



FAMILY FORTUNES

For canny nurserymen, the second half of the 19th century was a boom time, and none were cannier than the Veitches. Toby Musgrave charts the progress of the family responsible for the first orchid hybrid to be made in the west.



The Veitch dynasty was founded by John Veitch (1752-1839), a Scot from Jedburgh. In 1808, while employed as land steward by Sir Thomas Ackland of Killerton, near Exeter, John rented land at nearby Lower Budlake and established a nursery selling mainly trees and shrubs. It was a success and he rented more land in 1810, before moving the operation to larger premises at Mount Radford, Exeter, in 1832.

Luckily, John Veitch's son James (1792-1863) and grandson James junior (1815-1869) were natural successors to the business. James took over the Exeter nursery, and James junior was sent to London to train with nurserymen there for two years. On his return to Devon, James junior used his new-found skills to help his father improve and expand the Exeter nursery, and in recognition of his contribution, he was made a partner in the nursery in 1838. However, James junior soon realised that Veitch & Sons, being based in Devon, could not compete effectively with the large London nurseries, and in 1853 he acquired the Royal Exotic Nursery business of Messrs. Knight and Perry on the King's Road in Chelsea, London.

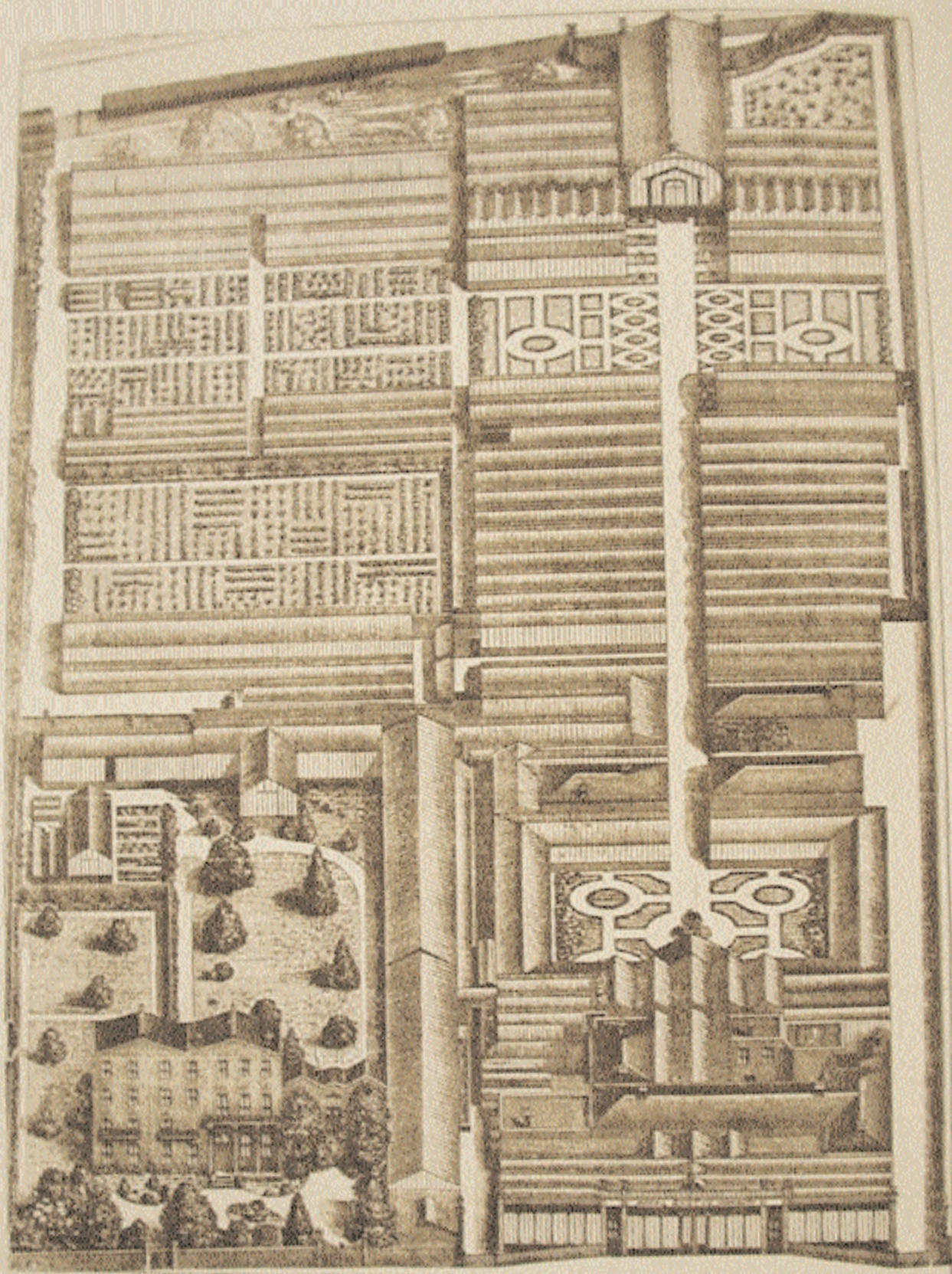
James junior was industrious, an astute businessman, a skilled horticulturist, and from 1856-64, an active member of the Council of the Royal Horticultural Society. Among other contributions, he instigated the

