

1925 – 1942

Richard Burton was born Richard Walter Jenkins on 10 November 1925. He was the twelfth child of 13 children born to Richard 'Dic' Walter and Edith Jenkins. The Jenkins clan lived in the mining village of Pontrhyden set high in the valley of the River Afan in South Wales. It was a tight community, forged together on the heaving copper works and shallow coal mines.

Edith had 13 children in 26 years: Thomas Henry 1901, Cecilia 1905, Ifor 1906, two girls Margaret Hannah who both died in infancy, William 1911, David 1914, Verdun 1916, Hilda 1918, Catherine 1921, Edith 1922, Richard 1925 and Graham 1927. At the age of 44 she gave birth to her last child before dying of puerperal fever. Richard was two.

The death was a bitter blow to the family. Dic dealt with it by going his own way, taking more frequently to drink and living a nomadic life, moving from daughter to daughter. The younger children were farmed out to elder relatives. Richard was scooped up by his sister Cecilia and taken to live with her and her husband, Elfed, and their two daughters Marian and Rhianon, in Port Talbot.

Cecilia was devoted to her younger brother and brought him up as her own. She had a positive, deep and lasting effect on Richard and he remained forever grateful to her throughout his varied and colourful life. His feelings about Cis are recorded in *A Christmas Story*, written and narrated by him for BBC radio in 1965. 'When my mother died she, my sister had become my mother, and more mother to me than any mother could ever have been'. He lived with them for 15 years.

Port Talbot was one of the biggest steel works in Europe and most boys' futures in those days only extended as far as the pits the town was built on. Elfed, Cis and Richard lived in Taibach in a small, terraced cottage. Cis loved her husband, but when it came to Richard she said she, 'couldn't help herself'.

While Richard was growing into adolescence, with all the usual energy and angst, Cis was stretched to the limit. She devoted time to her children, Elfed and her younger brother, as well as cooking and cleaning for the rest of the Jenkins clan back in Pontrhyden.

While Cis more than filled Richard's need for a mother, he idolized Ifor, his brother who was 19 years senior. As the third Jenkins child, Ifor could turn his hand to anything: coal mining, rugby football, building, plumbing, mechanics and poetry. Ifor became Richard's rock and protector throughout his life, leaving the Welsh valleys behind to join Richard as his personal assistant and go wherever his brother's career took him.

At school the Welsh boy made good progress by passing a scholarship to Port Talbot Secondary School in 1937 at the age of 11. Richard credits Meredith Jones, his tough schoolmaster, 'without Meredith Jones I would never have gone to University.'

While Richard had an appetite to learn and later would find great pleasure in writing, it was the sports field that got his undivided attention at school. Rugby football – which he reached international standard, and cricket – of which he became team captain, were his obsessions. He knew all the players' names in the Welsh teams, the local teams and the world teams. His whole family was 'fanatically rugby-conscious' – it was in the blood and a life-long passion. No matter where in the world he was, whatever he was doing, he would get the rugby results. During theatre performances he would catch the scores on radio, while hovering in the wings between his speeches.

Back in school Richard studied well and acted in a play by George Bernard Shaw called *The Apple Cart*. All this natural progression came to an abrupt end in his fifth year. Just when he should have been studying for his School Certificate – the key to further education – he left secondary school to work as a haberdasher's assistant in the local co-operative shop. And he hated it. Elfed, on the other hand, considered that, for 28 shillings a week, it was a good job and one for life.

For Richard it was not good news. At 15 he was an independent boy who like smoking, drinking and girls. He was strong and a good sportsman. He came from a family of miners. Working in a shop, ferrying socks across town was sheer humiliation. Later he would refer to the move as necessary because of a small family crisis. No one in the family questioned the move. He proved his point by doing the job badly, and exhausted his frustrations at a local youth centre founded by Meredith Jones. Here Richard came face to face with the trade that hauled him out from behind the shop counter and took him and his family away from the edge of poverty.

Leo Lloyd, the drama master, was dedicated to his job and persuaded Richard that acting was completely fascinating. Richard would later acknowledge, 'he taught me the fundamentals of the job...channeled my discontent and made me want to be an actor'. In the youth club he played the role of a Count and was in a radio documentary about the Air training Corps (ATC) of which he was a member. However, still he folded shirts in the shop. It was Meredith Jones who proved to be his saviour – persuading the Glamorgan Education Committee to readmit Richard to grammar school. Eighteen months after leaving school, he was back with the new teacher, Philip Burton, to keep an eye on him.

