Berkhamsted Audio Trail No 3
Graham Greene's Common
Final 08.15

Audio point 1 Kitchener's Field

- Those travelling by car should park in the car park opposite the Inns of Court memorial (on your left at the T-junction at the end of New Road) and go directly to **Audio point 2 Greene's Commons**.

- Walkers should leave the railway station by way of the pedestrian subway at the Platform 4 exit, pausing to glance across at the building to your immediate left. Now the Marlin Montessori School, it was built as the private waiting room for Lord Brownlow and his guests. Greene mentions “the private entrance to the gritty old railway station reserved for the use of Lord Brownlow”. At the outbreak of war in 1914 Lord Brownlow placed the building at the disposal of the Inns of Court Officers Training Corps and it was used for the Quartermaster's office and stores throughout the war.

- With Berkhamsted Castle to your right, walk along Brownlow Road and, where the road bends right, keep straight ahead and go through the right hand gate at the entrance to the playing fields, home to Berkhamsted School Sports Ground and Kitchener's Field Bowls Club (foot path 1).

- Greene explains how the name came about. “...the old playing fields near the railway station, beyond Berkhamsted Castle, and when war came they were taken over by what was called Kitchener's Army and to this day they are known as Kitchener's Fields”.

- Where the tarmac gives way to footpath, continue ahead through the fields with the hedge to your left. The line of trees up the hill ahead of you marks the edge of Berkhamsted Common.

- The arrival of the Inns of Court Officers Training Corps, numbering up to

2,500 men, at a time when Berkhamsted's population was only 7,500, had a massive impact on the town. They were the “Sandhurst” of Kitchener's Army, and Greene recalled that “the Corps was regarded by the citizens with some pride because it was not an ordinary regiment – every man was a potential officer as well as a potential barrister”.

- At a crossroads in the path turn right, passing the buildings of Well Farm to your left. This path (58) leads directly to New Road. Just before the road turn left at a made-up path (56) and follow it to a small car park at the top of the hill.

Audio point 2 Greene's Commons

- The plural in the heading is not a misprint. Greene thinks of the Berkhamsted he knew in his boyhood as being bracketed by Commons.

- “Further off to the north, on the green spaces of a map empty as Africa, lay the wastes of gorse and bracken of the great Common which extended to Ashridge Park, and to the south the small Brickhill Common and the park of Ashlyns, where I once saw a Jack in the Green covered with spring leaves, dancing cumbrously among his attendants like the devils I met later in Liberia.”

- In a single sentence of no more than 5 lines, a narrow focus on a Berkhamsted embraced by its Commons, is sandwiched between a wide angle shot taking in Africa in general and Liberia in particular. The startlingly disparate locations are linked in Greene's mind by the dancing devil he has met in both.

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- Our walk today explores part of the “great Common” to the north. But before moving on spare a thought for what Greene calls Brickhill Common, but more generally known today as Brickhill Green. This is a tiny scrap of ancient woodland at the junction of the A41 and Chesham Road on Berkhamsted's southern boundary. Indeed, construction of the junction meant that part of the precious woodland was lost forever. The name is derived from Brick Kiln Green and, together with Brick Kiln Cottage on Berkhamsted Common, (we'll come to that later) it makes a neat parallel reminder of a once flourishing local industry.

- “It was now I began to develop a love for the landscape around Berkhamsted which never left me, so that Chesterton's rather inferior political ballade “Of the First Rain” moves me still like poetry with its key-line: “A storm is coming on the Chiltern Hills”. Chenies, Ivinghoe, Aldbury have always meant more to me than Dartmoor or the fells of Yorkshire, and the hidden spots of the Chilterns were all the dearer because they were on the very borders of Metroland. They had the excitement of a frontier.”

- The “hidden spots of the Chilterns” are valued by Greene, not for their picture postcard views, but because “They had the excitement of a frontier”. That has to be a uniquely Greene take on things, and, as we shall see, a feeling of excitement is rarely missing from his emotional reaction to landscape.

- With the road and memorial behind you, take a made-up footpath at the left hand corner (56) and follow it down hill, parallel to New Road. (Those who have just walked uphill should retrace your steps.) Just before the junction with the Well Farm access lane turn right and follow a clay path (unnumbered) through the trees at the edge of the Common, with

occasional glimpses of Well Farm and its fields through gaps to your left. After some 700 metres you come to a junction of paths, with a kissing gate on your left.

Audio point 3 The kissing gate

- Our path (51) now leads uphill, but, before continuing take a moment to go through the gate and enjoy the view.

