

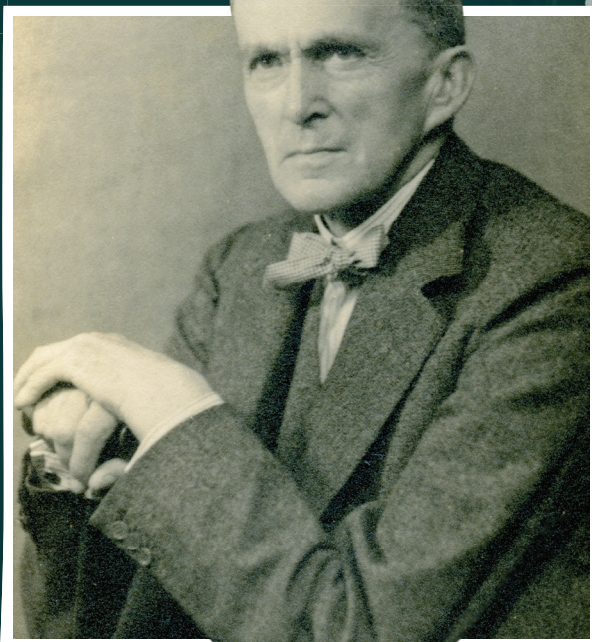


CORNWALL'S Daffodil Kings

HOW CORNISHMAN
PD WILLIAMS HELPED TO
ESTABLISH THE DUTCH
DAFFODIL INDUSTRY

Words by **Jean Carr**





Daffodil breeder Percival Dacres Williams was feted by his horticultural contemporaries as Cornwall's Daffodil King. In the fields surrounding his home at Lanarth, St Keverne, on the Lizard peninsula, he perfected more than 500 registered new varieties and thousands of daffodil seedlings before his death in 1935. These were eagerly snapped up by wealthy collectors and bulb merchants from Holland and America, and his large cupped 'Carlton' is still the most widely sold daffodil of all time.

Dutch daffodil merchant Matthew Zandbergen (1903-1990) regarded PD, as he was affectionately known, as "the world's most successful breeder of his time", while bulb importer John Scheepers, director of the Horticultural Society of New York, planted a trial collection of 64 daffodil varieties from PD in 1927 and promised: "I shall leave no stone unturned ... to advance in this country the new craze for finer daffodils."

He was as good as his word. Three years later, Mrs Paul Davis of Greywoods, Nashville, Tennessee, ordered 79 different varieties to be shipped by parcel post via Plymouth, New York and Washington. The total bill was £736, equivalent to around £33,600 today, requested by PD to be paid in gold.

Just how important PD's daffodils were – and still are – to the Dutch and American daffodil market is only now being documented with the unpacking of long-neglected boxes stored in Lanarth's attics during the Second World War when the house was requisitioned for evacuees. These contain letters, telegrams, invoices, bulb catalogues, stock and order books, photographs and evocative botanical paintings by visiting artists commissioned by PD to record his latest Cornish-bred daffodils in full bloom. Some of these varieties have disappeared from current bulb

Inset: PD WILLIAMS

Top left and above: OZAN

catalogues, but thrive anonymously in gardens worldwide.

A tantalising selection from the Lanarth archive can be seen at a free exhibition, Cornwall's Daffodil Gold Rush, in Falmouth in March. The display traces how daffodil fever spread in the late 19th century from the Isles of Scilly to mainland Cornwall, creating a golden harvest from West Penwith to the banks of the Fal estuary and steep slopes of the Tamar Valley.

PD was well placed to capitalise on this trend. He was 26 when he inherited Lanarth in 1891 from his father, George Williams of Scorrier, descendant of mining tycoon John Williams. PD's cousin was JC Williams, who inherited Caerhays in 1880 when he was just 18, and is best known for the rhododendrons he planted on his estate. As wealthy landowners, the cousins used their capital, contacts and time to travel at home and abroad to transform their horticultural passions into high-profit ventures. They founded the Cornwall Daffodil Spring Show in 1897 to showcase their own commercial daffodils and those of other local growers.

In 1903 PD was appointed High Sheriff of Cornwall; the Census of England and Wales in April 1911 records a substantial household at Lanarth which included three ➔

To find gardens
to visit this
month, go to:



www.ngs.org.uk



www.cornwallgardensociety.org.uk

children, a Swiss governess, eight domestic servants and visitors including three bulb and seed merchants.

During the 1920s and 1930s, fortunes were made – and lost – by the post-war demand for daffodil flowers, new varieties and a growing international market for bulbs. PD's handwritten invoice to Mrs Paul Davis prices just one Brunswick daffodil bulb at £10, or £457 today, and one Plantagenet bulb at £20 or (£914).

PD was noted as "having an intuitive, almost mystical approach to breeding". He tucked a rabbit's tail in the top pocket of his jacket as an aid to pollinating his daffodil flowers. His Cornish-bred bulbs were shipped to Europe, America, New Zealand and Australia. His flower displays consistently won top awards at the Royal Horticultural Shows and internationally. He was visited at Lanarth by wealthy American daffodil collectors such as Mr and Mrs Kenyon L Reynolds from Pasadena, California, so eager to tour "the land of daffodils" they brought their own car with them on the SS President Harding, which docked at Plymouth. PD was mobbed by Dutch bulb growers at the London RHS shows, and just months before he died in 1935 he gave a "thrilling lecture" on British Daffodils – Past and Present at the International Daffodil Conference.

