

Jerry Peirce (1696-1768)

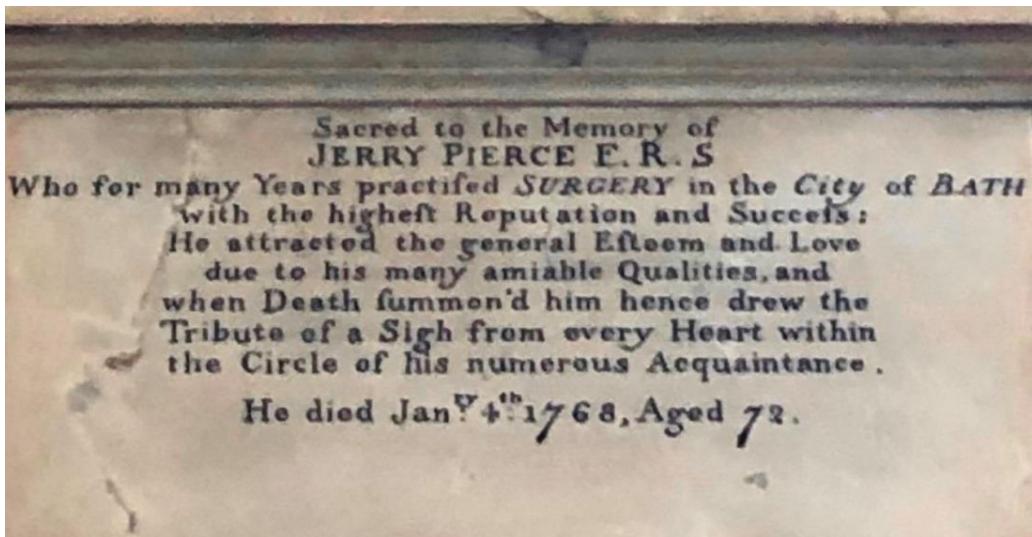
Jeremiah ‘Jerry’ Peirce F.R.S. was a prominent member of society in eighteenth-century Bath and the city’s most eminent surgeon. He mixed with the leading philanthropists and entrepreneurs of the day including Master of Ceremonies Richard ‘Beau’ Nash, stone mines developer Ralph Allen and architect John Wood the Elder.

Peirce was appointed Senior Surgeon at the Water or General Hospital, later the Mineral Water Hospital, on Upper Borough Walls, when it opened in 1742. He was a close friend and colleague of Doctor William Oliver, first Physician of the Hospital and inventor of the famous Bath Oliver Biscuit.

Peirce died in 1768 and was buried at St. Swithin’s Church, Walcot. Despite the spelling PIERCE on his memorial, contemporary sources including Jerry himself spelt his name PEIRCE and so this version is used here.



Interior of St. Swithin's Church. Jerry Peirce's memorial can be seen at high level to the right of the east window. (Photo: Anna Barclay).