- Greene depicts the Common of his schoolboy memories as, not so much a place of recreation, more a place of refuge. The path we have just taken is one long hiding place from any real or imaginary dangers that may lurk from the direction of the town we have left behind us. Although, in his writing, Greene seems to dwell on negative aspects of his school days, and these seem to predominate, he acknowledges that, at least in the early days, "I was not unhappy at school...The only class that I actively hated was held in the gym."

- "At some point that year I abandoned the effort of trying to vault or climb a rope or scramble on the parallel bars, and I pretended, whenever that class came round, that I was ill. I would walk up on to the Common and stay there, hidden among the gorse bushes with their yellow flowers until school was over....I enjoyed the feeling of being safely hidden among the bushes...even if I were not yet hunted..."

- But hunted indeed he became, not much later – even if by no more threatening a person than big sister Molly…

- "It was...on the last day of the summer holidays that I made my break for

liberty. I wrote a note...saying that I had taken to the Common and would remain there in hiding until my parents agreed that never again should I go back to my prison. There were enough blackberries that fine autumn to keep me from hunger, and I prided myself on knowing every hidden trench. This time it was a quisling who took to the maquis....

- There was a wonderful sense of release from all the tension and indecision as I made my way up the long road lined by Spanish chestnuts from the ruined castle to the slope where the Common began. I had to hurry, for here on this open road I might have been intercepted, but the race against time was part of the excitement on that golden autumn day, with a faint mist lying along the canal, across the watercress beds by the railway viaduct and in the grassy pool of the castle. Then I was safely there, on the Common, among the gorse and bracken of my chosen battlefield.

- I had brought a book in my pocket, but I was much too excited to read, for I had a whole campaign to plan. There were two routes a search-party might take, the one by the road I had come and another through Kitchener's Fields which entered the Common by a flank. There was one point of vantage, an abandoned firing-butt, from which I could see anyone who approached for a hundred yards around, but there I would be exposed myself and I didn't like the idea of my rebellion ending in an undignified chase. I wanted to be an invisible watcher, a spy on all that went on, and so I moved restlessly among the bushes on the edge of the Common, watching for the enemy, ready to retreat unseen into the depths, like the franc-tireurs of Henty or David Balfour pursued by red-coats or Buchan's Hannay.

- I think at least two hours must have passed...And all this time I had nothing to do but roam my battlefield from bush to bush. My resolution was quite

unchanged. I had asserted my freedom...I was happy, and never in the future – not even when I played Russian roulette on this same Common – did I experience again the hopeless misery of the years which I was escaping now.

- It was time I looked at my exposed flank – a steep clay path between oaks and beeches above Kitchener's Fields. I moved rashly out beyond the cover of the bushes, and began to descend, until, turning a corner, I came face to face with my elder sister, Molly. I could have run, of course, but that hardly suited the dignity of my protest, and so I went quietly home with her. It was a tactical defeat, but it proved all the same a strategical victory. I had changed my life; the whole future was decisively altered."

- For those who are not so well-read as Greene, or for whom second world war history is not a recently lived experience, perhaps a few explanations are in order.

- *"a quisling who took to the maquis"*. Quisling was the name of a Norwegian army officer and diplomat who collaborated with the German occupying force, hence it became used for any person collaborating with an occupying enemy, and by extension, a traitor. *Maquis* is the dense scrub characteristic of Mediterranean coastal regions. (It was also used as the term for a member of the French resistance during the German occupation and, by extension, for a member of any resistance group). *Franc-tireur* is another, older, French term for an irregular soldier or guerilla fighter.

- Greene was warming to a theme here. Rebelling against the authority of school, he pictured himself, or rather, he recalls that his schoolboy self imagined himself, taking to the wilds as a guerilla fighter. Veterans of the

project to clear the remnants of the WW1 practice trenches on the Common of a hundred years' unchecked growth of hawthorn, gorse, bramble and other scrub, can vouch for the accuracy of Greene's designating it as *maquis*. As a long time resident of Antibes he knew exactly what he was talking about.

- There is something essentially Greene-like in that rather downbeat ending to what started out and continued for so long as an exhilarating adventure. Walking quietly home with h his sister Molly strikes quite the opposite note to the gung-ho action-man beginning. But that didn't stop him from putting a positive spin on the whole episode. He had demonstrated to his own satisfaction that when he chose to do so, he could strike out on his own and assert his independence, even if, at this time of his life, fleetingly.

- Having whetted your appetite, it's time to move on to that “one point of vantage, an abandoned firing butt” mentioned in the reading you have just enjoyed.

Audio point 4 The abandoned rifle butt.

