

# THE STORY OF THE WILLIAMSII HYBRIDS

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*Lady Gowrie*

'Copper, Fish & Tin' has for centuries been the backbone of life in 'The Little Land of Cornwall' (A L Rowse). Cornwall almost claims not to be part of England. It is nearly separated from it by the River Tamar, has a unique climate warmed by the Gulf Stream and is idiosyncratic to this day in its legends, its history and its outlook on life, even though 'copper, fish & tin' have been replaced by a newer ethos that revolving around tourism and our beautiful natural assets.

Those who sought to make a living from mining we traditionally called 'tinnners'. Pre-eminent among successful tinnners in the Parish of Stithians in the centre of the county were the Williams family. They were well documented in the 1600s and their business interests burgeoned through the eighteenth century. By 1800 they controlled or managed over a quarter of the copper mines in Cornwall. At that time Cornwall was the world's leading producer of copper and tin, both essential alloying metals for bearings (bronze and brass) in the new machinery of the Industrial Revolution. The Williams and other mine owners met regularly in 'The Copperhouse' (standing as a private residence to this day) to fix the world price of copper.

The Williams family were well-established in several major houses close by the mines that had brought their fortune. In the 1850s Michael Williams bought the dilapidated Caerhays Castle, a rural/coastal property some 20 miles away, built some 50 years previously for the Trevanion family by the fashionable, expensive but inefficient architect, John Nash, whose star was then riding high on the commission to build the Royal Pavilion in Brighton for the Prince Regent, subsequently George IV. The Trevanion's ambition out-ran their pocket and they abandoned the Castle and fled to Paris just ahead of the bailiffs.



*Typical Cornwall coastline*



*Caerhays Castle*

The Castle was refurbished and became home to the Williams family. In 1880 the great gardener-to-be, J C Williams, inherited the estate and a considerable pail of the great family mining fortune. JCW's mother stayed on at Caerhays Castle during her lifetime while her son bought for his own use a second property Werrington Park near Launceston.

This had a range of greenhouses and a conservatory that possibly sparked JCW's interest in horticulture. He began to dabble in the hybridization of rhododendrons and daffodils and to observe the success in other older-established Cornish Gardens of the many new plants arriving from S E Asia via great plant hunters of the nineteenth century and the nurseries and organizations that sponsored them. (e.g. Robert Fortune 1845, Sir Joseph Hooker 1848, etc).

JCW sought to join in this bounty and by 1903 Werrington Park and Caerhays Castle received a major new group of rhododendrons sent by E H Wilson (Veitch's Nursery) from Western China. An accident that resulted in a permanent limp prevented E H Wilson from returning to this (at that time) very wild part of China. But JCW became a major participant in a syndicate that sent George Forrest back to this same area in 1912. This was just the beginning and Forrest returned six more times. In 1924 on the slopes above the Salween River valley he found a new species of camellia to be named *C saluenensis*. Seed of this new species arrived at Caerhays and in due course grew and flowered. Indeed it grew well, flowered well and set seed at a surprisingly young age (much younger than *C japonica* that usually requires 5-7 years before it flowers).



*Sp. Saluensis*

Coupled with this was knowledge of the fact that it derived from 6000-9000 feet. All this must have sparked thoughts of it having general garden-worthiness, probably hardiness, and its easy seeding suggested the possibility of crossing it with existing camellias.

Little is recorded (the papers were in a briefcase stolen on a train to London) concerning the exact *C.japonica* pollen parents of the first 'Williamsii Hybrids' as they came to be known. The one constant factor was the seed parent the plants raised from the original Forrest seed of *C.saluenensis* several of which may still be found at the Castle growing in the rear courtyard.

The several aspects that characterized these new hybrids were:

their often outstanding floriferous performance

their early blooming

their hardiness

their ability to form buds and bloom in low light conditions (i.e. more northerly locations)

their self-grooming ability (to drop dead flowers).

Individually these qualities were appealing. Collectively they made the Williamsii hybrids a revolution in camellia culture.

The first named variety honoured their creator himself 'J C Williams'. It is a single pale pink on a bushy, dark green leafed plant that I can reliably find blooming outside the 13th century St Mawnan Church in my own village in Cornwall on New Year's Day. Other varieties reflect names within the family, that of Head Gardeners I one being George Blandford) and 'Caerhays' and its adjoining village (St Ewe).



*Caerhays*



*St. Ewe*



*George Blandford*

The success of JCW naturally prompted others to follow suit. Most outstanding was the cross '*C. saluenensis* X *C. Japonica Doncklaerii*' made by Col. Stephenson Clarke of Borde Hill in Sussex, England. Gardeners have always exchanged plants among themselves and this camellia named 'Donation' was no exception. In 1941 Trewithen Garden (also in Cornwall) received a small plant of this new variety from its raiser. It thrives at Trewithen to this day and is the parent of ALL the 'Donations' in the world. Sadly Borde Hill lost their plant of the original cross. Col. Clarke's generosity proved to be the world's gain. Other successful crosses by various raisers appeared and established themselves as very garden-worthy plants.

