

St. Helen's Oratory, Cape Cornwall

Archaeological recording during repair works



Historic Environment Projects

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Thanks are due to Peter Rose for his thoughts on the origins of the dedication of the site at Cape Cornwall to St. Helen.

The views and recommendations expressed in this report are those of Historic Environment Projects and are presented in good faith on the basis of professional judgement and on information currently available.

Freedom of Information Act

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Cover illustration

Repairs in progress to St. Helen's Oratory during 2001.

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Fig 16. The small window in the eastern wall of St. Helen's Chapel before works, showing the lost inner lintel.

Fig 17. The collapsed masonry adjacent to the doorway in the north-eastern corner of St. Helen's Chapel prior to works.

Fig 18. An early stage during the conservation works. The foundation courses of the collapsed walling have been reconstructed, whilst repointing is under way on the southern wall.

Fig 19. A later stage during the reconstruction of the eastern wall and doorway reveal.

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Abbreviations

EH	English Heritage
HER	Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly Historic Environment Record
HE	Historic Environment, Cornwall Council
NGR	National Grid Reference
OS	Ordnance Survey
PRN	Primary Record Number in Cornwall HER
NT	The National Trust

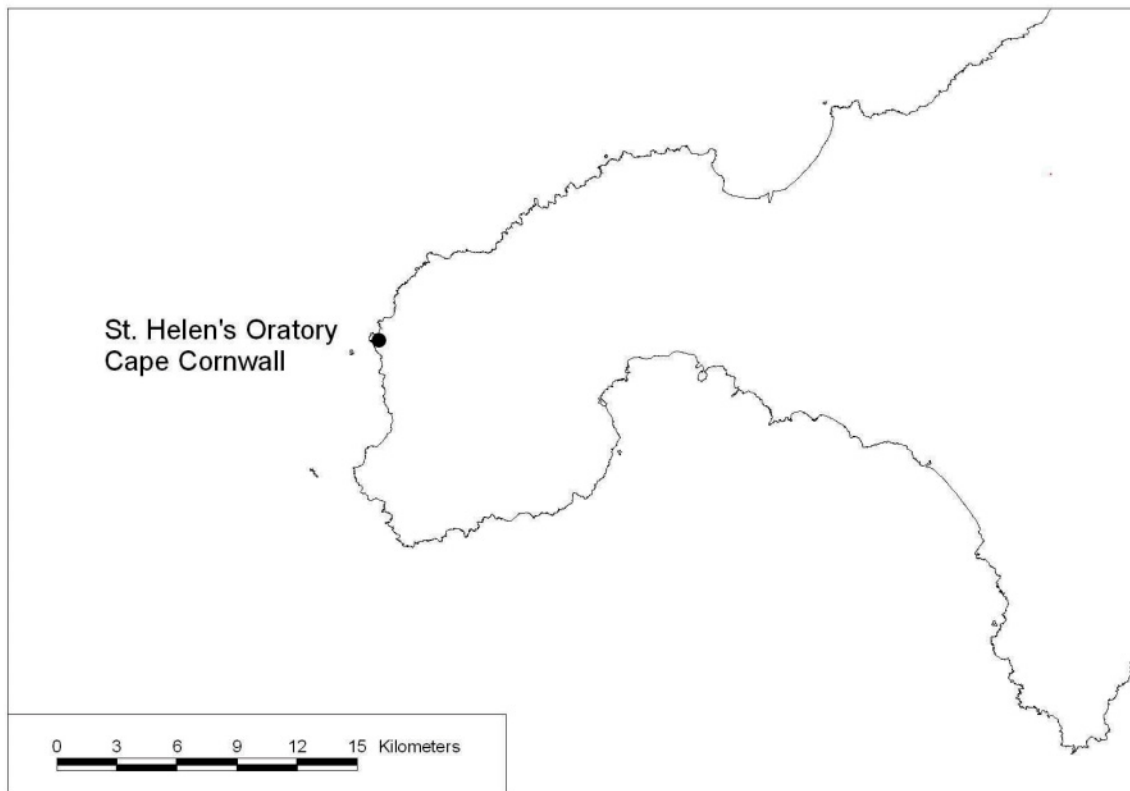


Fig 1. The location of St. Helen's Oratory, Cape Cornwall.