- Leaving the kissing gate directly behind you, go uphill and you will find the abandoned rifle butt a few steps to the right off foot path 51, “the steep clay path between oaks and beeches above Kitchener's Fields”, just before it opens out into the common. It is better approached from behind as the side towards the path is quite steep.

- Now you're standing on it you may be forgiven for doubting Greene's describing it as a “point of vantage”. But, at the time he was describing, it commanded a 180 degree vista of the whole stretch of the valley back

towards Berkhamsted . Today the many years of unchecked growth of scrub have blocked out the view – and indeed have so obscured the mound that it is possible to walk past it and miss it altogether, as Maurice Castle and his adopted son, Sam were to do during one of their walks on the Common described in *The Human Factor*.

- "The bracken was turning to the dusky gold of a fine autumn, and there were only a few flowers left on the gorse. Castle and Sam searched in vain for the rifle-butts which had once stood – a red clay cliff – above the waste of Common. They were drowned now in tired greenery. 'Did they shoot spies there?' Sam asked. 'No, no. What gave you that idea? This was simply for rifle practice. In the first war'".

- "...'There is a green hill far away without a city wall'...The city wall was like the ruins of the keep beyond the station, and up the green hillside of the Common, on top of the abandoned rifle-butts, had once stood a tall post on which a man could have been hanged."

- So, in Greene's imagination, the Common did not feature solely as a place of refuge, but also, at times, as a place of menace. Sam's innocent question about whether the rifle butts were where they shot spies, carries an electric charge for the reader, who is aware that his father is not just a professional spy, but indeed a double agent.

- Was the "tall post" real or imagined? Could it ever have served as a gibbet? Such questions don't need answers. Greene was creating a fiction and a shiver down the spine of his reader is the effect he is looking for.

- But far from being only a place of menace, the abandoned rifle butt

featured in one of Greene's more enjoyable boyhood memories.

- "...the Star...published the story and sent me a cheque for three guineas. I took the editor's kindly letter and the complimentary copy up to the Common, and for hours I sat on the abandoned rifle-butts reading the piece aloud to myself and to the dark green ocean of gorse and bracken. Now I told myself, I was really a professional writer, and never again did the idea hold such excitement, pride and confidence; always later, even with the publication of my first novel, the excitement was overshadowed by the knowledge of failure, by awareness of the flawed intention. But that sunny afternoon I could detect no flaw in "The Tick of the Clock". The sense of glory touched me for the first and last time."

- Greene was notoriously self critical as a writer. In his second volume of autobiography *Ways of Escape*, he was later to remark of *The Human Factor*, "I am never satisfied with a novel, but I was more than usually dissatisfied with this one". But as we move on to the next stage of the walk let's not dwell on the negative. We'll leave the rifle butts behind, with a young Greene cheerfully pondering what to spend a well-earned three guineas on.

- Retrace your steps to the path and continue uphill to the open Common. As the ground levels out, follow a diagonal path, crossing two bridleways, and passing through Frithsden Beeches. The complete walk, approximately 1 kilometre from the rifle butt, takes you to a metalled track (the access road to Brick Kiln Cottage (bridleway 53)) at its junction with Ashridge Road . The return leg takes you back the way you came, following the same path in the reverse direction until you reach the junction with the second bridleway, its marker post helpfully numbered in indelible marker pen 55, where you turn

left heading for the WW1 trenches, car park, and home.

- You have complete freedom to complete the whole walk or adjust the distance to the time available by choosing your own locations for the next two audio points. A degree of ambiguity in Greene's descriptions provides the justification.

Audio point 5 At Frithsden Beeches

- As we have seen, Greene sought from the Common a quality of excitement. And perhaps he carried that search to its most extreme manifestation in the notorious Russian roulette episode. Did it really happen? There are, of course, other literary accounts of the practice and Greene may have been familiar with these. But (following Winston Churchill) there are some questions that should not be put. Why spoil a good story?

- "I slipped the revolver into my pocket, and the next I remember is crossing Berkhamsted Common towards the Ashridge beeches...Now, with the revolver in my pocket I thought I had stumbled on the perfect cure. I was going to escape in one way or another, and perhaps because escape was inseparably connected with the Common in my mind it was there that I went.

