

West Dartmoor U3A

Meeting Report for August 2021	Prepared by: Mary Logan
Speaker: Dr Helen Wilson	Subject: The remarkable Pinwill sisters

At our August meeting, Dr. Helen Wilson gave us an excellent talk on the lives and work of the three Pinwell sisters - Mary, Ethel, and Violet.

Their father was vicar of Ermington and it was here in about 1880, they met the two people who would greatly influence their lives, namely Edmund Seddings, the Arts and Crafts Architect and Designer and William Giles, a Carver and Woodworker.

Their mother Elizabeth was unusual for the time in thinking that her daughters should have a profession and she arranged for them to have lessons with William Giles who was undertaking work at Ermington Church.

Their father's family had been shipwrights in Plymouth and his interest in woodcarving was inherited by the three daughters who soon proved to have the skill and determination to make this a successful career.

Edmund Seddings who was supervising the modernisation of the church got on well with the family and championed the sisters' work when they later formed their own carving company Rashleigh, Pinwell & Co.

They undertook commissions with Seddings and often used his designs. Helen showed us many beautifully worked examples including a naturalistic art nouveau panel incorporating seaweed and fish from Crantock Church in North Cornwall. All the sisters worked on this commission to Sedding's designs.

The Pinwells did much work later at their father's church in Ermington including a new pulpit lectern and screen. The reredos was created by Violet herself; it incorporates a Nativity Scene carved in alabaster to a Seddings design after a Burne Jones drawing. This is among her best work. The semi kneeling angel, an elegant iconic feature, was used repeatedly in many churches including Plympton St. Mary (1898).

The Pinwell sisters completed 645 pieces and worked on 165 churches, many of these in Devon and Cornwall – Mary Tavy (1893), Lydford (1900), Buckland in the Moor (1907), St. Andrews Plymouth, Sheepstor, St. Winnow, Morwenstow and Poundstock.

The sisters lives inevitably changed in time. Mary married in 1900 but continued undertaking commissions. Ethel remained working in Ermington while Violet had a new office in Plymouth. Eventually Ethel moved to Sussex in 1922 where she had a new career as a hotelier, returning in the 1940's to buy Ermington Rectory.

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Violet continued as sole owner of V. Pinwell-Carver. In 1908 she employed 29 carvers and joiners. Later in the twentieth century the demand for ornate carving fell as a simpler modern style became fashionable and less and less money was available. The company closed with Violet's death in 1957.

Questions revealed the carvers preferred working in Baltic to English oak, being cheaper and straighter. As this increased in price they used chestnut, but this wood is more brittle. An average commission took about ten weeks and a number of orders may have been worked on at the same time.

Dr. Helen Wilson's book on this subject is available at Bookstop in Tavistock.