

Richard Steevens

Born: c.1654

President: 1703-1704, 18 Oct – 15 December 1710 (died in office)

Died: 1710

Richard Steevens and his twin sister, Grizzell, were born in Wiltshire around 1654. Their parents, John Steevens and Constance Gwynn, were married at Wantage, Berkshire in the April of that year. John, like his father, Richard, and his father-in-law, Humphrey, was a clergyman. He graduated from Oxford before being ordained at Bromley in 1642 by John Maxwell, Bishop of Killala. Maxwell had recently escaped the rebellion in Ireland and he would go on to serve as a royal chaplain in civil war Oxford. According to tradition, John Steevens was also a committed royalist. In the 1650s, having fallen foul of the Cromwellian authorities, he moved his family to Ireland. Following the Restoration, he was appointed rector of St Mary's, Athlone and a number of adjoining parishes.

The young Richard Steevens was educated in Athlone by George Thewles. He entered Trinity College Dublin in 1670, apparently intent on becoming a clergyman. He received his BA in 1675, his MA in 1678, and he also took deacon's orders. Having followed thus far in his father's footsteps, Richard decided to instead pursue a medical career. This change of direction may have coincided with the death of John Steevens in 1682. Richard was at Leiden in 1685. By 1687 he was back in Dublin when he was awarded his MD by Trinity.

In 1692, Steevens was named a Fellow of the College of Physicians in Ireland. He was centrally involved in the activities of the College thereafter, serving as Censor for several years after 1694 and as Registrar in 1700-01. In 1702, the College resolved that election to the office of President should be determined by seniority. Steevens was thus unanimously chosen President in 1703. In September 1710 he was appointed Professor of Physic at Trinity and a month later he was again elected President of the College of Physicians for a second time. His tenure in these posts was cut short, however, as Steevens died at his lodgings on William Street in Dublin on 15 December. Steevens' considerable posthumous reputation owes much to the terms of the will that he made on the day before his death. A year earlier, in 1709, he had spent £10,000 in purchasing almost 3,000 acres of land in County Westmeath and King's County (Offaly). The Westmeath estate lay ten miles from Athlone in Drumraney, one of the parishes that had formerly been part of the Rev. John Steevens' bailiwick. Under Richard's will, the income from this property was bequeathed to his sister, Grizzell, for her lifetime. After her decease, it was to be used 'for an hospital for



maintaining and curing from time to time such sick and wounded persons, whose distempers and wounds are curable'.¹

For the first sixty years of her life, Grizzell Steevens has left few traces in the archive. In 1717, she made the momentous decision to expedite the building of the Dublin hospital envisaged by her brother. Trustees were duly named and Grizzell handed over £2,000 to begin the work. Dr Steevens' Hospital was eventually completed in 1733. Twelve years later, Samuel Madden noted that Grizzell 'watches over and attends the poor patients with inimitable goodness'.² She died in 1747.

The hospital endowed by Richard and built by Grizzell eventually closed its doors in 1987. It is now the headquarters of the Health Service Executive, as well as the home of the Edward Worth Library (1733).

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¹ Will of Richard Steevens, of the City of Dublin, Doctor of Physic, 14 Dec. 1710.

² Samuel Madden, *Boulter's monument, a panegyric poem* (Dublin, 1745), p. 61.

