

Michael Ventris: chronological notes on his life

by Martin Pickles 27th August 2013

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Please note: I have tried to assemble all the principal facts and anecdotes of Michael's life into one document.

Michael's Early Life

Michael Ventris is born on 12th July 1922 in Weathampstead in Hertfordshire, the son of Lt. Colonel Edward Ventris and Dorothea Ventris (née Janasz). His father is from a distinguished military family but only achieves the rank of colonel himself. Michael's mother is Polish on her father's side and English on her mother's.

Michael spends much of his early life in Switzerland, partly because of his father's tuberculosis, although it benefits his own asthma. (Another factor may be that Edward and Dorothea are undergoing Psychoanalysis by Jung). As a result Michael becomes fluent in French, German and Swiss German and picks up Polish from his mother. In 1930 he acquires a book in German on decipherment, which is a gift from his father.

In 1930 the family moves back to England. His parents' marriage starts to disintegrate and in 1934 Dorothea starts divorce proceedings against Michael's father on the grounds of his adultery, citing one Margaret Shepherd as correspondent. In 1935 Michael starts at Stowe, a progressive public school, under founding headmaster J.F. Roxburgh. By 1936 Dorothea and Edward are divorced. Yet Edward and Dorothea remain in contact, partly through their concern for Michael's schooling. During holiday time, they sometimes stay near Eastbourne at adjacent hotels and meet on a park bench halfway between.

The Move To Highpoint

In 1936 Dorothea and Michael move into an ultra-modern flat: number 47, Highpoint I in Hampstead. Hampstead at the time is the focus of artistic and bohemian London (known as "the Artygentsia"). Dorothea is a patron of the arts and personally knows the Russian-Jewish artist Naum Gabo, the British artists Henry Moore, Ben Nicholson and Barbara Hepworth and the ex-Bauhaus architects Marcel Breuer and Walter Gropius. She is also a member of the Pioneer Architecture Group and a keen supporter of Modernism.

Perhaps as a conscious break with her "County" background and traditional married life, she commissions Breuer to design all her furniture and fittings, including a glass-topped desk. Indeed, she sells off her old 17th and 18th century furniture at Sotheby's in December 1936. Breuer makes comprehensive architectural drawings of 47 Highpoint in order fully to integrate the furniture with it. This is perhaps when the young Michael first starts to see and appreciate architectural plans.

On October 16th 1936 Michael goes a school trip under Stowe Classics teacher P.G. Hunter to the exhibition "British Archaeological Discoveries in Greece And Crete" at the Royal Academy in London. Sir Arthur Evans, then the most eminent archaeologist in the country, gives the boys a personal guided tour of the exhibition, including the

collection of prehistoric Cretan clay tablets with a form of pictographic writing on them that he has named “Linear B.”

Evans is convinced the language of the tablets is a non-Greek one. Michael pipes up, “Did you say they haven’t been deciphered, Sir?” Michael is later spotted reading books on Linear B by torch after lights out in his dormitory. Another teacher tells him off for working on a decipherment of another Cretan script – that of the Phaistos Disk – during his Greek classes. In 1937 Michael writes to Sir Arthur Evans for the first time.

In the two years that follow, Michael starts to specialize in Classics under Patrick Hunter with a view to applying to Oxford but over the summer holidays of 1939 he has a rethink and finally decides he wants to be an architect. He writes to Marcel Breuer for advice and Breuer suggests he try applying to the Architectural Association rather than Oxford.

During 1939 American archaeologist Dr. Carl Blegen of the University of Cincinnati excavates a site at Pylos on the Greek mainland and finds a number of Linear B tablets, which goes against Sir Arthur Evans’ assertion that the script was non-Greek.

At her Breuer-designed desk in Highpoint, Dorothea writes exhaustive and desperate letters to Roxburgh at Stowe about Michael’s dietary and intellectual needs. She also maintains correspondences with Gabo (who by now has joined Nicholson and Hepworth down at the artists’ colony at St Ives) and Breuer (now moved to Massachusetts). Her tone is diffident and self-conscious. In 1938 her ex-husband Edward dies of tuberculosis in Switzerland.

In 1939 the German invasion of Poland freezes the assets of Dorothea’s father Joseph Janasz, forcing him to come to England and to stay at Highpoint. He dies a year later in London. Without her family income and having to manage on half a military pension, Dorothea is forced to take Michael out of Stowe a year early. Michael applies to the Architectural Association in London, which remains open despite the outbreak of war, and secures a place.