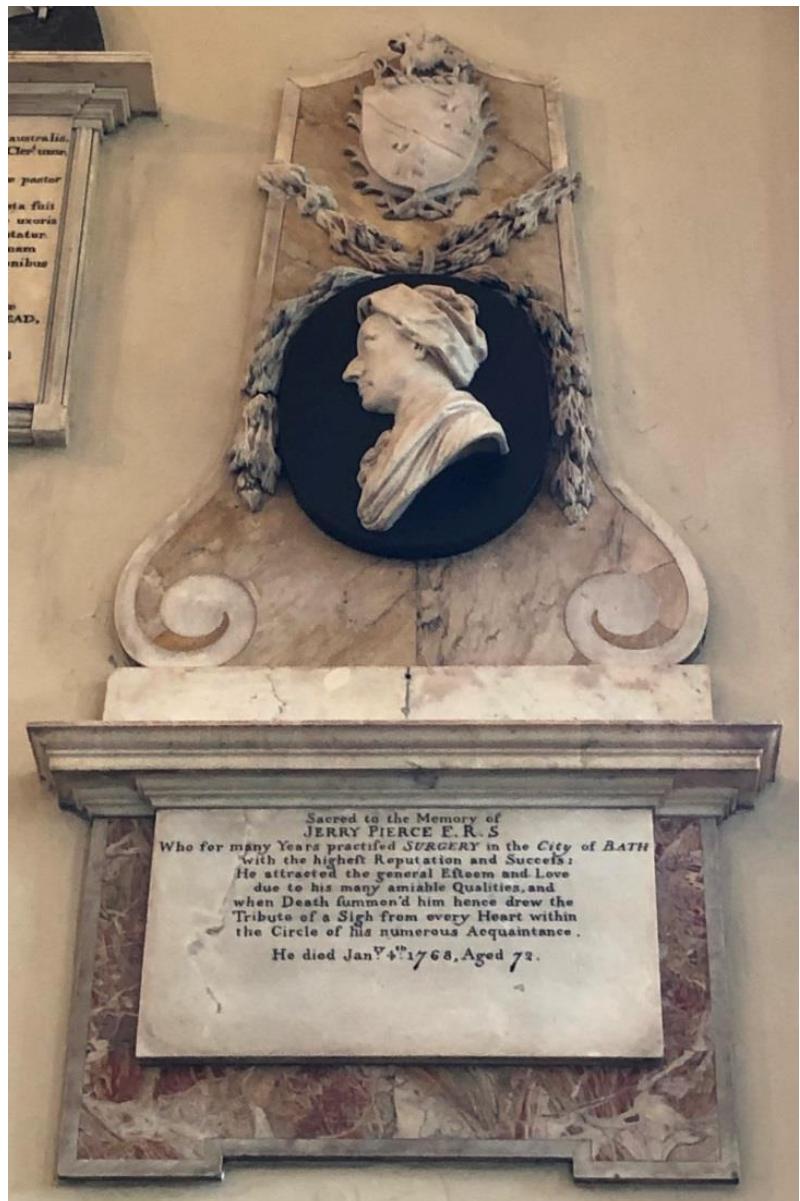


Inscription on Jerry Peirce's memorial in St. Swithin's Church. F.R.S stands for Fellow of the Royal Society.



Above: bust of Jerry Peirce of 1750 by Prince Hoare (c.1711-1769) in the Mercer Art Gallery, Harrogate.

(Harrogate Museums and Arts, Harrogate Borough Council).



Right: Jerry Peirce's memorial, also by Prince Hoare, on the church's east wall, Prince Hoare was brother of the artist and Peirce's friend, William Hoare (c.1707-1792). William Hoare was also buried at St. Swithin's and his memorial is on the north gallery wall.

Peirce's arrival in Bath.

Despite his prominent role in eighteenth-century Bath, relatively little is known about Jerry Peirce's early life. He was born in London in 1696, son of a merchant tailor also called Jeremiah Peirce. It is not known where Jerry junior trained, although he would have had to serve a seven-year apprenticeship to be licensed to operate as a surgeon. Once qualified he would make his living from operating on well-to-do fee-paying patients.

Neither is it known when Peirce set up practice in Bath. He is first recorded in the city in April 1733 when he was appointed as Surgeon to Bellot's Hospital in Beau Street on a retainer of 20 shillings a year. He retired from the post in 1755.



Detail of an engraving of Bellot's Hospital as Peirce would have known it. The hospital was completely rebuilt in 1859. (Gibbs's *Bath Visitant* 1845).



Bellot's Hospital as it is today on the corner of Beau Street and Bilbury Lane.

By 1733 Peirce would have been in the city for several years and was already a successful surgeon. Within a few years he owned properties in Queen Square, where he was a neighbour of Dr. William Oliver, and in Gay Street and John Street. He came to wider prominence in 1735 after amputating a patient's leg rendered useless by a monstrous tumour, a feat which he recounted in a letter published in the *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* two years later. The operation clearly did his reputation no harm and in 1742 he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society.

The Water or General Hospital.

In the late 1730s and early 1740s Peirce served on the committee set up to open a new General Hospital in Bath. In this role he would have worked closely on the project with Ralph Allen, who donated the stone, 'Beau' Nash who led the fundraising appeal and architect John Wood Elder, who donated the designs. For his part, in 1737 Peirce gave £30 towards the fundraising appeal, and was instrumental in securing other donations for the hospital. In 1738, at the first meeting of the Governors, he was appointed as the hospital's first Senior Surgeon, alongside Dr. Oliver, its First Physician. He was appointed a Governor of the hospital at the same time.

The General Hospital's foundation stone was laid in 1739 on the site of the old playhouse on Upper Borough Walls at the northern extremity of the walled medieval city. From the open slopes beyond it would have had the appearance of a Palladian country house, as was the practice in contemporary hospital design and as seen in the copper engraving below.

