow staircase that connects Christ Church dining hall with the senior common room. Nevertheless, Brighton's own rabbit-hole remains an unresolved mystery and a popular spot for Wonderland pilgrimages.

In 1967 a local cinema owner found a damaged and forgotten copy of the first Alice in Wonderland short film directed by Cecil Hepworth and Percy Stow in 1903. The movie was based on Sir John Tenniel's original illustrations and is believed to be the only surviving copy.

MODERN BRIGHTON AND ALICE

Alice is undoubtedly a gold mine for Brighton businesses, not so much due to the author's summer escapades to the city, but to the abiding popularity of his two literary gems.

Why have Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and its sequel Through the Looking-Glass never gone out of print, and why have they remained to this day the most quoted books after the Bible and Shakespeare?

The reason for this could well be their deliciously anarchic nature. These were, after all, the first children's tales to go against the morality and strictness of society's rules. Brighton's own liberal and whimsical philosophy could not fail to be charmed by them.



SO WHERE TO BEGIN YOUR WONDERLAND TOUR?

After departing Sussex Square, the explorer can venture further towards the centre of Brighton to admire the large Alice mural at 40 Middle Street, once home to the now sadly missed Alice Dreams curiosity shop.

The more adventurous visitor can even spend a night or two at the highly acclaimed Wonderland House, a quirky Alice-themed accommodation extravaganza with a chequerboard floor and teacup stools in the dining room.

After tea at the organic Mad Hatter Café ** (picture 6)** , a sweet treat awaits the weary traveller at "Choccywoccydoodah", the famous Brighton chocolaterie. Amongst their fabulous bespoke creations is Curiouser & Curiouser ** (picture 7)** .

Sussex Square remains one of the most sought-after residential areas in Brighton, and is home to academics and creative artists of every genre.

Only the residents have access to the secret gardens, and many an underhand auction for the much treasured keys have been known to take place! Wonderland enthusiasts yearn to use the enchanted gardens for their tea parties. However, be warned ... pink flamingos may attend, but no croquet is permitted! *

