

W James Stainer

1868 - 1937

Headmaster of York Place and, briefly, Varndean Boys' School 1902 - 1932

William was a Shropshire lad, born in Shrewsbury in 1868, to parents who also hailed from the town.

His father, also William, started work as a coach painter, Shrewsbury being an important railway junction in those days. By 1881, he had been promoted to railway foreman. Most men in their road also worked on the railways. His paternal grandfather, James Caser Stainer, born in Dover, had been a sergeant in the local militia, promoted to Drum Major by 1861.

His Mother, Sarah Jane (nee Davies) was the daughter of a local postman and had worked as a domestic servant to a butcher's family before her marriage.

'Our' William's generation found work outside the railways. In 1881, we know that his older sister, Jessie, was a school teacher at the tender age of 15. 13 year old William was a school monitor. In other words he was considered bright enough to help the teachers by instructing small groups of pupils. Ten years later, he was a trained Chemistry teacher, working at York Place and boarding in London Road, Brighton. Unfortunately, we don't know where he trained or if this was his first job.

At some point he had met Mary Jane Witcomb, born in Monmouthshire, but then living in Swindon and they married there in 1891, during the summer holiday (as any self-respecting teacher would!).

Mary's father was a foreman, again in the local (and much larger) railway works. However, before we think that that was the link, she and her brother were both teachers in Swindon by 1891. Can we speculate that the two men trained together?

From now onwards, and for reasons hidden in time, Mary Jane became known as 'Jennie' - even on her death certificate.

William was ambitious. At the age of 27, he gained a BA at Westminster Teacher Training College. This paid off quickly as the Stainers moved to Widnes in Lancashire in 1897, so he could take up the post of Head of Widnes Higher Grade Technical Day School. They could afford a female servant, who was probably needed as there were now two children, both born in Brighton, William Witcomb and Edith Mary.

William returned to Brighton in 1902 to take over the headship of York Place. He also became very active in the Freemasons. The 1911 census showed the family living at 48 Osmond Road, Hove, in an upper middle class neighbourhood. Edith was at school and William junior was an engineering student at London University. They had a servant to look after them and the 9 rooms in the house. At some point later, the family moved to 8 Hangleton Road.

Incidentally, William Witcomb went on to learn to fly during the First World War. He was a 2nd Lieutenant in the 4th Royal Sussex Regiment, going on to join the Royal Flying

Corps. He obtained his Flying Certificate in 1916, having trained on a Maurice Farman Biplane. For the remainder of the war, he was variously involved in bombing raids over enemy trenches in France and anti-Zeppelin duties back home. He went on to pursue an engineering career, working at Farnborough Airfield and patenting some inventions. Sadly, he predeceased his parents in 1936.

As for Edith, she nursed as a VAD (Voluntary Aid Detachment), married in 1925 and went on to have a son. Obviously a good artist, she had a painting accepted by the Royal Academy in 1960. She died in 1969.

William Stainer masterminded the move to Varndean, but retired due to ill health. He died on 17th March 1937 in Hove. Jennie survived him by several years, dying in Brighton in 1946.