

In February 2025 Tony Mundell saw all of the orchid paintings by Walter Pearce held at Haslemere Museum and thoroughly recommends a visit to see a selection on display. Walter Seward Pearce (1862-1941) was very much a Hampshire man, born in Southampton and later living in Romsey then Twyford. Remarkably he was deaf and dumb from birth, just like two of his three siblings. His brother Richard Aslatt Pearce was the first deaf person to be ordained as an Anglican clergyman and fulfilled his duties for the rest of his life. A document at the museum states that most of Walter's orchid paintings were done between 1933 and 1939, and that he spent many summers visiting the Isle of Wight. There are a few hundred paintings in all, but sadly most are only annotated with Latin names, only sometimes also including locations, often just a county or country. Walter had many contacts who sent him specimens to paint.

What I found so remarkable was the number of different species, unusual varieties and even suggested hybrids that he painted. A few such as Ghost Orchids were from Switzerland and Germany, whereas Military Orchids were from Switzerland and France. The paintings include a Lady's-slipper labelled Yorkshire; a Lady Orchid from Kent; Summer Lady's-tresses from the New Forest; both Small-white Orchid and Dense-flowered Orchid from Ireland. I found the painting of Red Helleborine especially interesting as it is labelled Petersfield. Possibly this was from the well-known site near Hawkley discovered in 1986, so predating it by about 50 years. The Bog Orchid and Musk Orchid are rather frustratingly also just labelled as Petersfield. A Lizard Orchid is labelled "Near Ryde, Isle of Wight".

All the commoner orchid species are well represented as are many varieties, e.g. many forms of Bee Orchid. The nomenclature of the Marsh Orchids was not fully settled during Walter's time, so it really needs an orchid expert to try to name those paintings as well as the unusual forms and hybrids (such as Loose-flowered Orchid x Green-winged Orchid) that he claims.