Philip, who was also Richard's commanding officer in the ATC, immediately saw the energetic promise that Jones had seen. Richard was a thirsty reader, particularly of poetry. Throughout his life he would quote and write in his Notebooks chunks of John Donne, Edward Jones, John Betjeman, Gerard Manley Hopkins, William Dunbar, Shakespeare and his greatest read Dylan Thomas. Richard had discovered the literary riches of this poet by himself and soaked himself in the Welshman's language. Dylan was his hero. Sweetly, their paths would later cross and a good friendship would grow.

Although they were opposites in character, Philip and Richard soon grew close as master and pupil. Burton drilled schooling into Richard as part of his compulsion to ensure the boy would get up and away from the coal mines. Richard rewarded him by gaining his school certificate despite missing 18 months of term time. The teacher worked on turning Richard into an actor, giving him every chance to act before an audience at school and the local YMCA. Years later, on being interviewed together, Philip Burton was asked: 'How did you come to adopt him?' When Philip paused to give an answer, Richard jumped in and said: 'He didn't adopt me; I adopted him.'

1943 – 1956

At 17, Richard was fed up with family tension at home and, on Philip's suggestion, thought about leaving home – it would mean one less mouth to feed for Cis and Elfed. Richard Jenkins moved into 6 Connaught Street, Port Talbot on 1 March 1943 – St. David's day. Cis let him go but said, 'nobody knows how much I cried.'

Philip continued to work on Richard, in particular his voice. As well as making him recite Psalms and Shakespeare in the living room, Philip took Richard to the top of Welsh mountains and made him speak parts of *Henry V*. As Philip walked further and further away, he insisted that Richard did not shout but still make his voice heard. This soon made Richard realize that what mattered was distinctness, not volume. His practise paid off – he had one of the most distinctive and memorable voices of all time. Many years later Elizabeth Taylor would remind Richard that he didn't need to speak louder than the level of a telephone conversation.

Philip supported Richard in every way. He guaranteed successful schooling; fed him; clothed him; taught him manners; broadened his reading; coached his acting; and gave him a surname. Richard Jenkins became Richard Burton as a means of securing a place at Exeter College, Oxford. Six months before joining the RAF, Richard gained admittance to Exeter College, Oxford – a privilege granted to very few cadets. If they showed promise during that period they would be given priority of consideration for becoming undergraduates when they were demobilized. Philip was advised that Richard was more likely to be accepted if he adopted the teenager. Richard had no objection but Philip, at 21 days too short of being 21 years older than Richard, was told it was not legally possible. Instead, Richard became Philip's legal ward. And with Dic Jenkins' signature on the agreement, Richard's name was changed by deed poll to Burton.

In 1944, before going to Oxford, Richard appeared in *The Druid's Rest*, a play by Emlyn Williams, the Welsh actor and writer. When the production moved to a London theatre, a critic wrote in the *New Statesman* magazine, that Burton showed, 'exceptional ability'. Richard said later that these two words changed his life.

At Oxford he was understudy to the role of Angelo in *Measure for Measure*. When the actor who was to have played the part got called back to active service Philip came up to coach him. It was his first big Shakespeare role, and was to be performed in front of important people such as John Gielgud, Terence Rattigan and Binkie Beamont (London's top impresario). 'We worked on it line by line, hour after hour,' said Philip. Robert Hardy, his new friend at Oxford and later, fellow actor, remembered how Burton 'totally commanded the audience...And the voice would sing like a violin and with a bass which could shake the floor.' After the play, Richard received his first professional offer from Binkie, who asked him to look him up after the war if he wanted to be an actor.

In 1944 Richard left Oxford to complete his RAF training. On passing out as a navigator he went to Canada for further training. However, with the war ending in 1945 Burton had to endure two years of idle frustration just waiting to be demobilized. Back at home, Philip had made his own progress and moved to Cardiff to work full-time for the BBC as a producer. In 1946 Philip secured Richard leave from the RAF to play Morgan Evans *The Corn is Green*, for television. However, it was his next role that truly set his mind on acting as a career.

In Parenthesis is a play based on an epic poem by David Jones. In 1948 Douglas Cleverdon produced it for BBC radio with parts for Richard Burton, Philip Burton and Dylan Thomas. Focused on WW1 with Welshness, poetry and drama, Richard thought it was the finest thing he ever did.

After he was demobilized Richard 'looked up' Binkie and secured a contract for £500 per year whether he worked or not. It was more money than his family earned in their lives – he was getting further away from the poverty of the coal mining towns he had grown up in.