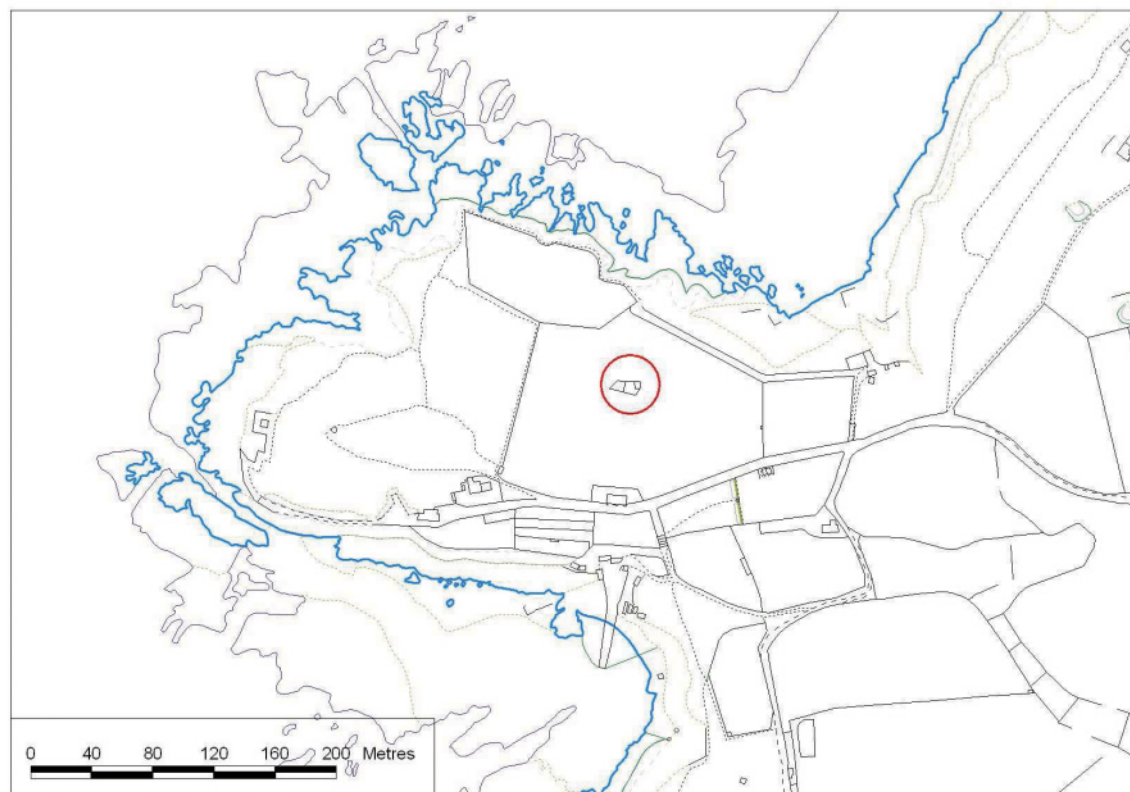


Fig 2. The location of the project area at Cape Cornwall. © Crown Copyright. All Rights Reserved. Cornwall Council 10049047. 2009.

1 Summary

During early 2001 conservation works were undertaken to the building known as St. Helen's Oratory at Cape Cornwall, SW 35238 31861. This building (site MCO6470 in the Cornwall and Scilly HBSMR), a Scheduled Monument (Cornwall 273), is a derelict field barn incorporating several phase of construction which stands on or near the site of an early medieval chapel or oratory, and may incorporate elements of this structure.

The building, together with the land on which it is sited, had been acquired by the National Trust a few years before. In October 1999, English Heritage were informed that a section of its east wall had collapsed and required repair. A joint project was undertaken between the National Trust and the (then) Cornwall Archaeological Unit's Scheduled Monument Management Project (funded by English Heritage, the Cornwall Heritage Trust and Cornwall County Council) to make good the damage. The opportunity was taken to replace failed pointing using a lime-based mix. CAU undertook photographic recording of the building prior to, during, and following the works and provided consultancy and advice during the project.

2 Introduction

2.1 Project background

The Scheduled Monument known as St. Helen's Oratory standing in a field to the east of Cape Cornwall is essentially a modern structure though occupies the site of a Medieval chapel. Damage to this structure was reported to CAU in October 1999, though it was understood that the section of collapsed wall had previously been reconstructed in 1985 by the then owner, Donald Payne. The National Trust, which had acquired the land on which the Oratory stands in 1987 were anxious to repair and consolidate the building. Grants to assist in the recording work were made available from the Scheduled Monument Management Project budget funded by English Heritage, whilst specifications for the work were drawn up by Dave Rickard of the NT Cornwall Regional Buildings Team. The costs of the repair works were met by The National Trust and the work was let to Ruari MacTaggart and Jenni Merritt, conservation masons.

