

My great grandfather, Alfred William Wills, died in 1949, the year before I was born; however, he was always a presence and, it seemed to me, spoken of almost reverentially. I knew he had been Mayor of Bath- where my family had lived for well over a century- and that he had owned and run a building company: "A. W. Wills & Sons". I knew he was a plumber by trade and had somehow "bettered himself" so that he was able to buy, outright, a splendid detached Georgian house on the prestigious Bathwick Hill and employ staff to help run the house and look after his family. I knew he was a religious man and considered philanthropic. But the details were a bit of a mystery.

My mother Esme, brother and I lived with Alfred Wills' daughter- my grandmother Elsie- from when I was about 5 years old. Elsie was also a well-known local politician and a redoubtable woman in her own right. I suspect that Elsie had an uneasy relationship with her father so the "messages" I was getting about him as I grew up were quite mixed. However, one day, years after my grandmother had died, my cousin Jane found some papers in the attic of a house where Grandpa Wills had lived and she kindly copied them and passed them on to my mother.

I started doing some genealogical research a few years ago and my mother remembered the papers and I now have them. They are Alfred Wills' autobiographical notes- but with bits missing; and also diaries of trips he took in the 1930's to Italy and North America; again, these are incomplete. I also have newspaper clippings covering many years of family history. I have a copy of his will- he gave away plenty of money during his life - but on his death his estate was valued, in today's prices, at something over £650,000 (What subsequently happened to this money is another story.....!)

When he was born in January 1872 he lived in a two roomed tenement with his parents, his father running the family concern- also a plumber.

So, how did this happen?

The answer in large part is actually "because he learned to dowse for water".

What follows is Alfred Wills' own words:

Just a few "weird" experiences of my early years.

When I was about six years of age, my maternal grandfather died. He was a Warder in Twerton Gaol. His death was quite unexpected, though he was ill with diabetes.

We were living in the house now known as 5a Argyle Street, and the structural condition is practically identical today.

In the kitchen, there was a large "Yorkshire" range, six feet long with an open fire in the centre, and a large oven on the right side. This oven would never get hot, and consequently was never used. You could almost keep your hands on the top plate, near the wall, even with a large fire.

My father and mother were sitting by the fireside, at 9:30 p.m.. On the "cold" hob, father had set an earthenware "presentation mug" which belonged to my grandfather. Father was

sipping his beer from it, and had finished, placing the mug as I have said. When he finally placed it down, there immediately came a "ticking" in the cup, which caused him to pick it up and look at it. It was perfectly sound, and was a valued article to my grandfather.

The ticking repeated, and again my father looked at it, placing it back gently. Again it ticked, and then "fell to pieces" on the hob, without anyone touching it. Father at once got up. "Lizzie, put on your clothes, something has happened to father, and if we don't hurry we shall miss the bridge. (My grandfather lived at Twerton, and in those days the Midland Bridge was closed at 10 p.m.) Hurrying, they met my uncle George, rushing to tell them that grandfather had just died suddenly.

In the same house:

I was thirteen or fourteen years of age when my sister "Flossie" died. She was about 5-6 years old, when she died.

The night before she died, there was a persistent "tapping" on the "single matched board" partition, which divided the stairs from the room. My father examined the boards, several times, and then, standing on the stairs, said: "I know my daughter is dying, go away." Mother and father, both declared, the tapping then ceased. I remember it as well, as he used to refer to it, and swear about it, when he had taken "more than was good for him."

The next morning, as she dies in the afternoon, my sister kept holding out her hands, exclaiming: "Why don't you come nearer, so that I can catch hold of your hands?" My mother, thinking it was a certificate of mine, she was looking at, got up and took it down, when my sister said: "Not that Mummy, you silly, can't you see these lovely faces, smiling at us, and holding out their hands?" Later, she said: "Mummy, hark: there's lovely music and singing."

She died very peacefully, 2 hours later.

When I was at Woodhall Spa in 1887, we had 2 dark haired men, named Witt, in our employ. They lived at Coningsby, a village five miles away, and used to walk to work and be on the job at 6 a.m. every morning.

One Monday morning, they did not turn up till 8 a.m. The eldest came to me, and said, "Boss, I'm going to have the day off to go to Spalding. My brother died last night, at Spalding." Now, I knew, he had walked five miles, and had left before any post could have arrived: there was no telephone, and no telegraph before 8 a.m. So I said: "A day for the king, you mean?", the common phrase when a man took a day off. "No," he said, "Last night at a quarter to ten, we were sitting talking, listening to the rain, when my brother opened the door from the road, stood in the doorway, looked at us, smiled all round at us, and closed the door and was gone, before we could say anything. I rushed out, but he wasn't in the road or anywhere around. He died suddenly guv'nor, last night, that's what that is, and I'm going to see about it." It was true. The "time they lost" was the only time they were absent for the whole job.

A few years later, W. J. Holloway was well known at Argyle*¹ for some years, during Mr. Turner-Smith's time.

One morning, going to business, he said: "Alf, I've an aunt in America and she died last night."

"How do you know?"

"She came to see me, in my room, during the night. I haven't heard from her for years and I don't know her address, but note the date, as I shall be sure to hear."

Three weeks later, he showed me a letter he had just received from America, and she had died, as he said.

About that time, I attended what was called a séance, in Daniel Street. The only persons present, being members of the aristocracy of Bath at that time. Capt. & Mrs. Gataker, were

the leaders of Bath Society, at that time, and when they attended the theatre, it was always billed: "Under the patronage" etc.