- Beyond the Common lay a wide grass ride known for some reason as Cold Harbour to which I would occasionally take a horse, and beyond again stretched Ashridge Park, the smooth olive skin of beech trees and last year's quagmire of leaves, dark like old pennies. Deliberately I chose my ground...I put the revolver to my right ear and pulled the trigger. There was a minute click, and looking down at the chamber I could see that the

charge had moved into the firing position. I was out by one. I remember an extraordinary sense of jubilation, as if carnival lights had been switched on in a dark drab street. My heart knocked in its cage, and life contained an infinite number of possibilities. It was like a young man's first successful experience of sex – as if among the Ashridge beeches I had passed the test of manhood…

- This experience I repeated a number of times...at fairly long intervals...As I inserted my fifth dose, which corresponded in my mind with the odds against death, it occurred to me that I wasn't even excited; I was beginning to pull the trigger as casually as I might take an aspirin tablet. I decided to give the revolver – since it was six-chambered – a sixth and last chance. I twirled the chambers round and put the muzzle to my ear for a second time, then heard the familiar empty click as the chambers shifted. I was through with the drug, and walking back over the Common, down the new road by the ruined castle, past the private entrance to the gritty old railway station reserved for the use of Lord Brownlow, my mind was already busy on other plans".

- There's a sense of "moving swiftly on" at the conclusion of this passage. There is also a powerful sense of release combined with a positive look to the future – although, knowing Greene as we do, it can't last…

Audio point 6 The Dead Letter Box

- As we have already noted, *The Human Factor* is partly set on various parts of the Common. It's theme, like much of Greene's work, is about loyalty and betrayal: the war is the cold war rather than a "hot" one. But the psychological heat of that novel had been forged on the Common between

1914 and 1918. The protagonist, Castle, knowing his cover is about to be blown, sets in train an escape plan. The Common, which had been the scene of practice warfare for the officer cadets, now becomes a stage for real and present danger. The beech trees of Ashridge that provided cover for trainee soldiers and later a truanting schoolboy now provide a "safe drop" for Castle to contact his controller. The book code which Castle uses for the drop in a hollow tree, six trees back from the Ashridge road, is taken - entirely appropriately - from *War and Peace*.

- “On the other side of the long ride through the Common known for some reason as Cold Harbour the beech woods began, sloping down towards the Ashridge road. Castle sat on a bank while Buller rummaged among last year's leaves. He knew he had no business to linger there. Curiosity was no excuse. He should have made his drop and gone...It was over fifty years since he had discovered the hollow in one trunk...four, five, six trees back from the road...he never returned to the tree until almost fifty years later he was asked by a man in the lounge of the Regent Palace, whom he never saw again, to suggest another safe drop.”

- As noted previously, unlike the rifle butt (and the trenches that are our next stop) there is some ambiguity about the exact location of Castle's hollow tree. Greene himself cultivates vagueness: “four, five, six trees back from the road” and remembered across a gap of over fifty years. But Otto Preminger, who directed the film version of *The Human Factor*, chose to film the dead letter box scene a few yards up the lane that leads from Ashridge Road towards Brick Kiln Cottage. Rather than a hole in a hollow tree, the film shows Castle's envelope stuffed into a cleft between two stems of a growing tree.

- Identifying a tree from a 1979 movie in 2015 presents something of a challenge, particularly as this tree only had a bit part (non-speaking) in the film. And anyway, the distinguishing feature of a dead letter box, like the spies who use them, is to fade into the background as inconspicuously as possible. Why not choose a tree for yourself?

- Now retrace your steps, following the same path in the reverse direction until you reach the junction with the second bridleway, its marker post helpfully numbered in indelible marker pen 55, where you turn left heading for the WW1 trenches, car park, and home.

Audio point 7 The WW1 trenches

- "Where are the trenches?" "You can't see them now for the bracken."
  Of all the whole wide expanse of the "great Common" it is the WW1 practice trenches which seem to have claimed pride of place in Greene's memory and exerted the strongest pull on his imagination. So much so that they became a key element in the back story of his hero, Castle, and, as we have just seen in The Safe Drop, the mock warfare of the first war became the all too real setting for the cold war some 60 years later. Greene puts it, more succinctly: "... the days of the guerilla had returned, day dreams had become realities".

- "When Castle was a child there still remained on the Common the remnants of old trenches dug in the heavy red clay during the first German war by members of the Inns of Court OTC, young lawyers who practised there before they went to die in Belgium or France as members of more orthodox units. It was unsafe to wander there without proper knowledge, since the old trenches had been dug several feet deep, modelled on the original

trenches of the Old Contemptibles around Ypres, and a stranger risked a sudden fall and a broken leg. Children who had grown up with the knowledge of their whereabouts wandered freely until the memory began to fade. Castle for some reason had always remembered, and sometimes on his days off from the office he took Sam by the hand and introduced him to the forgotten hiding places and multiple dangers of the Common. How many guerilla campaigns he had fought there as a child against overwhelming odds. Well, the days of the guerilla had returned, day dreams had become realities."