Given that the work was to be undertaken as part of the Scheduled Monument Management Project under the supervision of the Cornwall Field Monument Warden, the need for SMC was waived by English Heritage. All repair works were to be undertaken using lime-based pointing and building mixes (see Appendix), the masonry required to undertake the agreed repairs was to be sourced from rubble piles in and surrounding the building, whilst a pre-works and post-works photographic record was to be created by CAU, who would also undertake background research on the building and would be available on site to provide advice on the works. Both the recording and the building work were undertaken during 2001.

2.2 Aims

- To prepare a pre-works photographic record of the building.
- To undertake documentary research within publicly-accessible sources to provide a background history for the site.
- To prepare a photographic record of the building during and on completion of works.
- To summarise the project in a short report.

2.3 Methods

2.3.1 Desk-based assessment

During the desk-based assessment historical databases and archives were consulted in order to obtain information about the history of the site and the structures and features that were likely to survive. The main sources consulted were as follows:

- Cornwall HER
- Early maps and photographs (see Section 9.1)
- Published histories (see Section 9.2)

2.3.2 Fieldwork

A number of visits were made to the site in advance of the works with the Cornwall Field Monument Warden, the National Trust St. Just Area Warden and a representative from the National Trust Regional Building Department to agree the specifications for and limitations of the work. A series of photographic views of the structure and its setting were recorded prior to works.

The CAU archaeologist visited the site on a number of occasions during the relatively short works programme, initially to ensure that the contractor was aware of the requirements of the brief and the constraints on working imposed by the scheduled

nature of the site. Through discussion during this phase, decisions were also made about the extent of areas to be re-pointed, the appearance and finishing of the new lime pointing, sourcing of rubble stone for the section of wall to be rebuilt and the re-siting of surplus rubble recovered from within and immediately adjacent to the building in order to remove trip hazards from the site. Additional photographs of the work in progress were taken at this stage and following completion of the works.

2.3.3 Post-fieldwork

Colour photographs taken during the fieldwork were digitised and incorporated into the Cornwall and Scilly HER. The results of the watching brief have been written up as this report.

3 Location and setting

St. Helen's Oratory is sited at SW 35241 31860 at 30m OD at the centre of a low saddle on the central part of the promontory known as Cape Cornwall near the tip of West Penwith. The building lies at the middle of a pasture field known as Parc-an-Chapel (the field of the chapel), is accompanied by two small enclosures to its west (these being defined by low Cornish hedges) and has open views to the north and south, being readily visible from Kenidjack Head to the north and Carn Glouce to the south. The site lies within the parish of St. Just in Penwith.

4 Designations

4.1 National

St. Helen's Oratory is a Scheduled Monument (Cornwall 237).

4.2 Other

The site is bordered by the Aire Point to Carrick Du Site of Special Scientific Interest, and is within the Cornwall AONB. The site is within Area A1 of the Cornwall and West Devon Mining Landscape World Heritage Site, inscribed in July 2006.

5 Site history

Cape Cornwall was long considered to be the 'true Land's End' (Pen Kernow), a view which persisted until accurate mapping of Cornwall showed this not to be the case. The Cape is a striking coastal feature, and has been posited as the site of a late prehistoric cliff castle (HER MCO 6533), though this is considered doubtful, as there are no surface indications of ramparts and ditches, nor have any shown up on aerial photographs of the headland. Nevertheless, the Cape was almost certain to have been a 'special place' in the prehistoric landscape – a distinctive locus where land, sea and sky met - like others which have been noted in Cornwall over the past few decades

The Cornwall and Scilly HER record two lithic scatters of prehistoric date (HER MCO 6617 and MCO 40324) just to the west and south-east of Parc-an-Chapel (the field within which the Oratory stands), a now-destroyed cist (HER MCO 27267) on the southern side of this field, another which contained an urn sited on its eastern boundary (HER MCO 27268) and a documented barrow (HER MCO 2304) just to the south of the chapel site. For the fairly tight distribution of these sites see Fig 6. It seems probable from comparison with other similar sites elsewhere in Cornwall that this was an area of the landscape given over to ritual or ceremonial activities and the other associated features of comparable date would have been sited here but either remain undiscovered or have been lost without record through the effects of agricultural activity.

A now-lost Chi-Rho marked stone found on Cape Cornwall near this location suggests that a Christian site may have been established here as early as the 5th Century (Hencken 1932, 222-3, Pearce 1978, 22, 28; Thomas 1994, 199), but it is uncertain when the first chapel was established on the site. The form of the original chapel is

unknown, but is likely to have been simple in plan, perhaps similar to the example known as Chapel Jane at Gurnard's Head not far along the coast to the east. It may be that both sites were deliberately established on topologically highly visible promontories which might have been culturally important within their surrounding areas since prehistory.

