

# Royal Defiance Cycle Co

By Lynn Hughes

AS COMPANY MOTTOES GO, 'A Free Country and a Mountain for Me' can claim pretty high points for individualism. This was the slogan of a forgotten Welsh cycle, and later motorcycle, manufacturer, which had its beginnings in Victorian times in the Amman Valley in south-west Wales.



Fig 1: William Williams and unidentified boy outside John Williams' shop, pre-1900

The goat motif of the Defiance colophon is a device of the Williams family, two of who, Arthur and William, established the company in 1880. The motto, inscribed in Welsh, is, like many others, aspirational. Most of us have at some time pleaded that we live in a free country; and the Williamses farmed a

swathe of the Black Mountain. As to how they became Royal warrant holders on top of it all is another question.

Defiance's other claims to fame are that they were, in 1878, the first cycle maker in Wales, and, at the latter end of 1884, among the first to make a chain driven bicycle outside of Coventry, at that date presumably a Kangaroo (*information from the Amman Valley Chronicle and East Carmarthen News, 23rd Feb 1933, p6.*)

The story begins with William Evans, a carpenter of The Traveller's Well inn, Wern Ddu Road, Glanamman, who, in 1872, sought the assistance of his relative and neighbour in making wheels for his ceffyl-pren (wooden horse), a two-wheel, front driving velocipede. Moses Williams, blacksmith, agricultural implement maker and millwright, was a well-known local craftsman in iron, in business since 1830. He operated from the roadside smithy with his sons, on a site adjacent to the family farm, Gelli Fawnen, on a busy, but narrow route, traversed by coal and limestone hauliers. A number of boneshakers followed this prototype out of Gelli's foundry. They were sold to friends and local customers but, as elsewhere, interest waned and it was only in 1878, after the ordinary was becoming fairly well established, that the Williams brothers, Arthur and William, made a



Welsh ordinary. Their initiative was formalised in 1880 with the founding of the Defiance Cycle Works.

Williams, Defiance. Brother William, meanwhile, became licensee of The Ship tavern in Llanelly at which



Figure 2: Arthur Williams outside his Ammanford (High Street) shop with John Morris, a local coachbuilder, and Moses Williams in the 1930s

Masterminded by the talented William Williams, in 1885, they produced a chain-driven bicycle, which on Easter Monday, Arthur rode all the way to Swansea. It caused a sensation, amazing the people of Gwaun-caerwen, Cwmgors, Clydach and Morriston on his route to and from Swansea. Some hundreds of Defiance machines were built in Gelli Fawnen forge, and surviving account books testify to their being especially popular locally. Arthur founded a retail and service branch in Ammanford, and in 1886, his brother, John Williams, opened depots in Swansea and Station Road, Llanelly, trading as John

premises he describes himself as manufacturer of 'Ship' cycles and air rifles.

The Defiance company exported models 'specially adapted for the colonies' and altogether offered eight models which found their way as far afield as Australia and Africa. One testimonial from a Matabeleland dispatch rider in the Boer war, claimed to have ridden one of their 261b Light Roadsters on the roughest roads from Johannesburg to Bulawayo and frequently 'across-country'. The rider, Neil McWilliam, estimated he had ridden his Royal Defiance over 4,000 miles in four



months, and it was still 'equal to new'; 'the finest machine on the market'.

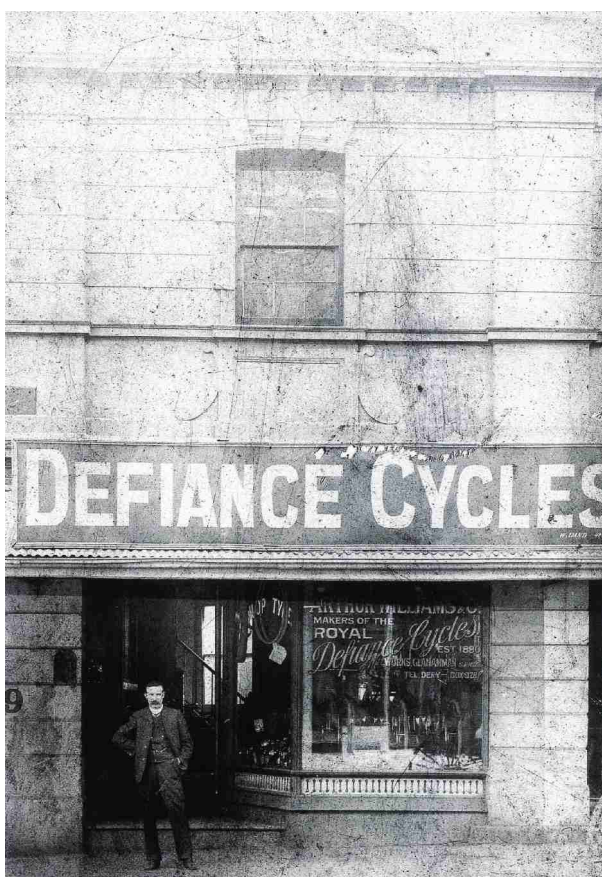


Fig 3: John Williams at the Defiance Cycles shop in Swansea pre-1900

Defiance built tandems, racing machines and a lady's model that was 'upright and natural, and therefore graceful and correct'. It was not cheap at 15 gns; the racer was £13.10s.0d and the Light Roadster cost £15.0s, net cash, when a Humber Standard model could be got for £8.0s – and their top of the range Gents was 16 gns. A Glanamman Defiance Cycle Club was formed in the Amman valley whose membership quickly rose to 150, and it was nothing to see, on Saturday afternoons, a turnout of 80 to 100 riders on tours to Carmarthen, Llandovery, and Llandilo – even to Aberaeron. A tandem ridden by well-known tandem racers, David

Thomas, Penybank, and his friend Evan Williams, the butcher, often also led beves of bicycles, preceded by a bugler. The prize for the largest club turnout at a sports event was, in curious fact, a bugle – which the Glanamman club invariably won.

