The Emergence of the Pinwill Sisters

Introduction

As the Pinwill sisters become increasingly known and better acknowledged for their woodcarving work in churches across Devon and Cornwall, it is timely to assess how it came about in 1890 that three young women took the audacious step of setting up their own company and succeeded in making their mark in what was essentially a male profession. This paper seeks to explore the factors that predisposed the Pinwill sisters to embark on this venture and enabled them to create a thriving company. Their family background was paramount, with a long tradition of wood working on their father’s side and parents who inspired in them the confidence to learn, develop and perfect their skills. The early success of the business was due in no small part to the patronage of the architect Edmund H. Sedding, nephew of John Dando Sedding. Commissions from Edmund ensured a high standard of design and a good reputation was soon gained. Before long other architects recognised the talent of the Pinwill sisters, including Frederick Bligh Bond and George H. Fellowes Prynne.

Documents related to these early days are scant and largely comprise a short family memoir published in 1990 and a newspaper interview given by Violet Pinwill in 1934. These chronicle events mainly from the perspective of Violet, who managed the business single-handedly for nearly fifty years. Although her two older sisters, Mary and Ethel, left within the first two decades, their contribution was crucial in establishing the business in the early years. Through an array of other sources it is possible to piece together a more comprehensive narrative, to discover what influenced these young women, and to place the emergence of the Pinwill sisters in a wider context.

The Restoration of Ermington Church and the Development of the Company

Henry Bingham Mildmay of Barings Bank, having engaged Norman Shaw in 1878 to transform his wife’s ancestral home at Flete, near Holbeton, into the ‘huge, romantically craggy and castellated mansion’ we see today, turned his attention to the churches within his estate. All Saints at Holbeton and St Peter and St Paul at Ermington were in need of restoration and Mildmay decided upon the Arts and Crafts architect John Dando Sedding to carry out the work between 1885 and 1889. Of the two churches, it is evident that Mildmay very much favoured Holbeton and Sedding found himself with ‘the opportunity... of showing what could be done with an old building when untrammelled by want of money’, which resulted in a lavish but tasteful restoration. Resources for the Ermington work, on the other hand, seem to have relied as much on the fund-raising activities of the incumbent Revd Pinwill and his family, organising bazaars and the like, as they did on Mildmay’s generosity.

Given the attraction of the ‘opportunity’ at Holbeton, after producing modest plans for Ermington, John Dando handed over supervision of that restoration to his nephew Edmund H. Sedding. It may have seemed for a while as if Ermington had drawn the short straw, but this turn of events led to a transformation in the lives of Edmund and the Pinwills.

The team of craftsmen that arrived in 1885 to carry out the restoration work at both Holbeton and Ermington were employees of Trask & Co. of Norton sub Hamdon, Somerset, a preferred contractor of J. D. Sedding. The family maintains that, as work began at Ermington, it was Elizabeth’s idea for the head woodcarver to teach her daughters in his spare time. This may seem extraordinary to us
today, but in the late 19th century the skill of woodcarving was seen as one of a range of ‘accomplishments’ that genteel young women may learn, usually for their own amusement. It was often taught in private classes and also, for example, at Exeter High School for Girls. The School of Art Woodcarving in South Kensington, London, was established in 1879 and over the next six years attracted more than 100 women to their classes. From about 1895 its director was Miss Eleanor Rowe, who went on to write a classic book on Practical Woodcarving in 1907.

Three of the seven daughters, Mary Rashleigh (born 1871), Annie Ethel (1872) and Violet Alice (1874), grasped this opportunity to learn the art of woodcarving. Their tutor was probably a man described as ‘Giles the carver’ on the reverse of two photographs [Figs 1a & b] of the Pinwill sisters with an example of their early work. Most of the other daughters followed in their mother’s footsteps and became talented musicians. Elizabeth’s grandfather, Thomas Greatorex, was organist and master of choristers at Westminster Abbey 1819-31 and Elizabeth herself was a fine musician.