- The 600 metre fragment revealed by the 2012-2014 Trenches Project would have surprised Graham Greene as much as it has twenty-first century Berkhamsted residents. In the period when *The Human Factor* was set, some 60 years after they were first dug, as Castle explains to Sam, "You can't see them now for the bracken". And to keep them in the spruced up state that prepared them for the centenary of the outbreak of WW1 in August 2014 will require a regular bracken-bash from time to time, no doubt by volunteers. This is essential if memory is not once again to begin to fade, and the old trench only to be found, as Castle found it, with difficulty.

- Recalling unhappier memories of his school days, Castle tells Sam that when he was a child, "I thought there was a dragon living ... in an old dug-out down there among the trenches".

- "Once I saw smoke coming out of a trench and I thought it was a dragon'.
  'Were you afraid?'
  'No, I was afraid of quite different things in those days. I hated my school, and I had few friends.'

'Why did you hate school? Will I hate school? I mean real school.'
'We don't all have the same enemies. Perhaps you won't need a dragon to help you, but I did. All the world hated my dragon and wanted to kill him. They were afraid of the smoke and flames which came out of his mouth when he was angry. I used to steal out at night from my dormitory and take him tins of sardines from my tuck-box. He cooked them in the tin with his breath. He liked them hot.'
'But did that really happen?'
'Of course not, but it almost seems now as though it had.

- Once I lay in bed in the dormitory crying under the sheet because it was the first week of term and there were twelve endless weeks before the holidays, and I was afraid of—everything around. It was winter, and suddenly I saw the window of my cubicle was misted over with heat. I wiped away the steam with my fingers and looked down. The dragon was there, lying flat in the wet black street, he looked like a crocodile in a stream. He had never left the Common before because every man's hand was against him—just as I thought they were all against me. The police even kept rifles in a cupboard to shoot him if he ever came to town. Yet there he was, lying very still and breathing up at me big warm clouds of breath. You see, he had heard that school had started again and he knew I was unhappy and alone...I made a secret signal to him. It meant “Danger. Go away,” because I wasn't sure that he knew about the police with their rifles.'
'Did he go?'
'Yes. Very slowly. Looking back over his tail as though he didn't want to leave me. But I never felt afraid or lonely again. At least not often. I knew I had only to give a signal and he would leave his dug-out on the Common and come down and help me. We had a lot of private signals, codes, ciphers...'
'Like a spy,' Sam said.

'Yes,' Castle said with disappointment, 'I suppose so. Like a spy.'

- Castle remembered how he had once made a map of the Common with all the trenches marked and the secret paths hidden by ferns. That was like a spy too. He said, 'Time to be going home. Your mother will be anxious...'
  'No she won't. I'm with you. I want to see the dragon's cave.'
  'There wasn't really a dragon.'
  'But you aren't quite sure, are you?'

- With difficulty Castle found the old trench. The dug-out where the dragon had lived was blocked by blackberry bushes. As he forced his way through them his feet struck a rusty tin and sent it tumbling.
  'You see,' Sam said, 'you did bring food.' He wormed his way forward, but there was no dragon and no skeleton.
  'Perhaps the police got him in the end,' Sam said. Then he picked up the tin. 'It's tobacco', he said, 'not sardines'."

- This is a miniature masterpiece of the story-teller's art. How much of Greene himself is in there? It doesn't matter. *The Human Factor* is a work of fiction that can be read and enjoyed on its own terms. That said, the image of Castle/Greene forcing his way along the old trench through the brambles and striking his foot against a rusty tin can only be based on a real life experience. Any veterans of the Berkhamsted Trench Mapping Project can honestly say "Been there. Done that". Once they even came across a skeleton, but it wasn't the dragon. Just a deer.

- It is tempting to think, after hearing again the tale of the trench dragon, that inside Greene, the grown-ups' novelist, there lurked a children's author. (There are just 4 children's books, illustrated by Edward Ardizzoni,

listed among his collected works.) This story is crying out to be illustrated by Quentin Blake. Or animated by DreamWorks (think: “How to Train your Dragon”). But no. It's just perfect as it is for its place in the novel – the child as father of the man.

- Let's leave the last word to Castle: “Time to be going home”. Continue walking along the bridleway in the same direction and the car park is 350 metres away, on your left. For those returning on foot to the railway station, follow the route by which you came up, past Well Farm and through the fields to Brownlow Road and past the Castle.