

The Ann of Clay

Capt. Francis Plumb 1841

by Jonathan Hooton

Synopsis: the author gives some background on the artistic genre known as “pierhead painting” and traces the origin of a particular example which features a locally owned vessel.

The genre of ship portraits is one that is probably of more importance to those interested in maritime and local history rather than to the art historian. For the period before photography it is of vital importance in supplying the details of the hull, rigging and appearance of the many small merchantmen and fishing vessels that plied their trade around the coasts of Britain and Europe throughout the nineteenth century.

The characteristic that distinguished the ship portraits, or pierhead paintings, as they were frequently known, from marine paintings, was that the ship itself was the primary object, overriding all other considerations. Little attention was given to the sea or sky and background details were lacking, not always accurate and, if they were included at all, it was mainly to identify the port, especially if the ship was trading overseas.¹

However, the details of the ship were usually meticulous. Accuracy was very important because the purchasers were usually the owners or master of the vessel, who wished for a memento of a craft that they were often emotionally

involved with. Although it was permissible to accentuate details such as pennants or flags, they would not tolerate inaccuracy in the depiction of the ship. Sometimes the works were commissioned, but frequently the artist would produce sketches speculatively and hope for a sale. This would not be forthcoming if the ship were not reproduced in almost photographic detail, or if the price was too high.

The artists were usually self-taught, based at one port and frequently they had been to sea and had gained first hand knowledge of their subject matter.²

The genre is likely to have descended from the 16th and 17th century ‘votive’ paintings. These were devotional paintings destined to hang in churches and intended as a thanksgiving, commissioned by the crew after a miraculous delivery from a near disaster at sea. They showed the vessel in the midst of a storm often with the Virgin Mary or a patron saint appearing in the storm-laden clouds. This led in later centuries to the tradition of painting a pair of pictures, portraying the vessel in both foul and fair weather.³

The first true ship portraits appeared in the 18th century and seem to have originated from ports in the Mediterranean. They spread rapidly to the rest of Europe and the majority date from the 19th century. At the beginning of the period it was usual to show the



Figure 1. The “Ann of Clay Capt. Francis Plumb 1841” in (almost) all its glory

vessel in two and sometimes three positions on the same canvas, broadside, stern and bow, although later in the 19th century this usually became broadside only. Usually there would be an inscription stating the name, rig, home-port, name of the master and the port where it had been painted. The medium for most of these paintings was either watercolour or gouache, chosen because they were quick drying and easy to handle. Speed was important, because the vessel was usually in the port for only a few days and the painting could be supplied quickly, often the next day, rolled up for easy storage on board ship.⁴

Ship portraits survive for several of the Glaven’s ships. Although some still remain locally many have left the area as descendants of the ship owners

have moved away. One fine example that has come to my notice recently is the ‘Ann of Clay’ owned by William May of East Ruston. It is a watercolour, heightened with gouache, with a hand painted border (fashionable 1780-1830) and close framed (i.e. no mount) in its original mahogany frame (Fig.1).

It is entitled ‘Ann of Clay Capt Francis Plumb 1841’. The signature on the painting is ‘J Hansen Sandberg No 11 Altona.’ Altona is a port on the river Elbe next to Hamburg and in 1938, when the city boundaries were altered, it became part of Hamburg. Sandberg was a street in Altona, and presumably J Hansen was living at number eleven. Roger Finch says of the port that “Altona, where once the Danish East India Company had its headquarters, on the Elbe estuary above the great port of Hamburg was the home of a

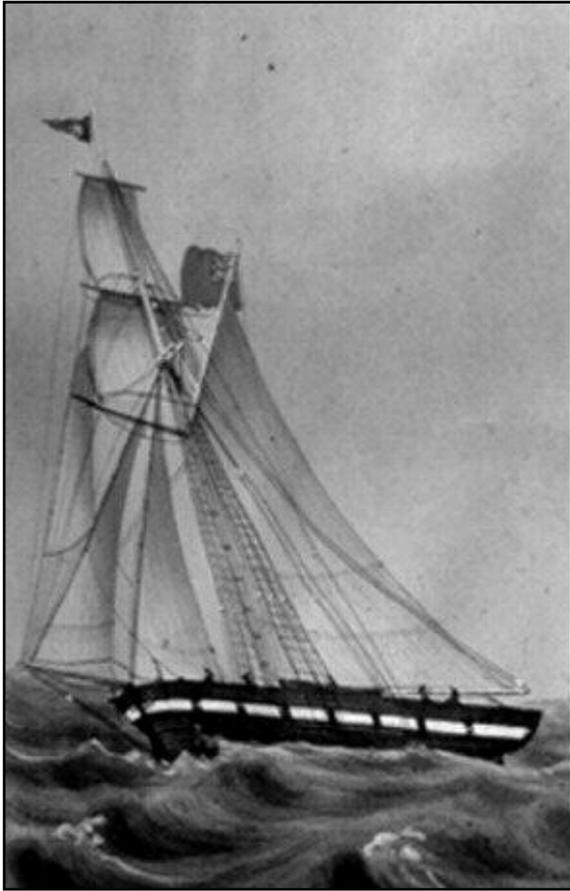


Figure 2. Detail of the sloop-rigged vessel, possibly the Ann re-rigged.

long and distinguished line of ship painters. Their paintings were brought back to Britain aboard the schooners and brigs to be proudly hung in sailors' homes all through the nineteenth century...Many paintings deriving from Altona were by the Hansens; H.C.Hansen (flourished 1838-47), B.H. Hansen (flourished 1827-56) and T. Hansen, working at approximately the same date, who were no doubt related".⁵ He does not mention a 'J' Hansen (although T and J may have been confused), but a J Hansen is included by E.H.H. Archibald, in his Dictionary of Sea Painters, who records the following,

"Hansen, J. Flourished early/mid 19th century. German ship portraitist working in Altona in the second quarter of the 19th century and in the usual stiff and stylised manner".⁶



Figure 3. Detail of the right hand vessel

The book also has an illustration by J Hansen (plate 514) of 'The schooner Regina of Muhlerberg/Blankenese 1840' from the Altonaer Museum in Hamburg. This shows two views of the vessel and includes a background similar to the 'Ann'.

