Extract from "History of Ilfracombe, No. 1" by John Longhurst

LANTERN HILL AND ST. NICHOLAS CHAPEL

The hill overlooking the pier is called Lantern Hill.

The hill on which the Chapel stands has in the past been called Lantern Rock and St. Nicholas's Hill. Its height, above high water mark, is about 100 ft. and in all probability a light holder was there many years before the Chapel was built on the crest. It formed the eastern end of a chain of rocks running west to Capstone Hill and was doubtless an island at highwater before the quays, causeways, and northern sea walls were built. Traces of these old sea walls which linked up some of the rocks were discovered when the foundations of the houses were built, on the Quay. Centuries ago the sea, which has receded from this coast, would probably have covered the Wilder valley from the harbour right up as far as Brookdale Avenue, where the East and West Wilder meet, flowing in and out from the harbour and Wildersmouth Bay. Fine brown drift sea-sand, like the sand at the Strand, has been found not far below the surface in various places in the valley and an old chart is said to be in existence showing a vessel moored near what is now the bottom of Sommers Crescent. The stone causeway shown in old prints, connecting Lantern Rock with the adjacent rocks was probably built when the Chapel was erected. Rough paths led to the Chapel and across the burial ground on the north slope of the hill: bones and brass buttons are known to have been unearthed and tradition has it that priests were buried there.

If the owner of Lee - the Laerda or Laerta of the Exon Domesday - in 1030 lived up to his name "Godric" it is probable that he was the builder of the first chapel on Lantern Hill and of a tiny "Sanctuary" which stood on the site of the present Chapel Cottage in Lee, and as Wardred appears to be Edward transposed, it looks as it the Confessor was selected as patron, although not just then for Edward the Confessor did not die until 1065. Mention of the chapels which, in the past, came under the jurisdiction of Ilfracombe Church appears to have been made in 1416 when Bishop Stafford appointed the then Rector, Hugh Herle, to the position of Confessor at St. Wardred's Lee and St. Nicholas. It is doubtful if any of the earlier fabric of St. Nicholas remains, as the present building, from the evidence of the original features still existing, appears to have been fully built between 1310 and 1321: it is just possible that Bishop Stapledon may have had it erected during his visitation in 1321 when the Parish Church was enlarged.

What did the Chapel look like at the time? It would certainly not have looked anything like the present building. A model of the Chapel as it is thought to have looked is to be seen in the Museum together with scale drawings by the late Mr. Hussell.

On the north side of the chapel, it is thought, was the tower from which the light shone. This tower would have been octagonal, finished with a conical roof, probably covered with lead: and immediately below the roof the light would have been placed, hung on a pulley and raised and lowered from the inside - the rope coming down by the three-sided projecting window, which was probably used as a look-out window for watching the movement of vessels to and from the port. There were without doubt two small pointed windows in the west wall, about 12 inches wide on the outside. One is still in existence: the other stood where the fireplace now comes. The main window would have been in the east wall: the door in the south wall, and the holy water stoup would have been just inside this door on the right hand side as one entered. The chapel measured about 31 ft. by 13 ft. and the height from the floor of the nave to the top of the ridge about 19 ft. and would have accommodated about 40 people. The roof was probably of slate or thin stone slabs obtained from nearby, and stone would have formed the floor.

Bishop Lacey, who was a friend of Harry of Monmouth, had gone with him to Agincourt and in the reign of his son Henry VI (1413-1422) licensed the Rector of Spreacombe to perform Divine Service not only at Spreacombe but also at Lee, St. Nicholas and in Chambercombe oratory. The Chapel on the rock was at this time a place of pilgrimage as well as being a harbour light.

In the register of Bishop Voysey 1522 it is recorded that the Chapel was in use as a lighthouse, and as the inhabitants of Ilfracombe were too poor to maintain the light, the faithful were invited to contribute towards the cost and the promise was given that those who did so would be given an indulgence of forty days. The Chapel continued to be used for religious purposes until dissolution of the monasteries in the reign of Henry VIII and when, probably by 1540, all lines of communication between the priest and the nearby monasteries had ceased to exist, and the Chapel was left empty. No records exist from 1522 down to the end of the 18th century. Doubtless the sea-going inhabitants still found it necessary to keep the light burning and as the chapel was no longer in use as such it was converted into a dwelling house. The porch on the south side and the steps and door at the east end were built in 1650.

An old painting of the harbour and its vicinity is on view at the Museum. The legend at the bottom of the painting is "Ilfracombe with a view of the Bark London who came from St. Lucia with 150 black prisoners and was wrecked in Raparee Cove Oct. 9th 1796". The painting shows the chapel very much as it now appears, except that the lantern is shown at a greater height. The present lantern bears the date 1819 on the vane, so it was most probably erected then. At some time a fireplace was built and a floor was inserted across the chapel so that when, in 1835, Mr. John Davie and his

wife took up residence there was room for them to bring up a family of fourteen children. The Davies left in 1871, as the blasting operations in connection with the building of the pier at that time made the chapel untenable as a dwelling house.

During Mr. Davie's residence there Sir Boucher Wrey, the lord of the manor, suggested that a reading room should be started. This was opened in 1837 and discontinued 30 years later. The visitors' book, containing the names of many well-known people of the time, was unfortunately stolen soon after the Davies left in 1871. After that the chapel became a laundry for several years and later one of its rooms was used for some time as a band practice room for the Artillery Volunteers.

A Mr. Buckley writing from London in 1881 commented "I do not know who is responsible for the Chapel's preservation and repair but I must say that its present condition reflects disgrace on those who are the owners of it". He also complained of the poor light furnished by a very inferior gas jet, which was supplied by a pipe led up the face of the rock. It was not until many years later that the Rotary Club in Ilfracombe began the restoration of the Chapel which was completed in 1962.