Over Easter 1940 Michael writes to Sir Arthur Evans a typed letter of many pages which reads like a rough draft of a subsequent article. He seems to be trying to get Evans’ approval for his article.

In the summer before he is due to start at the Architectural Association, Michael goes to stay with Naum Gabo in St Ives and continues work on his article about Linear B, entitled “Introducing The Minoan Language”. Whilst he is working on the article he receives news that his mother has committed suicide in a seaside hotel somewhere on the Welsh coast on 16th June by taking an overdose of Barbitone. Gabo and his wife Daska become Michael’s de facto guardians. Michael nevertheless completes his 26 page article on Linear B and it is later published in the American Journal of Archaeology, where it is thought to be the work of a much older man.

In October 1940 Michael returns to Highpoint where he lives on his own and enrolls at the Architectural Association. There he meets the glamorous Lois Knox-Niven, an architecture student in his year. Lois’ mother is from a family of aviators and her step-

father is chairman of De Havilland. Michael and Lois soon start seeing each other around the time of her 21st birthday and by March 1942 Lois is pregnant. They marry on 20th April 1942 with a minimum of fuss at a registry office, with two unknown witnesses. Lois moves into Highpoint.

The RAF

In August 1942 Michael is drafted into the RAF and starts his basic training at a ghastly RAF base in Ludlow, Shropshire. He starts a long correspondence with Lois: their enforced separation seems to ensure they remain passionately in love until the end of the war. Lois and their imminent child (whom they nickname "Araminta") seem to be an emotional lifeline for Michael. At this time he also starts to teach himself Russian.

In October he moves to an RAF base at an old school near Scarborough, North Yorkshire. He compares Scarborough favourably with St. Ives.

On 15th October Sir John Myres of Oxford University, now the senior figure in Linear B since the death of Sir Arthur Evans, writes to Michael after reading his "Introducing The Minoan Language" article in the AJA. Michael starts a long correspondence with Myres, which lasts until 1954. Michael offers to help him on a book project for free.

Michael and Lois' son Anthony Nicholas (or "Nikki") is born on 2nd December 1942; Gabo and Daska are made godparents. By January 1943 Lois has been joined at Highpoint by the family nurse (Freda) and by Lois' sister Susan Babington-Smith and her husband Anthony Cox.

In the RAF Michael specializes in being a navigator, rather than a pilot, thus going against Lois' family tradition. It is later suggested that Michael failed the sight tests for being a pilot, but whether or not this is the case, navigating suits his skills much better. He moves to a new base in Heaton Park, Manchester in May 1943 before Moncton, New Brunswick, Canada in July. He starts working on architectural designs for his and Lois' dream house.

In September 1943 Michael moves to a new base at Stevenson Field, Winnipeg, Manitoba and by November is sending Lois actual designs for their dream house. In December Michael starts to learn Portuguese. In a maudlin letter to Lois he describes that he lacks purpose or even a personality. Perhaps to devise a purpose for himself, he starts designing calculating machines in January 1944. He also confesses to working on doodles for his own projects during lectures. In February he finishes his navigation exams, coming second, and afterwards moves to a new RAF base in Ottawa. By March he is making actual models of their dream house and trying to acquire a reading knowledge of Dutch, Swedish, Italian and Spanish in addition to his other languages.

In November 1944 a more mature Michael is back in Britain, stationed at Holme in Yorkshire as a Flight Lieutenant with 76 Squadron. His letters to Lois of this time seem more terse and introspective.

Michael works as Navigator on a Halifax bomber conducting raids over Germany until April 1945 and takes part in the saturation bombing of Worms on 20th February. In May he devises a calculating machine for helping him take altitude readings.

On 10th May, two days after VE day, he travels to London to witness the celebrations and to be reunited, briefly, with Lois and Nikki.

In June he is back in Yorkshire and describes York as a “barbarous town” and Yorkshire a “hick district.”

On 5th July 1945 he and Lois vote Labour in the general election, partly to annoy her Conservative-voting parents.

By early July 1945 Michael is stationed in Plön in Germany. On 9th July he watches a partial eclipse of the sun and nearly blinds himself in his left eye: two days later he still complains of a blind spot, although after another two days it has started to improve. He buys a Leica camera with which he starts documenting life on the RAF base in Plön. In late July he abandons a personal project of a detailed language study in order to concentrate on architecture and assembles an index of architectural information.

Shortly afterwards he is back in Plön again, and on 10th August is knocked down when, forgetting about right-hand traffic, he walks into the path of an oncoming truck. Recovering from concussion in hospital in Lübeck he hears on the radio about the dropping of the A bomb on Hiroshima.