In 1948 Richard made his screen debut as Gareth in *The Last Days of Dolwyn*, a part specially written for him by Emylyn Williams. Williams and Burton had the same roots. Both were from working class Welsh backgrounds – Williams left the rural land to become a writer, actor and director and both men had been to Oxford University. Williams knew that the boy that was going to be famous, 'the startling looks, fearless green eyes set widely in a dramatic face.' His second British film *Now Barabbas Was a Robber* had critics comparing him to Olivier.

By now Richard was enjoying habits that remained unbroken for the rest of his life – drinking, smoking, reading and doing crosswords. It was on the set of *Dolwyn* that he met his first wife. Sybil Williams was a 19 year-old drama student with a small part in the film. They married a few months after meeting – he was 23. She adored him: he thought she was wonderful. And, no matter how much Burton strayed in the coming years, he would always be heard to remark, 'I'll never leave Sybil.'

In 1950 he earned £1,000 for ten days' work in *The Woman With No Name*. Life was getting more comfortable and he and Sybil bought a house in Hampstead. His next role was in a play written in verse called *The Lady's Not For Burning*, directed by John Gielgud. In it he worked alongside some of the best stage actors of the time.

His love for words and language was obvious through his continuous work with BBC radio. Burton began narrating for radio in the early days of his career and would continue to do so for the rest of his life. His work included poetry, plays and school programmes – all for a fraction of the fees he could command in his film work.

During the years 1949 to 1951 he completed four films: *Now Barabbas Was a Robber*, *Waterfront*, *Green Grow the Rushes* and *The Woman With No Name*. He was also in the play, *Phoenix too Frequent*. By now he was signed to Alexander Korda on a seven-year contract.

A major turning point in his career came when he played the lead role in the play, *The Boy with a Cart*. Anthony Quayle, a leading actor and director saw Richard in the role and was impressed by his performance. He thought that the young actor would make a perfect Prince Hal in *Henry IV* and the King in *Henry V* for the forthcoming Shakespeare season at Stratford-upon-Avon that was part of the 1951 Festival of Britain. With coaching from Philip and support from his good friend Robert Hardy, Burton knew the speeches backwards before rehearsals began.

It was a good summer. He received impressive reviews. Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall came to see the plays and were transfixed by him. Kenneth Tynan a noted critic of British theatre said of him: 'a brimming pool running disturbingly deep...Burton's voice is urgent and keen...He turned interested speculation into awe as soon as he started to speak.' News soon reached Hollywood of this arrogant young talent and a year later he was starring opposite Olivia D'Havilland in *My Cousin Rachel*.

While regarding himself as a theatre actor he spent the next four to five years commuting between London and Los Angeles. Korda loaned him to Twentieth Century Fox for a three-picture deal. The films he made under Fox were *My Cousin Rachel*, *Desert Rat*, and *The Robe*. For the three films Burton received £80,000, while Korda's cut was £15,000. Sybil watched Burton, night after night, tot up the figures on a piece of paper kept in his pocket. Burton was making it big.

Across the Atlantic, Richard's reputation grew and in 1953 Daryl Zanuck offered him a seven-picture deal for \$1 million. With a commitment to do *Hamlet* at The Old Vic (for £45 a week), Richard turned down the offer. He made his point: he was independent and strong-willed. Money was nice but it was not everything to the actor whose greatest joys were words, words, and words. Of course the gossip drums beat out across Hollywood while Burton made his way back to London.

In 1953 Burton prepared nervously for his 39-week Shakespeare season at The Old Vic. Once again Philip was there to coach him. His *Hamlet* was one of revenge, not a poetical angst-ridden young Prince. Claire Bloom was his Ophelia. In this year he took time to go back to Wales to visit his family. They were as proud of him as he was pleased to see them. He brought presents for everyone which he continued to do throughout his life – always ensuring that he was ‘seeing them right’. His generosity was natural and extended beyond his family to charities and friends. His early contracts with the BBC, whether television or radio, often contain clauses that waive his fee in favour of a local charity.

The Old Vic season also included him playing Coriolanus, Toby Belch in *Twelfth Night*; Caliban in the *Tempest*; and the bastard in *King John*. The season was such a critical success for Richard and at times his fans were so over-whelming that he would have to be smuggled away from the theatre in a taxi. He had propelled himself to the top of his profession, he was snapping at the heels of Gielgud and Olivier. However, while the actor should have been soaring with pride in himself, he was shaken to the core by the death of Dylan – his hero and friend – who died from alcoholic poisoning on 9 November 1953. He was 39.

The young poet had just finished writing a new play, *Under Milk Wood*. Douglas Cleverdon, a BBC drama producer, had been supportive of Dylan throughout the years he was writing the play and decided to put together the first radio performance of the play. Everyone taking part did it for free and all the royalties and fees went to Dylan’s young widow and children. Richard played the part Dylan had written for himself, and Philip and Sybil also had parts. Later Richard would play the same role on film.