In 1895, David Moses Williams, another brother, emigrated to South Africa. Assisted by Arthur, who journeyed for the purpose, they set up a Defiance retail outlet and repair facility in Eloff Street, Johannesburg. Their manufacturer's trademark, accordingly, proclaimed them 'Messrs Arthur Williams & Company, The Defiance Cycle Company of Glanammon & Johannesburg'. Without recourse to national advertising, Defiance machines earned a reputation for lightness, strength, and durability second to none. In particular, their Racing Models Nos 1 & 2 achieved prominence on the Johannesburg Wanderers, Durban and Pretoria tracks.

The remarkable C J Kruger, a boy of 17 and a crack rider, won prizes amounting to £437 in five months on Royal Defiance cycles. These included, among others, the Pretoria Cup, the Wanderer's Cup, Pugh's Fifty Guineas Challenge Shield, The Caledonian 100 Guineas Cup and, at Durban on 20th May 1899, the one-mile and five-mile championships of South Africa (Royal Defiance Catalogue circa 1903). The enterprise was not able to immediately capitalise on this auspicious beginning, as the Boer War intervened and, at

some point, their complete stock was requisitioned for the military without payment.



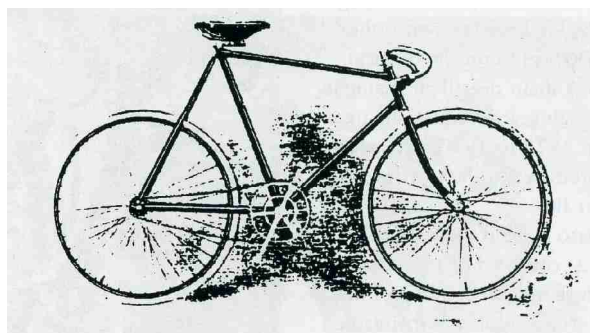
During the 1890s the sobriquet 'Special Defiance' was adopted before the company became 'Royal'. A plausible suggestion is that it served to

distinguish the Glanaman firm from other makers of Defiance models; Simpson & Sons, Bridge St, Mansfield who traded after 1892 as Defiance Cycles; R E Humm in Plymouth also traded as Defiance, as did H C Mitchell in Sudbury, Suffolk. This led to confusion and could explain a notice in Arthur Williams' catalogue and on his letterhead, asserting, 'We have no connection with any other Company'. At the time, among the hundreds of small makers and assemblers of bicycles all over the country, there were seven in business calling themselves 'Tourist', five 'Triumph', and another five 'Wonder'. So four 'Defiance' companies are not surprising.

Arthur and John Williams saw the coming of the motorised cycle at the turn of the century and got in on the ground floor. They produced the first Royal Defiance motorcycle in 1901 but were under-capitalised and soon ceased production. But Arthur Williams & Co kept up the cycle retail business for half a century, until Arthur died in 1948. His old shop in Ammanford, on the Glanaman road near the Square, has only recently been demolished. In Glanaman, a fourth generation of the Williams family still defiantly farms the mountain, and in a free country.

## **Royal Defiance Racing and Road Racing Machine**

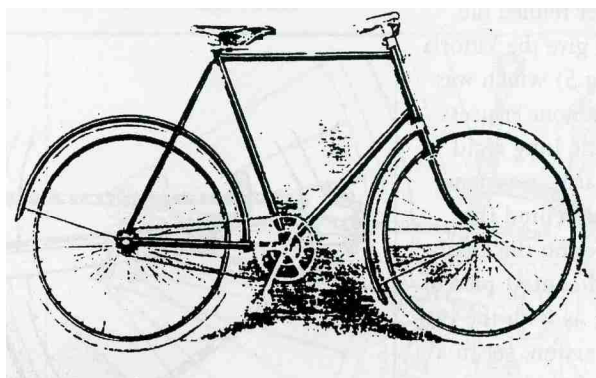
Nos. 1 and 2



This Machine has been specially designed for speed and we can assure our Customers that nothing better can be built. During the past season this mount has shown its superiority over other makes in a vast number of important races both at home and abroad. Further remarks are therefore superfluous.

## **Royal Defiance Light Roadster and Roadster**

Nos. 3 and 4



This Machine is built as Light Roadster and Full Roadster on the most approved lines, its frame being extremely strong, light, and rigid. With regards to weight every detail has been carefully considered so as to reduce it as low as possible, consistent with the production of a trustworthy mount. The materials, workmanship, and finish are of the highest quality, and no better Machine can be desired or obtained for hard riding and touring purposes.

From the 1903 Royal Defiance catalogue

**Acknowledgment:**

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**Note on Lynn Hughes:** "Llandilo boy and Carmarthenshire man, Lynn Hughes returned to work as a publisher and writer in his native Tywi valley after a career in the film and literary world of London as head of the script department of MGM.

The BBC TV serial *Hawksmoor*, based on the life and legend of Twm Sion Cati, was his creation and he is series editor of *The Welsh Classics*, whose purpose is to present in English the classic literature of Wales to a wider reading public" [From the flyleaf of *A*

*Carmarthenshire Anthology*, 1984 edition.]

