

GARDNER WILLIAMS DINNER – Tuesday 24th February 2015

SENTIMENT DELIVERED BY THE DEPUTY MASTER

Master, Wardens, Fellow Turners.

It is my privilege tonight as your Deputy Master to deliver the sentiment in fond remembrance of our benefactor, Richard Gardner Williams, Citizen and Turner for 18 years. It is an honour to do so but also a challenge, for two reasons:

First, the Company has already heard sixty seven previous versions, and each year it becomes progressively more difficult to introduce fresh facts or a novel format. We have already had at least two in verse, as well as one structured around an operatic theme; and

Secondly, neither his life nor his time as a Turner is very well documented. Last year on this occasion Past Master Peter Gibson's valuable researches of material newly available on the internet filled out some of the gaps in the account included in our company history.

Notably, Peter argued convincingly that our benefactor would have wished to be called Gardner rather than Richard Williams. I shall describe him thus but he remains an enigma. In the case of speeches with little fresh to say an enigma is sometimes preferable to hard fact. You may recall one of the final lines from *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*: "When the legend becomes fact, print the legend".

Tonight, thanks to the genealogical expertise of our Master, I shall try to shine some light on Gardner Williams' Welsh connections. But first I should outline the essential facts. He was born in Cheshire on 24th February 1866; the birth being registered in Birkenhead, as close to the Welsh border on the River Dee as makes no difference. He was, therefore, a mid Victorian, enjoying as he grew up the economic opportunities of an Empire on which the sun famously never set. The world he came into was, however, a troubled one. The War Between the States in North America had ended the previous year, and in the summer after his birth Prussia won a Seven Week War with Austria which was the key to creating a united Germany. Who then knew where that was to lead? In the City of London on 11th May "Black Friday" saw scenes of commercial panic following the collapse of the merchant bank Overend and Gurney.

However, then as now, life went on and if we had been dining here we would have overlooked a large building site to the south as the Victoria Embankment was constructed by Bazelgette to cover a giant sewer eliminating the Great Stink from the Thames. And Greathead's invention of a refined tunnelling shield that year was integral to the construction of the deep tube network – the Crossrail project of its day.

Gardner Williams was, of course, blissfully unaware of these developments in his cradle, but engineering was to play a big part in his life. He grew up in Cheshire, the son of a railway accountant, and he served an engineering apprenticeship. He put that training to good use both as a commercial traveller in lubricants to the railway industry, and later, possibly for his own account and thus a potential source of his wealth, in the design, manufacture and installation of refrigeration equipment.

His railway contacts may be presumed to have led to his admission to the Freedom and Livery of our Company on 16th January 1913, around the time when he went into the refrigeration business. He and his wife enjoyed the social occasions which followed.

So much so that some fifteen years later, and three years before his death, he made the will which bequeathed nine tenths of his estate to the Company, and one tenth to his family church at home in Cheshire, after life interests in the income to his wife and sister. His wife died in 1945, having been invited to dine with the Company on several occasions. She apparently declined these invitations as she did not wish to travel to London from the home in the north she shared with her sister in law, who herself died four years later.

So, although he had died in 1931, when the estate was valued at £43,402, approximately £4 million today, it was not until the immediate post war period that the Company received its legacy. The Court invested it wisely, and successive investment committees have husbanded it. Thus enabling the Company to enjoy the robust financial position reported at Common Hall earlier this evening, and us all to savour the splendid feast put before us tonight.

What then of his Welsh connections? I am pleased to report we can now establish beyond doubt he was in Wales for at least one day. That day was, however, arguably of considerable importance in the history of our company.

On 6th March 1895 Gardner Williams married Edith Helen Harrison in Llandaff Cathedral, or *Eglwys Gadeiriol Llandaff* to the Master and me. Those of you who have visited the Millennium Stadium – scene of several Welsh triumphs over the English in recent years, but sadly not this year although we did win the first half – may have noticed the River Taff flowing swiftly to the sea alongside the west flank of the stadium. If you follow that river north for two miles or so you come to Llandaff, now a delightful suburb of Cardiff. It is well known to both the Master and me, as he spent much of his boyhood in Whitchurch nearby, as did I mine a little further north in the coal-mining valleys cut through the hills by the Cynon and Rhondda tributaries of the Taff.

Gardner Williams was 29, a handsome, established engineer, but Edith was nine years younger. And we can imagine the eager young bride on that morning in Ivy Cottage, Freehold, Llandaff preparing for her big day. But I doubt she would have ridden in an open carriage to her wedding in the splendidly named Cathedral Church of Saints Peter, Paul, Dyfrig, Teilo and Enddogwy.

The winter of 1894/95 was one of the coldest on record with the February temperature the lowest ever recorded in the UK. The Thames froze and at Kingston horse drawn coaches crossed the ice.

By contrast, in the warmth of the southern hemisphere earlier that day England had won the Ashes at Melbourne Cricket Ground in a game described by Wisden as one of the greatest of all time. But she was in Freehold, Llandaff not Australia.

The Freehold part of the address is interesting. It is a place not a description of legal title. As a Welsh writer once put it: “Wales is culturally castrated by Non-conformism, politically raddled by Marxism, and economically exploited by England”. Because of absentee English landlords freehold properties were so uncommon in the newly urbanised parts of South Wales that a concentration of them in a desirable part of Llandaff apparently merited the unusual place name.

Edith Helen Harrison, or Edith Ellen as she appears in later census returns, is also an enigma. The marriage certificate records no rank or profession for her although her father is shown as a deceased farmer. She was born in 1875 in Westbury on Severn, Gloucestershire, on the Welsh side of the river, but neither she nor her father appear in relevant census returns prior to her marriage so she may have lived abroad. She was resident within the parish at the time of the wedding which was by licence presumably because her groom was not.

And as we picture her short journey from Ivy Cottage to the Cathedral, wrapped up warm against the cold, we will have to use our imagination to recapture the exact appearance of the wedding venue, for during the Cardiff blitz on 2nd January 1941 it was extensively damaged by a *Luftwaffe* parachute mine. Only Coventry Cathedral fared worse, and, as the Archbishop of Canterbury may care to note, an apology from the Head of the German Lutheran Church is still awaited.

Although the layout still generally follows the foundations laid down by the Normans in 1107 and later additions, it was substantially re-constructed after the war, and is somewhat different today from how it would have been for the young couple. Perhaps Edith, in her northern retirement home, heard of the destruction as a sad reminder of her romantic day there 46 years earlier.

What happened to them after the wedding? We know the marriage was a long and happy one, as evidenced by Gardner Williams’ solicitude to provide for his widow after his death, albeit their union was not blessed by children. Had they appeared it is unlikely that a solicitous father would have been quite so generous to the Company. It is also inherently probable in the circumstances that the decision to make the bequest was shared by Gardner with Edith, who presumably assented to his plans.

We may, therefore, regard the day of the wedding as a truly important one in the history of our Company, and extend our thanks to Edith for her part in our good fortune, as well as to Wales and the Welsh for their part in making it happen.

I will close by adopting some of the words of the then Master at the first commemoration dinner in 1948.

Fellow turners “let us remember with gratitude and joyful thanksgiving the man who was minded to honour this Company with his wealth and confidence. Let us resolve to put the legacy to good use. Let us determine to be ever mindful of his trust. Thus can we best keep green his memory that it may be an example to all and an inspiration to others.”

I ask you all to reflect on these words as we pass the Loving Cup and drink a toast in memory of our benefactor, Richard Gardner Williams.

