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# *Paphiopedilum spicerianum*: unravelling some of the mystery

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Fig. 1. *Paphiopedilum spicerianum*. (image taken from plate 515-516 of Lindenia vol. 11 (1895); a double plate of *Paphiopedilum Leeanum* and its parents.

Much has been written about the history of the collection of *Paphiopedilum spicerianum* over the almost 130 years which have elapsed since its introduction (Fig. 1). Throughout this body of knowledge, one problem exists; that of telling fact apart from fancy with any degree of certainty. For me, the major question involving this species is the report that it was originally gathered on the Assam-Bhutan border, an assertion that has not subsequently been supported. I have also felt that some clarification of the relationship between the three members of the Spicer family who were mentioned in these stories would be necessary to make sense of it all.

The Chinese whisper effect implies that gathering one's material from secondary and tertiary sources leaves one open to another's agenda, whatever that agenda may be, thus the most primary of sources must be sought out in attempting to sort out any historical query. Regarding *Paph. spicerianum*, such primary sources would be the publications of the English nursery, Messrs. Veitch, who purchased the first specimens from the Spicer family; the versions of the Sander collection of this species from the pen of Frederick Boyle; a relevant journal being published at the time of these events (ca. 1880) - in this case the *Gardeners' Chronicle*; and also J. D. Hooker's views on the matter.

# Veitch

The house of James Veitch & Sons was the first to introduce this species into commerce. From Veitch's *Manual of Orchidaceous Plants*, aside from a long description, comes the following history: "This beautiful species first became known to us in the autumn of 1878, when we received a flower from Mr. Herbert Spicer, of the Woodlands, near Godalming. The sender could give no information respecting the origin of the plant from which the flower had been gathered further than that he had received it and some others from India, amongst a mixed collection of orchids. Arrangements were made by which a portion of the *Cypripedium* plants passed into our hands for propagation, and subsequently we acquired the remainder; the species in the meantime had been named by Professor Reichenbach in compliment to the introducer. Not long afterwards its habitat was discovered in Assam it is said, by the collectors of Messrs. Low and Co. and of Messrs. Sander and Co., and a considerable number of plants was received by both firms from India; the habitat is thence known, but the precise locality has not yet been divulged."

I had imagined that Veitch's monumental work, *Hortus Veitchii* would have made mention of this species, but this has proved not to be the case (Steve Topletz, *pers. comm.*).

The plate accompanying the description in the *Manual of Orchidaceous Plants* is offered here (Fig. 2).

Fig. 2. *Paphiopedilum spicerianum*. (Veitch, p. 47, note: flowering period given as "beginning of November through Christmas".)

## Frederick Boyle

Regarding the history of Sander's importation of *Paphiopedilum spicerianum*, the two versions of Boyle make for wonderful reading. These are now readily available to all those with an Internet connection (see bibliography below). Reading through them will help to make more sense of the rest of this piece. It must be remembered that Boyle was fed his information by his friend Frederick Sander. Sander was essentially using this useful writer and journalist as a means of aggrandisement and advertisement, and gave him sufficient in the way of facts and fancy that he could construct a good story. The *About Orchids*, A Chat version from 1893 was rather short and included many falsehoods, presumably deliberately invented by Sander. In *The Woodlands Orchids* version dating to 1901, some--but certainly not all--of these were corrected. The latter is undoubtedly the truer and more useful version and is considerably more comprehensive; it is the one that should serve as a basic history regarding the Sander importation. It is, however necessary to attempt to independently verify each and every fact presented in this version.

Incidentally, Arthur Swinson's version of the *Paph. spicerianum* story in *Frederick*

*Sander: The Orchid King* is nothing but an inventive paraphrase of Boyle's *Woodlands* version. Swinson's bibliography and source references do not claim any more than that.

## The Gardeners' Chronicle

The original award description and first mention of *Paph. spicerianum* is as follows:

"RHS 14 October 1879. Floral Committee - Dr. Denny in the Chair. FCC awarded to Messrs J. Veitch & Sons, for *Cypripedium Spicerianum*, a small-flowered species with the upper sepal white, marked with a central purple line, lateral sepals greenish also with a central line, the lip greenish, shining and the top of the column white, spotted violet and wavy at the margins." (*Gard. Chron.* n.s. 12: 505 - 1879).

(Notice the misapplication of the term "lateral sepals.") This was written by the editors of the *Gardeners' Chronicle* and, as far as I can see, is a valid description of the species. It predates the more comprehensive one of Reichenbach f.

□

Fig. 3.

On 19th January 1880 (*Gard. Chron.* n.s. 13: 40) the above description was repeated almost verbatim and it was accompanied by the first illustration of the species - described as an "Icon. xylogr.;" in other words, a woodcut, and a very beautiful one at that (Fig. 3).

A week later, a further note was added (p. 74):

"CYPRIPEDIUM SPICERIANUM - we understand that this *Cypripedium*, which is illustrated in our last issue, was received some time ago by Mr. Spicer among a mixed collection of orchids without any indication of its habitat.

