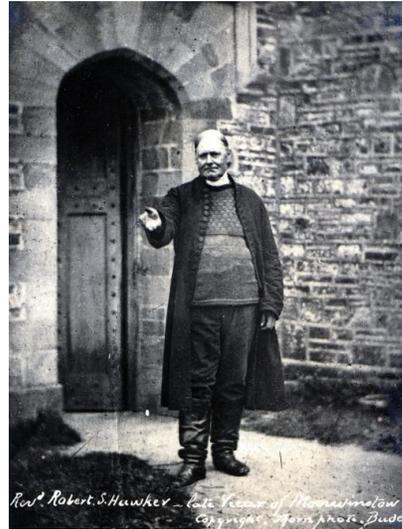


## The Reverend Robert Hawker, Vicar of Morwenstow

*Sue Cox April 2014*

The Rev. Hawker, vicar of Morwenstow, has a reputation as an eccentric, an opium eater, a servant of the poor and the writer of *The Song of the Western Men*, the song which we know as *Trelawny*, the Cornish "National Anthem". Hawker was a romantic High Churchman who believed (or claimed to believe) that demons and spirits were part of everyday life.



He was born in Plymouth in 1804, eventually to become a third generation clergyman in his distinguished clerical family, but in his early days he distinguished himself primarily as a practical joker, school drop-out, and all around thorn in the side of his family. But a wealthy and generous aunt enabled him to acquire an Oxford education, and he early on distinguished himself as a poet as well as a prankster.

To the surprise of many, he married a woman, and heiress, more than 20 years his senior, but with whom he enjoyed a devoted 30-year marriage. Following his graduation from Oxford and his ordination he was offered the parish in Morwenstow and surprised many more by accepting the challenging post. Morwenstow, the northernmost parish in Cornwall, was isolated, poor remote and largely ignored. It had not had a resident clergyman for 100 years. Its people were reputed to be wreckers - people who illegally gathered and even plundered the cargo of ship-wrecks.



Because his wife had inherited money the couple was able to build a lovely vicarage and Morwenstow, improve access to neighbouring communities, restore the church and building and maintain a school in the parish. They were extraordinarily generous to their struggling parishioners, bringing them food, money, clothing and blankets. They instituted a collection at weekly services and distributed the money to labourers' families.

He earned a small reputation as a poet, but a greater one as an eccentric. He once kept a pig as a pet and took it on pastoral calls. He had nine cats that followed him everywhere, and usually had dogs that tended to participate in services. Methodists and Bible Christians were numerous in the parish, but Hawker was convinced that they (and John Wesley) were responsible for the number of pre-marital pregnancies. In spite of his criticism of the Dissenters, though, he still brought food and support to those in need. Asked about that, he said he wanted to bring them some comfort in this world because he knew what comfort awaited them in the next. Asked if he refused to bury Dissenters in the churchyard, he responded that he would be happy to bury all of them.

The coast upon which Morwenstow sits has long been famous for shipwrecks, and it was the custom to merely bury the bodies of sailors washed ashore in the sand. Hawker insisted they deserved a Christian burial, and had bodies carried up the cliffs from the shoreline and buried in the churchyard. One of the most famous of the dozens of shipwrecks there during his ministry was that of the Caledonia, a Scottish brig. All but one of the crew drowned, including the

captain, and Hawker used the figurehead from the ship as a grave marker for the crew. (It has now been moved inside the church to preserve it.)



One man, a Jerseyman named Edward LeDain, was found alive and stayed in the parish to recover. In gratitude to the hospitality he sent Morwenstow the best Jersey cow he could find, and he named his son Edward Robert Hawker LeDain. Hawker built a small hut from driftwood on the cliffs overlooking the Atlantic Ocean that became known as Hawker's Hut. He spent many hours there writing his poems and letters. This driftwood hut is now the smallest property in the National Trust portfolio.

His standard dress was a Guernsey knit by his wife or someone in the parish, a claret-coloured jacket, and fisherman's boots. He refused, though, to wear black, except for his socks which were knit from the wool of his black ewe. Following the death of his wife Charlotte in 1862, he became very depressed and was addicted to opium - although his best poetry was written during this time. He also developed a relationship with St. Morwenna, the founder of the church and who gave her name to the parish of Morwenstow. Morwenna came to him in a vision and he believed they shared a special relationship.

However, he gave up opium when he fell in love with Pauline Kuscynski, the governess to the children of a clergyman friend. Although he was sixty and she

was only 19 years old, they married and enjoyed 10 happy years together which included the birth of three daughters, Morwenna, Rosamund and Juliot.



*Hawker aged sixty-six,  
wearing the garb  
of sailor's thick jumper  
and sea boots he favoured  
for much of his life.*

Money was scarce, so more and more Hawker published stories and other prose writing in an attempt to earn more money to support his young family. He has been much criticized for his embellishments of the truth in his writing - or perhaps it was just his vivid imagination. Whatever, much of his writing is entertaining but the reader should remember that he was never held back by the lack of facts, or by facts which were at odds with his own version of events. From mid-1873 on, his health deteriorated. In 1875 he wrote to his friend, "I have consulted Dr. Goodfellow again and his reply is very ominous." In April, he acquired a curate, and his wife determined that as soon as the curate arrived, they were to leave Morwenstow for a while. He seemed to have a premonition as to what was coming and took his Churchwarden aside to show him where he was too buried.

He died in Plymouth in 1875, but not before is last seemingly inexplicable act: On his deathbed he converted to Roman Catholicism. Since then debate has raged about whether he knew what he was doing, and why he would do that after a lifetime serving the Anglican communion. However, he had always been an Anglo-Catholic, even though he had never demonstrated a particular calling to the Roman church. People will argue about this for decades, I suppose, but we will

never know the truth. However, he was buried in the Catholic cemetery in Plymouth rather than in his beloved churchyard at Morwenstow.