The Three Johns

The House of Veitch had won international acclaim for its plant introductions, floral displays, landscaping schemes and husbandry but perhaps the most important legacy it has left is the wide range of plants introduced via hybridisation. The majority of the plants sent back by the collectors were usually successful in their own right, but often subtle changes had to be made to the plant's genetic make-up to improve colour, hardiness or foliage for a thriving commercial market. In the case of the orchids a very lucrative market could be entertained with the production of new colours and it was in this particular field that the Veitch company excelled. With plants, including orchids, being sent to Exeter and Chelsea from all over the world the opportunities to create a perfect plant were endless and the three hybridists employed by James, Robert and Harry Veitch excelled at it.

John Dominy, John Seden and John Heal all worked as nurserymen, but in typical Veitch fashion they were promptly moved to specialist duties after showing a particular aptitude or a desire to learn.

John Dominy

John Dominy was a Devonian who joined Veitch from another local firm called Lucombe, Pince and Co, in 1834. He became an authority in cross breeding techniques and specialised in orchids. His success became legendary and it was claimed by the Gardeners Chronicle at the time that he was more successful than insects in ensuring fertilisation of plants. Dominy proved to be equally successful with hardy shrubs and achieved success with fuchsias sent back by William Lobb and rhododendrons sent back by Thomas Lobb. One of his rhododendron award winner hybrids, **'Princess Royal'***, proved to be a very successful plant and from 1857 it was selling for 42 shillings for a small plant and 63 shillings for a larger plant.*

John Seden

Orchid: Brassiocattleya binosa Warbash Valley

With the expansion continuing at Chelsea, James Veitch Jnr made an audacious approach for Dominy which his father rejected. As a compromise a very capable member of the Chelsea staff was sent down to Exeter to train under John Dominy. This was John Seden from Dedham in Essex who was originally employed on general duties at Chelsea. He was moved into the orchid houses where his aptitude became apparent and he was despatched to Mount Radford in 1861. He returned to Chelsea after only two years but with confidence enough to carry on several breeding programmes as well as seeking new varieties from imported parent plants. John Seden was soon as successful as Dominy and when his mentor joined him in 1864 after the death of James Snr at Mount Radford, they carried on their hybridisation work and also investigated acclimatisation and ventilation techniques. Dominy retired in 1880 with **Calanthe 'dominii'** *as his tribute. Seden continued to produce new varieties of numerous plants and was rewarded with the Victoria Medal of Honour in 1897.*

Orchid: Paphiopedilum micranthum

John Heal

The third John was John Heal from Barnstaple who was originally employed on general duties at the Coombe Wood site. He was moved to Chelsea to take charge of the fern collection which was expanding rapidly due in part to the efforts of Thomas Lobb who was collecting in Borneo. He later became head of the New Plants Department, but we are indebted to him for his work on tuberous begonias, amongst others. He succeeded in producing the first white begonia, **'Queen of the White'***, by crossing the palest colours from earlier projects and he is also credited with the first of the large flowered varieties, the orange and scarlet* **'Emperor'***. From a commercial and amenity point of view his greatest success must be* **Begonia 'Elatior'** *which is still linked with many of the varieties we use today.*

John Heal received the Victoria Medal of Honour with his colleague, John Seden, in 1897.

Orchid: Phalaenopsis 'Romance' x 'Music'

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

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