

John Goss of Hatherleigh

A Century ago Gregor Mendel Abbot of Brunn, whose experiments on the crossing of plants have so profoundly modified the views of biologists on the physiological processes of heredity, was born of poor parents in a Bohemian village. He published the account of his experiments in 1865 but it was not until 1900, eighteen years after his death, that biologists came to appreciate what he had accomplished. It is, therefore, interesting to find that in 1820, before Mendel was born, a Devonshire man, John Goss, began a hybridization experiment identical with one of Mendel's and published an account of it in 1822, in the "Horticultural Transactions", but he failed for lack of knowledge and interpretive curiosity to realise the importance of the discovery. His letter, however to the Royal Horticultural Society contains a sentence which possesses a curiously prophetic significance; "Should this new variety of pea neither possess superior merit nor be deemed singular in its bicoloured produce, yet there is I conceive, something in its history that will emit a ray of physiological light"

Mr A. D. Darbyshire, in "Breeding and the Mendelian Discovery" (1911), 'has given the main facts in the life of this remarkable man: "John Goss was born in Hatherleigh and baptised on 27 June 1787. (Tom, let me digress here for a second and this in order to tell you that John Goss lived at Pixton Farm in Iddesleigh, as a boy, and that your great-great~great-great grandfather was his grandfather) - to continue - He is next heard of as a lad who cleaned boots and did other odd jobs at the Rectory at Iddesleigh, (next village to Hetherleigh) where the Rector took a number of pupils. One of these became interested in Goss and helped to educate him with a view to his entering the Church (of England) But Goss had scruples, and he became an usher in the school. He was an active and inventive man. He made an "orrery" (A model of the solar system) a reading hook for teaching the aged poor to read, and a calculating machine.

At the age of 26 he married, under romantic circumstances. A lady came one day to Hetherleigh to visit an old servant, and created a sensation in this out-of-the-way village by driving up to her door in a post-chaise. On getting out of her carriage, she stumbled and would have fallen but for the timely intervention of a young man, who stepped forward and saved her. This young man was John Goss. He was sent for to be thanked for his services. They were married on 6 March 1813, His wife (Lady Harrington) was 29 years older than he was. At their marriage he was 26 and she was 55. It was during his married life that he made the crosses with peas (in 1820) and sent his note of them to the Royal Horticultural Society (1822). It may be that the carrying out of his experiment was made possible by a leisure which he owed to his wife. He speaks of a 'living retired' in the country. It seems that his horticultural work was successful, for he received a prize (purse with gold) for his work from a Horticultural Society. His wife died, aged 65, on 19 Jan 1823, and he went to live at Okehampton, where he died on 31 May 1833, at the age of 46, leaving his money to establish libraries in Hatherleigh and Okehampton".