formation of the RHS Fruit and Floral Committees; and the Veitch Memorial Medal is in his honour. Under his guidance, the Royal Exotic Nursery became the largest of its kind in Europe, due mostly to James' division of the nursery into 11 sections: orchid, fern, new plant, decorative, tropical, soft-wooded, hard-wooded, vine, propagating, seed and glass. Each produced a vast range of the highest quality plants and was overseen by a skilled foreman. As business expanded the nursery acquired sites at Feltham, Langley and Coombe Wood.

Eventually it became unfeasible to run both businesses side by side and in 1863 Exeter and London became independent. In Exeter, James senior was succeeded by his younger son, Robert (1823-1855), and this branch became Robert Veitch & Sons, with Robert succeeded by Peter (1850-1929). The London branch took the name James Veitch & Sons and here James junior was succeeded by his sons John Gould (1839-1870), Harry James (1840-1924), and Arthur (1844-1880).

The Veitches' master stroke, and a symbol of their prosperity, was to employ plant hunters to collect exclusively for their nurseries. Before 1863, all collectors were dispatched from Exeter, but when Robert succeeded his father, their employment shifted to London. By carefully selecting the destinations, the nursery was able to collect new plants to feed the

LEFT: ILLUSTRATION OF *CYPRIPEDIUM SELLIGERUM* FROM AN 1877 CATALOGUE, WHICH OFFERED 'NEW PLANTS OF J. VEITCH & SONS' OWN INTRODUCTION'. ABOVE: JOHN VEITCH, THE FOUNDER OF THE VEITCH DYNASTY, WHO ESTABLISHED THE FIRST NURSERY IN 1808.



The Original Nursery at Chelsea



OPPOSITE: A BIRD'S-EYE VIEW OF THE KING'S ROAD NURSERY, 1853. ABOVE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: THE ROYAL EXOTIC NURSERY, CHELSEA. THE ROTHSCHILDS' BOG GARDEN, GUNNERSBURY, LAID OUT BY THE NURSERY. THE CHELSEA NURSERY, LARGEST OF ITS KIND IN EUROPE.

insatiable appetite of the horticultural elite, who wanted, and were prepared to pay premium prices for, a constant supply of rarities with which to show off. For example, in 1854, a *Wellingtonia* seedling (*Sequoiadendron*) from the seed introduced the previous year cost a princely two guineas. The collectors were also under instruction to collect large quantities of seed from 'nearly new' plants – recent introductions that still had a novelty value – which were sold to new suburban villa owners. And it was not just outdoor plants. Technological advances meant conservatories became affordable and heating systems controllable. The obsession for 'winter gardens' and hothouse plants was due in no small part to the exotic ferns, orchids and foliage plants brought back from faraway jungles by Veitch collectors. The new plants also provided the raw material from which the team of highly skilled plant breeders produced new hybrids. Indeed, it was the

Veitch nurseryman John Dominy who, in 1856, flowered the first orchid hybrid – *Calanthe dominii* (*C. furcata* x *C. masuca*). This was followed by many other 'firsts', including tuberous begonias, nepenthes and amaryllis.