It was a Sunday night. After some "prayers" the room was darkened but not before I had permission to hold a match and box in my hand. On the side wall, within six feet of myself, a light appeared, like the light of a lantern a long way off. Gradually, it seemed to advance and get brighter and brighter. I was non-plussed and kept my eye fixed on it, when I suddenly became aware of a shadowy human form, rising in front of me, as though someone had bent double and was straightening upright again. There it was, close enough for me to touch it, rising.

I was so startled, that I struck my match, nothing there, and every person sitting still. I insisted on the full lights, and would have no more.

But all of them insisted that I was very psychic, and prevailed upon me some months later, to try clairvoyance, I think they called it.

I had seen some of this and thought it all humbug, and was quite willing to prove it so, for myself.

So I consented to try. When Mrs. Gataker made the passes in front of my face, I pretended to do just what I had seen the other mediums do, and to the best of my knowledge and belief, I humbugged them so completely, that I dared not venture again, for fear of being found out, and I dared not face this, for business reasons.

But the extraordinary part of the story is this: I was considered so successful, and what I said proved to be so extraordinarily true, so they said, that for years afterwards I was continually being pressed to submit myself again, in many of the large houses, in Queen Square, Royal Crescent, Circus etc.

But my fame also spread. Years afterwards, in various parts of the country, I was asked if I was the man they had heard of, in this connection. W. T. Stead, was publishing "Borderland" and asked for an interview. I called, I think it was in Norfolk Street, and saw a lady, who said she was "Miss X" but I stoutly disclaimed any connection with Spiritualism.

I have never had any other dealings with the question, though I have had other experiences, not as pronounced as those I have quoted, but I do sometimes wonder – in view of the wide testimony I have referred to – whether I did humbug.

That I set out to do it, and felt I had accomplished it, I am quite certain.

It must be remembered, I did not know any other person out of the twenty, who were there, except Leicester Gataker and his mother. It was the other people who spread my fame.

Mentioning Leicester Gataker brings me to the outstanding events of my business career.

It was in 1898 that I first met him, in business. He had started as a Professional Water Expert, and had some trouble with a small water supply, in a well, on Little Solsbury.

This old well, only required deepening two feet, but it was a most dangerous job, and no one would undertake it.

Against father's advice, I took it on, and did the job myself. It makes me shudder today, when I realise the risk I took. The old sides were so rotten that they might have collapsed any moment, and the trouble I had made me almost throw up the sponge, but, I could never face defeat, kept on, and succeeded.

This laid the foundation of a lifelong friendship, and a business which materially helped to make the fortune of our family.

My father was definitely opposed to any part in it, and for three or four years, I carried on, demonstrating to him by figures and cash, "that it was better than Plumbing."

I had all sorts of curious experiences, some of which I will relate.

My first and earliest was: At Ashbrittle Rectory, we had predicted and guaranteed a supply of water at 150 feet for a given sum of money, complete with pumps, tanks etc.. At this time I had notions of properly sharing with the employees, a proportion of profits.

So, before the men started out, I called them (four) together, and told them that I would give them 10% of any profit made. They were to be paid, hourly, just as before, and whether the job made a profit or loss, was no concern of theirs: all our old arrangements, under which we

had been working stood, but, I wanted them to share in any success. Each job would stand by itself, if we made no profit, well, they were no worse off than under the existing arrangement, but, if we made a profit I wanted them to share.

Curiously enough, on this – my first and last experiment- all went extraordinarily well. From the appearance of the ground, we had expected – as all others did – solid rock from the surface, and had estimated accordingly.

Instead, we got into a pocket of clay, and the boring which we had calculated to take three months, was everything completed, pump installed, a gloriously successful job, in three weeks.

We had completed for about £100, what we had calculated would cost £300. The glorious uncertainty of contracting.

I remember, I debated with myself as to whether I ought to disclose, on this exceptional job, the extraordinary amount of profit made, but persuaded that “honesty is the best policy” I paid over to the men, about £25, where I had calculated it would be about £5. I thought I made it clear to them, that this was highly exceptional etc. and despatched them to another job, in high spirits.

Then I went off for a three week business tour, a new job each day, in Scotland. *2

When I came back, I looked through the “daily reports”, and this gang was doing exceptionally badly, so I took the next train to see what was the matter. Fortunately, I met the Agent for the property, who exclaimed to me he was on the point of writing to me to complain of the slow progress made.

“It is your own fault Mr. Wills. I overheard your men say, in the middle of drinking bouts, if you could afford to give them £25 bonus on three weeks, they weren’t going to work their b----- guts out.” In ten minutes, they had no further chance, so far as I was concerned, and thus ended my experiment.

But my troubles were not yet over. The Rev. gentleman, refused to pay the account, alleging that he had been grossly overcharged, in the original estimate for the work, and could have got it done by a local firm for “half the money”.

Of course this was true, when “everybody knew the conditions”, but he forgot that before we started that everyone had expected hard rock, and that no-one else would guarantee him a supply of water.

On the other hand: we had guaranteed this bountiful supply, taken the risk of the strata, and unless he had produced to him, this much needed water supply, he did not pay a single penny.

Of course Gataker was a responsible contractor, and we were only sub-contractors to him. Not being used to business, he was very greatly distressed, and rushed off to the “family lawyer”, a Mr. Adam of Queen Square, a gentleman of great reputation, amongst the aristocrats. But he was not “commercially experienced” and he advised a compromise suggestion of 25% reduction.

In fact, he wasn’t sure whether the claim could be substantiated in law, and suggested another lawyer, for such matters as these, unless his advice was followed.

This distressed Gataker still more, and he came to explain matters to me with a long face. He had a 5% commission up to 10% and in this case was entitled to £30.

I wasn’t more than 25 years, but I laughed so much at the advice he had received, that he became infected with it, and said, “If you can get this account paid, I’ll give you personally my commission. I’d like to prove to my father that old man Adam is a ‘jimmy safety breeches and has no guts’.”

