

Care and Diligence - the professional life of James Pearse, sea surgeon, courtier and the founder of naval medicine

C P Willoughby

'His Royal Highness has consented, having observed his care and diligence in the fleet.'

Abstract

James Pearse was the most distinguished English military surgeon of the late 17th century. He established the basic principles of naval surgical care and was a notable innovator and administrator during the Second and Third Dutch wars. He was a friend and colleague of Samuel Pepys, a courtier, a gossip and a royal confidant. His work, though now largely forgotten, had a profound influence on the development of the Royal Naval Medical Service during the following two centuries.

Willoughby C P. *J R Nav Med Serv* 2019;105(3):202–206

Introduction

James Pearse was the most renowned military surgeon of his age. He was a meticulous administrator, a hands-on medical practitioner, a courtier, a gossip and an entrepreneur. He had an eye for the ladies and a beautiful wife, with whom he had at least 19 children. While coping with a busy professional life, he was a gregarious soul who enjoyed eating, drinking and making merry. James Stuart, Duke of York and later King James II, was his patient and patron for quarter of a century.

Pearse was a friend, colleague and a close contemporary of Samuel Pepys, in whose diaries he figures on many occasions. Pepys was born in 1633, but Pearse's origins are not known with any certainty. A James Peirce (the spelling of the surname is highly variable), son of James, was baptised at the Collegiate Church of St Katherine by the Tower on 5th January 1635/6¹ and this is the only Pearse (or variant) to be born in London at around this correct time. He may have been a son of the James Pearse who practised as a barber-surgeon in Cripplegate.²

The younger Pearse would have been apprenticed to a barber-surgeon - possibly his father - at the age of eleven or twelve and then would learn his surgical skills by observation and personal instruction, possibly with some external teaching in anatomy and pharmacy at one of the London hospitals. Pearse would have completed his apprenticeship in his late teens and probably became a Freeman of the Company of Barbers and Surgeons shortly afterwards, though the date of his admission into the Company is not recorded. His later career was largely as a sea surgeon, and entry to this specialty would have been after an oral examination at Barbers' Hall, as the livery company had been given the duty of assessing surgeons for the royal fleet in a charter of 1626 from Charles

I. No record of this examination exists in the Company's archive.

Early career as a military surgeon

The first reference to Pearse's career is in a letter from Lord Edward Montagu, later the first Earl of Sandwich - patron and distant relative of Samuel Pepys - to the Navy Commissioners dated 20 May 1658.³ Montagu commanded the fleet flagship NASEBY and requested that no surgeon should be appointed to this vessel without his agreement, and that funds for medical supplies should be forwarded either to the Company of Surgeons or to Jas. Pearse who was clearly in charge of organising this aspect of the ship's preparation for sea. Pearse was at the time in his early twenties but must have been a senior and respected practitioner to be appointed to such a position of responsibility in a first-rate ship of the line.

Pearse was frequently short of money during his working life and, probably for this reason, at the start of his career he also took up a position as surgeon to Colonel Eyre's regiment of the Parliamentarian army, into which he was commissioned on 31 January 1659/60.⁴ This proved only to be a short-term post, as Eyre was relieved of his command immediately after the restoration of the monarchy.

In April 1660 Pearse was aboard NASEBY (now re-named ROYAL CHARLES) in the company of Samuel Pepys on the voyage to fetch Charles II back from exile in Holland.⁵ The expedition lasted about six weeks, during which time Pearse and Pepys had a falling-out but were later reconciled. Pearse's efficiency as a surgeon and his later careful attention to detail as an innovator and administrator must have commended him to Pepys, as the two became firm friends as well as professional

colleagues. By 1665, Pearse had become Surgeon General to His Majesty's Navy.⁶

The Duke of York to the Principal Officers of the Navy:

'Whereas I judge it very necessary, that some fit, able and experienced person be appointed Chirurgion-General of His Majesty's Fleet now fitting forth to sea, for His Majesty's service in the narrow seas, the better to provide for, and take care of such sick and wounded men as shall happen therein; I have therefore thought fit to appoint James Pierce, one of my chirurgions in ordinary, to be Chirurgion-General of His Majesty's Fleet. These therefore are to will and require you forthwith to cause the said James Pierce to be entered Chirurgion-General of His Majesty's Fleet accordingly, together with such salaries and allowances as are proper and have been usual for a Chirurgion-General to have and receive for that service; and for so doing these shall be your warrant.'