In all, 22 Veitch plant hunters were dispatched to all corners of the globe between 1840 and 1910. The first were the Lobb brothers: William, who went to South America in 1840, and Thomas, who visited the Far East in 1843. In 1860, James' son, John Gould Veitch (1839–70) became one of the first plant hunters to visit Japan. Here he met another collector, Robert Fortune, and there ensued a race to be the first to get their discoveries back to Britain, and so extract the premium price they would command. Among others, Fortune claimed *Chamaecyparis pisifera*, and Veitch, *Chamaecyparis pisifera* 'Squarrosa'. John Gould returned in 1861, and another journey in 1864–6 took him to Australia and the South Sea Islands where his treasures included *Pandanus veitchii*.



ABOVE, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: INSECTIVOROUS *NEPENTHES CHELSONI* IN THE 1874 CATALOGUE. *CROTON REGINAE*, A NEW HOTHOUSE PLANT IN THE 1877 CATALOGUE. SIR HARRY VEITCH, THE LAST OF THE GREAT VEITCHES. THE 1866 CATALOGUE. OPPOSITE: *BEGONIA STELLA*.

Leaving his sons to run the London nursery, James junior retired in 1864. He died five years later and his contribution to British horticulture was praised in *The Gardener's Chronicle*: 'Were we to attempt to show how far our gardens are indebted to the Herculean and unflagging labours of Mr Veitch, we should have to write a history of most of the new plants introduced during the last thirty years; for it was to his active superintendence of their importation, and to his discriminating choice of collectors, that we may largely attribute the success.'

More tragic was the early death of John Gould from tuberculosis the following year. It was left to his brother Harry to manage the nursery for the next 30 years, until John Gould's sons, John Gould junior (1869-1914) and James Herbert (1868-1907), were old enough to take over. Harry Veitch, who compiled *Veitch's Manual of Coniferae* (1881) and *Veitch's Manual of Orchidaceous Plants* (1887-94), as well as launching the RHS Chelsea Flower Show in 1912, was more than up to the job and expanded the company's reputation for quality and variety. He continued to dispatch plant hunters, including his cousin Peter CM Veitch (1850-1929). Peter's exploration of Mount Kinabalu in Borneo with FW Burbidge yielded many extraordinary carnivorous nepenthes. Harry also sent Veitch's most successful

hunter, Ernest H Wilson, to western China in 1899. The last family traveller was James Herbert, among whose introductions were *Physalis alkekengi* var. *franchetii* and *Rhododendron schlippenbachii*. He wrote of his adventures in *A Traveller's Tales* and also compiled the story of the Veitch dynasty, *Hortus Veitchii* (1906).

When Harry retired, his nephew James Herbert took over, but it proved too much for him. He became withdrawn and eccentric, offended customers, and business began to decline. After his death at only 39 years of age, Harry (who was knighted in 1912) returned to put the business back on track. However, the expiration of the lease of the land at Coombe Wood and the outbreak of the First World War in 1914 sounded the death knell for this remarkable horticultural dynasty. The last Veitch, Anna Mildred, the daughter of Peter, sold the Exeter business shortly before she died in 1969, but the memory of the Veitch dynasty lives on in the RHS's annual Gold Veitch Memorial Medal, one of the highest distinctions in international horticulture. ■

Seeds of Fortune – A Gardening Dynasty by Sue Shepard, which tells the story of the Veitch Nurseries, will be published in May 2003 by Bloomsbury, £18.99.