I wrote two letters and one wire, and in five days got from Quicks lawyer a cheque for the full amount. But, Mr. Adam, never forgave me, and persecuted me for years afterwards.

About this time, Gataker was engaged by the Egyptian Government to go to Egypt, at a big fee and expenses. My earnings were then about £3 a week, plus what I could earn at “Water Finding.”

Another source I have used for information is the Book "The Divining Rod" by Sir William Barrett and Theodore Besterman. ^{*4} This was first published in 1926 and is subtitled "An Experimental and Psychological Investigation". Until very recently this book was out of print, but is now available in paperback. Barrett had been studying dowsing for decades.

The reason I introduce this now is that Gataker and Wills are mentioned several times. It seems that the trip they made to Egypt together- and subsequently to Tunisia- helped bind a long-term working relationship that continued when they returned to England. Indeed, Kelly's Directory of Bath in 1911 shows:

"Wills and Sons, builders" sharing the same premises as "Gataker & Wills, waterworks engineers". And again, in 1919. ^{*4}

What pleases me is that the same directory shows:

"Larkhall (an area of Bath) Liberal Club; President: Councillor A.W Wills".

It also lists the Bath City Council Committees that Alfred served on. ^{*3}

I am not so sure that many politicians these days would be proud to advertise the fact that they are dowsers....but that's another story and debate....

I now include extracts from "The Divining Rod":

"A large supply of water appears to be necessary in the manufacture of beer, for here is another brewery case. The facts are described by Mr. H. D. Yorath, the manager of Lloyd and Yorath, Ltd, of 23 High Street, Newport, Monmouth. It appears that in this case it was Gataker's assistant, A. W. Wills, who dowsed. He located several supplies of water, and recommended that a well should be sunk at one of these. Here, he declared, a supply of 800 gallons per hour would be found at a depth not exceeding 300 feet. At 120 feet 720 gallons per hour was reached and at 285 feet, when boring was stopped, the supply had reached 1200 to 1500 gallons per hour. This supply did not give out under continuous pumping.

(Another example of A. W. Wills' dowsing...)

The following account from General R. H. Jelf, of Ofcote Hurst, Ashbourne in Derbyshire...(who writes that...) "being 700 feet above the sea, it was most important to me to find water, and if possible in one of the very few fields that stand above the house. I showed (A.W. Wills) the field where I should like to find the water, and he strolled about with eyes closed, and fingers extended (no rod) until at last he seemed to strike a line like a hound. He said, "Yes, there is a good stream within 100 feet below the surface here, running in such and such a direction (pointing down towards the bottom of the {word illegible} which you know).....

I sunk a well at the point indicated, and though it is nearly the highest point in the country round, at about 50 feet such a splendid supply of water was found that the well fell in! I sunk another in the same line that he had indicated, but with more care, and after putting in a bottom at 60 feet, I got a head of 14 feet permanently in the well, sufficient to supply our house, and to give considerable aid to two farms.....

I should mention that after finding the line *without* a rod, he plucked one out of the hedge and showed that it did work as they claim. But he *found* the water without the rod, by some kind of sensation apparently."

The way that dowsing works is a familiar debate to us today- and it seems exactly the same in my great grandfather's day.

Gatker participated in a “scientific experiment” that is described in the report of the “Bath Antiquarian Field Club” from 1899. *4

Briefly, several dowzers were asked to walk across a board under which were salt cellars; then copper wire was introduced into the equation; then the dowzers were “insulated”. It would appear that the theory being tested involved some notion of electro-magnetic forces. Gatker was asked to dowse having had his copper rods in contact with iron filings and needles. There was no sign of magnetism at the start; he then walked over a known water spring and got “positive dowsing feelings” with his rods spinning (apparently for seven minutes) and still there was no magnetic field produced.

More experiments doing things with iron filings, salt, empty wine bottles followed: no conclusions could be reached except:

“From the above experiments it would seem that it is no ordinary electric or magnetic force which causes the phenomena observable in Mr. Gatker.

“May it be some form of animal magnetism which fails to shew itself experimentally? I hope that other observers, interested in this subject, may be induced to make careful experiments with other dowzers, and report their experience.”

Later in this report we read:

“Professor Barrett writes to me on July 12th 1898. “I need hardly say all ideas concerning any magnetic or electric influence are absurdly wrong. I know (some of the experimenters’) views, but their opinion is entirely unsupported by any scientific evidence. I am glad to see your experiments dispose of this vulgar error, and I will refer to your letter in my forthcoming report on the divining rod.”

There are then more comments about

“the recent discovery of a new type of obscure radiation from certain bodies, such as uranium salts, and also from numerous common bodies, with which we are surrounded, renders it conceivable that a radiation, to which opaque bodies are permeable, may be emitted by water and metals, which unconsciously impresses some persons.”

Also:

“...an impression from without appears to be gained not through the ordinary channels of sensation. Thought transference will, I believe, be found to receive remarkable confirmation with the dowsing rod.”

And:

“ Few will dispute the proposition that the motion of the forked twig is due to unconscious muscular action.”

I cannot avoid the pun - somebody seems to be hedging their bets!

One thing I note here, in light of the earlier entries from my great grandfather’s autobiography: nowhere is mentioned anything to do with what today we might term “the world of spirit”. Alfred Wills lived in the time of the rise of the séance as a social activity and a common acceptance of mediumship; yet no connection seems to be being made between that world and the world of

dowsing. Alfred himself embraced both worlds. I make no comment other than express surprise.

Which leads me on to another of Alfred Wills' stories, this time from when he was working near Tunis.