On 13th August he writes to Lois to tell her he has devised a perspective drawing machine (which will eventually become “The Perspector”) and goes into considerable detail without mentioning his own condition or asking Lois about hers.

On VJ Day (August 15th 1945) he hears that Lois is pregnant again. He writes in his diary “finally good news.”

On 21st August while travelling as a passenger in an army car he is involved in a road accident, the impact of which makes him blind for twenty seconds.

In September he has a ticket to the Belsen trial and delivers prisoners to Copenhagen, where he admires the modern architecture.

In October his letters to Lois anticipate their permanent reunion; he also describes a language file he is amassing - which suggests he didn't abandon his language study after all - which he calls his “Polyglot Project.” Yet in December he writes in his diary “[I am] also increasingly preoccupied by figuring what sort of person I am, the results never being very satisfactory.”

In from December 1945 to January 1946 he makes design notes and plans for an officers' mess at Plön and binds them together as a beautiful presentation book.

By January 1946 he has made modifications to “The Perspector” and plans to resume his studies at the Architectural Association the following September. He manages to

visit Lois and Nikki in February but has to return to Plön. Their daughter Tessa is born in April and Michael resumes work on improvements to “The Perspector”, working into the early hours. He makes further adjustments through May and posts prototypes to Lois.

In June Michael and Lois meet for a short holiday in Copenhagen. Michael returns to Germany in July to serve the remainder of his time in the RAF before returning to Lois, Highpoint and London in August after being demobbed. Later that month he visits Oxford for the first time to meet Sir John Myres. Also in August 1946 a young Oxford classicist called John Chadwick writes to Myres about his own research into Linear B.

Return To The Architectural Association

Michael and Lois resume their studies at the Architectural Association in October 1947, the AA’s Centenary year, starting their fourth years. The AA Principal is now an ex-army officer called Gordon Brown and they are taught by Walter Segal and Egon Riss. Fellow students are Oliver Cox (the younger brother of Lois’ sister’s husband Anthony Cox) and Graeme Shankland.

Michael, Oliver, Lois and Graeme work together on many architectural projects using the technique known as “Group Working.” Oliver frequently stays over at Highpoint when working with Michael on architecture projects, such as their design for a warehouse for Penguin Books in March 1947. Michael, Oliver and Graeme are elected to the student council of the AA and help found a student architecture magazine called “Plan”. Michael and Oliver work together on a modified version of the Perspector, which they call the “Perspectron.”

In 1947 the student council successfully invites Le Corbusier to come and give a lecture at the AA. This is a massive coup as “Corb” had already turned down an invitation from the AA governing body. Michael proudly shows him his Perspectron but Corb is unimpressed, saying, “I have no time for these camera views of an interior!” Undaunted, Michael patents his invention.

Over the summer Michael, Oliver and Graham stay in a flat together in Stockholm in order to study Modernist Architecture in Sweden. Michael speaks fluent Swedish, supposedly from having listened to Swedish radio for only a few weeks beforehand. This enables him to work full time for the Swedish Cooperative Wholesale Society during June and July. Michael seems to be in his element: earning a living as an architect, talking in Swedish, doing architectural studies of Stockholm and filling pages and pages with travel sketches of architectural minutiae. So organized is he that even draws a graph of his expenditure! The four return to the AA in October.

In February 1948 Sir John Myres tries to put together a team of academics to help him transcribe Linear B material for publication of the second volume of Scripta Minoa, the book started by Sir Arthur Evans. He approaches an American academic, Dr. Alice Kober, and Michael Ventris; he does not approach John Chadwick. Michael is happy to offer his services for free. In the summer of 1948 Michael and his friends take their finals. They are now qualified architects. In June Michael arranges to visit Sir John Myres in Oxford later that summer.

Michael, Lois, Oliver and Graeme set off on a post-finals holiday in old army van. They cross the channel by ferry and visit Paris, Switzerland, Venice, Rome and Viareggio. Michael, unable to drive, is the navigator. In August when the others want to go and see Le Corbusier's Unité d'Habitation at Marseille, Michael says, simply, "No. I don't want to go. I really have to get back" without saying why.

The reason is in order to get back to England to work with Sir John Myres and Alice Kober in Oxford. Michael goes more or less straight to Oxford from after returning to Highpoint in the van with a view to working there until October. However, Michael resigns from the project early, blaming "irrational & irresistible impulses of dread or homesickness", and heads back to London. Nevertheless, he continues to correspond with Myres on friendly terms and even continues work on his own card index of Linear B symbols and names and addresses of other academics in the field of Minoan texts. However, a relationship with Kober does not develop; she regards Ventris as an amateur.

