

In the footsteps of Ann Green

Coincidences abound: A harrowing experience as a student in Bristol led author **Robert Wallace** to write *Clara's Secret and other Bristol Mysteries*. But the story would turn out to have parallels with true life and another work of fiction...

When in 1935 Ethel Winifred Baker sat down to write a Bristol-set novel with a memorable female protagonist, she would have had no inkling that over 65 years later, another local author would attempt to do the same, and the results would have much in common.

The former was *Ann Green of Clifton*, published in 1936, and the latter was *Clara's Secret* by Robert Wallace, published by Tangent in 2008. What do they share? One thing is that, despite their convincing appearance of reality, neither Ann nor Clara ever actually existed, but their fictional lives were woven into a factual

fabric of life that very much did exist. The two women frequented the same crescents, villas and squares and strolled into the same parks and Downs 100 years ago. But ultimately they were both destined to become victims of tragedy as their stories unfold.

Ann Green's life was set in 1831 in the genteel world of a Clifton long since forgotten except for the images preserved in grainy sepia photographs, illustrations and original engravings. She was the daughter of a wealthy Bristol merchant who owned Clifton Court, now the Chesterfield Hospital on Clifton Green. In an unlikely but fairytale romance, Ann fell in love with Norton Lane, an Oxford don. But because Lane was merely the son of a Clifton shopkeeper and presumably considered not worthy of her, Ann's father refused absolutely to consent to their marriage. Instead, the lovestruck couple met up in secret, exchanged mutual declarations of love in letters



and planned to elope. However, the very day before their intended marriage, the Bristol Riots broke out in and around

Queen Square. Norton tried bravely to persuade an angry mob not to torch the Cathedral, but was killed in the process, his body consumed in the burning of the Bishop's Palace. (There was great antagonism against the Bishops at the time, because it was largely due to them that the Reform Bill was rejected by the Lords.) Norton's dying words were to send the wedding ring to his intended bride who waited for him in Clifton, in vain.

In St Andrew's Churchyard at Church Walk, just off Victoria Square, a stone marks the grave of one Ann Green. It simply states that she died 21 February 1864, age 55. The Ann Green in the novel is fictitious, but the Ann Green in the Churchyard must have existed. So who was she?

In the 1861 census for Clifton, Ann Green is recorded as: "unmarried, age 50 and living as Head of the Household at 13 Buckingham Place". According to the death certificate, she died at the same address and the inscription on the gravestone bears testament to her passing.

St Mary Magdalene Church in Stoke Bishop, the setting for one of the other Bristol mysteries

Photographs © Adrian Ford

“Ann Green’s life was in a genteel Clifton long since forgotten”

Dowry Square: Clara's home and place of death



Norton Lane and the fictional Ann Green, meanwhile, were to be married on All Hallows' Eve – 31 October – the same date that Clara Box lost her life in Dowry Square, Hotwells. Her tragic death occurred in the most extraordinary of circumstances. But more significantly perhaps was the identity of her killer. And Clara's secret remained just that until it was 'revealed' to a medical student in a flat in Windsor Terrace many years later...

“ Sunday 31 October 1976. It was a bitterly cold night as I recall and a group of us were sitting around casually drinking tea and chatting.

Meanwhile, our friend Jilly was taking a bath in the lofty tiled bathroom across the hallway. Jilly was quite undeniably beautiful, a curvaceously shaped brunette of about 19.

And then we heard it.

An ear-piercing scream that was at once so loud and so insistent that we all leapt out of our combined reverie in sheer fright.

“What is it Jilly? What's happened?” we all shouted out, from the other side of the bathroom door.

Later, she explained what she had experienced.

“I... I was soaking in the bath, thinking of nothing really and then the atmosphere suddenly changed... I opened my eyes and felt a dark shadow pass right over me... as if there was someone else in the room... or something. Then a heavy pressure on my chest forcing me down under the water... I was slipping away... I was dying.”

We were mesmerised by her horrific description and saw the fear in her eyes.

“Then I remember small sounds, whispers. ‘Why are the clowns so frightening?’ It was a girl's voice, over and over. Her voice sounded like me, but I wasn't speaking, I couldn't speak for fear. The presence was so powerful I couldn't even hear myself scream. Did I scream?”

So what was it?

What tragedy could have been so intense that it echoed down through the mists of time? I was determined to find out and, eventually, I did.

Clara.

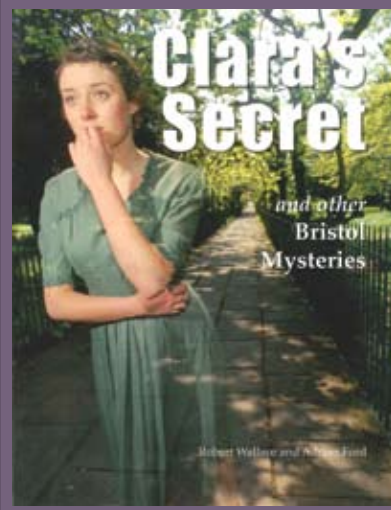
She hadn't been speaking to Jilly that Sunday night; she had been speaking to me. Communicating. Jilly was merely a mortal conduit, a door from this world to the next. The 31st October – the evening of Samhain – when the souls of the dead were allowed to revisit their former homes, or perhaps the place where they were murdered.

It was Clara's secret, but what exactly was her message and why had she chosen me to deliver it to? 🐾

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Reader offer

This is an edited extract from *Clara's Secret and other Bristol Mysteries* by Robert Wallace and Adrian Ford (Tangent Books 2008, £12), available from Tangent Books, Waterstone's, Bristol Guild and Amazon. Throughout October, *Clifton Life* readers can buy *Clara's Secret* half price via www.tangentbooks.co.uk – just quote code 'Clife'.



With the help of the library, Robert pieced the mystery together

