

NOTES CONCERNING THE SYMBOLIC ORIENTATION OF ST HELENA'S CHURCH, LUNDY

R.W.E. Farrah, Annual Report of the Lundy Field Society, 43, 78-91.

By

M.S.Ternstrom

Whistling Down, Sandy Lane Rd, Cheltenham GL53 9DE.

1. Mrs Langworthy's legacy: Mrs Sarah Langworthy (nee Heaven) was a first cousin of William Hudson Heaven. When she died in 1891 the bulk of her fortune was left to a nephew, Joseph Robert Heaven, and part to her sister, Frances. When Frances died in 1895, she bequeathed some money to the Rev. Hudson Heaven, which he used for the church. The text of Lundy (A. & M. Langham 1984) reads "A legacy from Mrs Langworthy *enabled* Heaven ... to build a permanent stone church", not *requested* as stated.

2. While there is no systematic description of the building of the church as such in the Heaven papers, there is a series of references to it in the diaries between February 18th 1895 (the plans) and July 4th 1897 (the date of the first Sunday services). The building was completed in 1897.

3. The Heaven family did not disapprove of the church; to them it was an achievement in which they took pride and deep satisfaction. Indeed, it was regarded as the crowning event of the family's ownership of the island, and it was also a family memorial. Many items of the fabric and interior were given by family members (*Lundy, Bristol Channel* A. & M. Langham 1959). Miss Amelia Heaven bequeathed a sum for the upkeep of the church, and Miss Eileen Heaven supported it during her lifetime. The wisdom of Mr Heaven's using the whole of his inheritance to build the church may well be questioned in the face of the family's financial difficulties, but I have found no evidence of such a comment being made at the time.

In the light of modern criticism of the size of the church, it is interesting to note a diary entry for August 1896, which refers to the iron church: "Service (so big a congregation that 5 or 6 went away)."

4. There is no reference to any difficulties or anxieties over arrangements for the consecration of the new church. Relations with the mainland authorities appear to have been good, as is supported by the conferral of the courtesy title of vicar on Mr Heaven in 1886, despite the fact that Lundy did not constitute a parish. He was then in the unusual situation of being both vicar and patron. Until the new church was built, he regularly took candidates for confirmation across to the mainland.

5. The date of the consecration given in *A Lundy Album* is correct, as there is a full diary entry for June 17th 1897 describing the events of that day. I think the *Ifracombe Chronicle* first gave the wrong date of June 7th (possibly a typographical omission of a digit) and was then followed in good faith by subsequent writers, as the error was not corrected until 1980. Thus neither the date of the Solstice or of Whitsun can be relevant to the occasion of the consecration. The service was held before lunch.

The date for the consecration would have depended on several factors, which were beyond the control of Mr Heaven. Firstly, when the builders would have finished the work, allowing for the vagaries of the weather and its effect on transporting materials. Secondly, when the Bishop would be free to travel to Lundy. Thirdly the dates of sailing of the steamers (in this case the Brighton) as a considerable number of people were to make the crossing. On March 12th 1897, when the church was nearing completion, Mr Heaven went ashore; on April 8th the date of June 17th was confirmed by the Bishop. It is reasonable to assume a connection between these two dates, and that the date of the ceremony was decided then. A letter from Mr Heaven to his niece dated 1.1.97 refers to

uncertainty of the date; "... the consecration cannot take place very well before the early summer."

The date of consecration was St Alban's day (as it was then observed) but, for the reasons cited above, I think this was fortuitous. I can find no reference that might confer significance on this fact.

6. In a letter to L.R.Loyd of 03.10.25 Dr J. C. Heaven, who was cousin, nephew by marriage, and executor to Mr Heaven, denied that at any time had his uncle ever expressed a wish that the chi-rho stone should be his tombstone.

It should also be remembered that the early Christian memorials at Beacon Hill were not known to the Heaven family at that time. The first one to be unearthed, during the excavation of Miss Amelia Heaven's grave in 1905, was the Tigernus stone, but the inscription was not noted until Loyd wrote about it in 1923. Similarly, it seems that the significance of the standing stones was not appreciated, as there is not one single reference to them in any of the Heaven papers.

7. Mr Heaven shared what knowledge he had of Lundy's history with Mr J. R. Chanter, who published the first book about the island in 1887, and he went to stay with him for this purpose. That there are not more documents remaining (as opposed to letters and diaries) is due to the fact that some papers were lost in a fire at their solicitor's office in Bristol, and some were lost through the solicitor's incompetence. (Letter from Mr Christie's solicitors to Mr Harman's solicitors c.1925, undated, Lundy Museum Archive). Mrs M.C.H. Heaven collected all the family papers that remained on Mr Heaven's death (1916) and preserved them. As Lundy was extra-parochial it would not have been necessary to document the orientation or other details in order to get the approval of the Church authorities, so it is probable that such documents never existed.