It seems, however, that Mary, Ethel and Violet were also following family tradition in working with wood. Their grandfather, Revd William James Pinwill, was a keen amateur woodcarver, but what was a mere pastime for him had been the livelihood of both his father, Andrew, and grandfather, William, who were shipbuilders at Sutton Pool, Plymouth. The social transition from shipbuilders to clergy came when Andrew married an heiress of nearly £30,000 in 1799, enabling the family to later retire to their native Salcombe. Andrew became a country gentleman with considerable land holdings, acted as churchwarden of the daughter church in Salcombe and endowed the mother church at Malborough. He was also able to send his only son, William James, to Cambridge to study theology and become a cleric, thus beginning a different chapter in the history of the Pinwills.

After serving in parishes all around the country, the arrival in Devon in 1880 was a homecoming for Revd Edmund Pinwill, who had been born in Holbeton in 1840, when his father was Vicar there. And it was his father who bought the advowson of Ermington with Kingston from Mildmay, enabling his son to return to his native county. The girls must also have felt they were suddenly part of a larger Devon family and a growing understanding of part of their heritage conceivably inspired the three woodcarvers to embrace it wholeheartedly and make their way in the world, as their Pinwill forebears had done, with chisel in hand.

During the restoration of Ermington church, while the three sisters were training under Giles, they set up a workshop in the harness room above the vicarage stables. Edmund Sedding appears to have been a regular visitor to Ermington but there is frustratingly little documentary evidence of the interaction between him and the sisters or of how much influence he may have had on the development of their thinking. There is a suggestion that the training of the Pinwill sisters was some sort of ‘experiment’ by J. D. Sedding in pioneering ‘parochial sculpture’ in architecture. There may have been encouraging noises from that direction, since their work conformed to his Ruskinian ideals, with their emphasis on the art of craft, but the Pinwill sisters were far more than adjuncts to a greater plan. Their work sits well with the ethos of the Arts and Crafts Movement in which women were well represented. Whether the sisters were directly influenced or saw themselves in that mould is not clear, but today there is every reason to place them alongside the likes of the silversmith Edith Dawson (1859–1941), the stained glass artist Mary Lowndes (1856–1929) and the many other under-recognised craftswomen of that era.
By 1889, when the restoration of Ermington church was complete, two substantial pieces of work had been completed by the sisters. One, an elaborate reredos designed by Edmund Sedding for Chilthorne Domer church in Somerset [Fig. 1a & b], was reported on after its dedication. It was described as ‘one of the most magnificent specimens of woodcarving… to be found in the county’ and ‘a marvel of skilful work’.20 The other piece was a pulpit for their father’s church, which caused a
sensation on a national level, when a photograph of it appeared in The Queen magazine (forerunner of Harper’s & Queen), exciting such commentary as:

Lady wood carvers who have seen the pulpit recently placed in Ermington Church...
will either be stimulated to fresh exertions, or, if they are of a less sanguine disposition, will be cast into the slough of despond at the hopelessness of ever attaining such perfection in the art.\(^{21}\)

Such accolades must have encouraged the sisters enormously, although at this point it seems that while they had decided upon the path of becoming professional woodcarvers and were described as such in the newspapers, they had not yet named the company. Mary, being the oldest of the three, was seen as the leader, which may explain why the name decided upon was Rashleigh, Pinwill & Co. This was essentially Mary’s name without the forename, with a comma inserted, intentionally to allow the impression that it was two men in business together.\(^{22}\) Learning to carve and becoming recognised as skilled and artistic craftswomen was one thing; three women setting themselves up in business was a brave and extraordinary move that required caution, but also a belief that they could succeed commercially. The major source of such confidence was Edmund Sedding, who was by then obtaining commissions in his own right and in a position to become a patron of the newly-established company. All the early work of Rashleigh, Pinwill & Co. stems from his commissions, including the restoration in 1890 of the magnificent 16th century chancel screen at Manaton [Fig. 2]. For this project, sections of the original gilded running ornament across the cornice required replication to restore its full length, and the sisters, in copying this work, learned from the masters of old. The choice was made by Sedding, probably out of respect for the ancient work, to leave the new carving without gilding, ensuring that the original carving shone out.

