

## Book Review

# The Blanket of the Dark

Readers will be familiar with John Buchan's Richard Hannay adventure stories such as the *Thirty Nine Steps* or maybe some of his Scottish stories such as *Huntingtower*. But I was not aware until coming to the Wychwoods that he had set two novels in our area. I laid my hands first on *Midwinter* and confess to being disappointed. *The Blanket of the Dark* is in a different league.

### A Good Read For Any Age

Set in the period of the Dissolution of the Monasteries the story describes the adventures of the hero (a monk by training but with a distinctly unconventional background) as he is caught up in the threatened risings in the Cotswolds against the rule of Henry VIII and Thomas Cromwell. This is an unput-downable good read for boys and girls of all ages starting from about ten years old, but the interest for the modern reader will also lie in the author's feel for the historical period. John Buchan moves his hero easily from the depths of the Wychwood Forest, via Osney Abbey and rough taverns in the lower parts of Oxford, to an eventual lodging in his patron's luxurious country house somewhere west of here, where you can feel the warmth of the fire, the red tapestry hangings and the oh so luxurious (though still cold) linen sheets. And I shiver still as I recall his description of a

rider caught in an unexpected snowstorm in the Forest.

### Spot Local Settings and Win Wine!

But the star attraction for local readers must be the variety of settings not many miles from where you are sitting. Places are named and described in loving detail with little or no disguise and I re-read the book with an old Ordnance Survey map to hand as I followed the hero's route from Oxford via Wood Eaton and around the fringes of Otmoor (John Buchan lived for a long time at Elsfield and is buried there). By my reckoning his foster mother lived somewhere between Leafield and Minster Lovell. Shipton appears

several times, sometimes in its own right as Shipton Barren aka Waste or only lightly cloaked as Shipton under the Forest. Even Witney is mentioned - as a poor little place. Ramsden and Swinbrook get a better press, even if Swinbrook is infested by the King's Fettiplace supporters. The denouement perhaps takes place on the bridge across the Evenlode at Charlbury. Read it and tell me what you think.

*To encourage your reading and researches, your reviewer will offer a bottle of wine, care of this magazine, to the most plausible and best documented index to the current location of the places mentioned in the book.*

**Robin McConnachie**

