

William T Shiell, Tweedside and Berwick Cycling Clubs

Record Holder, 1889 to 1894

William T Shiell was born in Chirnside, Scotland, in December 1867, where his father, David, was originally a draper, then a coal merchant. By 1881, they were living in the Land Steward's House in North Road, Berwick, where David was employed as a dairyman.

Three years later, in February 1884, David Shiell took over the management of *The Welcome*, 129 Marygate, which had opened in 1877, as a public house for workmen. He renamed it *The Welcome Temperance Hotel*.

The Berwick Advertiser commented on the model of the white cow in the window as follows: *One can fancy that the model of "Crummie" with the decoration round her neck is intended to represent the temperance movement cause, and its exhibition may be taken as an improvement, in an artistic sense, upon the plain announcement of "milk sold here" though the latter form possesses the advantage of appealing more directly to the average intelligence of mankind.* David sold meal tickets for 1d or 3d each, which could be purchased by charitable people to give to the many beggars living in Berwick, instead of money, which might be spent on drink.



The Welcome Hotel (1890s) was situated on the left hand side directly next to the Scots Gate Arch. It is believed to be the building shown on the photograph above.

William and his younger brother, David, were both keen cyclists and rode for the original Tweedside Cycling Club, which held meetings at the Welcome. William was the Club's bugler in 1889. That year, having presented satisfactory proof of his accomplishment, William was presented with a silver medal by the Club, for being the first member to cover 200 miles in 24 hours.

In September the following year, riding a light Beeston Humber safety, he broke the club record for 100 miles, riding from Berwick to East Linton and back, and then to Houndwood and back, in 7 hours and 58 minutes, seven of which were spent eating dinner. This was twenty minutes faster than the Newcastle record for the same roads and considerably faster than the previous Berwick time, of 8 hours and 46 minutes.

In October 1891, William completed the route in 7 hours 22 minutes, despite encountering a strong wind for much of the way. In the same week, he attempted to break his own record of 202 miles, in 24 hours, and Mr AM Donaldson's Scottish record of just over 240 miles. William, riding one of Messrs Devey's latest build of Northern X, fitted with solid tyres, rode from Berwick to East Linton and back, reaching Grantshouse shortly after 6 am Saturday, a distance of 106 miles. The darkness and the bad and greasy roads, which were partly metalled, conspired to slow him down. After a short rest, he cycled the same route, covering 212 miles by 4.30pm. Setting off again just before 5pm, he aimed for Kelso by way of Swinton. This time, the intense darkness caused William and his pace-maker, to travel over four miles along the Greenlaw turnpike before realising they were on the wrong road. They finally found their way to Kelso and took another short rest. William completed over 248 miles in 24 hours but the 8 miles, cycled on the incorrect road, were likely to be deducted from the total. The performance was considered an exceedingly good one for the time of year and William was confident that he could increase the distance in more favourable conditions. Mr Devey presented William with one of his machines in recognition of his performance.



Pictured above is a Northern "X" cycle built by Joseph Devey & Co. © The Online Bicycle Museum.

At a concert, held in December, at the Welcome Hall, by the Cycling Club and presided over by the Sheriff of Berwick, County Councillor J Weatherston, William was presented with a life size portrait of himself in racing colours, standing beside

his favourite roadster. After being heartily cheered, he returned thanks and said he would rather ride 200 miles than stand up and make a speech. During the event, displaying his musical talent, he played a concertina solo.

The Tweedside Cycling Club may have changed its name to the Berwick Cycling Club, as by April 1892, it was the latter, using the Welcome as its headquarters, with William named as the record holder for the 100 miles and 24 hour races.

William features less frequently in the newspapers, although younger brothers, George W and John commenced racing for Berwick. William's record for the 100 miles, was broken in October 1892. That month, he took part in a 50 miles cycle handicap race on the Edinburgh Road, from the Land Stewards House to Innerwick and back, but retired at Grantshouse.

A new club, called the Tweedside Cycling Club, opened in Tweedmouth, in March 1893, with 30 new members. Only the officials were named.

No further mention has been found of William racing but he still held the 24 hour record as at November 1894, for a distance of 247½ miles.

David Shiell worked for Joseph Devey and it is likely that William did as well. The Berwick 1891 census, records William as a *Cycle Maker* and David as a *Cycle Salesman*. David joined Ross and Sleigh, [later Rossleigh], Edinburgh bicycle dealers, in 1894 and opened a cycling depot for the company, in Newcastle, in 1901. He soon started selling motor cycles, seeing them as the future, and then motor cars. He remained with the company for 52 years, 45 years as Newcastle District Manager.

Still at 129 Marygate in 1901, the Berwick Census records William as a *Journeyman Baker* and his father, a *Confectioner and Pastry Cook*. William died in January 1902, aged just 33, a baker in Morpeth.

