

Richard Gardner Williams Sentiment 2022

Master, Wardens, Fellow Turners, thank you for granting me this privilege of paying tribute to the life, work and generosity of our benefactor Richard Gardner Williams ‘RGW’.

The period of *Covid Interruptus* is over and for the first time since I joined the Company this sentiment is being delivered in the Saddler’s Hall where let me remind you the motto is: ‘Hold Fast, Sit Sure’ or, if RGW had retained his Cheshire accent, he might have said ‘Just Listen Up’.

As we look again at RGW’s life I should like you to bear in mind two themes pertinent to many life stories in the wider livery movement of The City of London:

- Leaving home and making your way in the world;
- Coming to London; and,
- being noticed by your peers for what you can do and what you do contribute.

In framing this sentiment, I might have looked to Dick Whittington BUT, as a personal indulgence, I turned to Alan Bennett for inspiration.

In a sketch written and performed by him he played the part of a vicar who had travelled by rail to give a sermon at another parish. As he exited the station without showing his ticket a voice behind him called “Oy mate, where do you think you’re going?”

and so, tonight, I ponder whether RGW ever asked himself that question.

RGW was born 156 years ago today on 24 February 1866 at Long Barrow, Cheshire. His grandfather was an established farmer in the village. His father, Thomas Williams, had already made a break with farming, was an accountant working in Birkenhead and later Chester.

RGW attended King's School, Chester. One might assume he was not put under any pressure to stay and work in Chester or the family farm. Indeed, with the benefit of a good school education, he may well have been encouraged to look further afield.

In 1882, aged 16 and building on a childhood interest in engines, he became a 'premium apprentice' at the Crewe locomotive works and was later appointed to the drawing office of Laird Brothers, shipbuilders of Birkenhead.

Laird Brothers had been responsible since 1838 for the development of steam powered commercial and naval ships. Laird Brothers would later, but probably after RGW had moved on, merge with Johnson Cammell, railway locomotive engineers of Sheffield, to become Cammell Laird.

Big steam engines; locomotives; the smell of the sea; the bustle of Liverpool; the stories of faraway places.

Other famous families operating in the north west and with overseas operations included the Leverhulme Brothers – later Unilever -- and the Vestey family wholesale meat and food producers. Between them, these companies owned and operated large estates in Africa, Australia, New Zealand and Argentina serviced, in the case of the Vestey family by their own shipping line, Blue Star, operating from both Liverpool and London.

RGW might well have formed an appetite for overseas travel at this time but stuck to what he knew. - For much of the nineteenth century lubricants were by-products of agriculture: animal fats or castor oil. RGW is likely to have had some familiarity with both.

Some years later RGW was appointed by Charles Cheers Wakefield as an engineer with the Vacuum Oil Company and became the company's sales representative selling lubricating oils to railway engineering companies in Cheshire and Staffordshire. - One talented Cheshire lad had spotted another.

From hereon the story is perhaps that of the two Likely Lads

In 1899 Wakefield left the Vacuum Oil Company, came to London and formed his own company C. C. Wakefield & Company Limited. RGW, no doubt at Wakefield's invitation, joined the new company, indeed he was listed as one of its founders.

The company established its early reputation in locomotive lubricants. There would have been a similar demand for marine engine lubrication but RGW concentrated on railways and, having established contacts with agents of the Argentinian railways, made a number of visits to South America in the first decade of the twentieth century.

As an aside, it should be noted that the task of selling in Argentina at this time would not have been an easy one. Argentina was not part of the British Empire; the over exuberance of constructing railways in Britain and America was past its peak. There was considerable competition, so RGW would have required to exercise his full skills as a salesman in that market.

As testimony to the efforts of RGW and his generation, it is worthwhile, if you are ever in Buenos Ayres, to visit both the main station and the railway museum nearby and take note of the range of railway equipment Britain sold to Argentina in that era – every thing from cast iron stations down to oil cans. All with the metal badges of their British manufacturer.

Between 1887 and 1912 at least ten members joining the Turners had connections with South American railways. Amongst them was Felix Fighiera who, on admission in 1904, was acting secretary of the Buenos Ayres and Pacific Railway Company. He served as Master for two successive years 1912 and 1913. In 1906 Charles Cheers Wakefield joined the livery. He joined the Court in 1912. He never became Master but, as Sir Charles Wakefield, served as Lord Mayor in 1915.

RGW was amongst good company. - On 16 January 1913 he was admitted both as a freeman and to the livery by Felix Fighiera and supported by Charles Wakefield.

Later that year RGW was accompanied by his wife Ellen at the Livery dinner.

By about this time, thanks to recent research by Past Master Gibson, we believe that RGW he had joined the Lea Valley Engineering Company, specialists in commercial refrigeration, as a director at a time when it was supplying refrigeration equipment for Shackleton's ship "Endurance".

Both Wakefield and RGW had been too old to serve in the First World War. Both had enjoyed considerable success. Whether out of conscience or duty both were generous philanthropists: Shortly after the end of World War One Wakefield was instrumental in financing the purchase of Talbot House in Poperinghe near Ypres from which the Toc H movement grew.

Also, as the City marks the 900th anniversary of Thomas Becket's birth, it might be noted that in 1930 Wakefield, financed National art Collections Fund to purchase of the 'Howard Grace Cup' for the V and A Museum. The cup comprises a simple ivory cup, encased in a gold and silver encasement, the ivory cup believed to have been a personal possession of Thomas Becket.

Given the close friendship of these two gentlemen, it is highly likely that RGW could have contributed to both these acts of philanthropy but such was the modesty of both men that the public record of their generosity is hard to find.

So far as we now know RGW remained with the Lea Valley Engineering Company until he retired to Torquay in 1930. He died in February 1931 shortly before his 65th birthday.

But I have not completed the travelogue of RGW.

On 16 February 1917, RGW's longtime friend, mentor and sponsor, now, Sir Charles Wakefield was created Baronet of Saltwood.

“Where is Saltwood?” you ask

Near Hythe in the County of Kent!

There must be a good chance that RGW was invited to visit. RGW's journey in life was complete. He had made it to KENT!

Ladies and Gentlemen

RGW's bequest is the foundation of our survival as a Livery. The purpose of his gift was not just about a commemorative dinner. It placed upon all of us a duty and a responsibility:

- Our duty this evening is to remember Richard Gardner Williams' generosity;
- To ask ourselves, as Turners, “where do we think we are going?”; and,
- For each of us to commit to play a part in the Company's future.

Please Stand

RICHARD GARDNER WILLIAMS 1866 -1931

In Piam Memoriam