In the Autumn Michael and Graeme Shankland stay on at the AA to do a one-year course in town planning at the Planning School. Michael is frustrated that the course is sloppy and illogical. Oliver Cox is luckier and goes to Hertfordshire County Council to work on the Hertfordshire Schools Project. Oliver sometimes stays with Michael and Lois at weekends; Michael is jealous of Oliver's success and Oliver can see Michael "switching off." After he finishes, Michael and Lois go on holiday to Copenhagen. By chance a young AA graduate called Dargan Bullivant runs into them in the Tivoli Gardens.

The Ministry Of Education

In September 1949 Michael joins the Ministry of Education on Curzon Street as part of a team designing schools, but he has a very lowly position and still feels he is at arm's length from architecture. Joining him at the MOE is fellow AA graduate Edward Samuel. At the MOE Michael works on designing Wokingham Secondary Modern School, for which the architectural team is Mary Crowley, David Medd, Dargan Bullivant and Michael Ventris.

At this time Michael also resumes work on Linear B: he is to be seen studying Linear B symbols, looking for repetitions, at his desk at lunchtimes, sometimes helped by Edward. In fact during 1948 and 1949 he tries to create the first normalization of Linear B, that is, a standardisation of the 85 signs of the script.

In 1949 Michael then applies the principles of Group Working to the decipherment: he compiles a questionnaire on Linear B which he sends to the twelve senior academics in the field and then publishes their findings as "The Mid-Century Report" on 7th March 1950. The one abstainer is Alice Kober. Noone suggests that the language is Greek. Michael answers his own questionnaire in the same book as his architecture notes. At this time he again announces his resignation from the Linear B project, to concentrate on architecture.

Yet in July 1950, Michael and American academic Emmett Bennett meet in London for the first time. Bennett is another Linear B expert and responsible for publishing

the Linear B tablets discovered by Carl Blegen in Pylos. They start a friendship and start to share material.

Interestingly, during 1949 and 1950 Michael works on another research project at the same time as “The Mid-Century Report” called “A Guide To Modern Architecture In Western Europe 1900-1950”. This project also uses Group Working principles with Michael, Robert Jordon (the new AA Principal), Anthony Cox and Lois as its core team. Michael prints cards for architecture students in various cities to fill in and return to him to form “the basis of a compact index to good Modern Architecture in England and other countries of Western and Northern Europe.” The project is never completed.

On May 16th Alice Kober dies of cancer in New York.

Around this time, Edward Samuel and his wife Stella are sometimes guests at Highpoint, where Lois flirts with Edward. Edward is also invited to go on holiday with Lois and Michael down at St Ives and to go camping: he feels that he is invited along as Lois and Michael no longer have anything to say to each other. When he is asked to share a tent with them, he decides to sleep head to toe with them, with his head sticking out of the tent.

At some time in 1950 Michael has a telephone conversation with his stockbroker: he is now independently wealthy and does not have to work for a living. Confident that he is in reach of a decipherment, he asks the MOE for a year’s sabbatical. He is turned down so he resigns, leaving in around February 1951. He leaves architecture in order to concentrate full time on Linear B.

The Decipherment

Throughout 1951 Michael writes and publishes a series of “Work Notes” about his attempted decipherment, which he circulates around other academics. He conjectures that each Linear B symbol represents a syllable. His “Work Note 1” of 28th January contains a grid in which he tries to lay out the glyphs in vertical columns according to which vowels each glyph/syllable contains and horizontally according to which consonants. This grid becomes a key means of achieving the decipherment.

Around this time he and Lois buy a plot of land at North End in Hampstead, close to Golders Green, on which to build their dream home.

In August 1951, Michael visits Greece and Turkey in order to attend a conference in Istanbul. In Athens he meets Carl Blegen. He also visits Crete and sees the Palace of Minos (as restored by Sir Arthur Evans) for himself.

In early 1952 Michael creates a wooden version of his grid: a wooden board with 85 hooks on it, resembling a hotel key board. He prints Linear B symbols onto metal disks to hang on each hook. These he can move around in order to try lots of different permutations of his arrangements of the hieroglyphs. If Nikki and Tessa spot their father working on his grid, they know they have to leave him alone.

During Spring and Summer 1952 Michael and Lois also draw the final designs of their house at 19 North End.