"Whilst I was there, the feast of Ramadan, was celebrated by the Arabs. They go from sundown to sundown, without food or drink. When it is over they feast and dance. I have seen them, after a feast, both in Tunis and Egypt, with their "tummies" looking as though they had footballs packed inside. They take two or three days to sleep it off.

We were granted the favour, one night, to go to the camp, and watch their religious orgies. We were made to promise, and strictly warned, that whatever we saw, we must not laugh. An American, named Sessions, who accompanied us, could not restrain himself- when he saw the weird and frenzied dancing, and the very high state of ecstasy to which they worked themselves, until they collapsed – and he laughed. Almost immediately, our Maltese interpreter, shouted, "Run for your lives."

I don't think either of us covered the half mile, in such record time, at any stage of our existence, followed by a howling frenzied mob of fanatics, who, - we were told – were shouting, "Death to the cursed Christian dogs."

Inside the house we barred and bolted windows and doors quickly, revolvers and guns were produced, whilst the Maltese parleyed with the outsiders, and eventually got them to go away. Early next morning saw Sessions' departure, in an "ice cart". It would have been impossible for him to have remained with safety.

Later, I was the only European on the station, (at the house) for three days, whilst the rest made the grand tour of the grape growing country.

I had a gang of natives, working at starting to bore a well, with a Maltese interpreter. They were very intelligent, and I had no difficulty with them, but they all thought I had dealings with the Unknown, and one of the gang, would never let me get near enough to him, for my shadow to cross him.

He was an excellent worker, but as soon as he saw me coming, he would run away, shouting what sounded like "Urscoot Ur-scoot" and would not return till I had gone.

It was explained to me that he said I had an evil spirit, in fact, was the devil himself, as he had seen me "twirling the twig" and only the devil could do that.

They were frightfully superstitious, though whether more so, than English ladies, who bow to the new moon, and turn their money, I can't say.

They were absolutely fatalistic in outlook.

One day, one of the gang, crushed his fingers in the winch, very badly.

He absolutely refused to have his wound washed, dressed, or touched in any way. He kept repeating "Kismet kismet" (It is fate).

A few days later he died in agony of blood poisoning, but no one seemed to worry.

Whilst I was alone, a curious incident happened, which no one has been able to explain to me, though many have told equally weird stories to me.

At that time, the British were in the Soudan, fighting the Mahdis. It will be remembered by those old enough, how the British at Khartoum – I think it was – captured the palace at night, by a midnight attack, and opened the tomb of "The Mahdi" *¹⁸ and destroyed the remains by burning and scattering the ashes.

That morning, at 6 a.m., I went out for my early morning visit, and the Maltese interpreter told me of the success of the British and the destruction of the tomb. He said the natives had told him, then.

Greatly excited, I rushed back to the house, and phoned the British Club, in Tunis, only to be told they knew nothing about it there, but if the natives were saying so, I might be sure they were correct.

It was mid-day before they got the "wired news" in Tunis. I believe it is 2,500 miles, as the crow flies, across the Sahara desert, between Medjez-el-Bab and Khartoum.

No population, to beat drums, signal, or otherwise communicate. How did the natives convey the news?"

So a local Tunisian sees dowsing as the work of the devil, just as some Christians did (still do) back in the UK.. And yet more fascination with "the unknown" and looking for an explanation.

There is one final anecdote I would like to include here, this one from his time in Egypt.

"Our fame had evidently spread, and we were asked to go to Cairo, to survey a site about 25 miles along the old caravan route to Suez, for His Highness, the Khedive, Abbas II.

He delighted to be able to walk about in his shirt, trousers and slippers, but found it difficult to enjoy himself thoroughly, as he was so liable to be caught, or overlooked, in his existing palaces, and so he contemplated building himself a small place, where people could not call, unexpectedly.

(Even princes and rulers are not free).

We were quartered in Shepherds Hotel, and at the next table to us at dinner, each evening, was the Maharajah of Sarawak and Suite. We were feted, that is the only term, which is correct.

Gataker went to the palace, but as he had to get an outfit of frock coat and silk hat, specially, I was left at the hotel.

But, I saw Abbas, under more informal conditions. Gataker was taken ill, and I had to carry on alone.

Abbas came out to see me at work, and I held his hands to experiment with him. A soft fat flabby personage, as you touched his flesh it seemed like soft indiarubber, it sank in and rose again almost like an indiarubber ball.

He was very delighted, and very charming to me.

He placed his private coach at my disposal, for transit, and gave me an officer, and four Egyptian soldiers, as my personal guard.

There were four horses, and a liveried driver. The horses had bells on their harness, and there was a relay every twelve miles.

Outside Cairo, we passed the camp of the XIII Lancers (I think it was) and as we approached, each time, the guard turned out.

The officer would draw his sword and salute, the Gypies would stand at attention, eyes right or left, going or coming, and I, (Alf Wills the Plumber) would have to return the salute.

How I chuckled to myself, as I thought of the officer, one of the aristocrats of England, rushing out to salute, twice a day for a week, Alf Wills the Plumber. How they would have cursed, had they guessed. But, 'twas the emblem of pomp, power, and vanity they saluted: the Coach.

One day, I picked up in the desert, two small pieces of petrified wood, perfect specimens. Brewster Bay, the Khedive's English Secretary, offered me a couple of sovereigns for them, at dinner, that night, but I refused, and have them now.

How did they come there? How many thousands of years had they been petrified. Was it a piece of a tree which Joseph had sat under? These and hundreds of other thoughts, I had then. I wouldn't part with them for anything, at that time.

When we had finished our work, Gataker wanted me to go up the Nile with him to Luxor, holiday making and sight seeing. I, very foolishly, refused. I wanted to get home. Three months was long enough for me."