The first description of the chapel was by Dr. William Borlase in the mid-18th century, the Cornish historian noting *'On the isthmus which connects Cape Cornwall with the adjoining hill in the middle of the plain stand the remains of an old chapel. It was about 45 feet long and 12 broad. The eastern end was faced with hewn stone and had a pretty window to the altar. The chapel yard is enclosed with a wall of stone, and directly west of the chapel are to be seen the ruins of a dwelling house which tradition says was a religious retirement.'* These would appear to be the structures shown on the 1st Edition of the OS 1:2500 mapping dating to about 1878 (Fig 4).

By the time Borlase wrote this description, the chapel could have been rebuilt at least once, though may well have retained some of its original fabric. It and the 'dwelling house' to the west were still roofed in 1878 (Fig 4). Borlase further thought that Cape Cornwall might originally have been called *'the promontorie of Helenus'*, named, he speculated, *'because Helenus, the son of Priamus, who arrived here with Brute, lieth buried there, except the sea have washed away his sepulchure'*. Whilst Borlase's derivation of the name of the founder of the chapel is erroneous, reflecting the then fascination with the classical cultures of the eastern Mediterranean and their supposed influence on the historical development of Britain, the name 'Helen' may derive from that of the missionary who founded this site. The island of St. Helen's in Scilly, where there was also an early Christian chapel, was named for St. Elidius or Elide (Thomas 1985, 204; Orine 2000, 111-2).

The dimensions and orientation of the present building are quite different from those given by Borlase and it seems very likely that it is of modern construction, although on the site of the original chapel. It is probable that the present building represents a field barn constructed from the rubble of the chapel by Colonel Oats during the early years of the 20th century following his acquisition of Nanpean Farm and his complete reorganisation of the farm and its associated field system. It is unfortunate that in his enthusiasm to reorganise his estate at Porthledden and Nanpean and to provide work for unemployed local miners it seems probable that Colonel Oats destroyed a structure which may well have preserved many of the elements of the original chapel and its associated house. Comparison between the 1st and 2nd Editions of the OS 25" mapping (dating to *circa* 1878 and 1908) together with modern mapping suggest that the present 'chapel' overlies the presumed 'dwelling house' and that the chapel site lay just to its east (see Fig 7).

As well as the chapel (MCO 6470), the Cornwall and Scilly HER notes a number of related sites including a documented holy well (MCO 6952) just to its south (of which no traces now survive), a stone inscribed with a Chi-Rho found nearby (MCO 7138), which was subsequently thrown down the vicarage well in St. Just, and a Latin cross of fourth century type (MCO 45704) ploughed up from the abandoned Cape Cornwall mine leat which passed close to the chapel site (see Fig 4) and which was subsequently erected on the gable of the present building (Fig 10).

In summary, St. Helen's Chapel seems most likely to represent an early 20th century agricultural building standing on or near the site of an early medieval chapel which may have survived until the early decades of the 20th century. However, variations in the construction style of the building suggest that what remains represents more than one phase of construction, the northern wall clearly being of most recent build (this work possible representing a rebuild of Colonel Oats structure during the mid 20th century). There remains, therefore, a slight possibility that some elements of the walling of the building in Parc-an-Chapel are of some antiquity, something which is borne out by the considerably more vernacular style of construction of the western and southern walls.

All above ground traces of the original associated chapel enclosure and the dwelling house referred to by Borlase and mapped by the OS in 1878 have certainly been destroyed, though it is very probable that below-ground remains of all of these sites will survive within its vicinity. Comparison between maps (Fig 7) suggest that the present scheduled area (which covers the building and the enclosure to its west) does not cover the site of the chapel, and should therefore be extended to the east.

Little maintenance work seems to have been carried out the building from the 1960s by when this field had become agriculturally marginal. Its slated roof gradually disintegrated (see Figs 8 and 9), and eventually sections of its southern wall collapsed. These were rebuilt in 1985 by the then owner, Donald Payne of Nanpean Farm. However the rebuilt walling again collapsed in 1999, necessitating its reconstruction in 2001.

