

**THE DIARIES
OF
ROBERT PEARSE Jr.
OF NEWPORT, CORNWALL
FOR 1785 AND 1790**

Transcribed and with an Introduction by

Tony Wise

PREFACE

Robert Pearse Jr. probably started using his printed diaries largely to keep a record of his business transactions as a yarn jobber, working in and around Launceston in Cornwall, but, having paid 1s 8d, perhaps felt he should also make use of the 'Memorandums and Observations' pages as well as those labelled 'Account of Cash'. By the time he was writing his 1785 diary, America had recently declared independence, the industrial revolution was under way, George III was on the throne and Mozart was writing his music in Vienna. Between then and 1790, the year of the second surviving diary, the anti-slavery movement was gathering momentum, George III was showing signs of madness and the French Revolution was in progress. Pearse mentions none of this - his main concerns were his family, his wool business and his life as a devout member of the local Dissenting Independent Church.

I first saw these diaries some time in the 1970's, when the then owner, Miss Helen Kick, lent them to my father, knowing that they had a common ancestor, Thomas Wise, whose death is recorded in one of them. They had been passed down to Miss Kick from two of her great-grandparents, Richard Wise and Ann Pearse and she later gave them to my cousin, Mrs. Sally Messenger, who has kindly lent them to me to make this transcription.

Pearse was well-educated and relatively well off, so perhaps not entirely ordinary but probably typical of many contemporary members of the middle class. Few personal accounts of life in Cornwall at this time have survived and although the diaries only cover two years, they do contain details about the workings of the local wool industry as well as the growth of the Independent Church and give us a glimpse into what it was like to live in Newport, Cornwall at that time. I hope a wider audience will now find them as interesting as I do.

INTRODUCTION

NEWPORT CORNWALL.

Only two of Robert Pearse's diaries have survived, those for 1785 and 1790. On the outside of the front cover of the 1785 diary, he identifies himself as 'Robert Pearse Jr. Newport Cornwall' and there are faint traces of something similar on the cover of the 1790 diary. Since the Parliamentary Reform Act of 1832, Newport has been part of Launceston in east Cornwall, and is an area in the Kensey valley with the old walled town and castle of Launceston to the south and the even older settlement of St. Stephens to the north. In Pearse's time, however, Newport and Launceston were both boroughs, each returning two members of parliament, and there had been some rivalry between the two areas ever since the eleventh century when Earl Robert de Mortain, half brother of William I, displaced the market controlled by the Canons of St. Stephens to the new town near his castle on the other side of the Kensey ¹. In 1155 the Canons moved from the old priory at St. Stephens church to a newly built one near St. Thomas church on the south side of the Kensey ². Although the main centre of economic activity had then been in Launceston, the priory had a good income from substantial holdings of land in the area, and it is not surprising that another borough grew up near it, to the north and towards the hamlet of St. Stephens. This became known as Newport³ and R. Peter and O.B Peter⁴ cite an agreement in 1274 between Edmund Earl of Cornwall and the Priory and Convent at Lanceuatone, as the first mention of this name - 'La Niweport'.⁵

The Kensey valley had long been the site of a number of water mills, including the Town Mills used for milling corn and located not far from the Priory. The area also became the site for other industries needing a plentiful supply of water, such as tanning and wool processing. It is therefore not surprising that this location is where Robert Pearse senior, the diary writer's father, developed his wool business when he decided to move away from his native Hatherleigh in about 1752 (see below).

At the time that Robert Pearse junior was writing his diaries, Launceston was a thriving market town and capital of Cornwall. The assizes were held there, there are references to this in the diaries, and this resulted in a substantial income for the town from providing suitable accommodation for the judges, lawyers and all those attending the trials. Daniel Defoe, visiting the town in about 1725, remarked in one of his letters⁶ "There is no tin, or copper, or lead, found hereabouts, as I could find, nor any manufacture in the place; there are a pretty many attorneys here, who manage business for the rest of their fraternity at the assizes: as to trade, it has not much to boast

¹ Recorded in *Domesday Book* – e.g. section 4,2 in volume 10 (Cornwall) of the Phillimore edition, 1979 edited by Caroline and Frank Thorn

² P.L.Hull *The Cartulary of Launceston Priory*, Devon and Cornwall Record Society 1987.