![Fig. 2. The restored sixteenth-century screen at Manaton (1890), showing the gilded original carving and the ungilded Pinwill work.](image)

Edmund was staying with the Pinwills in Ermington when he received news in April 1891 that his uncle had died.\(^{23}\) He was the natural successor to the prestigious and lucrative Sedding business in London, but he eschewed that opportunity and instead set up a practice in Plymouth.\(^{24}\) The reasons
for such a decision are open to conjecture: a fondness for the Westcountry, particularly Cornwall, where he spent the very early part of his life, his love of ancient churches, and an increasing demand for his sensitive restorations. Added to this, he surely derived great pleasure in encouraging the flourishing of the Pinwill company and it was in his power to sustain it still further. When Rashleigh, Pinwill & Co. established offices and a workshop in Plymouth in about 1893, it was at the same address as Sedding’s architectural practice and remained so for many years. Sedding’s designs, carried out with skill and flair, brought the Pinwill sisters the recognition they deserved. Perhaps the best and most complete example of the synthesis of Sedding design and Pinwill execution is to be found at Crantock [Fig. 3], where the entire interior was refurbished between 1899 and 1906.

![Fig. 3. Crantock church, refurbished apart from the seating between 1899 and 1902, to designs by EH Sedding carved by the Pinwills. Note the traditional style of the screen, yet the decidedly Arts & Crafts poppy heads on the choir stalls beyond. (Courtesy of PWDRO)](image)

The partnership of the three sisters was not to continue for long though. When Mary married in August 1900 she submitted to convention and left the business. Ethel and Violet continued, with workshops in both Ermington and Plymouth and with the company name slightly altered to R. Pinwill. An increasing number of commissions in Cornwall came through Sedding, including the central portion of a new rood screen at Stratton, the completion of the furnishings at Crantock, the restoration of a chancel screen at Madron and refurbishment of Lanteglos by Fowey. Other prominent architects began to engage the sisters, notably Frederick Bligh Bond for a new screen at Lydford and for the refurbishment of Lew Trenchard church [Fig. 4] and George H. Fellowes Prynne for the restoration of the early 16th century screen at Buckland-in-the-Moor [Fig. 5]. Documents
related to the latter indicate that the sisters worked on pieces separately, with Ethel being credited and paid for the carving work at Buckland,\textsuperscript{26} which is of a particularly high standard.

Fig. 4. Pillar casing with niches, part of the chancel screen at Lew Trenchard church, housing figures of St Petrock, St Peter and St Michael the Archangel.

Fig. 5. The restored screen at Buckland-in-the-Moor carved by Ethel Pinwill, for which she was paid £424 15s.
Ethel may have struggled somewhat with an arrangement in which her younger sister Violet was perhaps in a more powerful position, occupying a superior location in Plymouth for obtaining and directing work. There is no evidence of a rift between the two, but sometime around 1908 Ethel left Devon to set up as a woodcarver in Kingston on Thames, Surrey.\(^{27}\) Why Surrey and whether she made a success of this venture is not known, but the loss of yet another sister left a void that Violet had to fill. The sisters were employers since at least 1891,\(^{28}\) when joiners were needed to prepare the wood and to install the finished pieces in the churches. With the increasing amount of work available and the loss of both her sisters, Violet also employed carvers. She ensured a high standard of apprentices by teaching woodcarving at Plymouth Technical College and employing the best of the tutees, such as Charles Gait.\(^{29}\) She also brought in trained men, including Herbert Minchinton from London, who came with the skill of stone carving, increasing the range of work that could be carried out. At the height of the success of the business, in the years before the Great War, 29 men were employed by the company. Violet Pinwill, a women less than five feet tall, commanded great respect from her employees and ran the business successfully for nearly 50 years. During that time, the style of church furnishings changed considerably and she adapted accordingly. One of her crowning achievements, which she probably designed herself, is the low relief, carved and painted panels for the 1946 reredos at St Gabriel’s church in Peverell, Plymouth [Fig. 6], which, though based on a medieval painting, manages to wear a mantle of modernity. By the time Violet died on 1st January 1957, Pinwill carvings in both wood and stone were to be found in over 180 churches across Devon and Cornwall and a further 18 in counties elsewhere.\(^{30}\)

