

The Great Storm of Heswall, the Deaths and the Floods

by Greg Dawson



On the evening of Sunday 19th September 1875, a very severe storm hit Heswall and surrounding area very hard. After raining all the previous day Sunday morning started off bright, but a storm was brewing and during the afternoon it became very hot and muggy. That evening, the service at St. Peters Church, Heswall was attended by over 200 people and lessons were read by the Rector, Reverend Mark Coxon. Mr. Cowlishaw, master of the National Schools, usually played the harmonium at St Peter's, as the old church organ was in need of repair. But, on the evening of the storm, Mr. Cowlishaw invited his friend Mr. John Heveran, a schoolmaster at Neston National School, to his house for tea. After tea, Mr. Heveran volunteered to play the harmonium at the evening service. Mr. and Mrs. Cowlishaw, Mr. Heveran and Mr. Lewis, a Neston druggist, all entered the church together and went up to the organ gallery where John Heveran took his seat at the harmonium. An hour into the service, the thunderstorm broke violently with forked lightning and torrential rain. One of the party remarked that "the brass about the organ might attract the electric fluid" (lightning), so, Mr. and Mrs. Cowlishaw and Mr. Lewis moved away from the instrument. John Heveran remained seated at the harmonium and played the 'Magnificat' whilst the congregation sang. Suddenly, he was struck by a bolt of lightning which then passed through the floor and hit the pew under the gallery where a number of people were sitting.

When the lightning bolt hit the church it extinguished all but two of the lamps and candles. The sudden darkness, loud thunder claps and plaster falling from the ceiling onto the organ making a frightening noise, caused panic amongst the congregation and some people ran out through the torrential rain into the Village. Churchwarden Thomas Swift found a light and made for the pew under the gallery where he found a number of semi-conscious victims in a ruck at the corner of the pew. When people got over the initial shock of what had happened, they carried the casualties into the porch. Most were found to be shocked but otherwise alright, however, five victims appeared to be badly hurt. A young lad named Henry Rathbone, son of a local labourer from Gayton, was dead and four others were injured. They were William Woodward and William Hewett, both young men, Henry Tarbuck, gardener to the Rector and Thomas

Davies, groom to William Laird, the Birkenhead shipbuilder who had a country house in Heswall. Young Henry Rathbone's body was moved into the nave. Then, Mr. Houghton and the Reverend J. Porter remembered that there was still somebody in the organ gallery and immediately went up, only to find John Heveran laying dead by the harmonium. The lightning had struck him under the right ear leaving a round red mark, it had then passed down his right leg, tearing a piece of leather from the heel of his boot as it left his body.

When the lightning hit the church tower it shattered the wooden flagstaff to matchwood and destroyed the weathervane. The lightning bolt entered the church through a small hole in the apex and some people thought that after it had struck the floor, it rebounded up through the ceiling and out of the church, damaging the roof in two places. It was even more unsafe outside and many people stayed in the church as the storm raged for nearly three more hours. Some people did go out and found themselves in water up to their waists as the lightning and torrential rain continued. The gushing rainwater formed into streams which joined to become rivers, washing over all before them as they thundered down the hillsides and into the Dee Estuary. The long sandstone boundary wall around the property owned by Lord of the Manor and M.P. for North Stafford, Mr. William Bromley-Davenport, held back millions of gallons of water before collapsing. This caused a small tidal wave to burst across the road flattening about 30 yards of wall behind Mr. Peter Sutherlands house and ruining the garden. The water which did not escape through this gap, raged along the road and down two steep hills near to the church. The raging torrents knocked the Rectory garden wall down and rushed onward to the ground floor rooms, covered the lawn with sand, mud and boulders and filled the cellars. Roads in the Village were washed away leaving large potholes, some four feet deep. When the swollen Scarbrook burst out of the The Dales it washed away the bottom end of Scabbrook Road (now Delavor Road) leaving very deep potholes.

The four people injured on the pew with the unfortunate Henry Rathbone, were very lucky. Woodward, Hewett and Tarbuck were taken home where they recovered overnight and the next morning they returned to work. Thomas Davies complained of a burning sensation in his chest but was otherwise not too bad. The inquest into the deaths of Mr. Heveran and Henry Rathbone was held in Heswall National Schoolroom. It was recorded that the death mark on Mr. Heveran was a round red spot under the right ear and on young Rathbone a larger wound in the throat, immediately under the chin where the electric fluid had entered the body. West Cheshire coroner, Mr. Churton, recorded a verdict of accidental death with a recommendation that a lightning conductor be fitted to the church tower. It seemed that the iron weathercock on the Tower had attracted the lightning and as there was no proper conductor installed, the lightning passed down the tower and into the church.

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