In the next three years he completed three more films in America: *The Rains of Ranchipur*, *The Prince of Players*, and *Alexander the Great*. In 1955 he jetted back to London to play in *Henry V* and *Othello*. It was these performances that caused Kenneth Tynan to say that Burton ‘was now the natural successor to Olivier.’ In 1956 Richard was awarded the *Evening Standard* drama award for his *Henry V*. Still managing to successfully juggle respectful theatre work with big money Hollywood roles, he flew off to Jamaica to star with an up and coming starlet – Joan Collins – in *The Sea Wife*.

1943 – 1970

By 1957, with a third of his earnings going to the taxman, the Burtons upped sticks and moved to Céligny, Switzerland. He named their new home, *Le Pays de Galles* – French for Wales. The British press criticized his move, but it made financial sense to a man that would rather see his money go towards helping his family and friends than the taxman – in 1957 he earned £82,000 but only kept £6,000. In September that year, Sybil gave birth to a baby daughter – Kate.

Jessica, Richard and Sybil's second daughter, was born in 1960. Richard adored his children. He was close to Kate throughout his life. Jessica suffered from schizophrenia and autism, which anguished him and made him reflect with deep thoughts of concern and helplessness. He wrote tenderly in his Notebooks about both daughters.

While he continued to make films in Hollywood, some of which were classed as mediocre, Richard never failed to remind the public of his outstanding talent. In 1960 he played George Holyoake in *A Subject of Scandal*, a play written for television by John Osborne and directed by Tony Richardson. He caused an uproar when he commanded a fee of £1,000 from the BBC – an unprecedented sum for the BBC – and had to hold a press conference with Tony and John to defend his fee. The most the Corporation had ever paid an actor was £500. After recording the play he returned to America to complete two projects – the narration of 26 episodes of *The Valiant Years*, a series based on Churchill's memoirs, and *Camelot*, a Broadway musical (he was paid \$100,000 for *The Valiant Years* and \$4,000 a week plus a percentage for *Camelot*). His next project shaped the course of his life beyond prediction.

Cleopatra was the most expensive film of its time and made international headlines throughout its production. To preserve its future, Twentieth Century Fox desperately needed the film to be a financial success. And, with Elizabeth Taylor playing Cleopatra and demanding an unprecedented fee of \$1 million, the studio was only too happy to watch the publicity machine go into overdrive about her hairstyles, jewels, acting, figure and temper. It was not so happy when the publicity turned to gossip and speculation about her adulterous affair with her co-star Richard Burton who was playing Anthony.

While Elizabeth got her million-dollar fee (in fact, she got paid more like \$3 million due to over-run fees), Richard got the best financial contract of his life: \$500,000 for 10 weeks' work, with \$1,000 a week expenses. Sybil and the children joined him in Rome for filming. However, when the gossip about his affair with Elizabeth got too loud, Sybil left with the children and went to New York to visit Philip Burton. The affair seemed to set the world press on fire, the Vatican spoke out and the American Congress sought to prevent them from entering America again. Initially the studio was anxious and angry with the couple, however, it soon became apparent that their pairing would increase box office sales – the couple was currency.

They continued their relationship throughout their next film, *The VIPs*, with Richard eventually divorcing Sybil in 1963. Elizabeth got her divorce from Eddie Fisher in 1964. In the same year Richard began rehearsals for *Hamlet* in Canada and New York with John Gielgud directing.

In 1964 they married and the first film they made together as husband and wife was *The Sandpiper* in 1965. It was not considered to be a critical success, but, as predicted by the studios, the film made money.

The Burton-Taylor relationship has been well documented for its passion and its fury. Now it is part of Hollywood history. Elizabeth had grown up in the MGM studio system and was well accustomed to the pros and cons of living life as a screen goddess. She was beautiful, she had wealth beyond imagination, but as Richard learnt quickly, she also had the intelligence and the wit to be able to play the players at their game and win. He was a proud working-class Welsh boyo, thrilled by poetry and rugby. His talents had earned him good financial security, but on divorcing Sybil he gave her almost everything he had. For Elizabeth, there was to be no material gain by marrying him. Metaphorically, he was stripped – what she saw was what she got. His life changed by being with Elizabeth. Paparazzi followed them everywhere. Soon they owned houses in Mexico and Switzerland. Cooks, secretaries, hairdressers, bodyguards and dogs travelled with them everywhere. Their pay role also included a merry band of trusted agents, lawyers, accountants and doctors (Elizabeth endured constant ill health).

