

ROBERT PEARSE THE INDEPENDENT CHURCHMAN

Pearse's parents, Robert senior and Grace, came from Hatherleigh, where they were married in 1751. Both had probably been brought up by non-conformist parents, and attended the Independent meeting house in Hatherleigh, which is where all their children were christened even though most, if not all, of them had been born in Newport (see below). It is clear from his diary entries that Robert junior followed his parents' example and was a devout Christian and strong supporter of the Independent chapel in Newport. In 1785 he attended three or more church meetings each week, and although this had reduced somewhat by 1790, he was still playing a very active role in the local congregation.

The history of the non-conformist churches in Launceston (and Newport) has been described by several authors – the Peters (p.330), Robbins¹, and, most comprehensively for the United Reformed Church, by K.E.Hyde². It is clear that by Pearse's time, there had been some sort of Presbyterian presence in Launceston for over a century but the first definite reference (Robbins, ref. above p.241) to a meeting house was when Edward Bennett, of Hexworthy, conveyed a piece of land an £120 to 'found a Presbyterian Meeting House in or near Launceston' in 1707 (CRO document X 750/4/1,2). This was duly built in 1712 on a site in Castle Street. The first minister was the Rev. Michael Martin, who died in 1745, leaving £50 to his own meeting house and £10 to that at Hatherleigh. (This apparent connection between the congregations at Launceston and Hatherleigh may well have been a factor in Robert Pearse senior's decision to move to Newport around 1752.)

According to Robbins (p. 271), the death of Rev. Martin was followed by a decline in the Presbyterian movement in the town. The Rev. Mr. Castle from Hatherleigh preached there occasionally for a few years but the meeting house was eventually closed. It then came about that the future of the non-conformist movement in Launceston and Newport was to be much influenced by the remarkable religious conversion of three teenagers living in Tavistock. These were John Eyre, who was born and educated in Bodmin, and the twin brothers John and William Saltren who were the sons of Thomas Saltren of St. Stephens (Launceston) and the grandsons of John Saltren of Treludick in the parish of Egloskerry, just a few miles northwest of Launceston. All three were later ordained and their story is told in a biography of William Saltren published in the Evangelical Magazine in February 1796, which is anonymous but almost certainly written by John Eyre, who was the magazine's editor, and also in a biography of John Eyre by G. Collison published in the same magazine in 1803. John Eyre was born in January 1754 and the Saltrens in January 1755; all three remained at school until they were fifteen, Eyre in Bodmin and the Saltrens almost certainly in Launceston. Robert Pearse was clearly well educated and about a year younger than the Saltrens, so it is likely that he was attending the local grammar

¹ See footnotes 4 and 7 above

² K.E.Hyde *The Union Church at Launceston* Baptist Quarterly vol. 14.3 p. 117 and vol. 14.4 p. 153



Rev.^d JOHN SALTREN.

Bridport.

A Portrait of John Saltren published in the Evangelical Magazine in 1798

school at the same time. After leaving school, John Eyre and William Saltren were apprenticed in the wool trade in Tavistock and John Saltren was also in Tavistock, perhaps also an apprentice. At first, John Eyre had been something of a reveller but evidently his Christian upbringing one day in 1773 caused an abrupt change of heart and he befriended the more sober Saltren brothers. John Saltren returned to Launceston in 1774, where he gathered together a congregation which met initially in a room in the house in Newport of William Sheeres, who is often mentioned in Pearse's diaries. This soon became too small and a move was made, first to a large kitchen in a house at Newport Square, and then to the 'Great House', at the foot of St. Thomas Hill, which was the property of Joshua Thomas, an alderman of the borough. It would have been here that Pearse and his family worshipped in 1785, the year of the first diary. Prior to this, however, in 1775, William Saltren and John Eyres had attended a service at Plymouth Dock led by the evangelical preacher, Rev. Andrew Kinsman. This so inspired them that they hired a meeting room in Tavistock where John Eyre preached and soon built up a small congregation. At the end of 1775, Eyre returned to Bodmin, where he preached for a while before going to Lady Huntingdon's college in South Wales. He was later ordained in the Established Church and went on to be a prominent Evangelical clergyman.

On Eyre's departure, the congregation in Tavistock persuaded William Saltren to lead them and this he continued to do until 1781, when, apparently dissatisfied with the results of his preaching, he decided to give this up and returned to Launceston. Here he continued under his brother's ministry until the next year when John Saltren also felt a call to go elsewhere and moved to Bridport, where he continued his ministry for many years. Once again, William was persuaded by the congregation to fill the vacancy and he went on to acquire the old meeting-house in Castle Street in Launceston which the congregation had rebuilt as a place of public worship and it was formally opened in 1788.

Robert Pearse was clearly much influenced by his former school-fellows and church activities played a big part in his life. His diary for 1785 contains many references to the meetings of the congregation which he attended, usually several times a week and these sometimes note who read the lesson and preached the sermon. The 1790 diary, however, contains less detail – by then meetings were being held in the new meeting house in Castle Street in Launceston. The majority of services were conducted by William Saltren but Pearse records several occasions when the sermons were preached by ministers visiting from other Independent congregations, including Rev. Mr. Pierce from Truro and Mr. Winterbotham from Plymouth, who was later (1792) imprisoned in Newgate prison after preaching a sermon wishing success to the French revolution. Pearse was also friendly with Mr. John Barnett, the minister at the Abbey Chapel in Tavistock, and would call in at his house to break his journey when travelling to or from Plymouth. His two sons, John and Robert, were baptised there.

In 1785, Robert Pearse travelled to Ashburton to be present at the ordination of John Saltren and James Stote on 9th June. William Saltren was ordained at a meeting of the congregation at Launceston on 9th June 1790; he was to continue as the minister in Launceston until his death - 18th April 1795. Pearse was one of the trustees of his will – reflecting his leading position in the congregation.

One more piece of church history which must be mentioned is the visit of John Wesley to Launceston on the 31st August 1785. Pearse seems not to have been impressed by the sermon which he described as 'a Mixture of Stuff'. There is no mention in Wesley's Journals of this visit but it was not his first to the town. By then he was 82 and was on

his way to Bristol from preaching further west in Cornwall, so perhaps the sermon was not one of his best.