

HALLEY'S MOUNT, ST HELENA

by Trevor W. Hearl

The imminent return of Halley's Comet early in 1986 has focussed worldwide attention once again on the achievements of that remarkable 17th century astronomer. Some years ago, in August 1977, Edmond Halley was the subject of a commemorative set of St Helena stamps to mark the tercentenary of his visit to the island. Early this year, 1985, a memorial was raised, by private initiative, on the grassy slopes of Halley's Mount as a visible reminder of the man and the event over 300 years ago.

St Helena had only been settled for a few years when, in November 1676, this enterprising 20-year-old genius left Cambridge for the remote island in the South Atlantic to study the southern sky. King Charles II persuaded the East India Company give Halley a free passage on the next Indiaman taking supplies to their infant colony. Having set up his observatory, logically enough on a high ridge near Hutts Gate, Halley spent 18 months of meticulous labour, his observations unfortunately all too often hampered by cloud and mist. Experience would have taught him to set up his instruments nearer Jamestown, yet it was a mistake repeated a century later, in 1761, by Dr Maskelyne when observing the transit of Venus, which was obscured by cloud over the ridges at the vital time, though clearly seen in Jamestown.

Halley, nevertheless, plotted 341 stars using a 5.5-foot sextant and made the first complete observations of a transit of Mercury on 7th November 1677. He returned to England in October 1678 with a reputation as "the Southern Tycho". His study of comets was to come later, published in 1705.

The site of Halley's observatory on St Helena was named after him from the outset. Governor *Janisch's Extracts from the St Helena Records* (2nd ed. 1908, p. 16) quotes an order of 8th May 1682 stationing alarm guns on "Hawley's Mount" -- the name spelt as he pronounced it -- "to be fired by any person discerning a ship". Curiously, however, no 18th century cartographer seems to have marked the site. It first seems to have been shown on a map by Col. James Cocks in 1804, depicting a telegraph station on the Mount. The better-known *Geographical Plan of the Island and Forts of St Helena* by Lieut. R. P. Read (1815; 2nd ed. revised 1817) marked "Halley's Mount" with the modern spelling and a large flag.

During February 1985, Ken Harwood, St Helena's visiting optician, surveyed and excavated Halley's Mount and furnished it with a suitable "monument" to St Helena's first visiting astronomer.

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