6 Results of consultancy

The consultancy and recording were straightforward. Little that was new concerning the history of the building could be gleaned from available documentary sources, and the relative antiquity of some elements of the structure remains open to further research. The style of construction of the northern elevation of the present structure suggests a 20th century origin, though given the marked change in the size, shape and orientation of the building between the 1878 and 1908 editions of the OS 1:2500 mapping (a period which spans that during which the original chapel is likely to have been demolished and its replacement constructed under the instructions of Colonel Oats), this wall is likely to represent a subsequent rebuild. Despite the vernacular style of construction evident in the remainder of the building, suggesting a build date before the 20th century and the possible incorporation of parts of the original structure, map evidence (see Figs 3 to 5, 7) suggests otherwise, and it has to be concluded (on present evidence) that the present building was constructed in the first decade of the 20th century, whilst its northern gable wall was rebuilt some years after.

The works undertaken to the building in 2001 were limited to those parts of its fabric which had become unstable, or which required weatherproofing to prevent future deterioration. These were focussed, in particular, on its eastern wall, where the collapse of the masonry which had been replaced by Donald Payne in 1985 was extensive (see Fig 11). The rubble from this collapse was moved away from the foot of the wall, sorted, and re-set using as a guide a number of archive photographs combined with archaeological evidence (for example the original width of the doorway) to ensure the authenticity of the reconstruction. A limited amount of re-setting of lost stone was also undertaken on the southern wall.

On the western wall, a fallen inner lintel was re-set above a small window, whilst failed pointing on both the inner and outer faces of the southern, eastern and western walls was hacked out to an average depth of 50mm and replaced. The northern wall, which appears to be of more recent construction than the others, had been pointed in a cement-based mix, and the pointing on this elevation was judged to be in reasonable condition, and not requiring replacement in 2001. The stonework of the wall heads was re-set in a lime-based building mix to prevent water ingress to the wall cores where the turf capping was absent. Minor repairs were also undertaken to the low Cornish hedges forming the enclosures to the west of the structure.

7 Recommendations

St. Helen's Oratory was re-inspected in December 2009, and the building was found to be in good condition, requiring no further conservation works at this stage. Minor damage to the Cornish hedges forming the enclosures to the west of the building was noted, and appeared to have been caused by the cattle which have been grazing Parc-an-Chapel for the past year. The damage was slight, consisting of a few dislodged stones, and did not appear to have had any significant archaeological impact. The Field Monument Warden for the site is aware of this situation and the National Trust

Area Warden for St. Just has been informed and asked to make good the damage. The site should be monitored on a regular basis by the National Trust to pick up any further damage of this sort and, if necessary, devise the means to prevent its repetition.

8 Appendix – Specification for repairs

ST. HELEN'S ORATORY, CAPE CORNWALL, ST. JUST

Scheduled Monument Cornwall 273, CAU SMR SW33SE 113, PRN 29777

NGR SW 3523 3187

REBUILDING AND CONSOLIDATION: OUTLINE SCHEDULE OF WORKS

1. Reconstruct the east wall of the building to its pre-collapse outline, using only masonry recovered from the rubble pile at the foot of the wall. Reference will be made, if possible, to any photos made of the building before the wall collapsed.
2. Re-set loose stonework in the south wall of the building.
3. Replace a missing granite lintel over the window opening in the west wall and rebuild a small amount of masonry above.
4. Rebuild all wall edges and cappings where loose. Re-bed the topmost course of stone to waterproof the wallheads or retain existing turf.
5. Rake out any recent loose pointing and replace. Pointing to be a lime-based conservation mix to the following specification: 3 parts local rab (granitic subsoil), 3 parts dark Gwithian sand, 2 parts sieved Castle an Dinas grit, 2 parts NHL5 hydraulic lime. Pointing to be brushed up before full drying has taken place to provide a weathered texture. A trial panel is to be made up and approved before the work takes place.
6. Remove loose surface rubble from around and within the building to a stockpile.
7. Repair Cornish hedges forming the enclosure to the west where necessary, using stone picked from the foot of the hedge, and in a style which matches the stonework to either side of the tumbled section.

9 References

9.1 Primary sources

Ordnance Survey, c1880. *25 Inch Map* First Edition (licensed digital copy at HE)

Ordnance Survey, c1907. *25 Inch Map* Second Edition (licensed digital copy at HE)

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9.2 Publications

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Pearce, S.M. 1978, *The kingdom of Dumnonia: studies in history and tradition in South Western Britain*, Padstow

Thomas, A.C. 1985, *Exploration of a drowned landscape* London

Thomas, A.C. 1994, *And shall these mute stones speak? Post-Roman inscriptions in western Britain*, Oxford and Northampton

9.3 Websites

<http://www.imagesofengland.org.uk/> English Heritage's online database of Listed Buildings