Their most successful picture together was *Whose Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* He persuaded her to play the part of Martha to stop anyone else doing it – she earned an Oscar. She cornered him into co-starring as George – he should have won an Oscar. In the film their hair-raising domestic slanging matches were performed with uncomfortable realism.

Richard continued to make films, at least two or three a year. These included *The Taming of the Shrew*, *The Comedians*, *Doctor Faustus*, *Boom*, *Candy* and *Where Eagles Dare*. He was charging \$1 million per picture. For *Where Eagles Dare* he received living expenses of \$50,000, first-class travel for him and seven others from any location in the world to the first film location, and from the final film location to anywhere in the world. He had a chauffeured limousine at his disposal 24-hours a day and had written into all his contracts since he began acting that he did not work on 1 March – St David's Day.

Richard lived life at full throttle. He was here to enjoy the ride and was prepared to forfeit his health for the greatest experience. He had smoked since the age of eight, later puffing 100 a day. He also enjoyed drinking. Both habits were like old friends to him. As his career took off so did his drinking. Even though he knew he was an alcoholic, he couldn't and wouldn't say 'no' forever. When working, he would often go to the pub at lunchtime and then have to be levered out in order to complete a scene. Some producers became concerned that he might collapse on set.

After filming *Anne of the Thousand Days* in 1969 Richard began to feel indifference towards the films that he was making – he had been in the business for 20 years. In 1970 he was awarded a CBE and took Cis and Elizabeth with him to Buckingham Palace to receive his honors. For *Raid on Rommel* in 1970 he remained sober throughout the filming. The abstinence was sometimes self inflicted and at other times doctor's orders.

1971 – 1984

In staying off the drink Richard enjoyed newfound health and realized that drinking Tab during the day rather than three bottles of Vodka was not too onerous and actually had its benefits. However, when his brother Ifor died in 1972 his will buckled and he began to drink heavily with little regard for his health or for the effect it was to have on his relationship with Elizabeth.

Ifor's death had a profound affect on Richard. He questioned everything and became unimpressed with his achievements. It is possible that he was fed up with being indifferent about his career; fed up with living under the microscope of the press; fed up of Elizabeth's jet set (as he would scornfully refer to her lifestyle). When the Taylor-Burton relationship faltered and unhappiness reigned, they agreed to separate in 1973. He would say of life, 'poetry and drink are the greatest things on earth'. She would say of their marriage, 'there were too many differences.' With the separation and then divorce in 1974, he entered a period of calm. Elizabeth, however, never ruled herself out of his life and in 1975 they were re-married in Botswana, Africa. She, with passion and energy, behaved as if they were marrying for the first time. Richard was more cautious.

It was during the rehearsals for his next theatre role as Martin Dysart in *Equus*, that he found support in a woman other than Elizabeth and with this the realization that his re-marriage was not a success. Susan Hunt had separated from her racing-driver husband James Hunt, and Richard was besotted with her. She joined Richard in New York and was by his side when *Equus* opened in 1976. Later Richard claimed that Susan helped him pick up his career and kept him clear of his destructive vice – drinking. Producers were reassured by Susan's steadying influence and Richard went on to secure the film role of Dysart. In 1976, Richard divorced Elizabeth for the second time and married Susan. As a reformed character, he aimed to be more discerning about the roles he took.

The marriage did not last and they were divorced in 1982. Although Susan was credited with keeping him dry from drink, Richard had never really kicked his addiction to alcohol.

In 1982 he embarked on a seven-month project in Vienna taking the title role in the film epic *Wagner*. On the set he met Sally Hay who was working as a freelance production assistant. Sally was a successful, independent, career woman and Richard was impressed. 'She can do everything...there's nothing she can't do...she looks after me so well. Thank God I've found her,' he said proudly to his close friend Brook Williams.

In 1983 he began rehearsals for *Private Lives*, a play by Noël Coward. His co-star was Elizabeth Taylor and with the *New York Times* announcing 'Together again!' the box office was soon busy with ticket pre-sales. During the seven-month tour – New York, Philadelphia, Washington, Chicago, Los Angeles and Boston – Richard and Sally got married in Las Vegas. At the time, Richard talked to Sally about returning to the London stage.

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In 1984 Richard and Sally went to Haiti for a well-earned rest for four or five months. In spring, they returned to Céligny in good shape – Richard was fitter and happier. In July, he completed the film adaptation of George Orwell's *1984* and an American mini-series *Ellis Island*. He also began preparing for *Wild Geese II*.

On 5 August 1984 Richard died of a cerebral haemorrhage in Geneva, Switzerland. He was 58. At his funeral four days later in Céligny, he was buried with a copy of the *Collected Poems* of Dylan Thomas.