In the painting of the 'Ann', she is shown broadside on, rigged as a brig with a female figurehead, a square stern and eight figures portrayed on the deck, one of which appears to be a woman. She also has seven fake gun ports painted on the hull. To the right the vessel is seen stern on, in rougher seas and carrying less sail. More puzzling is the vessel to the left with just one mast. It could just be the 'Ann', rigged as a sloop as she seems to be the right size and has a similar white line with seven gun ports. However, there is no figurehead and the bow is different in

shape. It was not unknown for a brig to be re-rigged as a sloop, as this meant she could be handled by a smaller crew and therefore cheaper to run, but it is very unlikely that she would have been converted from a sloop to a brig. Ship portraits often contained other craft in the distance, such as the vessel in between the broadside view of the 'Ann' and the sloop. However, the sloop is shown flying the red ensign, a triangular blue flag with a white letter 'M' and appears to be painted in too much detail to be considered part of the maritime background. Possibly she was another vessel, commanded by Captain Plumb and included in the painting at his request, but as yet, there is no documentary evidence to support this view.

The painting is dated 1841, which is fortunate in trying to track down details of the 'Ann' because the surviving Cley Register of Ships in the Norfolk Record Office starts in 1839. The 'Ann', was registered on 14th September 1839, of 125 tons and built in 1830 at Peterhead. She had been re-registered from Newcastle. She was described as having 1 deck, 2 masts, length 68 feet, breadth 21 feet and 1/2 inch and depth 12 feet 3 inches, rigged as a snow with a standing bow sprit, square stern, carvel built with no gallery and a female bust. The 64 shares were owned by Thomas Beckwith, clerk, from Cley (32), Marjorie Moore, widow, from Cley (16), John Copeman, butcher, from Cley (8) and Phoebe Digby (wife of John Digby, shoemaker) from Cley (8).⁷

This was obviously the vessel in the painting, the only discrepancy in the description being that the registers record her as being rigged as a snow. However, the two rigs

were very similar, both being square rigged on two masts with the snow having a small trysail mast just behind the main mast. It is difficult to tell from the painting whether the mast is there or not. Lloyds registers for 1842-44 record the 'Ann' as a brig, sailing between London and Hamburg, with Captain F Plum as her master, so there was confusion between brigs and snows at the time.⁸

Francis Plumb was born in Blakeney in 1793, which would have meant he was 46 when he took command of the 'Ann' when she was re-registered from Newcastle in 1839. He was not present in Blakeney or Cley at the time of the 1841 census, presumably because he was based in London where the 'Ann' was trading from. However, there was a James Plumb, mariner, aged 25, living in the High Street in Blakeney, who was presumably a relation and probably Francis's son or brother.⁹

Although vessels of 125 tons could use Blakeney, the profits were obviously greater for the owners with the vessel trading from London. Captain Plumb was obviously profiting from the trade as on 22nd March 1842 he became a part owner of the vessel when he bought the eight shares that had belonged to Phoebe Digby.¹⁰

Two years later, when he was 51, Francis Plumb left the 'Ann' after five years as her master. He sold his shares in the vessel on February 29th 1844, to Robert Mann and a new master was appointed. The 'Ann' continued to be registered at Cley until 1847, although she is unlikely to have traded from that port. The appointment of a new master at

Newcastle in August 1847 was followed in the December of that year with the 'Ann' being re-registered at Workington.¹¹

Plumb apparently wanted a change in direction. He had made enough money to consider buying his own vessel and was weary of a life away from home. He wanted to be based in his home port and so decided to pursue a career as a fisherman. In November 1844, nine months after leaving the 'Ann', he purchased the sloop 'Susannah', built at Blakeney in 1822. In 1833 she was registered at Cley (and recorded as being of 23 tons) belonging to Thomas William Temple. Later that year she was sold to Robert Vince jnr. of Blakeney and Mark Cullingford of London, who held the majority of the shares, until she was bought by Francis Plumb.¹²

The 'Susannah' was re-registered at Cley in April 1845 (this time recorded as 19 tons) with Francis Plumb, fisherman, as master. The ownership at this date seems a little confused. Plumb must have had some financial difficulties as the vessel had been mortgaged to John Ransome, gentleman, of Holt in January of that year. It is not clear when Francis Plumb regained the ownership, but in 1848, a note in the Registers states that Henry Starling Ransome, as executor for the estate, of the now deceased John Ransome, "has transferred all his rights to Francis Plumb of Blakeney". Also, during 1848, Plumb used the vessel as security in borrowing £45 plus interest from William Cooke of Glandford. This was only a temporary measure as another note in the Registers records Cooke as stating "that all

his claims on the vessel 'Susannah' are satisfied and the mortgage cancelled."¹³

Francis Plumb must have continued fishing from Blakeney. He is recorded in the 1847 Poll book as living in Cley but was not mentioned in the 1852 Poll book, although James Plumb was still in Blakeney. By the time of the 1851 Census, (aged 58), his occupation was still given as fisherman and he was still living in Blakeney, though perhaps by now he was in semi-retirement with a younger relative in charge of the fishing. He may have died shortly after this and certainly by 1865 when the 'Susannah' was re-registered at Southampton.^{14, 15}

References

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