

The Veitch Heritage Garden

In the late 1700s and throughout the 1800s Exeter was the main base for one of the foremost nurseries in the UK headed by an internationally acclaimed family of plant hunters, collectors and nurserymen, the Veitches.



John Veitch

John Veitch was born in Jedburgh, Scotland in 1752, but, in the best traditions of a success story, he left Scotland at an early age and walked to London with ten shillings and his father's blessing to seek employment and his fortune. He had some experience of the nursery business and found employment with Lees of Hammersmith for the princely wage of eight shillings a week. He must have been quite good at it as his natural talents were quickly recognised by a local benefactor, Sir Thomas Acland the 7th Baronet of Killerton. He brought John Veitch down to Devon to work on a new landscaping project at Killerton House, now a

National Trust property approximately 5 miles to the north of Exeter.

As well as making the most of the superb natural features at Killerton John Veitch had paths and borders added and made full use of the gentle south facing slope and sheltered aspect. He quickly became the agent for the Acland Estate and with the help of Sir Thomas he established his first nursery at Budlake, near Killerton, in 1800.

Sir Thomas died in 1785 and the work on the grounds fell into abeyance but John carried on with a flourishing business as a landscape consultant and tree contractor. It is reported that he had a project in every county except Rutland during this time and in 1800 he became firmly established as a nurseryman following an order for trees to the value of £1,212. These were for Luscombe Castle where the renowned landscaper Humphrey Repton was undertaking a major replanting of the main valley area.

John and his wife, Anna Davidson, had six children but it was the youngest one born in 1792 who was to play a major role in the Veitch story. James was a natural gardener and he helped his father on the Killerton estate from a very early age. When the 10th Baronet resurrected the landscaping projects, James introduced many of his own ideas and working methods and some of the mature Spanish Chestnuts and Beech trees on the estate are a testament to this work.

At the end of the Napoleonic Wars access to plants from abroad became easier and deliveries for the nursery and Killerton began to arrive via Topsham Quay. (It is said that barrels of local cider frequently made the return trip to cement relations with reliable and proficient suppliers.) The resumption of work at Killerton put an end to the national enterprise but the nursery began to flourish as more plants were introduced. Killerton became a series of trial grounds for a number of these new introductions.

The Budlake nursery continued to flourish and in 1832 with James now at the helm, the nursery was expanded with the purchase of 25 acres of land at Mount Radford on the Topsham Road (this area



Acacia Exeter Hybrid

Malus hupehensis

Deutzia gracilis

James Veitch, Junior

now comprises the Gras Lawn development, the site of the Princess Elizabeth Hospital, and the housing to the rear of County Hall). This was followed by the first of a number of shops or seed warehouses in the city centre area, with the first at 54 High Street and the last at the site of the Well House Inn in Cathedral Yard. This site was still open in the late 1960s.

By 1837 two more additions to the Mount Radford site had been made. The first, and most important, addition was James Jnr, the eldest of six, who began work at the nursery following training at several London-based nurseries. The second addition was the completion of the specially-commissioned villa, Gras Lawn. The multi-stemmed Sequoiadendron which graced the front garden of the Veitch residence can still be seen today as it towers above the new development off Barrack Road.



James Veitch

John Veitch remained at Budlake and spent some time running down the nursery with another son, Thomas. As the Budlake venture closed other land purchases were made including, in 1836, a seven acre site at Broadclyst Heath called 'Brockhill' to hold the majority of the tree stock from Budlake and in 1838 eleven acres were purchased on Haldon for ornamentals. John Veitch entered retirement at Killerton aged 85 years and died there in 1839.

In 1838 James Jnr married a farmer's daughter from Poltimore called Harriott Gould. In 1839 and 1840 two more very important elements of the Veitch story arrived, John Gould and Harry James. In 1839 James Veitch Snr extended the nurseries still further by renting 30 acres of land at Poltimore known as the 'Bramberries'. This site was predominantly an overspill for Haldon and Brockhill.

Attending floral shows was an important part of the Veitch expansion and throughout the 1830's and 1840's numerous tributes were written about the 'most splendid exhibits shown by the Mount Radford Nurseries of Exeter'. James Veitch Jnr took over many of the daily management issues at Mount Radford leaving James Snr time to reflect on ways to expand the business.