In 1672 Pearse was commanded by the king to undertake the management of all monies allowed for the care of sick and hurt seamen 'laying out ... for the best advantage of that service' and by 1674 he was tasked to supervise all aspects of the care of sick and wounded in the fleet, taking over the duties of the late Commissioners for Sick and Wounded Seamen.⁷ He developed what we would now term an audit trail, ensuring that all the resources allocated by the Navy Commissioners for the treatment of such seamen were properly applied, so that 'it is not possible to wrong his Majesty or injure his subjects while the same methods are observed'. To this end, while at sea the whole charge of the supplies necessary for the care of sick and wounded seamen in the Royal fleet, including packaging and transport, was not to exceed 2d per man per month. If a seaman was transferred on shore for treatment, a certificate was to be provided stopping the man's on-board allowance and transferring it to subsidise his care on land. The total sum payable for treatment off the ship was capped at 6s 8d. Sea surgeons were instructed to provide the relevant certificates and to swear to their accuracy, and to produce receipts from landladies accommodating sailors on shore. The supplies for the care of injured seamen provided by the Navy Board were audited by Pearse himself, and ships' surgeons were obliged to account for the quantities of such supplies that they used. An allowance of 2d per day was agreed for any seaman needing treatment in the London hospitals, and Pearse undertook to provide receipts for this sum for every man thus paid.⁸ As well as laying down these regulations, Pearse designed a series of standardised invoices, certificates and receipts which could be used to trace accurately any medical stores issued to surgeons and also the course and expenses of management for any seaman treated within the system.⁹

Financial control was by no means Pearse's only innovation as chief naval surgeon. He was an advocate of designated hospital ships, though his attempts to introduce more of them into the fleet were sometimes thwarted on the grounds of cost.¹⁰ Both for hospital ships and the other vessels of the Navy, he made

detailed recommendations as to the medicines to be carried in the surgeons' chests,¹¹ the utensils, liquors, provisions and spices to be supplied to each sick bay (together with detailed costings for each item)¹² and even the suggestion that any extra monies from a surgeon's budget might be used to buy fresh meat and clean linen for the sick when the ship was in harbour.¹³ His equipment lists included not only medical and surgical items as such, but also ancillary kit needed for the management of patients on board, such as tow, corks, pins, needles, thread, tape, candlesticks and even old sword scabbards for use as splints.¹⁴

He also specified the personnel needed to run the various medical services. The Barbers' Company of London was charged with assessing applicants for sea surgeon posts (and surgeons' mates) in the Royal Navy. As a Warden of the Company between 1666-1668, and Master in 1675, Pearse would have been closely involved in the selection of surgeons for sea service, in advising on the rate of vessel in which each was thought competent to practise, and in performance monitoring by examining the journal kept by each surgeon during the service of every warrant.¹⁵ The Navy Board was inclined to try to interfere with the process of appointing sea surgeons when it suited their purposes. In 1675 Pearse was suspected by the other officers of the Barbers' Company of colluding with this practice, an activity which he strongly denied, requesting a letter from the Admiralty to clear him of the accusation.¹⁶

The second Anglo-Dutch War

While performing his duties as Surgeon-General, Pearse continued in the role of a hands-on sea surgeon, at least for the first decade of his career. He served between 1665-1667 in the Second Anglo-Dutch War, including participation in the Battle of Lowestoft (13 June 1665). In this engagement, the English fleet was poised to win decisively but failed to follow their advantage through; the Lord High Admiral, James, Duke of York, was accused of shortening sail prematurely in the ROYAL CHARLES, thereby breaking off the action and so costing the English a great victory. Two years later Pearse gave evidence to a parliamentary enquiry into the matter,¹⁷ where it eventually emerged that the order to break off action had allegedly been given by Lord Henry Brouncker, supposedly to reduce the risk to the royal Duke, who had already been slightly wounded.