10 Project archive

The HE project number is **2000040**

The project's documentary, photographic and drawn archive is housed at the offices of Historic Environment, Cornwall Council, Kennall Building, Old County Hall, Station Road, Truro, TR1 3AY. The contents of this archive are as listed below:

1. A project file containing site records and notes, project correspondence and administration.
2. Digital photographs stored in the directory R:\Historic Environment (Images)\Sites.A-D\Cape Cornwall St Helens Oratory
3. This report text is held in digital form as: G:\Historic Environment (Documents)\Sites\Sites C\Cape Cornwall St Helens Oratory repairs 2000008.doc

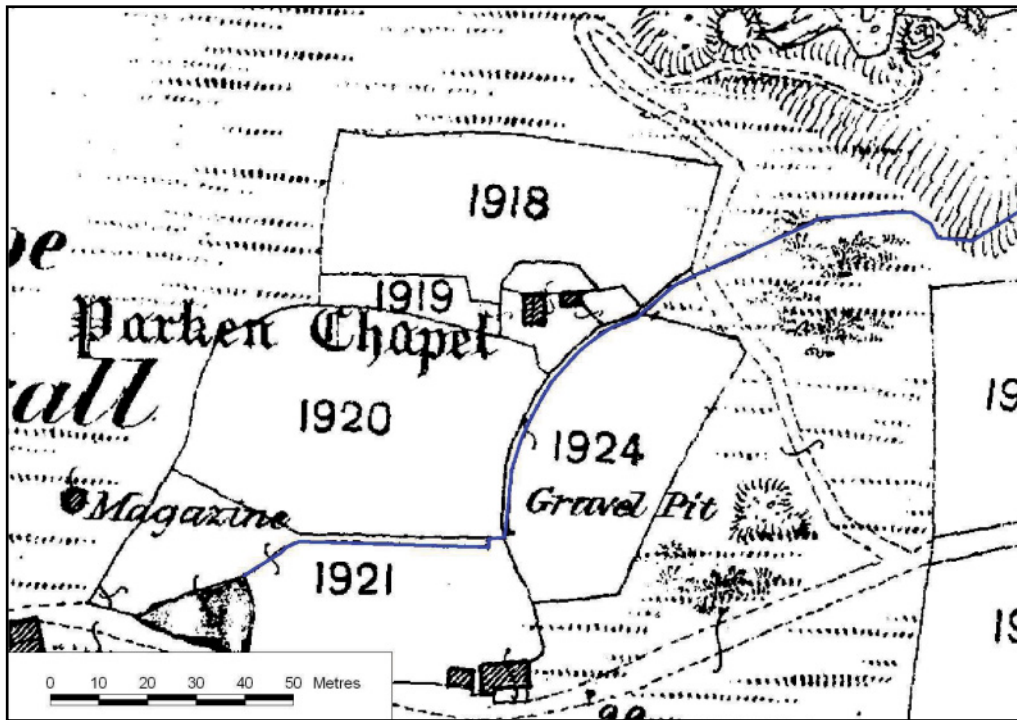


Fig 4. Parc-an-Chapel at Cape Cornwall in 1878. A small cluster of fields surrounds what was probably by then a barn and animal shed, the Cape Cornwall leat running through the fields from left to right. © Crown Copyright and Landmark Information Group. All Rights Reserved. Cornwall Council 10049047. 2009.