An internet search on the name "Melmoth Leicester Swale Gataker" is likely to include a link to pages that show him to be a direct descendant of William the Conqueror. There is no doubt he was part of what Alfred Wills called "the aristocracy", something he was apparently sensitive about.

Here's an example; a story involving *his* grandfather, Bill, or William Wills *⁵:

Just before I was born, - at the time when the aristocrats kept trades-people in their places, and their servants below ground level – my grandfather was sent to do some plumbing repairs at 14 Pulteney Street.

Off he went, with his mate carrying the tools, he dressed as was customary for a "master man" in silk topper, with an apron to cover his clothes.

Arrived at the house, he was unable to enter by means of the "Area entrance" – the correct tradesman's entrance – as the area gate was locked. He pulled the front door, and after some minutes, the door was cautiously "opened on the chain" (a custom preserved till my time, in some instances, and my own front door still has it) and after announcing his business, he was invited to step in "on the mat and wait".

A voice from the Drawing Room floor.

"Mary, who is it?"

"Please ma'am the plumber."

"Mary, run downstairs and put the silver away immediately."

Here Bill:- unfastening his silver chain from his waistcoat, and taking out his silver "turnip" watch, calls out, " Take this watch and chain home to my missus, there's some thieves in this house."

Under the heading, "Political", Alfred writes:

My father was an advanced Radical, with a definite leaning to Republicanism. It is astonishing to look back, and remember how many were only waiting for the opportunity to declare a Republic.

Many think of "Victoria the Good". All I can say is, the memories I have of my early youth, leaves the impression that the democracy, thought of her in other terms.

Probably, Gladstone's extension of the Franchise, which was very bitterly opposed in the early eighties, had a good deal of effect, and the fact that Edward, Prince of Wales, was declared to be a friend of Gladstone, and a Liberal, helped to keep the Peace.

Yet he and Gataker found something in common- the ability to dowse for water and to make this a business.

I am not sure how closely they worked together in later years. Gataker is often reported in the newspapers and has advertisements with only his name; yet during the period that these appear he does seem to be in partnership with Alfred. Gataker also worked with another famous dowser from Bath-Mullins. Maybe then, as now, dowsers sometimes used one another to "check" their findings. Gataker also lists his address as Weston-super-Mare, Bath and Bournemouth, even when he does not appear to be living

permanently in one of these places. He is in the census as being born in Bath in early 1874; still there in 1891; married in London in 1899 but living in Bournemouth in 1911 when advertising that he worked out of Bath. He died in Poole in 1942.

Business was not always simple. Many of the newspaper reports show court proceedings naming Gataker, usually when it involved Local Authorities.

Trewman's Exeter Flying Post or Plymouth & Cornish Advertiser (Exeter) 2.6.1900

WATER DIVINING IN SOUTH DEVON

SINGULAR ACTION AGAINST AN OVERSEER.

At Newton Abbott Sessions on Tuesday, Mr. Thomas Weight, one of the overseers for the parish of Ipplepen, was summoned by Mr. F. Howard, Clerk to the Newton Rural District Council, for not paying £100, the amount of a precept issued in August last. – It will be remembered that the Council have spent some £500 or £600 in searching for water in the parish, the services of Mr. Gataker, water diviner, being requisitioned. After boring at the spot indicated by that gentleman to the depth of some 220 feet the scheme was abandoned, the rock having been reached and no water found. A large number of the ratepayers declined to pay the demands made upon them, on the ground that the Council's action in spending money on water divining was illegal. – Mr. T. Windeatt (of Totnes) appeared on behalf of the Rural District Council, and Mr. Percy Pearce (of Plymouth) on behalf of the overseers. When the case was called Mr. Pearce asked that the Bench would grant a quarter of an hour's adjournment so that Mr. Windeatt and himself and the Rural District Councillors present might have a consultation with a view to arriving at a settlement. Mr. Windeatt afterwards applied for the adjournment of the case. A great number of points arose, and adjournment would give them an opportunity of discussing how far it might be possible to come to some arrangement so as to prevent litigation on one side or the other. Matters had been brought forward to which he felt he could not bind himself; in fact, he was not authorised to do so, and it would be desirable to refer the matter back to the Rural District Council for their decision.- Mr. Pearce said he had nothing whatever to do with the withdrawal of the proceedings, but he had no doubt Mr. Windeatt had exercised a wise discretion. It was unfortunate he had not been invested with authority to enable him to agree to the terms which might be arrived at. Under the circumstances, he would ask for costs to be allowed to his clients, but he had told Mr. Windeatt that if the District Council accepted the terms he had offered he would not ask for the payments of any costs the Bench might allow him, but if further proceedings were taken he should do so.- After a consultation, the Bench adjourned the case, and allowed the question of costs to stand over until the results of the Council's decision was known.

There is a similar, earlier, case involving Amptill Urban District Council. Although subsequently the parties concerned seemed to reach an out of court settlement (as described in several newspapers of the time, including the Cardiff based Western Mail in November 1898, under the headline "LOCAL GOVERNMENT BOARD SANCTIONS THE ROD"), I think quoting the article in The Ipswich Journal of April 22nd 1898, the newspaper local to where Gataker's family came from, reveals much about the problems that dowsers had at the time.

The Ipswich Journal 22.4.1898

WATER DIVINER'S FEES SURCHARGED

----- INTERESTING TO SANITARY AUTHORITIES

Several ratepayers attended the audit of the accounts of the Ampthill Urban District Council, and objected to a payment to Mr. Leicester Gataker for divining for water. It was stated that on a similar objection last year the auditor had surcharged the fees paid to the diviner, and an appeal had been made to the Local Government Board, but had not yet been decided. Mr. Gataker had one divination in which he recommended borings in a place called Fountaine's Field, near the surface, and in the green sand. After some boring had been undertaken and a water engineer had recommended the abandonment of the work, Mr. Gataker had furnished a further divination locating ten fresh so-called springs. These, it was objected, were contrary to the first series of divinations in the same field, as at the depths indicated it was affirmed by geologists that there could be no water at all, for the boring would then be deep in the Oxford clay.