In September 1665 Pearse became involved in the so-called Prize Goods Scandal when the Earl of Sandwich allowed his men to ransack several captured Dutch ships before the contents had been properly valued, contrary to standing naval orders. Pearse received part of an interim payment of £500 for goods and spices,¹⁸ but his wife was later obliged to hide some of the prize goods - including silks and pearls - from a Captain Fisher, to whom Pearse had agreed to sell them.¹⁹

Later in the Second Dutch War, Pearse was again on active service during the Four Day Battle (1-4 June 1666), when an English fleet under George Monck, Duke of Albemarle, was

effectively crippled by the Dutch, though both sides claimed the victory. In conversation with Pepys a few days later, Pearse was severely critical of Albemarle's performance, as the English had lost ten significant warships compared with four smaller vessels of the enemy fleet.²⁰ Although Pearse had come ashore shortly after the engagement, he returned to the east coast within a few days and - while unable to return to the fleet - visited the wounded seamen who had been landed, and supervised their treatment.²¹⁻²²

During this phase of the war, Pearse suffered a personal and ancillary loss. He owned a ketch - the JAMES - which was captured by the enemy. In October 1666 he petitioned the Duke of York and the King²³ that, in recompense, he should be granted the 100 ton pink ST ANDREW, a recent Dutch prize as he had:

'served to his utmost during the beginning of the Dutch war, both by sea and land, in looking after the sick and wounded seamen and soldiers. Has been at great expense in riding to execute his duty, and had a very great loss in the James ketch, lately taken by the Dutch.'

It was agreed that Pearse should receive the pink, but this decision was later reversed as the Navy wanted her for a fireship. In a later petition, Pearse asked the King for an 80 ton hoy, MERMAID - a different prize and presumably a replacement for the ST ANDREW. His personal maritime investment was not confined to merchant vessels. In 1667 Pepys mentions that Pearse had an 'interest' in the PANTHER, a privateer which was owned by Prince Rupert.²⁴

Between the Second and Third Dutch Wars (1672-1674), Pearse was mainly involved in administrative matters. However, after his services at Lowestoft, he was also appointed surgeon to the Duke of York's troop of Horse Guards.²⁵ This was possibly a gesture to increase his income, as the convention at the time was that sea surgeons were only paid during times of active hostilities.²⁶ The burdens of senior management were clearly weighing heavily upon him, as he was moved to petition the Navy Commissioners in December 1669:²⁷

'I suppose you know how I served His Majesty in the late war, and the salary allowed was such that no surgeon of any practice or reputation would have left this town to go into the country for, much less to sea. Since the war, I have viewed and reported on the wounds of several officers, and the commanders of the ships and yachts send their sick and hurt to me, to recommend them to the hospitals; they also apply to me to recommend their surgeons, not trusting to the Governors of our Hall, who often happen to be unknown and unqualified. I have had several references from you, in cases of differences between surgeons or their widows, about paying for the chests of the deceased surgeon, or right to the twopences. I have often attended your Board with propositions about sick and wounded, and providing recruits of medicine for the fleet at sea, which takes up much time, and gives me no small trouble and expense, without any matter of advantage. I submit whether, the Navy being so much

increased, your office can be without a person qualified to do such service, and whether such person would not deserve 130l a year for his trouble and charge.'

In January 1670 the Navy Commissioners responded with a partial agreement:²⁸

'...the increase of the Navy increases necessary charges, and that now there is frequent need of a surgeon, to take care of men hurt by accident, and sick men brought from ships; to testify to the sufficiency of men recommended by the Surgeons' Company; and to settle the value of medicaments &c, of surgeons who die at sea. Also when fleets go abroad, an able surgeon is required to provide medicaments suited for the diseases incident to foreign climates. They think however that some difference should be made between the 130l, the petitioner's salary as surgeon when in the fleet, and that when on shore, which they propose to be 100l.'

Three months later the King instructed the Duke of York, as commander of the Royal Navy, to instruct the Navy Treasurer to pay the latter sum on a regular basis even when the fleet was not on a war footing.²⁹ Pearse was thus on a salary approximately five times that of the average naval surgeon of the time while at sea, and had effectively negotiated a half-pay agreement for himself when ashore, almost fifty years before this became applicable to the generality of sea surgeons.

The Third Anglo-Dutch War and after.