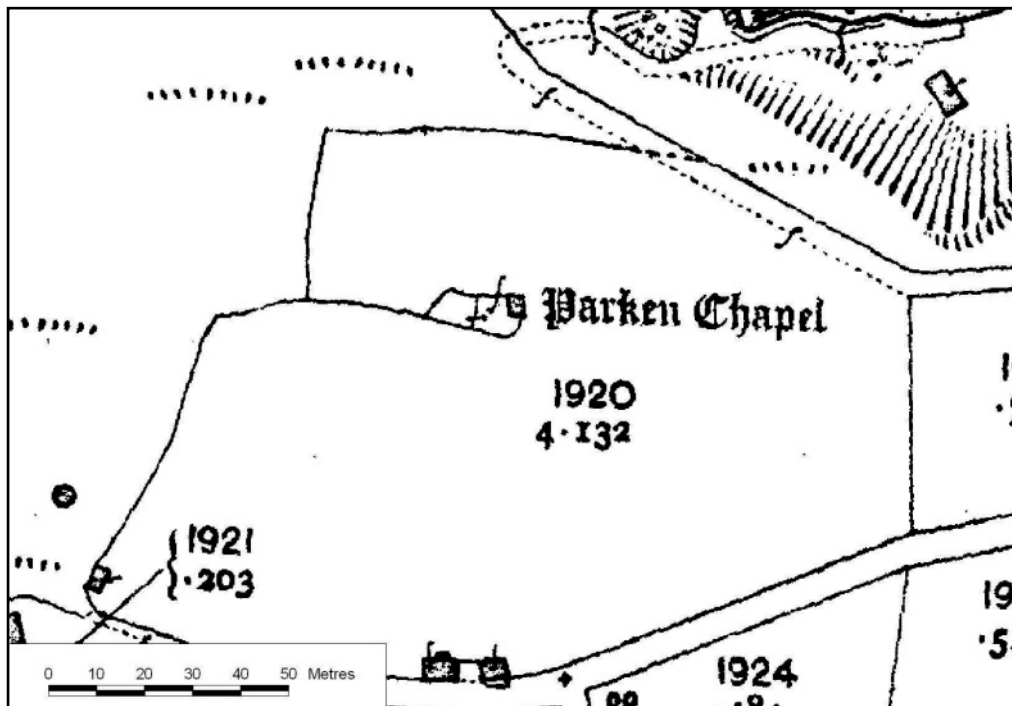


Fig 5. Parc-an-Chapel in 1908, more or less contemporary with the reorganisation of the Nanpean Farm field boundaries. The larger of the two buildings at the Chapel site had been demolished and the enclosures and remaining building shown on this mapping mirror what is there now. © Crown Copyright and Landmark Information Group. All Rights Reserved. Cornwall Council 10049047. 2009.

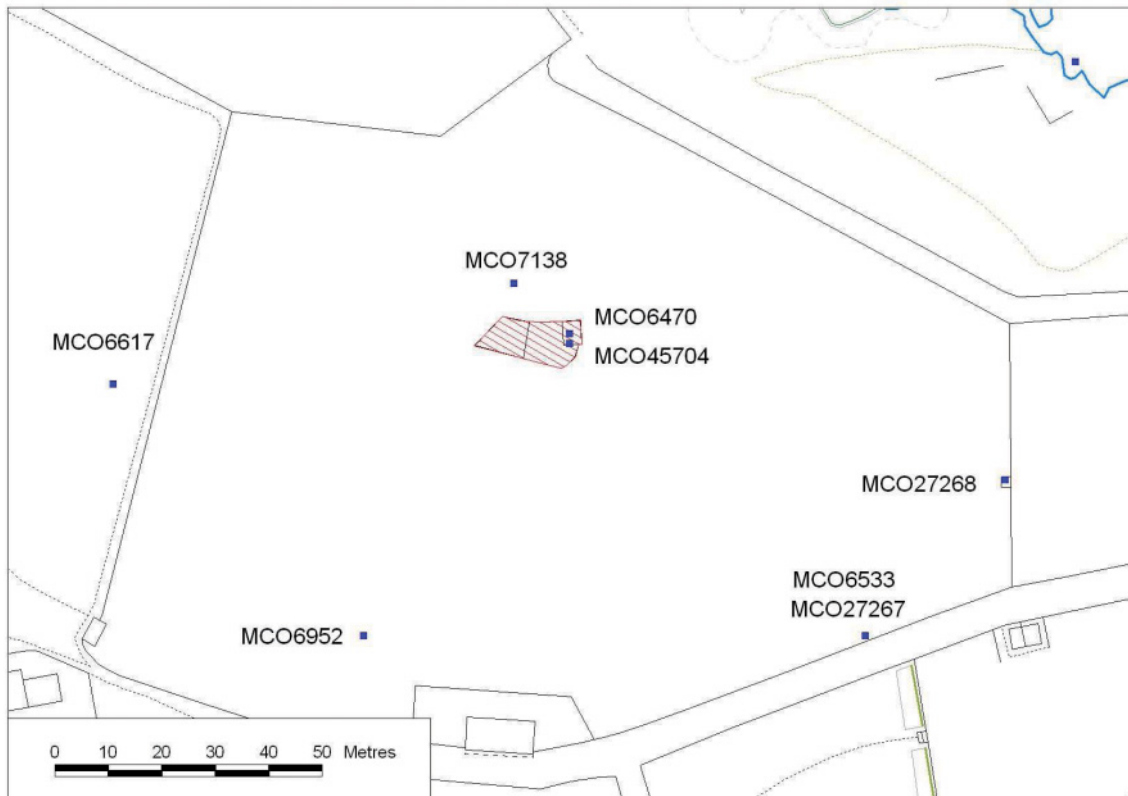


Fig 6. Sites recorded in the Cornwall and Scilly HER in the vicinity of St. Helen's Oratory (at centre). See Section 5. The red hatching indicates the extent of the scheduled monument. © Crown Copyright. All Rights Reserved. Cornwall Council 10049047. 2009.

