

Richard Gardner Williams Dinner 2014

The Sentiment, given by Peter Gibson, Deputy Master 2013-14

Master, Upper Warden and members of the Worshipful Company of Turners. We are all here tonight thanks to the generosity of one man, who bequeathed the major part of his considerable estate to the Company on his death in 1931.

We actually know remarkably little about Richard Gardner Williams. He remains something of an enigma although, thanks to the digitisation of more and more public records, additional facts are emerging.

Were I to give this Sentiment a title, it would not be “Who do you think you are?”, but rather “Who do we think that Richard Gardner Williams might have been?”.

Should RGW, as I shall refer to him, miraculously appear before us, we could not be completely certain of the way to address him.

He was born and baptised Richard Gardner, the son of Mr and Mrs Williams of Tranmere in Cheshire. Gardner was his second given name. We know that when he became a Freeman of the City, on 21st January 1913, he signed his name “R Gardner Williams”. From other documents, copies of which I have managed to locate, we know that he declared his surname to be Williams. So we can reasonably assume that some time during his life he decided to use his second given name in preference to Richard.

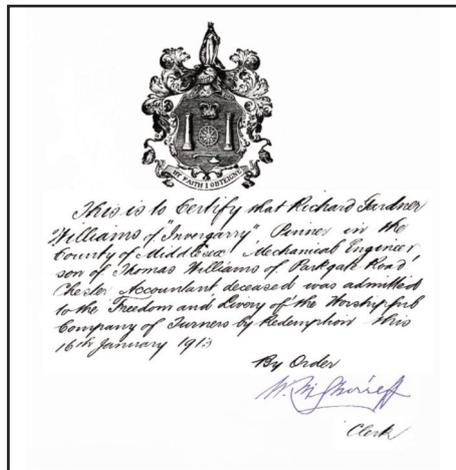
Past Master Roland Champness, in the first edition of our history, reports that “Richard” was thought to have attended King’s School Chester, but recent evidence indicates that this was not the case.

In his 1917 application to the Institution of Mechanical Engineers for membership, Richard Williams states that from the ages of seven to eleven he attended Mrs Allenby’s private school at Boughton Grange in Chester. He then moved to another private school, Mr Tinkler’s, also in Chester. Whilst at Mr Tinkler’s RGW attended technical classes at the Crewe Mechanics Institute.

After this, a little before his 16th birthday, RGW became an apprentice at the London and North Western Railway Crewe Works. The records show that he commenced work on 14th September 1881 and was taken on for one month’s trial, starting at 6am each morning and being paid 6 shillings a week. His month’s trial must have been successful as he remained for 5 years. He then moved

to Laird Brothers at Birkenhead Iron Works, where he was employed as a draughtsman for two years.

After leaving Laird Brothers, RGW’s I Mech E application glosses over his time with CC Wakefield & Co., describing the period from the age of 23 to 46 as when he had “subsequently been engaged on several commercial and partly mechanical undertakings”. Of course, as this was an application for membership of the primary professional engineering institution in the country at that time, only mechanical engineering experiences were of relevance.



Richard Gardner Williams was admitted to the Freedom and Livery of the Worshipful Company of Turners by Redemption on 16th January 1913 and a Freeman of the City of London on 21st January 1913.

At the time of this application in 1917, RGW declares himself to have been Managing Director of the Lea Valley Engineering Company in Waltham Cross, Essex, a small concern with about 30 employees. I have, so far, been unable to locate any information about this company.

We have also over many years tried to discover the source of RGW’s fortune. Although I have now found evidence that he held a number of shares in the Great Western Railway (left to him by his father) it may also be that as Managing Director of even a small engineering company he purchased or received shares that he was subsequently able to sell at a good profit.

A number of other facts have also come to light. On the night of the 1891 Census, RGW was staying at the London Hotel in Queen Street, Hull, where he described himself as a commercial traveller.

On a similar night in 1901, he and his wife Edith were residing in Argyll Mansions, Willesden; where RGW declared himself to be a mechanical engineer. The census return also reveals that he was earning enough to employ a living-in servant described as a cook/domestic. In 1911 he and his wife had moved to Pinner where he continued to employ a live-in domestic servant.

Champness tells us that by 1918, RGW was living at 10 St Mark’s Square, Regents Park, even in 1918, not one of the cheapest areas of London in which to live. The house is worth £3.3 million at today’s prices; but it could of course have been rented.

One mystery that remains is how RGW was employed in those 23 years from leaving Laird Brothers in 1888 until becoming Managing Director of Lea Valley Engineering around 1910.

Champness’s own researches revealed the CC Wakefield & Co. connection but, if RGW’s I Mech E application is to be believed, Champness appears to be wrong in recording that RGW retired from CC Wakefield in 1930.

When Roland Champness was Master in 1939, RGW had been dead for only 8 years and it was another nine years before the Company actually received the bequest on the death of his wife.

In 1939, the Wakefield archives were part of the Castrol archive and stored in London. The majority of these records were destroyed during the war and therefore further research into the Wakefield connection is something of a challenge.

When RGW died, his estate amounted to a little over £43,000 of which the majority ultimately came to the Turners’ Company. Although comparisons cannot be exact, £40,000 in 1931 equates to about £4 million today.

Master, before we pass the Loving Cup and toast the memory of our benefactor, may I present you with a copy of Richard Gardner Williams’ award of both Freedom and Livery of our Company - on the same day in 1913 (see panel). This was signed by the Clerk at the time, William Sherriff, who was very nearly at the end of his 46-year tenure as the Turners’ Company Clerk.