

RICHARD BIGNELL - MYSTERY MAN

Over the past few years whilst transcribing the wills of 18th and 19th century Fairford residents, one name has cropped up again and again as a witness to the wills. Richard Bignell acted as a witness to no less than 27 wills of Fairford people between 1768 and 1803. So who was Richard Bignell and why did he witness so many wills? Before the 20th Century most wills were witnessed by family members, close friends, business partners or neighbours. Richard Bignell does not appear to have been related to any of the deceased and surely he could not have been a neighbour to 27 people who died within the space of 35 years unless he was phenomenally unlucky. A search of the Fairford parish register which dates from 1617 reveals that nobody of the surname Bignell was baptised, married or buried in Fairford, at least not in St Mary's churchyard. Records for the Baptist and other non-Church of England churches in Fairford are unfortunately incomplete but no Bignell can be found in the surviving records. Richard Bignell does not appear in any of the annual censuses for Fairford which probably indicates that he had died or moved before the 1841 census, the first census to include names of all residents. Neither does he appear in the surviving 18th or 19th century electoral registers for Fairford, meaning that he did not own significant property in the town.

The clue to Richard's identity only came when reading carefully through the transcriptions of the wills, one will in particular. Alexander Ready came to live in Fairford in about 1715 having studied law in the Middle Temple in London to become an attorney (solicitors were usually called attorneys in the 18th Century). Alexander died in 1775 and is mentioned on two memorial tablets inside St Mary's church. One of the tablets commemorates his second wife Sarah but the other could be confusing at first sight because it commemorates Alexander Colston, late of Filkins. Seven years after Sarah died in 1731 Alexander Ready married Sophia Edwards, a great niece of Edward Colston, a wealthy merchant of Bristol who today is either revered or reviled in equal measure for his philanthropy or his involvement in the slave trade. In 1755 Alexander and Sophia had their surname legally changed to Ready Colston to conform to a clause in Edward Colston's will which stipulated that any husband of his female descendants would have to change his name to Colston in order to inherit. This was a smart move because in 1762 Sophia's elder sister died and Sophia became the last surviving heir of Edward Colston's remaining fortune which she and Alexander then inherited. Although Alexander and Sophia lived in Filkins Hall after their marriage, he still retained his business premises in Fairford, almost certainly in the building that is now called Colston House in the Market Place.


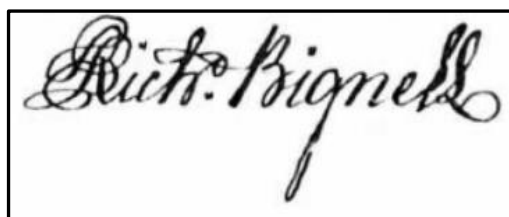
In Alexander's will he left to "my clerk Mr Richard Bignell one hundred guineas over and above what I may be indebted to him at the time of my decease" (i.e. his salary). Alexander also appointed Richard to be one of his trustees for a trust set up for Alexander's son Robert. Further research revealed that Richard Bignell of Filkins had been granted his Articles of Clerkship on 1 May 1756 when he was employed by Alexander Ready.

So the mystery of Richard Bignell is solved. He was not a resident of Fairford after all but the clerk of Fairford's most prominent attorney of the 18th Century. This very probably means that at least the early wills witnessed by Richard were handled by Alexander Ready Colston. However, 20 of the 27 wills witnessed by Richard were

made after Alexander's death in 1775. This suggests that Richard was still working in the legal business in some capacity. Alexander's wife Sophia died in 1790 and in her will she appointed Richard as one of her trustees and one of her executors so there was still a close connection between the Colstons and Richard Bignell.

Richard died on 15 July 1817 and was buried at Broadwell near Filkins. He is commemorated by a stone tablet on the external wall of the church of St Peter and St Paul at Broadwell. The tablet records that Richard was 83 years of age when he died so was born in or about 1735. Crucially the tablet also states that Richard was "late of Filkins, attorney at law". Having placed Richard at Filkins a search of wills made in the area shows that he witnessed at least seven wills between 1761 and 1790: three from Filkins residents; two from Kencot; one from Broadwell: and one from Clanfield. Undoubtedly there would have been more. It is ironic that when Richard wrote his own will in 1813 and had it witnessed he later added two codicils which he failed to have witnessed so the codicils had to be confirmed by two of his friends as being in his own hand writing.

A particular feature of the wills witnessed by Richard Bignell is his distinctive signature which hardly varied as shown in the wills of Esther Tovey written in 1776 and Elizabeth Stratford written in 1784, both widows of Fairford.

A rectangular box containing a handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Rich. Bignell". The signature is written in black ink on a white background.A rectangular box containing a second handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Rich. Bignell". This signature is nearly identical to the one in the first box, demonstrating consistency in his handwriting.