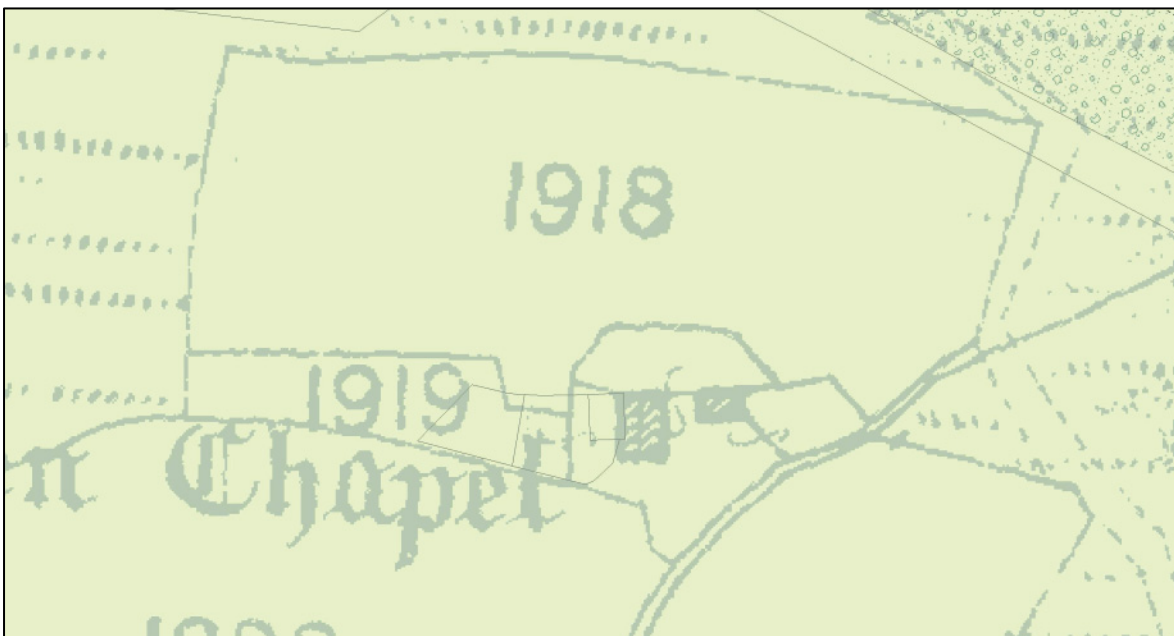


Fig 7. Modern OS mapping overlaid onto the 1st Edition OS 25'' mapping (circa 1880), showing that the present 'chapel' actually lies to the west of the original site. © Crown Copyright. All Rights Reserved. Cornwall Council 10049047. 2009.



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Fig 10. St. Helen's Chapel from the south prior to works showing the massive stones used in the construction of this wall and the cross re-erected on its gable. HE Digital Image Archive.



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Fig 16. The small window in the eastern wall of St. Helen's Chapel before works, showing the lost inner lintel. HE Digital Image Archive.



Fig 17. The collapsed masonry adjacent to the doorway in the north-eastern corner of St. Helen's Chapel prior to works. HE Digital Image Archive.



Fig 18. An early stage during the conservation works. The foundation courses of the collapsed walling have been reconstructed, whilst repointing is under way on the southern wall. HE Digital Image Archive.



Fig 19. A later stage during the reconstruction of the eastern wall and doorway reveal. HE Digital Image Archive.



Fig 20. The reconstruction of the collapsed section of the eastern wall approaching completion. HE Digital Image Archive.



Fig 21. The masonry over the external face of the window in the western wall. HE Digital Image Archive.



Fig 22. St. Helen's Chapel from the south-east in late 2009. HE Digital Image Archive.



Fig 23. The southern elevation of St. Helen's Chapel in late 2009. HE Digital Image Archive.



Fig 24. The southern wall of St. Helen's Chapel from the south-east in late 2009. HE Digital Image Archive.



Fig 25. St. Helen's Chapel from the west in late 2009. HE Digital Image Archive.



Fig 26. The internal elevation of the southern wall of St. Helen's Chapel in late 2009. HE Digital Image Archive.



Fig 27. The internal elevation of the small window in the western wall of St. Helen's Chapel in late 2009. HE Digital Image Archive.