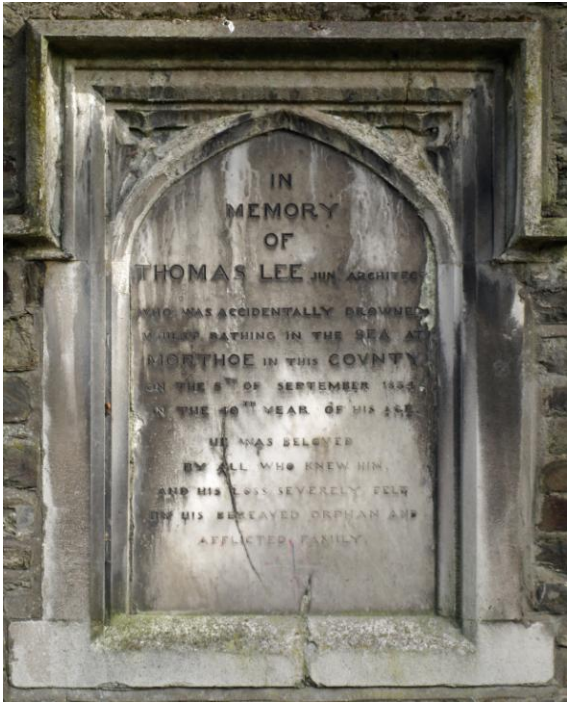


The Story of a North Devon Victorian Painter

FREDERICK LEE, R.A.
of Broadgate House, Pilton

Frederick's father, Thomas Lee, was a successful Barnstaple-born architect, who retired to his home town from London on inheriting a fortune in the 1780s, settling at Barbican House near Holy Trinity Church, where his sons Thomas and Frederick were born in the 1790s. Thomas junior followed in his father's footsteps as a successful architect, his local buildings being Arlington Court [1820], Barnstaple Guildhall [1826], the Wellington Monument in Somerset



[1818], Eggesford House and a number of West Country churches. He died in a swimming accident off Morteheo in 1834, and a tablet commemorating this accident (left) is fixed to the outside wall of St. Anne's Chapel in the town.

Frederick decided to join the army, but left in 1817 due to ill health, and from this time devoted his life to landscape painting, becoming a student at the Royal Academy in 1818, where he was elected a full member in 1838, enjoying great success as a landscape painter, associating with Sir Edwin Landseer and Thomas Cooper. He is known to have collaborated with them in the 1840s and 50s, Frederick painting the landscapes while Landseer or Cooper added the animals.

He settled at Penshurst in Kent with his wife Harriet and daughter Sarah Catherine, where Harriet died in 1850. Frederick remarried in 1857 and returned to North Devon in 1858, when he moved into Broadgate House, Pilton, where his second wife, Mary, sadly died only eighteen months after their marriage. Having inherited his father's fortune and being well-established as a major figure in the English landscape painting world, he travelled widely in this country and abroad, and from the 1860s spent his time between Broadgate House, his yacht in which he sailed the world, and South Africa, where he owned several farms. In November 1873 a letter from Frederick to his Barnstaple relatives was reported in the local paper which stated that, at the age of seventy, he had just completed a voyage around the world in his yacht 'Linda', and was then engaged on another trip to remote parts. The message concluded 'we are all well and hearty, and have no fear for the future.' He died in South Africa and was buried there in 1879.

Frederick Lee was certainly a prolific painter – compared to Constable, with only about twenty paintings to his credit, Frederick produced over 300 known works, plus many more in private hands completely unknown to the wider public. A large painting of the River Taw at Bishops Tawton is displayed at the Museum of Barnstaple and North Devon and a dilapidated little oil painting on board of his came to light recently at the North Devon Athenaeum. This has been professionally cleaned and re-framed and is now displayed in their office on the second floor of the Barnstaple Library. The scene has been identified as 'The Lane towards Pitt Farm, Raleigh

in Pilton' (below), painted in July 1830, and he was known to have painted other scenes in this valley of the River Yeo, the whereabouts of which are now unfortunately not known.



On his death in 1879 his daughter, Sarah Catherine, wife of Col. Hugh Robert Hibbert, inherited his estate in Barnstaple. This included not only Broadgate House and grounds where they made their home, but also a considerable amount of other local property comprising Broadgate Villa [now 'Fairfield' and 'Fairmead'], Bellaire House and grounds, nos 1 and 2 Bellaire, Fig Tree Cottage, Pilton Cottage in Dark Lane, Cross Park at the top of Bradiford, the Barnstaple Inn in the town and several local parcels of land.

This estate has long since been fragmented and sold, more houses have been built in the vicinity of Broadgate House, which has been spilt into separate units, part of which is in a poor state of repair. However, in Frederick Lee's time and for some years afterwards this was an elegant house, rebuilt in the 18th century on the site of a more ancient mansion, and where Col. Hibbert, Frederick Lee's son-in-law, entertained royalty in the person of H.R.H. The Duke of Cambridge in 1895. The days of grandeur have long gone, when armies of servants tended the various houses and grounds, but there is still an air of shabby gentility about the older houses, and it is regrettable that no Frederick Lee paintings are known of Bellaire when it was at its most elegant.

Margaret Reed