Mr. W. Casson, the Local Government Board auditor, in giving his decision, quoted Professor Barrett, who had written a monograph "on the so-called divining rod", which was published in the "Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research." Though apparently strongly biased in favour of diviners, Professor Barrett admitted that their general ideas of water were absurd, as they imagined springs to exist, like buried treasure, located to an area of a few square inches, or as underground rivers, which they professed to trace within an inch on either side. Mr. Casson stated that he could not, in the interests of the ratepayers, do other than surcharge the members with the fee objected to, as he was of the opinion that Mr. Gataker had, with a view of obtaining the fee paid to him by the council, made pretence to a power within the meaning of the decision in the case of "Reg. v. Maria Giles...in which it was held that "The pretence of a power, either physical, moral, or supernatural, and obtaining money by false assertion of such a power, whatever it may be, is an indictable offence under the letter of the statute and within the mischief intended to be prevented by it." The consideration in the agreement for Mr. Gataker's employment was therefore an illegal one, and the agreement for such employment void in law. He regarded divination as a survival from times when magic and witchcraft were generally believed in, and when the "divining rod" was used to discover not only sources of water but lodes of metal ore, hidden treasure, the bodies of murdered persons and lost boundaries of land. Where the practice of divination was not deliberately fraudulent, it was perhaps explicable on the hypothesis of self-deception, and the fact that where scientific tests were applied to diviners the experiments generally failed showed that much depended on what an eminent geologist who had written to him described as the use of an eye trained to notice the surface features of the ground.

This does seem to have a familiar ring to it!

I'm not sure what Alfred would have made of the accusations of witchcraft and works of the devil. His writings show him to be a man of integrity, hard work and confidence, so he may have been amused. He was also used to being in charge and making decisions: Alfred Jnr. having already had some years' experience working in the business, his father had made him a foreman when he was just 14 years old. He was also an active church member:

In March 1887 I joined the Church. In May 1887, I carried a letter of commendation from the Rev. Thos Stephens, to Woodhall Spa, and the Leader of the little chapel at Bracken Woodside, put me as leader of the Young Women's Bible Class, not one of whom was as young as myself. As I have previously said: I looked much older than my years, and they said I talked like it too. When I looked at the farm, the chapel was 2 ½ miles distant. I did the double journey many times, morning, afternoon and evening. Weather didn't count: what does when the heart is young?

Returning to Bath at the end of 1887, I resumed work in the Sunday School, as a fully fledged teacher, and worker in all directions. We had a "Christian Band" which met Tuesdays, about 100 strong. Sundays was a full day: Prayer meeting at 7 a.m., about 12 young men led by old Joseph King: 9.30 Sunday School: 11 Church (never out before 12:30) Sunday School at 2:30 – 4 p.m.: Prayer meeting 5:30: Church 6:30- 8 p.m., and a Prayer meeting after that. I regularly attended every meeting, never missing, unless ill.

He was, apparently, quite a popular speaker at church services, and never afraid to voice his opinion. Maybe his own father's influence helped here:

For organised religion, he had little use. He always spoke of the clergy as "black slugs" and Nonconformist ministers, contemptuously as sky pilots..... And yet: he always encouraged me, to render any help I could to my chapel, always making it easy for me to have "time off" at any time for that purpose only.

Around Easter time in 1931 Alfred made a trip to Italy with some colleagues from Bath politics. He met Mussolini whilst there:

"A little man, about my height and size, dressed in a rather shabby looking brown suit with riding breeches, top boots and spurs- just like a farmer going to market....His hands are as soft as a baby but he has the grip of a man. His large eyes were rolling restlessly, taking in everybody who entered {about 80} and looking furtively as though he was looking for trouble"

but in his diary of the trip, for March 26th he also writes:

"This was a deep red letter day. At 10.00 a.m. (I would never start before if I could help it). Motors for the Vatican Apartments, with a special guide. I had an invitation, with the others to see the Pope at a special audience.

I refused the invitation.

1. Because of my lifelong objection to "clerical assumption" of any kind.
2. Because I would have to pay homage to a man who represents all I despise.
3. Because I was not prepared to waste two hours of valuable time, having these objections.

He then describes his tour of the "priceless treasures", the "spacious galleries", the "ancient manuscripts" etc. which he obviously thoroughly enjoyed and appreciated.

Returning to Gataker and working for local councils; it was by all means not always contentious. There are some newspaper reports of the Ampthill story that openly say that the members of the council had every faith in Gataker- thus inferring that it was the auditor who got "cold feet" when faced with ratepayers who were not as convinced. And a few years earlier there is a report in another newspaper:

Illustrated Police News 25.1.1896

WATER DIVINERS AT RICHMOND

A remarkable story of water by the aid of professional water-finders has just been made at Richmond, Surrey. The corporation have had wells sunk to a considerable depth for the purpose of procuring a supply of water sufficient to meet the requirements of the borough,

and a supply which for the past five or six weeks averaged 230,000 gallons per day was discovered. Further borings for a greater yield have, however, been attended with little success. A fortnight ago two water diviners named Gataker and Mullins visited the Terrace Gardens Well, and indicated a number of places in the adits at which they alleged water would be found. The former stated that by making about fifty borings at indicated spots a supply would be found worth about £5000 a year to the town on the valuation of the Southwark and Vauxhall Company. On Monday week it was decided to commence a boring at a point where the water-finders alleged water would be found at a depth from 35 to 50 feet. When the boring reached about 20 feet a spring of water was tapped, yielding about 3000 gallons per day. These experiments have been carried out at the expense of Mr. Watney, a member of the council, who has generously undertaken to bear the cost of further borings at places specified by the "dowsers".