8. The orientation was marked out by Mr Heaven and the architect on 29th April 1895; they pegged out the site, and the work of cutting the turf was done by George Thomas. (This means that there would have been no written directions for the builder concerning the orientation).

It remains to examine the possible reason(s) for the particular orientation of the church:

i It is impossible to say whether the west windows are left plain for purposes of the solstice, or because there was neither money nor donor for stained glass.

ii Unless the axis of orientation was changed after April 29th, it is unlikely that the existence of the clay bed determined the church's position. The orientation was staked out before digging of the foundations began, and the presence of the clay caused great surprise.

iii That the orientation might be designed so that the entrance porch might be sheltered is possible. That the intention was for the front aspect to be seen on the path from Millcombe is also possible.

iv It is possible that the sunlight's falling on the altar was indeed intentional, independent of any significance that might be attached either to the date of the consecration or the date of the phenomena itself. If this were so, one would have expected to find some reference to the arrangement of services and the occasion of the phenomena in diary entries for June after 1897. The services are consistently recorded, but there is no mention of such a special event.

It is equally possible that the phenomena is inadvertant, in that the sun's rays would fall upon the altar at some point, whatever the particular degree of the E-W orientation.

v Although the size of the church now appears to be incongruous, I do not think that the height of the roof in relation to the whole can be said to be out of proportion.

vi From my reading of the Heaven papers, my opinion is that it is extremely unlikely that The Rev. Mr Heaven would have cherished a concealed motivation as is suggested, or that he would have been influenced by the symbolic factors outlined in deciding the

alignment of the church. Such an interpretation is not supported by the information about his disposition that we have (Langham, 1986). That symbolic ideas would have been either known or acceptable to him could be discounted if considered in relation to the lack of scholarship on the subject at the time; I note that the dates of the books relating to the religious and symbolic aspects of the church orientation given in Mr Farrah's paper are all post 1971. The catalogue of the sale of Mr Heaven's effects in 1916 is remarkable for the quality and extent of the natural history reference books, but the religious works listed are entirely conventional (Lundy Museum Archive). Further, the evidence of his intellect and disposition does not support the proposal that he would have decided upon alignments which had a basis that was not acceptable to conforming churchmen. I think it more likely that at the age of 69, and not being robust, his mind was on the fulfilment of his long-held ambition that would be his memorial.

My impression is that the ideas outlined would not have been current in the 1890s. Unless the Pettie painting of 1884 was made much of and widely circulated in magazines etc, it is most unlikely that Mr Heaven ever saw it, as there is not one mention of any travel to London. Or, if he had been guided by the principles illustrated by Pettie, would an alignment decided by the rising sun on April 29th 1895 give the result which is now observed? The existence of the old chapel was known, though not its date - the only surprising thing about that is that the family had seen fit to disturb what must have been a consecrated building for the purpose of installing their graves within it.

I would suggest that the orientation was decided on the occasion described above (April 1895). One possible explanation for it might be that Mr Heaven was anxious that the church should be visible from the sea. Large numbers of vessels sought shelter at Lundy, and many of the crews attended services on the island. Mr Heaven saw this as a very important part of his ministry, and it was one of the factors governing the size of the church. The church is certainly prominent on the skyline on the approach to Lundy, though whether this would have determined the orientation would have to be tested by survey, and I am aware that Mr Farrah does not agree with this hypothesis.

I agree with Mr Farrah that the orientation is unlikely to have been inadvertant or mistaken, though these two possibilities also remain.

Some details of the above notes would not have been available to Mr Farrah at the time of writing. Although I am unable to agree the thesis of Mr Heaven's having a concealed purpose in the orientation of the church, I should not wish the above comments to be taken as any criticism of Mr Farrah's interesting and valuable contributions to the astro-archaeology of Lundy.

REFERENCES

Heaven Family MSS: Diaries, Log and Letters

Langham, A. & M. 1960 *Lundy, Bristol Channel*, Privately printed

Langham, M. 1980 *A Lundy Album*, Privately printed

Langham, M. 1986 The Heaven Family of Lundy, 1836 - 1916. *Transactions of the Devonshire Association* 118, 93-121.

[The subject of the orientation of St. Helena's Church and the circumstances of its construction, are the subject of ongoing research by R.W.E. Farrah, and a response by him to the above will appear in next year's Annual Report.

This has developed into an interesting debate which is, in my view, worthy of record in the Annual Report (ed.)]