The following July, his father appeared at Newcastle Bankruptcy Court, described as a confectioner and restaurant keeper at "The Welcome". He had not kept any books,



Advert for The Welcome Temperance Hotel, which appeared in the Berwickshire News and General Advertiser on Tuesday, 1st January, 1889.

his excuse being that his *was entirely a ready-money business*. He owed £705 to 74 creditors. Although he understood catering, he had no experience in the bakery business and had had to pay a man, £80 a year. An illness in the family had caused him to lost control of the situation. Was he paying William or someone else after William's move to Morpeth, and was he referring to William's illness? He thought that the business could be sold as a current - going concern.

Shortly after William's death, William Hogg of Berwick, a long term friend and fellow cyclist, wrote to the Berwickshire News about William's cycling exploits on the ordinary [penny farthing], in the 1880s. An extract follows:

Then there were no pneumatic safeties with big gears, free wheels, etc. No! it was the much abused ordinary. I remember well his first attempt on the high machine. I had had a few lessons, and could actually mount one myself, when Willie Shiell took a violent notion to learn. He purchased a machine from Alf Stubbs (now in South Africa) for a sovereign. His training ground was on the walls, from the Scotsgate to the Flagstaff (now the military married quarters). It was a little while before he could really get away on the road, for this reason: when learning he used to mount at the Scotsgate by putting the ordinary against the wall, climbing up himself, then putting his leg across the saddle pushed himself away. One day he tried a spin by way of the Parade and Wallace Green. He went all right until he turned at the top of the last named street to come back. There is a slight slope, and being unable to bring the wheel round, he sailed merrily on, towards the upper gate of the New Gaol. He caught the gate to save himself and the cycle continued its career, until it finally collapsed in the middle of the yard. Willie meantime came down off his perch and had another try. This was one of Shiell's strong points, his determination.



1886 Beeston Humber Penny Farthing © The Online Bicycle Museum.

At Lowick, [Northumberland] where he tried his first race, his pluck carried him into the prize-list. The races at this place were round a block of buildings, by way of the

Commercial Inn and out into the main street again. They were not particular some 12 years ago at Lowick as to the distances of the races. It was simply four, six, or eight times round, as the Sports Committee decided upon. At the bottom corner there was rather a sharp turn into the main street, and any one coming with a good speed ran the chance of doing a header over the handlebars. I remember well this race. "Geordie" Craik, another crony of Shiell's, was going strong for first place, with Willie in hot pursuit. Coming into the street Willie took the header, up he got and off again. A second time the acrobatic feat was repeated, and yet he continued, and ultimately took the second place.*

He became popular at once. The next year though it was different. In the spring, Shiell had taken "Bride's Brae" in a hill contest at a speed which astonished many. It was his first year on a safety. At Lowick he was heard of, and accordingly, when he went to the annual sports, they were prepared for him.

[Alfred Stubbs is recorded on the Berwick1881 census, as the 12 year old adopted son of James and Margaret Gibson, Thompsons Terrace, 19 High Greens.]

William Hogg continued with: *Old Wheelmen remember Mr Devey having a home trainer competition in the Welcome Hall... the competitors had a dial, like a clock, in front of them with the distances recorded. They were sitting on saddles, with handlebars and pedals like the usual safety.* Mr JB Jobson, a strong rival from Berwick, beat William in this competition but William had his revenge when competing for the "Mayor's Prize" given by the Honorable President of the Club, Captain Norman. They raced from Spittal Maine, by Broadmeadows, to Fishwick, finishing at the Lodge Gates of Paxton. William was riding a little safety, which he had acquired from Newcastle and won comfortably.



The Lodge Gates, Paxton, where William Shiell finished first competing for the "Mayor's Prize." © Copyright Kirsty Smith and licensed for reuse under Creative Commons Licence: Attribution-ShareAlike 2.0 Generic (CC BY-SA 2.0).

On the same evening, in the mile handicap ridden from the fourth to the fifth milestone on Paxton Road, a cyclist coming in the opposite direction brought several competitors to the ground. Shiell was clear, but proving himself to be a thorough

sportsman instantly dismounted, to see if anyone was hurt, losing his first place in the process and coming second.

William Hogg had emigrated to Toronto, Canada, by 1926 and wrote regularly to either the Berwick Advertiser or the Berwickshire News. In 1937, he received a visit from David Shiell and his family, and William, with great happiness, wrote to the Berwickshire News about the visit and his memories of the Shiell brothers. He noted that William's record for 24 hours on solid tyres was never broken.

*The four roads round the block of buildings are Main Street, South Rd, Cheviot View, back to Main Street via the lane between Lowick Hall Farm and Garden House. The Commercial Inn, now a private house, stands in Well Close.

Acknowledgement:

The Online Bicycle Museum website for use of images. <https://oldbike.eu/>

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