Looking at advertisements placed in newspapers in Dublin, Belfast, Glasgow and other places in the UK, Gataker announces his intention to be "on tour" and work on a "No Water, No Pay" basis. This financial arrangement, becoming common at the time, seems to have been at the suggestion of Alfred Wills.

In the article above Mullins is mentioned- another well-known Bath dowser. He may well be the person mentioned, but not named, in the following article which was originally printed in the **London Pall Mall Gazette in May 1895**, but which was syndicated to several other local newspapers.

"THE WATER UNDER THE EARTH"
A MODERN USER OF THE DOWSING ROD

Mr. Leicester Gataker, probably the only professional finder of water by means of the divining or "dowsing" rod, has been caught by a journalist and interviewed in a train. His first confession is not surprising. "Incredulity is my greatest obstacle. People will not believe the evidence of their eyes. They see the twig turn and cry "Trick!" they find water in the spots I have indicated and cry "Fluke!"

"How did you discover that you possessed the power?" I asked. - "By the merest chance. After leaving Bath college I went into a London office; but the confinement made me ill, and I was obliged to go down to the West country to rest. I was walking one day with a friend who knew a local water-diviner, and he suggested that we should try if we too possessed the faculty of finding water. He was unsuccessful, but to my great amazement, as I was walking across a field I suddenly felt a mild shivering sensation, chiefly in my arms, and the forked twig I held in my hands began to revolve. I thought very little about the matter at the time, but when, after another trial, I found that my health could not bear the strain of office life, and when I discovered that my power increased with practice, I seriously considered the possibilities of water-divining as a profession."

"But surely you met with a great deal of opposition?" - "No; my father, who was a captain in the Bengal Staff Corps, and now lives at Bath, was most interested, and after I had studied and practised some months I commenced my present work with his permission. That was about two years ago."

"What happens when you light upon hidden water?"

- "A sensation not unlike a slight shiver comes into my arms first, and afterwards all over my body. I then hold the twig in my hands, and so long as I am above the water it revolves, ceasing immediately I get off the bed of the stream. A twig freshly cut from the hedge serves the purpose best, but wire answers equally well, copper wire being, however, much less sensitive than steel or iron."

- "Surely, the presence of water affecting you as it does, a hidden stagnant pool or a closed drain might deceive you?" - "No. I am only affected by running water, and I can gauge its depth and the number of gallons that it runs per minute."

"Is there any attraction between the twig and the hidden water?" - Mr. Gataker smiled. "So many people ask me that question," he answered. "The attraction is in me alone. The

movement of the twig its outward sign. I can find water without the twig, simply by holding out my hands.”

It is worth noting that Gataker had “friends in high places”. Some of his advertisements, where he lists previous clients, read like an extract from “Who’s Who”. In no way do I cast aspersions upon him; however, I read the first line of that article with particular interest, having just read a newspaper clipping from the **Daily News (London) of March 24th 1892**, that is 3 years earlier than the interview with Gataker, which describes a meeting of Northampton County Council where John Mullins...

“who calls himself “water discoverer by means of the divining rod” was introduced to the members.....Mullins marched about...with the conventional forked hazel twig in his hands. Having indicated the direction of the spring that feeds the existing well, the “water diviner” marched from field to field, pointing out here and there, where he said water would be found. At these spots his hazel twig, at least to the onlookers, inexplicably rose in his hands and pointed to the clouds.....Mr. Mullins fixed on two spots where he said wells should be sunk, and he prophesied the finding of abundance of water. In one of these places he said the spring was from 25 to 30 feet below the surface; and in the other he promised a spring would be found 70 or 80 feet down, capable of supplying from 10000 to 15000 gallons per day. “

In an article that is supportive of dowsing and somewhat critical of scientific sceptics, a reporter from Cardiff’s **Western Mail** writes, in March 1897:

“Lord Llangattock is not exactly the kind of man to be hoodwinked by charlatany, but of one water-finder he writes:- “Mr. Gataker, at my request, has been searching for water in several places on this estate (The Hendre), and has been most successful. Water has been found wherever he has indicated, and at the exact depth mentioned by him. I cannot speak too highly of him and of the wonderful skill he shows as a water-finder”.”

My great grandfather, Alfred Wills, found *he* too had “this wonderful skill”. Combined with his work ethic, his political interests and ability, his opportunism and his business acumen, this skill allowed him to travel the world in a way that was probably way beyond his dreams as an adolescent. He built up the business run by his grandfather and then his father, from a simple small family plumbing firm into a large building company. He used his dowsing skills to create the capital for investment, eventually employing scores of craftsmen of many trades.

The final entry that I have in his autobiographical notes is very frustrating- because it stops in mid-anecdote:

A few years later, I was engaged to go to Portugal.

A Scotch firm had several kinds of Mills, and a paper making works. I was engaged to find water for the paper works, at Albelheira, some forty miles inland from Lisbon, and approached only by mule road.

When I got there, I found that the site was an old Monastery, where 500 monks used to live. To my astonishment, the manager, - who knew nothing about me,- had some years before been the Manager of the Bathford Paper Mills. *⁶

I remember that in Portugal, I was very indignant, at the conditions of labour.

The equivalent of about eight shillings per week, for seven days labour, was the “top money”.

