**William Pearn, 1855 – 1926 [Draft 2]**

A ship portraitist born in 1855 at 22 Fore Street, Polruan, on the Fowey estuary in Cornwall. Polruan lies within in the parish of St Wyllow, Lanteglos, where he was baptised on 28 August and he was one of a large local family of seafarers going back into 17th century. His grandfather Robert Pearn (1802–93) – who lived next door – was owner and master of the 52-ton coasting sloop *Charlotte Anne*, built at Polruan in 1834/5, and of which his father William Dickenson Pearn (1829–66) became mate. His mother Jane Carne (b. 1829 at Poole, Dorset) was daughter of Henry Carne, noted when they married at St Wyllow on 29 June 1853 as ‘in the Coast Guard service’. William was, by four years, the eldest of three sons and a daughter. The boys probably broke the family seagoing tradition owing to the tragic death of their father in 1866, when he was swept overboard from the *Charlotte Anne* and his body never found. Their widowed mother thereafter kept a grocer’s shop in Polruan, where William’s brothers Robert (21) and Albert (18) were noted in the 1881 census as apprentice shipwrights, and their 16-year-old sister Elizabeth still at home. William was a 23-year-old ‘painter’ when he married Ellen Shaddick Herbert (21), daughter of a sailor, in her native Devonport on 14 January 1880. Their address was then jointly noted as 72 James Street but at the 1881 census they were living in Plymouth (30 Clarence Street) where they remained and had five sons, none of whom went to sea.

At the 1891 census William was listed as a ‘decorator’ and in 1901 and 1911, by which date he had moved to 5 Boon’s Place, as a ‘signwriter’. While ‘painter’ in 1881 is also likely to have been in the decorative sense, it is not that unusual to find such tradesmen living in seaports also working as ‘pierhead’ painters of ship portraits – usually broadside views of varied sophistication – for sale to seaman and shipowners. Enough Plymouth associations are clear among Pearn’s works to conclude he was the same man. He was a competent and colourful ‘recording’ hand – a good folk-artist rather than ‘naïve’ – often including elements of background such as other shipping, the Eddystone Lighthouse and decorative skies. The four in UK public collections are one of the ketch *Champion* (1879) in Jersey Museum and three in the National Maritime Museum, presented by the same donor in 1969: the schooners *Little Beauty* (dated 1875) and *Ocean Swell* (1878), and the brig *Martha Edmonds* (1880).

Others regularly appear at sale, suggesting Pearn had a large output: most are oils but he also worked in watercolour. The enquiry prompting this note was one made to the NMM about a privately owned watercolour dated 1903 of the fast cutter *Vanduara*  (Plymouth registry no. PH119), built in 1880 but shown in her later rig as ketch, possibly off the end of Plymouth Breakwater. At time of writing the latest example found is a 1910 view of the yacht *Carina* off a coastline. Since Pearn appears to have died, in the second quarter of 1926, aged 70 and still resident at Boon’s Place, later ones can be expected. His 73-year-old widow, Ellen, was still living at Boon’s Place in June 1931, with at least one of their sons (Albert Henry), when she was among of a party of seven travelling in one car on a pleasure-trip to Paignton. She was killed when it crashed owing to a tyre blow-out near Totnes. The Coroner’s view that culpably excessive speed was to blame was negated by a jury verdict of accidental death and the driver escaped with a warning.

*Summarised from Art UK discussion linked to Pearn’s painting of the schooner* Little Beauty*, in the NMM, Greenwich*

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