

Richard Gardner Williams Sentiment – 23 February 2023

Master, Wardens, Liverymen and Freeman of the Turners company

You may not all know that this will be 75th sentiment for RGW - and as your Deputy Master, it's a privilege (and something of a challenge) to delve into his life to find something fresh!

We've learnt a lot about him during this time (and from scant information available) with impressively researched papers, to delivering the sentiment in poetic verse and even based on an operatic theme. The very first sentiment given in 1948 referred to him as extraordinary businessman and wonderful philanthropist and that we should *'remember with gratitude and joyful thanksgiving the man who was minded to honour this Company with his wealth and confidence'*.

I've been reading many of my predecessors' sentiments and on thinking about the man, there is still more to inform our memory of him. We know as a businessman he worked in railways, petrochemicals and refrigeration but we should realise that in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries, when RGW was operating, these were cutting-edge, high-tech innovative fields.

- Building on a childhood interest in engines, when he turned 16 he became a 'premium apprentice' at the Crewe locomotive works and was later appointed to the drawing office of Laird Brothers, shipbuilders of Birkenhead. The late 19th century was a great period of innovation and product development in the railway and steamship industries. These high-tech products were as exciting as the electric cars and aerospace rockets of today and as an engineer they must have been fascinating industries for Richard to have worked in.
- Ever keen for new experiences we know that from 1890 to 1899 Richard worked at the Vacuum Oil Company for Charles Wakefield (a member of our Company and Lord Mayor of London in 1915). When Wakefield moved to London he founded – with RGW and seven others - the business of Messrs C C Wakefield & Company. Their product *Castrol* was a revolutionary petrochemical lubricant replacing traditional products. In 1885 the first petrol combustion motor car was invented in Germany and the next 25 years up until the First World War new and better products were brought out every year. Of course, the motor car was an epoch-changing invention and the need for petrol and oil-based lubricants was a key part of its development, replacing the traditional 19th century lubricants that were by-products of agriculture: animal fats or castor oil. *Once again Richard was heavily involved in cutting edge technologies.* C.C. Wakefield & Co was eventually subsumed into Royal Dutch Shell.

- His final move was to yet another new industry – refrigeration with the *Lea Valley Engineering Company* - starting as a salesman, but by the 1920s was their main shareholder and with whom he stayed until just before his death in 1931. The company specialised in the manufacture of refrigeration and ice-making equipment. At the turn of the century we have another invention – this time the electric refrigerator from Hungary and these first domestic fridges appeared just as Richard was starting his company. Again, we find him at the forefront of new product development.

What else do we know about him? In 2020 PM Andrew Neill (who is sadly indisposed this evening) explored the question of where RGW's wealth came from. He was unable to reach a definitive conclusion but from his dealings with the Lea Valley Engineering Company, it showed him to have been an agile financier.

I've called him an entrepreneur and innovator, but he must also have been an extraordinary salesman! On the 5th March last year many of you will know that Ernest Shackleton's ship *The Endeavour* was discovered below the Antarctic Ice. We know from Dan Snow's TV programme about the search and the plan to bring it to the surface - and when they do they're going to find a Lea Valley Engineering Company Fridge! Only a top-class salesman is going to sell a freezer to an expedition bound for the Antarctic. I should know, having covered a 1000 kilometres camping out on the Arctic Ice. It is very very cold there and I would not have appreciated being sold more ice! And by the way, another of his customers, much closer to home, is our much-loved Apothecaries Hall.

I believe our memory of him should be more than just a businessman, engineer and philanthropist for he was also a high-tech entrepreneur, innovator and salesman. Maybe we should call him the Bill Gates or James Dyson of his time!

We owe him a great debt for his legacy which not only provides for this wonderful evening where we come together as body corporate, but allows us to make a very real impact within the art & mystere of the Turners craft in particular. I'm reminded of a message from the Master Musician following the Civic reception for our last Wizardry in Wood – *'it was the absolute highlight of my two years as Master'*. We should be in no doubt of RGW's part in allowing us to share this glorious craft to great acclaim, and a little envy, within the City and wider public – and we can all feel an enormous sense of pride to be part of this ancient company.

So as we prepare to pass the Loving Cup and drink a toast in memory of our benefactor, Richard Gardner Williams, let us reflect on the words of the late Alan Fagg, Past Master and formerly both Chaplain to and Father of the Company:

As years go by, till we are old,
This tale will yet again be told,
A tale related loud and oft
In accents awed, sublime and soft...
So Master if thy will it be
Let us stand and we shall see
Each other's joy and gratitude
For riches to us all endued,
By one who spreads our bread with Jam
Richard - In Piam Memoriam

Melissa Scott, Deputy Master

7.5 minutes