The poor beggars got so tired, that overcome by the heat, they would fall asleep at their machines, and men were employed to go round and “keep the hands awake”.

Fresh meat, about three times a year, was all they could afford.

I was feted in Lisbon, invited out to dinner, entertained at the British Club, and reported in the Lisbon papers.

All this arose out of a daring test, I allowed them to make. I previously warned them that "I would only try it, and would not promise to be successful." In the presence of a great company, and several reporters, I was taken to a "cotton printing" works and turned loose, followed by about 100 leading personages.

My danger lay, in the possibility, that the water supply which they had, did not lie directly on an underground stream, but was planted on the side, in which case I should be on the side, perhaps twenty feet away, for my line, and it would be difficult to explain this away to the uninstructed.

(Then it stops....)

I did some internet research and found the paper mill in question, and looked at its history. ⁷ But I have not found the ending to this story. Nor do I have the rest of his manuscript or anything on Alfred's work after the early years of the twentieth century.

Perhaps, for me, reading what he wrote is a microcosm of dowsing itself. There are just as many questions as there are answers. But there is no doubt that this is, in its own way, a "success story". It is complex and multi-layered; it takes us down roads that were unexpected and maybe previously hidden. It exposes myths and consolidates intuitive thoughts and feelings.

Dowsing "worked" for my great grandpa Wills at the end of the 19th century and into the twentieth. It works for me, too, now – though as a pastime rather than a profession. These days we believe, hope, we know more about dowsing- using it for finding water and more; but the prejudices and uncertainties from more than 100 years ago remain.

There are those who believe- and those who refuse to believe whatever the evidence. It were ever thus....

Notes

***1 Argyle**

The Argyle Chapel (now the Central United Reformed Church, Bath) was opened in 1789, to provide a place of worship for a group who had seceded from the Countess of Huntingdon's Chapel in the Vineyards in 1781 or 1782. Shortly afterwards, in 1791, a burial ground was secured for the chapel at Snow Hill; interments continued there until the beginning of the twentieth century though they were few in number in the later years.

Such churches may have described themselves as "Methodist", "Baptist", "Presbyterians", "Congregationalist" (as Argyle Church was) or other churches that declared themselves as "Free churches". As a group they were known as "Dissenters", and until 1828 such people were ineligible for many forms of public educational and social benefits, including attending university.

***2 Trips to Scotland**

Rumour has it within the family (and I have no proof of this) that Alfred dowsed at Glamis Castle and there is said to be a photograph of him with Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon (later to be Queen Mother) as a small child, sat on his lap.

***3 Committees of Bath City Council**

Alfred was on these committees in 1911:
Hot Mineral Bath & Pump Room
Housing of the Working Classes
Sewage Disposal
Watch
Waterworks and Public Bathing Place
Bowling Greens (surveying).

He was later made Alderman and was Mayor Bath in 1918-19.

***4 The Divining Rod, by Barrett & Besterman, pub Methuen, London 1926**

Historical Directories:

<http://www.historicaldirectories.org/hd/>

All newspaper extracts courtesy of: British Newspapers 1800-1900 (Gale, Cengage Learning)

<http://newspapers.bl.uk/blcs/>

Bath Natural History and Antiquarian Club 1901:

http://www.archive.org/stream/proceedingsofbat09bath/proceedingsofbat09bath_djvu.txt

*5 William Wills

The story of William Wills being killed fighting a lion from a menagerie that visited Bath is part of "family lore" and was known to Esme, Alfred's granddaughter, and believed to be true. However, when researching the family history, I ordered a copy of William's death certificate and he actually died of bronchitis, his wife (Hannah) at his bedside. Perhaps his son, Alfred, thought it a more romantic account to tell his own son. Who knows? Alfred junior obviously believed the story.

*6 Bathford

....a village just outside Bath. Alfred went all the way to Portugal to find he encountered somebody who lived "just up the road" from him back home. The Bathford paper mill is still there and working.

*7

http://www.aim25.ac.uk/cgi-bin/vcdf/detail?coll_id=16947&inst_id=118&nv1=browse&nv2=sub

: ABELHEIRA PAPER MILLS LIMITED Date(s): 1899-1947

A large number of Grahams companies, registered in Glasgow, were trading individually in Glasgow and elsewhere, including Portugal and India, as early as the late 18th century. Grahams Trading Company Limited, however, was incorporated on 29 July 1924, as general merchants and manufacturers all over the world, with a registered office at 7 St Helen's Place, EC3. It was an amalgamation of several of the older Grahams companies and the newly acquired "Portuguese companies". The latter, Abelheira Paper Mills Limited, Boa Vista Spinning and Weaving Company Limited and Braco de Prata Printing Company Limited, had all begun in the late 19th century and were registered in Glasgow but traded in Portugal through William Graham and Company, William and John Graham and Company, and William Graham Junior and Company, who acted as their agents and held title to the real estate in Portugal.

The Portuguese business of Grahams Trading Company Limited was held through West European Industries Limited. In 1947, the "Portuguese companies" went into voluntary liquidation, and the various mills and factories were gradually closed down and sold off in the 1950s. Grahams Trading Company Limited was taken over by Camp Bird Limited in 1957 and went into voluntary liquidation in 1960.

Addendum:

Alfred Wills can be seen in a silent newsreel from Pathe News on 24th June 1929 at:

<http://www.britishpathe.com/record.php?id=17151>

He appears at the end of the movie, left hand side of the frame, a small man with grey hair carrying a top hat, walking towards the camera.

His portrait:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/arts/yourpaintings/paintings/alfred-william-wills-18721949-mayor-of-bath-1918-39843>

One of the Mullins family of dowsers can be seen from 1951 (with sound) at:

<http://www.britishpathe.com/record.php?id=48122>