

## Richards Family History

The surname Richards, like Richardson, is of patronymic origin. Surnames developed in the early medieval period in order to distinguish between the many bearers of the limited number of Christian names. One method was to ascribe the father's name to the son e.g. John Richard's son. Other developments came from occupation e.g. John le Smith; place of origin e.g. John Wootton; or a recognisable characteristic e.g. John Redhead.

The influence of Norman French following the 1066 conquest can be seen in the dominance of its Christian names in the Middle Ages, the old Anglo-Saxon or Scandinavian names having virtually disappeared. In the 1337 Lay Subsidy taxation list for Wootton, Berkshire the following names (in their latinised form) are pre-eminent: John, Thomas, Roger, Henry, William, Matthew, Hugh and Richard.

The name Richard has its origins in two Germanic elements *ric* (*ruler*) and *hard* (*strong/powerful*). Although French speaking, the Normans were the descendants of Viking invaders and the Germanic influence either came directly from them or from the Franks whose conquest of Gaul modified the Gallo-Roman language developed during the Roman Empire to produce the basis of modern French.

Relying upon the consistency of documentary evidence, it seems clear that forebears by the name of Richards were resident for centuries in the village of Wootton, Berkshire (from 1974 Oxfordshire), a few miles from Oxford. The first direct reference discovered is in the Lay Subsidy taxation list of 1524 in which a Thomas and a John Richards appear. At this time the estates of Wootton and Boarshill belonged, as they had for about four hundred years, to Abingdon Abbey. It is impossible to say whether any of those named in the 1337 Lay Subsidy were definitely ancestors of later Richards but it seems probable that their forebears had worked on the land in this area through the early feudal system and were possibly descendants of the Anglo-Saxon settlers who founded "Woodtun".

With the dissolution of the monasteries the estates passed in 1538 to the Hyde family and the manor of Wootton and Boarshill was established. There are few other taxation records from the sixteenth century but Simon Richards appears as liable for taxation in 1589. Both Simon and a Thomas Richards are named as jurymen at the manorial court in the late sixteenth century, so were obviously prominent village inhabitants. There are extant wills for a John Richards in 1565, Margaret in 1573, Simon in 1591 and Thomas in 1609. Such evidence suggests that these were yeoman farmers with sufficient land and possessions to warrant inheritance by probate. Thereafter, in the seventeenth century references cannot be found in wills, taxation records or parish registers until near the end of the century. Since the records available from the eighteenth century onwards provide such a clear picture of family lineage, it seems unlikely that the Richards were without land or farms during the large part of the seventeenth century. Apparently many records disappeared or were destroyed at the time of the Civil War and its aftermath and this may explain the gap in continuity of records.

Certainly in the eighteenth century the Richards, as freehold farmers, enjoyed a measure of prosperity in Wootton, although it has been suggested that even they found difficulty in meeting the costs of maintaining land and boundaries required under the terms of the Enclosures Act in the late 1790s.

For whatever reason , it was at this time that Thomas Richards took an opportunity to acquire land in the neighbouring village of Cumnor in 1799 and the general balance of residence for the Richards moved there. The land he acquired is referred to in the Cumnor Manor Court Roll of 1813 when landowners' estates were called in by the manorial Lord Bertie prior to the Enclosures Act of 1814. This land became Farmoor Farm which eventually passed out of the hands of the Richards family. Members of the family remained in Wootton ( William Richards, who served as constable to the Cumnor manor court, and then James Richards continued to farm) or married and moved elsewhere, but the name of Richards was now less strongly associated with farming in the village.

Two branches of the family farmed and held land during the nineteenth century in Cumnor: both Thomas and then his son James and Salisbury Richards ( who owned Swetman's Farm) served on the manor court jury for years: other members of the numerous branches worked as agricultural labourers, including our direct ancestors, a pattern which had perhaps prevailed for many years. However, as agriculture became less labour intensive, other opportunities had to be sought. Charles Richards b 1850 worked in the brickyards in Cumnor, but his son and my own grandfather, Henry Charles Richards b. 1876 was one who broke with a tradition of centuries. Starting his working life as a groom in the village, he was also a member of the Berkshire Militia. He saw an opportunity for a fresh career and joined the Royal Engineers which eventually led to him settling in Cardiff. Although some members of the family remained in Cumnor into the twentieth century, the majority had left to work and to found families elsewhere. Today there do not appear to be any residents of the name of Richards in the village.

Primary sources for establishing the Richards family line have been the Censuses from 1841 to 1911 and the parish registers of Wootton St. Peter and Cumnor St. Michael.

The Cumnor Parish Record, a unique historical website, has been invaluable in providing an initial impetus for research and a wealth of additional documentation and links.

The Bodleian Library in Oxford holds the Cumnor Manor Court Roll and book for the nineteenth century.

The National Archives hold the only extant manor Court Rolls for Wootton and Boarshill (late sixteenth century) and the original Lay Subsidy and Hearth tax records for the medieval period.

Also to be found there are Henry Richards military record from enlistment to retirement in 1920 and the Boer War medal rolls.

The Berkshire Record Office holds a number of Richards wills from the sixteenth to nineteenth century and records relevant to enclosures in Wootton in the late eighteenth century.

\* Details recorded in italics are assumed or proposed although not fully substantiated.