General Hospital, 1793;
copper engraving
showing the hospital
as it appeared from
1742 when it opened
to 1793 when the attic
storey was added.

(Victoria Art Gallery).



The hospital today. The
attic storey was added
in 1793 by architect
John Palmer.

Palmer is also buried at
St. Swithin's Church.
His memorial is on the
south gallery wall.



The General Hospital opened its doors to patients in 1742. It was one of the first in the world to specialise in the treatment of rheumatism and arthritis, conditions traditionally treated using the city's hot waters. Its founding purpose was to provide medical treatment for the poor and infirm who could not afford doctor's fees. Many took the view that the hospital's main purpose was to rid the city's streets of the many unsightly down-and-outs that came to Bath in the wake of the well-to-do classes seeking entertainment and a cure in the burgeoning spa, from which beggars were excluded.

Admission to the hospital's beds was restricted to poor English people. Bath residents were specifically excluded on the grounds that they already had free access to the curative thermal waters. In 1756 the concession was extended to people from Scotland and Ireland.

The hospital was renamed Mineral Water Hospital in the nineteenth century and, in 1859-60, a major extension was built. The Royal title was added in 1887 and in 1935 it was renamed again, this time as the Royal National Hospital for Rheumatic Diseases (RNHRD).

The painting by William Hoare R.A. (c.1707-1792) below, which depicts Physician Dr. Oliver and Surgeon Jerry Peirce examining patients, was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1751. It shows the two medics examining a poor family. Although the painting's title describes the patients as "afflicted with Paralysis, Rheumatism and Leprosy", medical opinion is that the state of their hands suggests that they were suffering from acute arthritis. The child's left hand and right forearm, prominently displayed to the viewer, also bear evidence of a skin complaint. In 1762 Hoare presented the painting to the hospital, where it hung until 2019.

In 1759 Peirce installed a 'sweating box' or 'sweating chair' in the General Hospital. No description of the formidable-sounding apparatus survives and its efficacy as a means of treating patients is unrecorded.



Dr. Oliver and Mr. Peirce, Physician and Surgeon, examining patients afflicted with Paralysis, Rheumatism and Leprosy, 1761, by Bath-based portrait artist William Hoare.

Jerry Peirce is in the centre of the picture with Dr. Oliver on the right.

Today the painting hangs in the Rheumatology outpatients' waiting area, RNHRD & Brownsword Therapies Centre, RUH NHS Foundation Trust, Bath.

(Photo: Pete Stone).

Peirce's place in Bath.

In eighteenth-century Bath the medical fraternity was viewed with some disdain, amidst suspicions that doctors were profiteering from the misery of the sickly rich who were willing and able to pay for relief from their suffering. Jerry Peirce may have been an exception to this, as suggested by Mary Chandler in her satirical poem *The Diseases of Bath. A Satire*, published in 1737, in which she asserts that

“*Peirce is humane, and, tho' a surgeon bred,
Is much too honest to enhance his trade.*”

Indeed, his “highest reputation” is acknowledged on his memorial in St. Swithin’s Church.

Peirce’s role as a successful surgeon in the growing eighteenth-century spa city brought him into contact with many of its luminaries. In addition to working alongside Nash, Allen, Wood and Oliver to build and then run the General Hospital, he was introduced into their elevated social circle and even treated some of the city’s notable visitors such as poet Alexander Pope and actor James Quin. He was an active patron of the arts in Bath and amassed a considerable collection of books and works of art.

Despite already owning properties in fashionable Queen Square and Gay Street, in 1738 Peirce commissioned architect John Wood the Elder to build him a tiny villa in Cold Ashton parish below the far end of the Lansdown plateau, just over the county boundary into Gloucestershire. Lilliput Castle, as it was known, well researched and published by Dr. Cathryn Spence, was Peirce’s out-of-town haven. Despite its diminutive size it seems to have played host to lively parties thrown by Peirce.

Lilliput Castle was built less than a hundred years after the end of the Civil War’s Battle of Lansdown, fought in 1643 only yards away on the northern slopes of Lansdown. Thomas Thorpe’s map of 1742 below shows ‘The Kings Camp’ on Freezing Hill and the Bevil Grenville monument, which had only recently been erected in 1720 on the spot where Sir Bevil Grenville, commander of a regiment of Cornish infantry, lost his life.



Detail of Thomas Thorpe’s map of 1742.

The map shows the location of Jerry Peirce’s villa. The extent of his estate is indicated by another property marked as ‘Mr. Peirce’s Farm’.