At the outbreak of the Third Anglo-Dutch War in 1672 Pearse was still principally employed on administrative duties. However, in August 1673 he was ordered to sail on the yacht KATHERINE to join the fleet in the North Sea. The vessel had a slow trip down the Thames estuary and then up the east coast, where they were informed that the main body of the fleet was somewhere between Texel and Camperdown. After heading across to the Dutch coast, they were chased by three frigates, lost them during the night, but were trapped on a lee shore the following morning and obliged to surrender, the only alternative being to run aground.³⁰ Pearse and the rest of the crew were taken prisoner, and Pearse lost his clothes, money, medicines and instruments to the value of £200. In his subsequent petition to the King, Pearse also mentioned that he had lost his private practice as a result of his absence on royal service. He was released after a few months when hostilities ceased in 1674, and in 1676 was granted a pension of £100 per annum in compensation.³¹

Pearse continued to be plagued by money worries. His salary as Surgeon-General was frequently in arrears³² and in addition the Navy was often late in reimbursing him for the huge amounts expended in necessary treatment of the sick and wounded: £286 18s 8d in 1674,³³ £80 or so in 1675³⁴ and £621 in 1689.³⁵ The cash flow that he was obliged to deal with could be enormous; in 1686 the Treasurer of the Navy was ordered to pay Pearse over £718 to reimburse the inhabitants of Portsmouth and Gosport for the quartering of sick and wounded after the Third Dutch War,³⁶ and in 1679 the Commissioners of the Navy were

instructed to make out 'bills of imprest' - the equivalent of drawing on a petty cash fund - to Pearse for £2,200 for the quartering and care of injured seamen.³⁷

By 1681, Pearse's administrative skills were so well recognised that, in addition to his position as Surgeon-General of the Navy, the King awarded him a commission as Surgeon-General of land forces.³⁸ Pearse dealt with the management of the Army medical service with the same attention to detail as he had demonstrated for the Navy, and took an active role in the organisation of surgical services required during and after the Monmouth rebellion against James II in 1685,³⁹ by which time he had also been appointed Serjeant Surgeon to the king. Despite his long-term affiliation with James Stuart, Pearse's efficiency as a manager led to his warrant as naval Surgeon-General being renewed by the new monarchs after the Glorious Revolution of November 1688.⁴⁰ However, his tenure in the post lasted less than a year, as it was decided that a single Surgeon-General to the Forces would be adequate; the naval position was abolished and Pearse was discharged.⁴¹

Gentlemen,

In pursuance of our Resolution taken the 20th instant for discontinuing the Office of Chirurgion Generall of their Ma'ts Navy, Wee do hereby desire and direct you to take notice thereof, and to cause James Pearse Esq, who at present holds that employment, to bee discharged therefrom accordingly.

Soe wee remaine

Your affec. friends,

etc etc.

Although arrangements were made, within a few months, for arrears of salary as Surgeon-General to the Forces to be paid, monies owed from other appointments to the Navy and to the Court remained outstanding. Pearse was eventually obliged to petition the Lords of the Treasury in July 1691 for a quarter years' income - nearly £100 - citing his 'great family and a sick wife' as particular difficulties.⁴²

Final years

Pearse did not enjoy a long and happy retirement after he dropped out of public life. He died in 1693 and his will - written two years earlier - was proved on the 19th of October of that year.⁴³ After giving instructions as to a modest funeral, Pearse left his house in Clerkenwell Green to his wife Elizabeth, and confirmed previous agreements as to the disposition of three more properties in Windsor, Germyn Street (sic for Jermyn Street) and Pall Mall. Elizabeth was left various annuities and all other items of his personal estate. He pointed out that all his older children had already received their expected inheritances, but special provisions were made for the two youngest sons, William and Thomas, who were to each receive at least '£300 in good English money' on reaching maturity. Furthermore Thomas, the only one of his sons who became a surgeon, was to inherit:

'... all my books of physick and Chirurgery together with all my instruments of Chirurgery both great and small, to be delivered to him when he shall be out of his Apprenticeship or when his Master to whom I have bound him shall think him fitt to be Intrusted with them.'

The place of Pearse's burial, like his origins, remains uncertain.

