

JONATHAN HARMER STONEMASON - POTTER - SURVEYOR

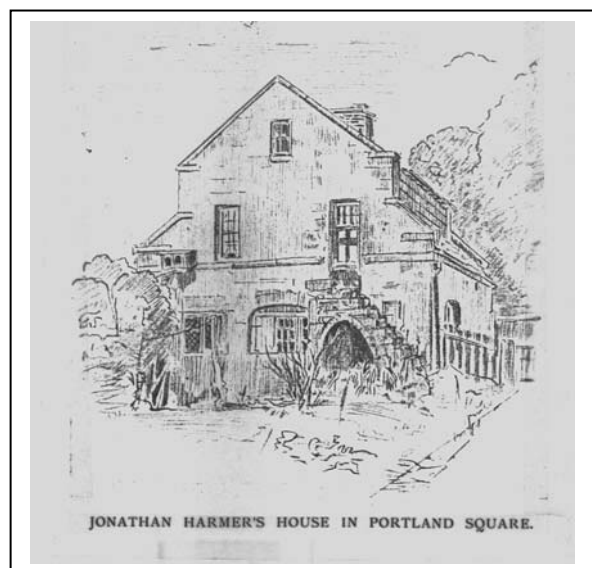
Although some of the text of this article was used in a newsletter published 10 years or so ago, in the early days of the Association, it seems timely to repeat and extend the information, as the vast majority of our present readers have joined the Association since that date. To those who might already know something of Jonathan Harmer, perhaps this will act a refresher as he was certainly an interesting man and the master of a unique craft.

Jonathan Harmer junior was the third child born to his parents, Jonathan senior, a stonemason, and his wife, Henrietta (Pattenden). Jonathan was baptised at Heathfield on 28 April 1762. He married Mary Chapman at South Malling on 4 July 1783 and the marriage was blessed with nine children, Henrietta, Joseph, Juliana, Edwin (1792-3), Edwin (1794), Columbianee, a second Columbianee, both of these daughters dying at an early age, Urania and Sylvan. Jonathan's younger brother John married in Lewes in July 1793, and by October of that year was in New York with his in-laws, the Renvill's. Jonathan and his family went across the Atlantic to join his brother shortly after.

On his arrival in New York, Jonathan started a series of letters to his father in England which are printed in "Heathfield Memorials (see note below), and these are the source of our insight into his fortunes. He outlined the business he set up as a stonemason, in which venture, and others, he seems to have been quite successful. There was at this time an acute shortage of skilled craftsmen in New York, and he remarked, that if his father were to send him a number of stonemasons, he could find them immediate employment. He appeared to become an ardent democrat who entertained the hope that one day there may even be an English Revolution.

Although on his arrival in New York, Jonathan had been quite impressed with the opportunities for advancement in his chosen profession, but as time passed he became disenchanted with the New York scene, the summer heat and high humidity, mosquitoes and the treatment meted out to the Negro element of the population. He refers to the prices of various commodities at this time, particularly fresh food. Apparently butter was somewhat difficult to obtain, was of indifferent quality and often rancid when available. His wife Mary complained increasingly of the plague of mosquitoes and the heat, saying that this combination made sleep well nigh impossible until the small hours of the morning. Yellow fever and dysentery were prevalent and claimed the lives of his two infant children.

Having arranged for the disposal of his New York business assets, Jonathan and his family returned to England in 1800 in the same brig in which he went out, The Atlas. It was while they were on passage home that his father Jonathan senior passed away, he being buried on 1 May 1800 at Heathfield. Jonathan (senior) bequeathed to his sons "all such Portland and other stone together with my working Tools and Utensils belonging to the Trade of a Stonemason and Bricklayer, and Land Surveying Books". On his return to Heathfield, Jonathan set up in business as a stone mason, potter and surveyor, building up a reputation for the quality of his work. He lived in Portland Square, Heathfield, and his house stands today and is now called "Harmers". His last two children, Urania and Sylvan were both born after his return.



It was at this time that that Jonathan began making terracotta bas-reliefs for use in his work as a monumental mason. The terracottas vary in colour from creamy-buff to orange, the redder pieces are believe to be made from clay dug in Heathfield Park, while the paler ones are probably from Fulham clay. He used moulds and after the clay had been firmly pressed into the mould, a very sharp tool was used to create the finer details. The clay was then baked in a wood-fired oven normally used for baking the family bread. The finished terracottas were very hard, sometimes twisted and cracked, but almost always extremely decorative. There are quite a number surviving in various Sussex churchyards, and the main designs are baskets of fruit, urns with rams head handles, figure groups representing Charity, tureen-shaped vases, cherubs sometimes surmounted by a crown with radiating rays, and a Masonic design with figures representing Faith and Hope and rosettes of varying designs. The terracottas seem to date from 1803, a surviving bill suggests that most of the designs were in manufacture by 1808 and give the price of the fruit and flower basket design as eight shillings.



The terracottas can be found in a number of churchyards in Sussex in varying conditions, some have fallen prey to the ravages of time and the elements and possibly vandalism. There are eight for instance at Herstmonceux, and several at Heathfield Church. Those inside, like the porch of Wadhurst Church and Cade Street Independent Chapel are in good condition. The only example of Jonathan Harmer's work in cast iron is to be found, in very poor condition, in Wartling Churchyard. It was probably made at the Ashburnham furnace.

Jonathan died in 1849 and left the business to his sons and grandsons. Sylvan continued to live in the house in Portland Square and his tombstone in Heathfield Churchyard (1884) is decorated with a large terracotta vase and two rosettes, all probably taken from stock, there is however, no such memorial for Jonathan. In 1897 a Mr Alexander bought up a stock of Harmer pottery, together with some books and papers found in the attic of the Portland Square house and later gave a set of the pottery and some moulds to the Sussex Archaeological Society, these are now in the Society's Museum in Lewes. Some years ago Ronald Harmer was able to acquire some of Jonathan's attractive terracottas and he kindly puts them on display at Reunions. Anyone wanting more information and an idea of exact locations of surviving terracottas in Sussex churchyards, please contact Michael or Ronald Harmer.



CHERUB WITH CROWN AND RAYS

NOTE: *"Heathfield Memorials"* is a history of the Parish of Heathfield by Percival Lucas published in 1910, largely based on a manuscript history written by Sylvan Harmer, son of Jonathan, between 1821 and 1831. The whereabouts of Sylvan's manuscript is unknown and Mr Lucas book is the only record we have of it. *Heathfield Memorials* gives us an insight into the parish of Heathfield, the Sussex Iron Industry, The Workhouse and Poor of the Parishes, The Harmer letters from New York, Jonathan Harmer, his craft and life in general in the parish in which so many Harmer ancestors lived. It is now a rare and sought after book, the current cost being around £80. Some years ago Michael Harmer was able to borrow a copy in order to make photocopies with a restricted circulation to Harmer Family Association members only.



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