

Master, Wardens, Liverymen and other Members of the Company.

In researching the life of our benefactor Richard Gardner Williams, I was struck by the way his life had somehow been in a parallel universe to my own life and that of my family. He was a

Mechanical Engineer and so am I.

He was born in 1866 and we should of course remember that today would have been his 150th birthday. Where was he born ? - in Birkenhead about 2 miles from where I was born and spent my childhood. Indeed his birthplace was a mere 300 yards from the residence of my paternal grandmother. He went to school in Chester – my father and grandfather went to school in Chester. This is getting creepy.

In 1881 at the age of 15 he started a Premium Apprenticeship in the locomotive works of the London & North Western Railway Company in Crewe. The LNWR was a huge company and indeed it was to become the largest joint stock company in the world. His father, a railway accountant, must have worked for the LNWR to get the apprenticeship for his son and would have had to stump up £200 – the going rate - for the 5 year apprenticeship. Richard was on one month's trial initially, earning 4/-per week (that's 20p). Company rules stipulated that he had to live within 2^{1/2} miles of the works. The working day was 6.am to 5.30pm with an hour and a half off for meals, Monday to Friday and 6.am to 12.30 pm on Saturday before returning to Chester for the weekend. The works were on a vast scale, employed nearly 6000 men, had its own steelworks and foundries and were totally gas-lit. It must have been very hard graft as he moved from machine shop to fitting shop to erecting shop to millwrights' shop interspersed with formal technical classes in the Mechanics Institute.

But he completed his 5 years apprenticeship before moving to Laird Brothers (later Cammell-Lairds) at the Birkenhead Iron Works in the design office.

He then moved to employment with the Vacuum Oil Company, an American company selling the specialist high temperature oils and heavy lubricants for the railway industry, for which he now clearly had the necessary technical skills. Those who knew him reported on his being a likeable and agreeable companion and a good salesman.

In 1895 he married Edith Harrison in Llandaff Cathedral but little is known of her or her family except she was born in Westbury –on-Severn (not 2 miles away from where my wife Ann’s grandfather had a ministry) This is getting creepier by the minute.

Like me he moved South from the dark satanic mills of Cheshire. He joined the newly established Wakefield Oil Company in 1899 where he became the special representative to South American Railways, English companies largely financed and run from England. He was expected to “network” with the English management of these railways particularly on the technical side He was a founder member of the Argentine Club (later the Canning Club). No doubt he was also a member of the LNWR Crewe Premium and Pupils’ Association who met frequently in London and included many of the most senior railway figures in Britain and the World.

Joining the Turners in 1913 he was part of a “Railway Group” of a dozen or so Liverymen.

One measure of his success in London may be reflected by the houses in which he lived, starting with a modest flat in Willesden, then a larger house bordering leafy Pinner Park and then to a substantial property off Regents Park.

Richard died in retirement on 13th February 1931 without issue and was buried back amongst his family roots in Great Barrow outside Chester. You will not be surprised to learn that the paternal side of my family were buried in the next parish Christleton. He had willed the major part of his estate , some £40,000, to the Turners Company which eventually came onto our books in 1948 with a requirement that it was to hold a Dinner every year in his name.

So I would ask you all at this stage to be upstanding so we can toast our benefactor (pause)

We should remember his hard school of learning in those early days. We should wish him well on what would be his 150th birthday today and we should thank him for his generosity in providing funds for our dinner tonight.

Richard Gardner Williams – Happy birthday and thank you

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