![Fig. 6. The painted and gilded panels in the reredos at St Gabriel’s church, Peverell, Plymouth, carved in low relief by Violet Pinwill in 1946, based on a painting by Filippo Lippi from about 1450-3.](image)

**Conclusions**

The Pinwill sisters did not emerge from a vacuum, nor were they moulded by the ideals of others. Their family background provided a milieu in which they were encouraged to develop their talents and to pursue their ambitions. A twist of fortune and a determined mother provided them with an expert teacher who had the patience to train three teenage girls to carve. Their friend and champion,
Edmund H. Sedding, risked his own good name as an architect in order to gain theirs as woodcarvers. The business they established was an enormous success, ensuring them recognition as being among the best woodcarvers in the Westcountry and a place within the pantheon of women who found expression through the Arts and Crafts Movement. The legacy of the Pinwills is not only in the numerous examples of their work, but as an inspiration for both women and men.

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5 In a report in _The Royal Cornwall Gazette_ (16 December 1887) of the reopening of Madron Church after restoration, it states that the work by Messrs Trask was of the same high quality as at Holbeton Church, where they were also working. It seems extremely likely that the same team of craftsmen worked at Holbeton and Ermington.
6 Chaytor, _Ermington Days. op. cit._
7 For example in the _Devon & Exeter Gazette_ (22 September 1892) Agatha Middleton advertised her wood carving and art work classes at The Studio, 37, Southernhay, Exeter.
8 In an advertisement for Exeter High School for Girls in _The Western Times_ (19 April, 1898) woodcarving was among alternative classes available for girls not preparing for examinations.
9 _Bristol Mercury_ (30 March 1885).
10 Reviewed by Harry Hems of Exeter in _The Illustrated Carpenter and Builder_ (12 April 1907) in which he notes that he generally did not consider women woodcarvers worthy of a second thought but that the only thing wrong with Miss Rowe was that she was not a man, ‘for a very clever man she would make’.
11 Plymouth & West Devon Record Office 116/36 and Pinwill archive at Ermington Church.
12 Chaytor, _Ermington Days. op. cit._
13 _Western Weekly News_ (22 September 1934). The only known example of the work of Revd William J. Pinwill is the fine pulpit at Salcombe Church.
14 Plymouth & West Devon Record Office 117/10 & 3867.
15 Plymouth & West Devon Record Office 117/14.
16 Chaytor, _Ermington Days. op. cit._
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
20 _Western Gazette_ (14 June 1889).
21 _Cheltenham Chronicle_ (1 August 1889).
22 Personal communication, Claire Garnett, granddaughter of Mary Rashleigh Pinwill, February 2013.
23 The National Archives, census 1891 RG12/1721 p. 8, accessed at www.thegenealogist.co.uk.
25 Chaytor, _Ermington Days. op. cit._
26 Balance sheet for restoration work at Buckland-in-the-Moor dated 1910; held by the church.
27 The National Archives, census 1911 RG14 PN3498 RD40 SD2 ED1 SN119, accessed at www.thegenealogist.co.uk.
28 The National Archives, census 1891 op. cit.
29 Chaytor, _Ermington Days. op. cit._
30 Unpublished data compiled by the author from Pinwill photographs deposited at PWDRO and numerous other sources.