

William Pearson (1767-1847)



A detail from a painting at the Royal Astronomical Society which shows William Pearson and his daughter, Frances. The original photo of the painting was taken by Mike Frost.

William Pearson was born at Whitbeck, Cumberland, on 23rd April, 1767. He did not attend school until he was eighteen. A fellow pupil, although a few years younger, was William Wordsworth. They corresponded in later life.

Pearson's first occupation was as a school master. He continued in this profession after taking holy orders. A school he set up in Surrey was attended by the sons of the Duke of Wellington.

In 1794, he became a curate in Lincoln. From 1810 to 1812 he was Rector of Perivale, Middlesex. He became Rector of South Kilworth in 1817. In 1821, having sold the school in Surrey, he moved to South Kilworth

and remained there until his death on 6th September, 1847. He was buried in the churchyard. There is a plaque commemorating him in the church.

During his lifetime, William Pearson was known for the many astronomical instruments he designed. The first, in 1796, was an orrery, showing the movements of the planets. There is a 1766 painting by Joseph Wright of Derby of an orrery in Derby Museum and Art Gallery. Another of Pearson's orreries can be seen in the Science Museum in London. He was also involved with the Royal Institution in London. He wrote around sixty articles on astronomical instruments for Rees' Cyclopaedia.

Pearson was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society in 1819. He published a book: *Introduction to Practical Astronomy*, in two volumes, in 1824 and 1829. In 1829 he was awarded the Gold Medal by the Royal Astronomical Society for this work.

He made many astronomical observations including Halley's Comet and the 1820 partial solar eclipse, when he measured diameters of Sun and Moon. With the assistance of Ambrose Clarke of South Kilworth, Pearson compiled a catalogue of 520 stars that could be occulted by the Moon.

Pearson built observatories both in Surrey and in South Kilworth. However, the smoke from the village chimneys affected his view of the sky from his home in South Kilworth. So he built a new observatory to the south, which is now a private house.

In 1812, Pearson first suggested the formation of the Astronomical Society of London (now the Royal Astronomical Society). The formal agreement to set up the Society was made at a meeting at Freemason's Tavern, London on 12th January, 1820. Pearson helped write the rules and served as treasurer.

He was also active in South Kilworth. He built a school in the village, acted as a magistrate in Lutterworth and was made a Freeman of Leicester.

As well as the Rectory and Observatory which still exist, other items associated with Pearson in Leicestershire include the base of a sundial he designed at the museum in Market Harborough. There is a copy of his book in the Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland Record Office in Wigston. D.A.L. Harrison wrote a three part article on Pearson which was published in South Kilworth parish magazine.

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