

Truth and five Lies from the 2020 Richard Gardner Williams sentiment

Felix Fighiera, about whom Liveryman Jerome Farrell wrote an interesting biography for last year's Turner magazine, became Master in May 1912. Unusually he was Master for two years that straddled the outbreak of the First World War¹. During his time on the Court, Felix Fighiera encouraged the introduction of new members and the allocation of a portion of their Livery fine to buying lathes for schools. Richard Gardner Williams was one of several with a background in South American railways and in engineering to be nominated to the Turners' Company.

As we already know from the back of the menu, Richard had worked for two oil companies: the Vacuum Oil Company, later subsumed into ExxonMobil, and C.C. Wakefield & Co., eventually subsumed into Royal Dutch Shell². We now know that he must have left Charles Wakefield's firm at the latest by the end of 1912 and presumably on amicable terms.

This is because January 1913 was a busy month for Richard. On Thursday 16th, he and seven other men were elected and sworn in as Freeman and Liverymen of the Turners. The following week, Richard and his wife, Edith, attended the Turners' Livery dinner at De Keyzers Royal Hotel in Blackfriars, sitting on the top table. As was typical of the time, it was a rather modest affair with just three courses and a speech by the Master³.

In the final week of January 1913, Richard founded the Lea Valley Engineering Company to manufacture refrigeration and ice-making equipment. Over the next dozen years, as Managing Director, Chairman and main shareholder of the Lea Valley Engineering Company, he was involved in the rapid growth of industrial refrigeration.⁴

Having worked with Charles Wakefield on lubricating and cooling locomotives and seen the many patents taken out by Wakefield for dealing with

¹ Lie: his two years (true) ended on 21 May 1914; World War I began in July and August 1914

² Vacuum Oil Company: true;

C.C. Wakefield: lie, now part of BP not Shell (see <https://www.classicoils.co.uk/history>)

³ True regarding dates and the attendance of Richard and his wife at the dinner;

Lie regarding the "modest" dinner. Source: Turners' Company history, Brian Burnett edition, pages 200, 212 and 226 refers to such a dinner in 1913 as "typically" comprising nine courses, seven wines, six toasts and eight speeches

⁴ True: records of the Board of Trade at the National Archives, Kew

pressurised fluids⁵, we now know that Richard was far more an engineer rather than simply an oil salesman.

Richard and his company patented two inventions. The first was to ensure that refrigerants, often noxious substances such as ammonia, could not escape if the pump failed.⁶

The second was “An apparatus for making ice-blocks, and in which ice-creams etc. may be made and subsequently preserved”⁷

Widespread domestic refrigeration was still many years away but there was strong demand from industrial users, hotels and restaurants, shipping and the Government. When he was elected to the Institute of Mechanical Engineers in 1917, four years after setting up Lea Valley Engineering, he gave as examples of the Company’s work, the manufacture and supply of refrigeration plants:

- for food to be served on Pullman railway carriages;
- for the Hotel Cecil in Gibraltar;
- for Apothecaries’ Hall; and
- for Sir Ernest Shackleton’s ship Endurance.⁸

The business was presumably flourishing because, by 1924, Richard and Edith had moved home from Pinner to Mornington Crescent.⁹

The company had a wide range of customers including International Soda Fountain Limited and the Savoy Café in Blackpool. Richard was operating from leased offices in New Oxford Street and owned in his own name the Company’s main plant at City Foundry in Waltham Cross, where today the M25 crosses the Lea Valley.¹⁰

The National Archives at Kew do not hold the annual accounts of his businesses but do record their beginnings and ends. Those records show interesting changes to his business in 1924 but it is not clear whether Richard was a net gainer or loser from these changes.

⁵ True: <https://worldwide.espacenet.com/patent/search?q=Wakefield%20Charles>

⁶ True: <https://worldwide.espacenet.com/patent/search/family/032584497/publication/GB191412547A>

⁷ True: <https://worldwide.espacenet.com/patent/search/family/010195074/publication/GB183740A>

⁸ All true except Apothecaries’ Hall; source – archives of the Institute of Mechanical Engineers

⁹ Lie: 6 February 1924 appointment of receiver gives his address at 10 St Mark’s Square, Primrose Hill.

¹⁰ True: Customers – Receivers’ cashbook 1924; Assets – Agreement dated 12 July 1924. National Archives, Kew

On 5th January, Richard himself appointed a receiver over the Lea Valley Engineering Company, of which he was still the main shareholder and was a secured creditor. In February, the Company was put it into liquidation.

Two months later, he established a new company, Lea Valley Engineering (1924) Limited and by July had agreed a deal with the receiver of the old Company. Richard bought the business and assets from the previous company for £2,500 and sold them to his new company for £8,500. Those assets included the patent for his ice-cream making apparatus and various tanks, machinery and lathes at the City Foundry¹¹

Meanwhile the unsecured creditors of the old business recovered just a third of what they were owed.¹²

Despite the new company initially growing, just two years after moving the business from the old company to Lea Valley Engineering (1924) Limited, that new company was itself put into liquidation.

Hence, I also have failed to explain the source of Richard's wealth that he so generously donated to the Turners Company.

I hope, however, that I have provided some further insights into our benefactor and his life after he joined our Company. It is now clear that he returned to his original training as an engineer and one hundred years ago was instrumental in the expansion of refrigeration and ice-cream making.

¹¹True: Same documents from National Archives at Kew

¹² True: Liquidators certificate dated 21 April 1926