The Veitch name needed some international attention and the only way to achieve this was to collect plants and introduce new varieties to a discerning public. The first of the great 'plant hunters', and possibly one of the greatest, was William Lobb who left Falmouth for Rio de Janeiro on 6th November 1840. He was followed by his brother Thomas, who worked at the Mount Radford nursery, who set sail for the Near East in January 1843 in search of orchids. With access to exotic plant material now assured a Veitch love affair with orchids began that was to culminate in outstanding displays at the Chelsea nurseries and world wide recognition for the three Johns – Dominy, Seden and Heal – who expanded and perfected the art of hybridisation.

By the 1850s it was evident that expansion was not just desirable, but essential. In 1853 a nursery site on the Kings Road, Chelsea, was bought and James Jnr, complete with family, moved to London.

The main Chelsea nursery and its satellites at Coombe Wood and Feltham became enormously successful. The new introductions, the plant houses and the orchids became part of the social calendar and royalty, heads of state, eminent scientists, including Darwin, and high society all paid homage to the collections at Chelsea.

The two nurseries operated together for ten years until the death of James Snr in 1863. James Jnr then went independent as James Veitch & Son(s) and the Exeter business was taken over by Robert Toswill Veitch, who moved the nursery to New North Road in 1864, and opened another seed warehouse in the High Street.

Robert was joined in 1880 by his son, Peter C M Veitch, who had travelled extensively in his youth. Peter brought his experiences of French and German nurseries into the company as well as an element of flair from the Chelsea nursery. Peter Veitch was a plantsman with a keen interest in trees and shrubs which he turned into a speciality for the Exeter nurseries.

When his father died in 1885 Peter became head of the Exeter nurseries and played a very active part in the life of the city. He was a keen sportsman, a Governor of the Royal Devon & Exeter Hospital, and served on a number of committees. In 1917 he was awarded the Victoria Medal of Honour, the second member of the family to be so honoured following James' son Harry in 1906, who was, by now, in charge of the Chelsea enterprise.



Enkianthus campanulata



Erica Veitchii



Potentilla Veitchii

Harry had no heir to the Chelsea nurseries and continued to be a major driving force behind them well into his senior years. The same drive and motivation encouraged research and development projects within the Royal Horticultural Society. Harry was knighted in 1912 following his dedication in establishing a new event on the gardeners' calendar, the Chelsea Flower Show.

Up to the outbreak of the First World War, the Exeter based nurseries were credited with the introduction of the following plants:

- 118 varieties of exotic ferns
- 232 varieties of orchid. Another 338 were raised by the Veitch company
- 498 varieties of stove and greenhouse plants
- 49 varieties of conifers
- 72 varieties of climbing and evergreen plants
- 153 varieties of deciduous climbing plants, shrubs and trees
- 122 varieties of herbaceous plants
- 37 varieties of bulbous plants.

The grounds at Killerton House

In 1931 the nurseries made their final move to larger premises in Alphington which were closer to another large site in Exminster. The interests in the High Street were moved to Cathedral Close, and this shop and seed warehouse remained in business until the late 1960s. (The site is now part of the Well House Public House.)

The Veitch family were great writers and much of their work is chronicled in **Hortus Veitchii** and **A Travellers Tales**, the latter being a factual account of the arduous expedition led by James Herbert Veitch into Japan and the far east where he explored countless botanical gardens. An original copy of **Hortus Veitchii** and other artefacts are on display at the Royal Albert Memorial Museum in Queen Street, Exeter and annually, usually in July, a horticulturally-based lecture is held at the museum in honour of this association.

The House of Veitch ended in 1969 when Mildred Veitch was forced to sell the company to St Bridgets Nurseries due to ill health. St Bridgets Nurseries continue to stock many of the plants from the Veitch catalogue and we are indebted to them for their help and assistance in compiling this tribute.

Mildred Veitch sadly had little time to enjoy a retirement as she passed away shortly after the sale and thus the house of Veitch came to an end. Many of the Veitch family are buried at Broadclyst Church on the outskirts of Exeter or at Higher Cemetery in the city.

Post script...

When the hands of the Royal Hospital clock move towards noon on the Thursday of Chelsea Flower Show an assembly takes place inside the main gate....the head gardeners of Britain hold their annual reunion. An early but unobtrusive move is made towards places of refreshment when it is certain that the talk will turn towards time shared with James Veitch & Son. anon



Sir Harry Veitch

With acknowledgement to the works of Shirley Heriz-Smith, horticultural historian and writer