Michael notices that certain Linear B “words” identified by Alice Kober only appear in the tablets from Crete and never in the ones from Pylos on the Greek mainland. This makes him wonder whether these “words” might in fact be Cretan place names. He attempts a decipherment of three of the words and for two of them comes up with the place names “Knossos” and “Amnisos”, the names of Cretan towns *in Greek*. He wakes Lois in the early hours with his discovery. This leads to his “Work Note 20” of 1st June 1952 which is titled: "Are the Knossos and Pylos tablets written in Greek?"

Michael now has the phonetic values of *some* of the Cretan hieroglyphs: he now needs properly to test his hypothesis that the script is Greek by testing the Pylos tablets and this is his project from now on until May 1953.

A few days later Lois invites architect Michael Smith and his wife Prudence around to Highpoint for dinner. Michael is very late, working in his room on his decipherment. He eventually emerges and tells his guests of his discovery. Prudence, a junior radio producer at the BBC, asks him to present his findings as a radio lecture. This leads to his broadcast “Deciphering Europe’s Earliest Scripts” on the Third Programme on 1st July 1952.

In Oxford John Chadwick hears the broadcast and on 6th July writes to Sir John Myres asking to meet up with him. Chadwick tests Michael’s solution and finds it sound in the main and asks Myres to put him in touch with Michael. Myres does so and Michael writes to Chadwick and Chadwick offers his services as a philologist. The two men start to collaborate but only meet for the first time the following October.

On 12th July Michael turns thirty

Their collaboration leads to Michael and Chadwick publishing the article "Evidence for Greek Dialect in the Mycenaean Archives" in the Journal of Hellenic Studies in late summer 1953. By using the word "Mycenaean" they are describing the Cretan tablets as being of Greek culture as direct challenge to Sir Arthur Evans’ assertion that the civilisation at Knossos was *not* Greek.

On 16th May Carl Blegen writes to Ventris enclosing an illustration of “P 641”, a Linear B tablet he recently excavated at Pylos. He applies Ventris’ decipherment technique to the tablet and finds the word “ti-ri-po-de” or “tripod” next to an illustration of a three-legged pot. This is an endorsement of the decipherment from one of the most important academics in the field. Michael is so moved he actually telephones Chadwick to tell him.

On 24th June 1953, Michael speaks at the Society of Antiquaries at Burlington House, next door to the Royal Academy where, seventeen years earlier, he first met Sir Arthur Evans. The Times newspaper describes the decipherment as “The Everest Of Greek Archaeology” to Ventris’ embarrassment.

After The Decipherment

By now the house at North End is fully built and in September 1953 the Ventris family moves in. The house has been designed as a showcase to house Michael's mother's Breuer furniture from the Highpoint flat. The children's bedrooms are on the ground floor whereas Michael and Lois' bedroom and sitting room are on the first floor.

Over the summer of 1954, Michael and Lois visit Greece and map the Emborio excavations on the island of Chios with Oxford dons John Boardman and George Forrest. Ventris produces architectural drawings of the site, rather than archaeological ones. In August he addresses the Classical Congress in Copenhagen and shows a slide of Carl Blegen's tablet "P641" for which he receives an immediate standing ovation. All the while Michael and Chadwick work on their book "Documents In Mycenaean Greek."

By the summer of 1955 the manuscript is finished. In June Chadwick gives manuscript to Cambridge University Press and writes a postcard to Michael in Linear B to this effect.

In March or April 1956 Michael, Chadwick and Bennett attend the First International Colloquium on the Mycenaean Texts in Gif near Paris. Michael tells Bennett he sees no future for himself in Linear B. He also receives an Honorary Doctorate from the University of Uppsala.

For all his fame, accolades and private income, Michael has no job and longs to get back into architecture. The board of the magazine Architect's Journal creates a Research Fellowship for him.

Michael meets up with Oliver Cox one night and Oliver drives him home from the Architect's Journal. Michael expresses great worries. Oliver suggests Michael needs to work with people in a team building buildings; at the time he is finding information for people he did not respect very much.

On 22nd August, Michael writes to Colin Boyne, editor of Architect's Journal, to announce his premature resignation from the Research Fellowship.

On 5th September Michael has lunch with Edward Samuels about the idea of going into partnership with him. Afterwards he drives his Hillman car to Coventry in connection with his Architect's Journal research before returning to 19 North End. He goes out at 8.30pm to collect Nikki from a friend's house and returns at about 10.30pm.

In the early hours of 6th September he goes out again in his car, perhaps to collect his wallet from his in-laws' house in Studham. Whilst driving home again along the Barnet Bypass on the A1 near Hatfield, at about 1.30 am his car mounts the verge just south of a lay-by and he drives a further 29 feet into the back of a parked lorry. Michael is killed instantly.