³ Historically, 'port' could mean 'town with market privileges, a borough' (OED).

⁴ R. Peter and O.B. Peter *The Histories of Launceston and Dunheved*, 1885, Plymouth, p. 9

⁵ Earlier references to 'the new street of Launceston' and 'the new vill of the manor of Launceston' occur in entries in *The Cartulary of Launceston Priory* (P.L.Hull above) dated around 1240.

⁶ *Letter III of 'A Tour Thro' the Whole Island of Great Britain divided into Circuits or Journeys*, vol.1 (1724). See *Early Tours in Devon and Cornwall* ed. R. Pearse Chope, David and Charles 1967.

of, and yet there are people enough in it to excuse those who call it a populous place". There seem to be no late eighteenth century accounts of trade in Launceston and Newport but Alfred Robbins⁷ cites a lecture given by his father, Richard Robbins, in 1856, describing business activities in the town twenty to thirty years earlier, i.e., around 1830. This recalls the mining activities at St. Stephens, Lifton, Stowford, Sydenham and Dippertown, and spinning-jennies operating at New Mills, Town Mills, Ridgeway, Wooda Road and the Island at St. Thomas Bridge. There were also thriving businesses engaged in building, malting, tanning, flour production, hatting, tailoring, shoemaking and smithy businesses. Amongst others engaged in the woollen and combing trades, Robbins mentions one of Robert Pearce's brothers, William and the latter's son Thomas, operating in Newport - Robert had died by this time. There were three wool wash-houses on the higher side of Town Mill leat, one below St. Thomas Bridge and another by St. Thomas churchyard. Other extensive woollen and combing businesses were located at St. Thomas, Castle Dyke and Fore Street and there was a serge factory at Town Mills. Robbins then describes how the loss of the assizes to Bodmin in 1838, together with the general reduction in the size of the west-country wool industry, brought about a decline in the town's fortunes, which was not to be reversed until the arrival of the railway in 1865.

At the time of the diaries in 1785 and 1790, however, both boroughs were prospering. Robert Pearce junior (aged about 29 in 1785), and probably the rest of his family, were enjoying a comfortable standard of living, as well as playing a significant role in the growth of the nonconformist church in the town.

THE DIARIES

Both are written in copies of "The Exeter Pocket Journal, or West-Country Gentleman and Tradesman's Memorandum Book", published in Exeter by B. Thorn & Son. They measure about 16 x 10 cm. and are bound in leather, originally red, according to the title page, but now brown. Copies of these used by other diarists in other years have survived but there seem to be no others for the years of 1785 and 1790 as used by Pearce. The diary pages open to give two pages for each week, the page on the left being headed "Memorandums, Observations and Appointments" and that on the right "Account of Monies". Also included are about fifty pages of 'useful information', including such things as complete listings of the members of both Houses of Parliament, tide timetables, details of stage coaches and an anonymous article on "The National Debt". These printed pages provide their own contribution to understanding the nature of day-to-day life in the West-country in the late eighteenth century.

Pearce used the diaries to record details of financial transactions in the course of his business as a wool stapler and yarn jobber, and was also quite conscientious in keeping typical diary notes of the day-to-day events in his life such as comments on church services, visits by visiting preachers, including John Wesley, business trips to collect wool from farmers and a few notable local events such as elections and the hanging of a chimney sweep for murdering his apprentice. Inevitably, for an Englishman, there are also a number of references to the state of the weather although, to be fair, this was relevant to part of his business – the drying of wool after washing.

⁷ Alfred F. Robbins *Launceston Past and Present* pub. Walter Weighell, Launceston, 1888, p. 319.