(Bath Record Office).

Peirce's final years.

Peirce retired from the role of Senior Surgeon at the General Hospital on 1st May 1761, the same day that Dr. Oliver stood down as Physician. In the following year, perhaps as a tribute to their twenty-one years' service, William Hoare presented his painting of Peirce and Oliver examining patients (page 5 above) to the Hospital. Both men continued to practice and, in 1764, they treated their long-time friend Ralph Allen in the final weeks before he died; each received a legacy of £100 in Allen's will. Oliver also died later that year and was buried at All Saints' Church, Weston.

Jerry Peirce died on 4th January 1768, aged 72. He was buried at the short-lived eighteenth-century St. Swithin's Church that preceded the present building. His memorial was the work of sculptor Prince Hoare (c.1711-1769), younger brother of Jerry's friend and neighbour, the artist William Hoare. The memorial is surmounted by a slightly damaged carving of an opinicus, a kind of heraldic griffin and the crest of the Worshipful Company of Barber Surgeons. It is doubtful whether the memorial was mounted in the old church as it was soon to be replaced by the present new and larger church, designed by Bath architect John Palmer (1738-1817). This church was built in 1777-80 and, in all probability, Peirce's memorial was installed within it. Seven years later the building was extended to the east by Thomas Jelly, at which point the memorial would also have been moved and re-mounted on the east wall to the right of the great central window.

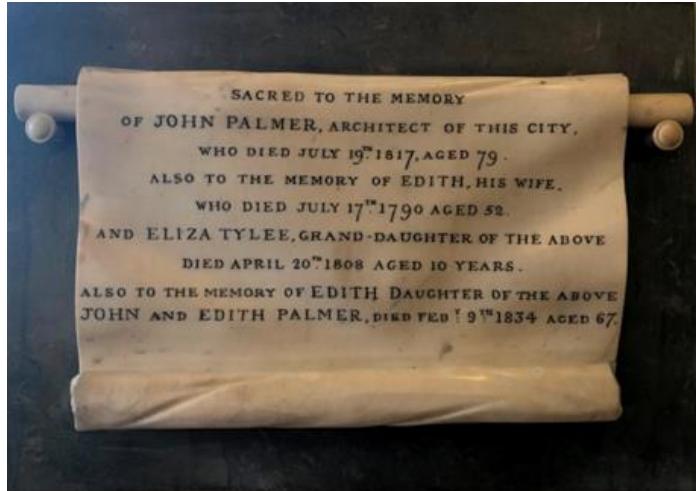


The three known images of Jerry Peirce: by artist William Hoare (left, RUH NHS Foundation Trust), and by his younger brother and sculptor Prince Hoare (centre, Harrogate Museums and Arts, Harrogate Borough Council), and right. All have captured a distinctive aquiline nose!

The empty space below the inscription on Jerry's memorial may have been left for the addition of an epitaph to his wife, Ann. In the event it was not used, despite Ann outliving Jerry. Ann's will, dated 9th May 1777 (The National Archives PROB 11/1031/84), describes her as "*Ann Peirce of Walcot, Somerset*", so one would expect her to have been buried at St. Swithin's. It is not known how much longer after Jerry she died but at some point she may have downsized her residence and moved out of the parish. The Bath Burial Index online records three women named Ann Peirce being buried at St. James's Cemetery on 27th November 1774, 3rd December 1778 and 30th April 1783. Further research is needed to determine whether one of these women was Jerry's widow.

Jerry and Ann Peirce had no children. Lilliput Castle passed eventually to Peirce's nephew Jerry Peirce Crane. In 1802 the tiny villa was incorporated into the large rambling house 'Battlefields' which still stands today.

There are memorials on the walls of St. Swithin's Church to two other prominent people who feature in this narrative: Peirce's friend and artist William Hoare, who painted the scene of Jerry Peirce and Dr. Oliver examining patients at The General Hospital (p.5 above), and the architect John Palmer who designed the present church in 1777-80 and added the attic storey to The General Hospital in 1793.



Memorials to artist William Hoare on the church's north gallery wall (left), and to architect John Palmer on the south gallery wall (above).

Acknowledgements

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All photographs are by the author unless otherwise credited.

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Carved marble opinicus at the very top of Prince Hoare's memorial to Jerry Peirce. The opinicus was a heraldic griffin used as the crest of the Worshipful Company of Barber Surgeons. (Photo: Henry Brown)