

THE LOBB BROTHERS; PLANT HUNTERS.

In the late 18th century and onwards into the 19th century wealthy landowners competed to adorn their estates with exotic trees first introduced by botanists such as Sir Joseph Banks [1743 – 1820], who travelled round the world with Captain Cook in the Endeavour. In 1832 John Veitch established a nursery at Exeter to supply exotic plants on a commercial scale to a growing number of enthusiasts at reasonable prices. For this purpose he needed a plant hunter to scour the world for new plants. He selected William Lobb on the recommendation of his brother Thomas Lobb, who was one of his assistants.

William and Thomas were born at Egloshayle near Wadebridge and the family moved to Perranarworthal, when their father was appointed gamekeeper to Sir Charles Lemon at Carclew. The boys were employed in the stove houses, which heated the glasshouses on the estate. Sir Charles was a keen gardener and he encouraged the brothers to pursue their interest in botany and horticulture. Whilst Thomas gained employment with Veitch at Exeter, William worked for Steven Davey at Redruth and then assisted the Williams family of Scorrier in the design and planting of their garden.

In 1840 William embarked from Falmouth in a packet ship bound for Rio de Janeiro to find new plants and send back seeds to John Veitch. He was asked in particular to find the monkey puzzle tree, previously only known for its nuts being a local food. This he did, finding forests of monkey puzzle trees in southern Chile. He sent back 3000 seeds and nuts from these trees. The plants became an instant hit in our great landscaped gardens and even in small suburban gardens. The name originated from a visitor to Pencarrow near Bodmin, who commented that the sharp leaves would puzzle any monkey trying to climb it.

William returned home in 1844, but was away again to South America in the following year on another 3 year trip. On Chiloe Island off southern Chile he found **Escallonia macrantha** our popular hedging plant. In the temperate forests there he found the **Chilean bellflower**, the **Chilean lantern tree**, the **Chilean firebush** and the **Flame Nasturtium**. He also collected seeds of our common **Berberis darwinii**, originally discovered by Charles Darwin during the voyage of HMS Beagle. All these new finds were nurtured in the Exeter Nursery, before being sold to eager gardeners and many thrived in the mild Cornish climate.

He returned to Cornwall in 1848 to be reunited with his brother, who in the meantime had been despatched to Malaya and Indonesia to find orchids, pitcher plants and other tropical plants to cater for the current interest for conservatories and orangeries. This really took off after the Great Exhibition at Crystal Palace in 1851 displayed the range of tropical plants that could be grown in heated conservatories becoming a status symbol.

William was not allowed to rest for long and was away to California in 1849 to collect large quantities of seed from the conifers previously introduced by David Douglas and Archibald Menzies such as the **Douglas fir**, the **Monterey pine** and the tallest trees on earth, the **Redwoods** with **Hyperion** attaining 379ft. Specimens from the extensive family of conifers were in great demand and were changing the garden landscapes of Britain. During this expedition he also introduced the **Ceanothus**, the yellow **Fremontodendron** and the red **Delphinium**.

In 1852 whilst he was in San Francisco a bear hunter informed him of a group of gigantic trees in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada. He set off post haste to this the Calaveras Grove, where he found 80-90 of the largest trees in the world the **Wellingtonia**. This is now a protected National Park and a major visitor attraction containing the largest living thing on earth, the 2000 year old **General**

Sherman tree, 275ft tall, 79ft in girth and weighing an estimated 2500 tons. William returned home with the precious seed and Victorians fell over themselves to acquire a specimen of these trees.

William left for California once again in 1854, contracted a disease and died there in 1864 and was buried unknown and un-mourned in a local cemetery. William was one of the finest, but least known of the plant hunters, who gave gardeners the most remarkable trees and loveliest plants ever grown.

Thomas made several expeditions to the Far East and India to collect orchids to satisfy a mania for these plants, an essential item for the ever growing number of collectors taking advantage of the major improvements in the heating systems for conservatories. During his last expedition in 1858 to Borneo, Sumatra and the Philippines he was required to search for attractive foliage plants, which were sold by Veitch as house plants to decorate window ledges and they became a favourite feature of the Victorian parlour. He lost a leg during this expedition in unknown circumstances as neither Lobb kept a journal.

Thomas returned to Devoran in 1869 and lived there peacefully for 25 years tending his garden and painting. He was buried in Devoran in 1894 and there is a plaque in the churchyard commemorating him and his brother.

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Please note that both plant hunters introduced many more plants and trees that I have not mentioned for the sake of brevity and not overloading this article with latin names.