

# Newton St Cyres History Group

## March Meeting

The meeting of the History Group on 20<sup>th</sup> March was a first – a joint meeting with the Friends of the Arboretum and the Gardening Club, held in the big hall. The subject was one of common interest to all three groups, the story of the Veitch Nursery and the plant collectors who were sent out all over the world by the family. Our speaker was Caradoc Doy, who has studied, researched and written about the Veitch family, and who is very knowledgeable about the plants they introduced to Britain over the years. He has a Silver Gilt medal from Chelsea Flower Show for an educational exhibit made in tribute to Sir Harry Veitch, and republished Hortus Veitchii, the original encyclopaedic catalogue, in 2006, 100 years after its first publication.



The founder of the Veitch empire was John Veitch, a Scot who came south in 1761 to work for Sir Thomas Dyke Acland of Killerton House. The Aclands were huge landowners and eventually John Veitch became the land agent for all the estates. By 1800 he had established his own nursery on Acland land at Budlake, and he also designed the 'Bear Hut' in the gardens, which was in fact originally the Ladies Cot, a birthday present for the wife of the ninth baronet. The walks and avenues at Killerton were also his design.

His youngest son, James Veitch, grew up at Killerton and learned from his father. He could see that there were opportunities and money to be made from the new plants which were entering the country and he started to ask people he knew were travelling abroad to bring back plants and seeds, and this is how Clianthus (the Lobster Claw plant) was introduced from New Zealand. Then the decision was made to send out plant collectors, financed by the family firm, specifically to collect plants and seeds for propagation, and in fact 23 collectors were sent out over a period of 72 years. The result was, in a way, to turn the whole country into a huge botanic garden, with a vast array of trees and shrubs and flowers now grown in the British Isles, far from their native habitat, which are a wonderful heritage. Furthermore, some of these plants are now rare in the wild, and the stock preserved here is being used to save them and reintroduce them to their original habitats.

The plant collectors have names which are now immortalised in the plants named after them; the Cornish brothers William and Thomas Lobb, Richard Pearce, John Gould Veitch, Charles Maries, Ernest Wilson are just some of the famous ones. They risked their lives in wild places of the world, often facing hostile inhabitants or uncooperative rulers, and suffering injuries and permanent health problems. Furthermore, a whole season's work could be lost if the returning ship was wrecked or the plants were maltreated as they travelled. However, the introduction of the Wardian Case after 1830 greatly improved the survival rates of living plants on their journeys back to England.

The new plants proved very lucrative to the Veitch family and they opened large nurseries in London, and were a formative presence in the Royal Horticultural Society and the Chelsea Flower Show. Sir Harry Veitch, who was instrumental in getting the Chelsea site organised for the annual show, was knighted for his work, the first horticulturist to gain this honour. Great care was given to

growing on, propagating and hybridising the precious new plants and then they were sold for significant amounts, all over the country. The names of the well known plants introduced by the Veitch collectors mentioned in Caradoc's talk are too numerous to list, and the story of the discovery of the Wellingtonia and the rivalry with America was fascinating. Again, it is too long to record here but it is worth looking it up on Google!

A branch of the Veitch family remained in Exeter and maintained a nursery here, and also a shop opposite the Guildhall in town for about 95 years, which later moved into Cathedral Yard, and which sold all sorts of gardening supplies, but especially seeds of all kinds. It only closed in the 1960s. Robert Veitch, who ran the Exeter branch of the firm, was the younger son of James Veitch, and his son, Peter, in turn took over the business in 1885 on his father's death. Caradoc Doy pointed out that there is an example of Magnolia veitchii 'Peter Veitch' in our arboretum, and it would be interesting to know what other trees there came from their local nursery. Another local connection is that over the years there were many artefacts from the collectors' various travels which were eventually donated by the Veitch family to the RAMM in Exeter. The last member of the family to run the nursery in Exeter was Mildred Veitch, the daughter of Peter Veitch, and she was in charge of the business from 1929 to 1969, when she sold to St Bridget Nurseries. Thus five generations of Veitch's had worked in Exeter from 1761 to 1969.

Caradoc shared some of his huge knowledge of the history of the Veitch family with humour and authority; it was clear that we had only scratched the surface of this subject and that it covered the areas of gardening, history and the arboretum here in Newton St Cyres.

### Next meetings

Meetings are usually on Thursday evenings in the village hall club room and start at 7.30pm. We have no special membership arrangements. Everyone is welcome. There is a small charge of £2 which includes tea and biscuits.

For further information contact Jean 851337 Isobel 851351

May 15th Chris Southcott, Tim Sedgwick and Malcolm Brooks will be presenting an evening on 'Newton St Cyres and the Exeter Crediton Railway'.

June 14<sup>th</sup> Our outing to Iddesleigh. We shall visit the War Horse Valley Country Park at Parsonage Farm. This is the valley that inspired Michael Morpergo who lives nearby to write War Horse. This will include a visit to their small WW1 exhibit and one to see farming as it used to be through the year. Their cream teas are to be recommended. The cost will be £5.50 including tea although some contributions towards petrol for drivers may be acceptable. We are collecting names so we can organise groups. There is also the possibility of opting to have lunch at the Duke of York Iddesleigh. If you would like to have lunch in Iddesleigh we shall meet at the hall car park by 12noon. If you wish to visit Parsonage Farm only we shall meet at the hall car park by 1.30pm aiming to all be ready to see the exhibitions by 2.30pm.. Please let Jean or Isobel know (phone nos. above)  
We shall of course need some willing to drive!

Sept 18 First World War - Roger and Jean Wilkins  
Oct 16 Peter Keay on Eastholme  
Nov 13 Roger Mortimer Monmouth Rebellion  
Dec 11 Joint Christmas Social with Gardening Club