References

1. England, Births and Baptisms 1538 - 1975. London Metropolitan Archives. Available from: <http://www.ancestry.co.uk>
2. Pelling M, White F. Physicians and Irregular Medical Practitioners in London, 1550 - 1640. (2004), British History OnLine. Available from: <https://www.british-history.ac.uk>
3. Calendar of State Papers Domestic 1658; 402. Ibid.
4. Commission as 'surgeon in Colonel Eyres his regiment'. House of Commons Journal 1660; 7: 828. Ibid.
5. Pepys S. Diary. 03 April 1660.
6. Stewart J. Surgeon- General James Pierce RN. JRNMS 1950;36:214-25.
7. Copy of a warrant from the Lords of the Admiralty, dated 28 Mar 1674. Pepys Library, Magdalene College, Cambridge: 2879. Miscellanea Vol. 11:106
8. Pearse, J His acct. of ye methods whereby he manageth ye duties incumbent upon him as Surgeon General of His Ma'ties Navy. 1687. Pepys Library, Magdalene College, Cambridge: 2879, Miscellanea Vol. 11:103.
9. Copies of the various certificates designed by Pearse to control and monitor the provision of supplies and treatment for the sick. Pepys Library, Magdalene College, Cambridge: 2879. Miscellanea Vol 11:108-10.
10. Calendar of State Papers Domestic, Charles 11 1669: 353. Available from: <https://www.british-history.ac.uk>
11. Calendar of State Papers Domestic, Charles 11 1666; 187: 427. Ibid.
12. Calendar of State Papers Domestic, Charles 11 1671-2; 323: 260 and 313. Ibid.
13. Calendar of State Papers Domestic, Charles 11 1671-2; 323: 549. Ibid.
14. Pearse, J. List of Medical Stores for Hospital Ships 1672; Information Sheet no. 116, The National Museum of the Royal Navy (2014).
15. Willoughby CP. Sea surgeons and the Barbers' Company of London. *The Trafalgar Chronicle (New Series 3)* Seaforth Publishing; 2018: p. 213-28.
16. Pearse J. Letter to the Admiralty Board. 29 April 1675. ADM/106/312/82. National Archives, Kew, England.
17. Pepys S. Diary. 21 Oct. 1667
18. Pepys S. Diary. 18 Sept. 1665.
19. Pepys S. Diary. 03 Dec. 1665.

20. Pepys S. Diary. 10 June 1666
21. Calendar of State Papers Domestic, Charles II 1666-67; 170: 53. Available from: <https://www.british-history.ac.uk>
22. Calendar of State Papers Domestic, Charles II 1666-67; 170: 87. Ibid.
23. Calendar of State Papers Domestic, Charles II 1666; 176: 215. Ibid.
24. Pepys S. Diary. 17 July 1667.
25. Calendar of State Papers Domestic, Charles II 1664-65; 125: 448. Available from: <https://www.british-history.ac.uk>
26. Calendar of State Papers Domestic, Charles II 1670: 111. Ibid.
27. Calendar of State Papers Domestic, Charles II 1668 - 69: 623. Ibid.
28. Calendar of State Papers Domestic, Charles II 1668-69: 596. Ibid.
29. Calendar of State Papers Domestic, Charles II 1670: 154. Ibid.
30. Lovell T. Account of the loss of the yacht Katherine to the Dutch. 02 Oct 1673. ADM 106/287/51. National Archives, Kew, England.
31. James Pearse. Archives. Worshipful Company of Barbers, London.
32. Calendar of Treasury Books 1685-1689; 8: 1480. London: HMSO; 1923. Available from: <http://www.british-history.ac.uk>
33. Pearse, J. Letter to Navy Office, 20 Jan 1674. ADM/106/312/80. National Archives, Kew, England.
34. Pearse, J. Report on his work and accounts for this. ADM/106/312/84. National Archives, Kew, England.
35. Calendar of Treasury Books 1685-1689; 8: 2165. Available from: <https://www.british-history.ac.uk>
36. Calendar of Treasury Books 1685-1689; 8: 1042. Ibid.
37. Calendar of Treasury Books, Vol 6, 1679-1680; 6 Out Letters: 47. Ibid.
38. Calendar of State Papers Domestic, Charles II 1680-81: 179. Ibid.
39. Calendar of Treasury Books 1685-1689; 8: 531. Ibid.
40. Warrant for James Pearse to be Chirurgeon Generall of Their Majesties' Royal Navy. 19 Mar 1688/9. ADM/A/1758/15. Caird Library, National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, England.
41. Letter discharging James Pearse from his office as Chirurgeon General of the Navy. 24 Sept. 1689. Admiralty Orders (Navy Board), AD-M/A/1762/302. Caird Library, National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, England.
42. Calendar of Treasury Papers 1556-1696; 1:185. Available from: <https://www.british-history.ac.uk>
43. Will of James Pearse, Gentleman, of Westminster. Prob/11/416 p 230. National Archives, Kew, England.

Author

Dr Charles Peter Willoughby

Retired Consultant Physician and Liveryman of the Worshipful Company of Barbers of London

Orchard House, 42 West Park Crescent, Billericay, CM12 9EG

cpwilloughby@aol.com