During the Second World War, Cornwall's daffodils were grubbed up, the fields used for growing food, and the Lanarth bulb business never really recovered. PD's son Michael continued to supply bulbs, including St Keverne, a new

daffodil he registered and still popular in Cornwall's daffodil industry today. Michael did not marry and left Lanarth to his godson Paul Tylor, whose wife Sue is collating the attic finds.

The correspondence, invoices and catalogues chronicle the lucrative Dutch and American business links. Matthew Zandbergen, PD's Dutch agent, originally visited Lanarth in the early 1920s as an interpreter for his father Gerrit, a bulb merchant from Sassenheim. Matthew later recalled: "We visited Lanarth frequently during flowering time and introduced his new varieties to growers in Holland. We exhibited his flowers in Dutch shows and forced some 200 new varieties of his seedlings every year. Many were bought by Dutch growers at fabulous prices to be tested in Holland, the best to be resold back to the English bulb market.

"Our regular visits were both interesting and educational as the famous breeders ... used to meet there to discuss aspects of their favourite flowers."

It is estimated that over ten years, some 2,000 different daffodil seedlings from Lanarth were transferred to Holland to be tested. Discussions on the merits of PD's seedlings took place over lunch or dinner at Lanarth and "so fast and furious would be the chatter" that what with interpreting Matthew would often miss the main course, scrounging what he could at the end of the meal. In the Lanarth Archive is a gold Gouden Medaille awarded to PD in April 1931 at the Haarlem Daffodil Show, and a graphic black and white photograph of the prize-winning Lanarth daffodils.

Four years earlier, in March 1927, a wooden box of Lanarth cut daffodils had been shipped from Plymouth to New York



Left: DAMSON PAINTED BY EA BOWLES IN 1930 **Above:** GOUDEN MEDAILLE CERTIFICATE
Right: LENDRA (LEFT) AND CARTHILLIAN PAINTED BY EA BOWLES IN 1935

on the White Star liner RMS Olympic, consigned to the care of the Chief Steward in the cool room. The flowers were delivered to the 522 Fifth Avenue offices of John T Scheepers, whose Beauty From Bulbs catalogue was the premier source for imported flower bulbs in the USA. Scheepers' telegram to PD confirmed: "Arrived splendid condition, awarded gold medal" at the Horticultural Society of New York spring flower show.

PD commissioned fashionable botanical artists Frank Galsworthy and EA Bowles to record some of his daffodils. The Lanarth Visitors' Book records they both stayed between March 25 and 31, 1927, and added doodles and sketches to their signatures. Some of the paintings found at Lanarth include one that finally revealed the name of a daffodil no longer listed in bulb catalogues, but growing at Ince Castle, Saltash – and no doubt anonymously elsewhere in Cornwall and the world. Castle owner Lady Alice Boyd has a collection of named heritage and miniature daffodils, but for years had sought the origin and name of this mystery daffodil which fills the borders of her drive each spring.

Sue Tylor explains: "Donald Duncan, the heritage daffodil specialist at Poolewe, in the north-west Highlands of Scotland, suggested it might be one of PD's, so Lady Boyd brought them to Lanarth. I didn't recognise them at all. We set off up into the woods to see if they existed in the wild and could not find anything remotely similar. Then I remembered the boxes of old botanical watercolours in the very top rooms.

"Botanical paintings are done precisely to scale, and one of Frank Galsworthy's daffodils seemed to match the colour, shape and measurements of the Ince Castle flower. We stuck

the daffodils Lady Boyd had brought on to plain paper, in the same position as the painting, and measured them. The really long stem and beautiful flower with a greenish tinge matched the Lanarth daffodil painting of Ozan. It was listed in PD's stock book as registered in 1916, and was in the 1933 RHS Classified List of Daffodil Names. It appears to have gone out of fashion and been dropped by bulb catalogues."

PD's rediscovered Ozan, together with other Lanarth-bred daffodils, can be seen in March at the Falmouth Spring Flower Show at the Princess Pavilion, Gyllyngdune Gardens. Show president Ron Scamp, himself a renowned daffodil breeder who has registered 450 new Cornish-bred varieties, says: "Once I have enough stock, I will include Ozan in our bulb catalogue. PD's contribution to the daffodil world is unrivalled; his bulbs and seedlings helped establish the Dutch daffodil industry and are still grown all over the world. To discover that his personal papers and the botanical paintings still exist is thrilling, and will add enormously to our Cornish daffodil history."

Information

- ▶ Cornwall's Daffodil Gold Rush runs from March 2 to 31, 10am to 5pm (closed Sundays), in the foyer of the Municipal Buildings, The Moor, Falmouth, TR11 2RT. Entry is free. Call 01326 315559.
- ▶ The 2018 Falmouth Spring Flower Show takes place on March 24 and 25 at the Princess Pavilion, Gyllyngdune Gardens, Falmouth TR11 4AR. Call 01326 211222 and see FSFS Facebook for updates.

Below: AN ENTRY FROM THE VISITORS' BOOK, APRIL 4, 1930 **Below:** PD WILLIAMS **Right:** NARCISSUS PORTHILLY BY FRANK GALSWORTHY, MARCH 27, 1927

