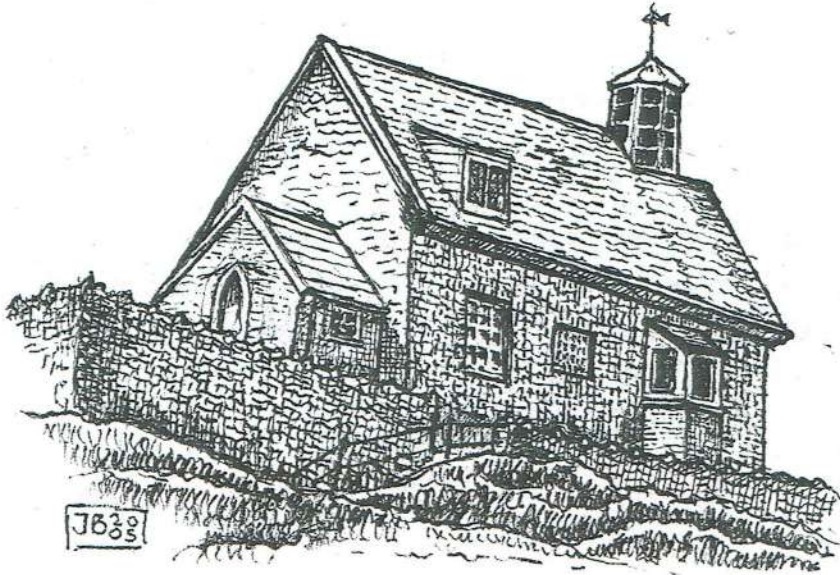


## ST NICHOLAS CHAPEL: Lantern Hill, The Harbour



Of all the many fascinating buildings Ilfracombe possesses, this is the most precious and most historic. Its location is unique, guarding the harbour and adding a human touch to a superb coastline. It may not have the dramatic architecture of Mont Ste Michel, or even our St Michael's Mount, but in its modest way it blends perfectly with its setting as well as performing its vital service to the shipping. Viewed from the Capstone with the majestic background of Hillsborough, or from the Harbour itself, rising above the ships and quayside houses, it completes the picture both by its situation and modest profile. George Eliot, visiting Ilfracombe in 1856, described it as:

"-an old bit of building that looks as if it were the habitation of some mollusc that had secreted its shell from the material

of the rock."

An apt description since it is built out of the rock on which it stands, quarried locally, if not from Lantern Hill itself. The paths up to the chapel have been beautifully engineered, especially as seen from the Capstone as they sweep up from the rocks below.

Its history goes back to Saxon times, making it, with the Parish Church, the oldest building in Ilfracombe, though it has been subject, like the church, to much re-building and adaptation. It was dedicated as a chapel where prayers were said for those who sailed from the harbour, and very appropriately its saint is St Nicholas, the patron saint of sailors. In 1321, when Bishop Stapleton of Exeter called for the extension of Holy Trinity, he also had St Nicholas Chapel re-built, and in 1416 it came under the Rector of Ilfracombe, Hugh Herle.

We do not know what the Chapel looked like, but according to a model that is referred to by a past curator of our Museum, John Longhurst, in his History of Ilfracombe, it had an octagonal tower with pointed roof on its west side and a light was raised nightly to shine out to sea. The little canted bay on this wall was possibly the base of this tower, and there is a pointed window which survives from this re-building.

It was from the Middle Ages, though we don't know when, that the chapel maintained a light to guide shipping using the harbour. This was, no doubt, one of the responsibilities of the priest both to pray for and guide sailors, but we do have a record in the register of Bishop Voysey of Exeter in 1522 that the chapel was used as a lighthouse and, since local people were too poor to pay for it, then the faithful could earn 40 days indulgence by contributing. The Register reads:

"In the chapel of St. Nicholas" erected above the Harbour of the town of Ilfracombe, a certain light is found burning on the summit of the said Chapel year by year throughout the winter at night-time like a twinkling star by night.

When Henry VIII dissolved the monasteries in 1540, St. Nicholas ceased to be a chapel and until the late eighteenth century there is no record to say how it was maintained, though it is most likely that the light was still kept burning. The porch on the south side was built in 1650, and a door opened up at its east end, later with a small porch. Paintings of the late 1700's show the chapel looking much as it does today, though with a taller spire.

The lantern, as we know it now, most likely dates back to the 1819 cut out on its fish-shaped weather vane. We do know, however, that from 1835 until 1871 a Mr John Davie lived in the chapel as lighthouse keeper, raising a family of fourteen children, and that in 1837 the Lord of the Manor, Sir Bouchier-Wrey, opened a reading room there until 1877. It was the construction of the new pier in 1871-3 that led the Davies to leave and the chapel was put to several uses, including a laundry. Through all this the light was kept burning, making it, as the local claim is, the longest working lighthouse in England. In the early days the light would have been made up of oil lamps, but in the nineteenth century gas was brought in, piped up over the rocks. It was in such a poor state in 1881 that a visitor said it was a disgrace to the town and it remained much neglected until 1962 when the Rotarians of the town took it over and restored it to its present state as a chapel and museum which draws thousands of visitors each year. The Rotarians transformed the eastern porch into a small chancel, returning it to its chapel form again, and occasional services are held here by the churches of the town.