



England's Last Alchemist at Lilley

In about 1911, the row of handsome Gothic-style houses near the Lilley Arms was built. The first of them, facing a small triangular green, stands on the site of a gloomy mansion, former residence of a very strange local character.

Johann Kellerman, born in the West Indies as the son of a Prussian gentleman and a Cree Indian princess, arrived in Lilley in the early 19th century. At first, he seemed a fairly normal gentleman of independent means, a racehorse owner stabling his horses at the back of the former bakehouse in West Street. He was also a kindly man; there are accounts of him digging a party of gypsies from deep snow and, in 1808, helping to save some of the effects from a fire that destroyed the Puttridgebury mansion not far away.

An 1818 vestry minute book records that he 'agreed to pay the sum of fifty pounds for an illegitimate child' (it did not record whose). But, twenty years later, a very different character is evident.

In 1828, reports reached the British government of a man living at Lilley supposedly able to transmute mercury into gold. Sir Richard Phillips, sent to investigate, records Kellerman living in fear of his life as a recluse in his barricaded mansion employing eight workers to supervise crucibles '*exposing preparations to intense heat over several months*'. Kellerman explained that, after long study, he had discovered the secret of the ancient alchemists and was able to produce unlimited quantities of gold.

In an account of subsequent events, Phillips was given a demonstration and handed a gold nugget to the government for their inspection, together with an offer to produce sufficient gold to pay off the National Debt.

After much delay, the offer was accepted but (not surprisingly), it was too late. On attempting to take up the offer, Kellerman had disappeared from Lilley. Reports said he had moved to Paris where he had relatives. He was almost certainly a charlatan and died there in poverty. However, shortly after his disappearance from Lilley, news broke that a small European country had suddenly and inexplicably revealed enormous gold reserves previously unknown.

Before redevelopment in 1910, the East Hertfordshire Archaeological Society visited the site where they were able to inspect a large cellar that remained, along with a furnace that had been used by Kellerman in his experiments.

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