In the 1960s Miss Gillian Carlyon of Tregrehan in Cornwall, the owner of a long-established estate with a camellia garden well recorded back into the 1890s and even earlier, began a hybridising programme. Cornwall has an agreeable, modestly warm and equable climate throughout the year. There are few extremes in either winter or summer. This creates an environment in which camellias thrive they grow and flower very well indeed. The lack of real heat in summer, however, impedes the ripening of both new growth and the setting of seed. This situation reflects itself in sheer disaster within the gardens if a serious freeze occurs and small setbacks to current blooms if a March or April frost occurs. Gillian Carlyon selected varieties known to set seed in our climate and others that might be expected to do so with a little encouragement. Both potential seed and pollen parents were established in a greenhouse environment and known, deliberate crosses were made. Her efforts were successful and varieties like 'E T R Carlyon' (*C. saluenensis* x *C. japonica* Adolphe Audusson) and 'China Clay' ( J C Williams x *C. japonica* Marjorie Magnificent) were born. Both J C Williams and Gillian Carlyon made deliberate crosses by removal of the stamens before their maturity (emasculatation), the application of specified pollen to the remaining stigma, and then isolation of the fertilized flower from visiting insects until the seed was formed.



*Donation – A most popular Williamsii*



*E.T.R. Carlyon*



*China Clay*

Another player on the world stage in the story of the Williamsii hybrids was Professor E G Waterhouse in Australia. In 1938 he imported a plant of *C. saluenensis* from an English nursery. It proved difficult to establish and as gardeners do in the face of such adversity he relocated it twice before it seemed to prosper. In 1945 it set seed profusely but then in 1946 it died ... but left a small forest of seedlings beneath itself. EGW expected these seedlings to be *C. saluenensis* itself and would replace the plant that had died. He lifted, potted and nurtured these seedlings until, in 1954, three of them flowered all distinct and different from the original *C. saluenensis*. They were duly named 'Lady Gowrie', 'Margaret Waterhouse' and 'E G Waterhouse'.

Subsequently others were named from this batch of seedlings-'Shocking Pink', 'Crinkles', 'Bowen Bryant' and 'Sayonara'. Nature had produced a new group of Williamsii hybrids by (unknown) cross-pollination from the surrounding japonicas in his garden. The profusion of seedlings suggested different pollen parents. The whole process was a favourable commentary on the warmth and heat of the Sydney climate encouraging seed set and viable pollen in contrast to the modesty of the original Cornish environment.



*E G. Waterhouse Var.*



*Shocking Pink*



*Margaret Waterhouse*

This same theme of the warmer climate giving more viable pollen and more ready seed-set was pursued by the Jury brothers in New Zealand in the 1960s. Their work using different pollen parents some native Australian and some of other origins produced some spectacular Williamsii hybrids that have proved themselves in many parts of the world.

'Anticipation' (*C. saluenensis* X *C. japonica* Leviathan) is a large paeony in a rich rose pink on a modest, upright bush well-suited to smaller gardens. 'Debbie' (*C. saluenensis* X *C. japonica* Debutante) a choice lavender pink paeony of vigorous growth and 'Debbie Carnation' the same cross repeated about 15 years later and selected to give a more compact bush, slightly better flowering and improved foliage. All were small improvements but considered in total 'Carnation' is better than the original. 'Elsie Jury' (*C. saluenensis* X *C. japonica* Pukekura) produced a late flowering, large upright and open bush with a lighter pink paeony bloom.



*Anticipation Var.*



*Basket of Debbie*



*Elsie Jury*

Camellias, by their very striking and colourful flowers that appear in the relative gloom of winter and early spring, have earned the title of 'The Rose of Winter'. Observing such qualities and judging the potential garden-worthiness was the essential stock-in-trade of the plant hunters of yesteryear. They may well have visited the nurseries of the day in far-off lands some, like Robert Fortune, certainly did and acquired plants from such sources and shipped them back to Europe. But the men that followed delved far from civilization and nurseries and relied on their own observations the terrain in which the plant occurred, the aspect, the soil, the altitude, the winters and summers that they grew in. Collectively these are the same observations that any gardener needs to make to ensure the success of his plantings. If the visual appeal of the plants and/or their flowers is added to all this, then winners may be found.

*Camellia saluenensis* came up trumps on many of these points. It flowered well, it flowered young, it willingly set seed, it grew at some altitude, it grew over a range of terrain, it grew in the lower light levels of shaded gullies. All in all it offered potential. J C Williams utilized this and created the 'Williamsii hybrids'.



*Golden Spangles (Williamsii)*