When it flowered for the first time, a bloom was sent to Prof. Reichenbach, who named the plant in compliment to the gentleman through whose instrumentality it was introduced to British gardens and from whom Messrs James Veitch & Sons purchased the stock."

The more extensive description of Reichenbach f., including a Latin diagnosis, came out more than five months after the award had been recorded (*Gard. Chron.* n.s. 13: 363, March 20, 1880). As it contains nothing of additional interest to this argument, it will not be repeated here. The name "*spicerianum*" however had been suggested at a much earlier date by Reichenbach f.

As I see it, the attribution of the authorship of the basionym, viz. *Cypripedium*

*spicerianum* Rchb.f. ex Masters & T. Moore, as offered by Cribb (1987) is the correct one, rather than the *Cypripedium spicerianum* Rchb.f. more often given, for example in the *RBG Kew, World Checklist of Monocotyledons* and later by Cribb himself (1998). The Masters referred to here as editor of the *Gardeners' Chronicle*. was none other than the famous Maxwell T. Masters, a doctor/botanist active in the Royal Horticultural Society, who succeeded Joseph Dalton Hooker as chair of the RHS Scientific Committee.

Towards the end of 1881, a note from James Douglas says "This is also proving itself to be as free in growth as *C. insigne*. A large plant had eleven flowers of large size," probably referring to a plant in the Veitch collection. Additionally at this time, the first indications appeared that this species was flowering in other collections, namely those of Mr. Smith at Brentham Park, Stirling, and C. Wynn Esq. of Birmingham.

The advert for the Sander sale of 16 February 1882, where the plants exported from India by Förstermann were sold (see Manning 2005), makes no mention of *Paph. spicerianum* at all. The catalogue of this sale may be more informative in this regard.

Less than a fortnight after this sale, the following note appeared:

"*Cypripedium Spicerianum*: This remarkable and beautiful species has now been imported in considerable quantities, and we may expect to see it much cheaper than heretofore. Mr. Sander, by whom the consignment was distributed through Mr. Stevens, says that the collector found it growing on the face of almost perpendicular rocks which were very moist. Indeed the leaves themselves show the state in which they were found, as they were covered with mud. As a hint to cultivation Mr. Sander says that the plants were found growing in loam, so that they are likely to succeed in cultivation under the same conditions as *niveum*. The plants must be placed in the warmest house. JD" (*Gard. Chron.* n.s. 17: 262 - February 25, 1882; "JD" was presumably the earlier-mentioned James Douglas.)

By April 1884, a Mr. Gordon was offering plants of *Paph. spicerianum* at "7s 6d - 15s each." Later in the same month, "Protheroe & Morris will offer at auction, from Mr. F. Sander, on Friday next (25th?)... a small but fine importation of *Cypripedium Spicerianum*, extremely rare in its native habitat." (*Gard. Chron.* n.s. 21: 502 - April 19, 1884)

It will thus be seen that March 9, 1884 given by Boyle in *The Woodlands Orchids* and repeated by Swinson as the date of the great first Sander sale of plants of this species is totally erroneous; this event had taken place more than two years previously, and in any case, March 9, 1884 was a Sunday, a definite no-sale day!

Additionally, nothing that could be construed as a record of the plants imported

by Low, as mentioned by Veitch, could be inferred from anything printed in the *Gardeners' Chronicle*. between 1880 and 1890.

So far, so good, but essentially my important questions could not be answered by anything above.

## Joseph Dalton Hooker

On the 1st of April 1880, a scant 17 days after the Reichenbach f. description had appeared, plate 6490 was published in the *Curtis's Botanical Magazine*, based on a painting by Matilda Smith. The accompanying notes were written by J. D. Hooker. Unfortunately these notes contribute little to the history of *Paphiopedilum spicerianum*, aside from the single fact that that the plant depicted had flowered at the Veitch establishment in Chelsea in October 1879. What is offered, however, is an excellent and thorough description of this species in English, much superior to that of Reichenbach f.

Hooker's 1891 note on this species in the *Flora of British India* gives no additional history.

## Who was who in the Spicer zoo

The Internet proves to be a marvelous genealogical resource where one may look into the histories of families, with a particular emphasis on British and American lines. I felt that if resources relative to the specific Spicers involved here could be located, much more sense could be made of the history of the collection of *Paph. spicerianum*.

1881 would be about the time Mr. Sander would have been calling on Mrs. Spicer, and conveniently it was also the year in which a decennial English Census was taken. Records of this latter event are available on the FamilySearch Website of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the Mormons).

Searching for a Herbert Spicer associated with the town of Godalming in Surrey, I found a reference to a five year-old who had been born there, and when I turned up the full census page on which his name appeared, much valuable information came to light. It was a list of some 15 people who had been at an address in Putney Heath Highlands (then in Surrey, now in Greater London) on the day of the census, which was the 3rd April, 1881. Nine of these people were Spicers, the balance being servants. The Spicers present were as follows:

So here we have the matriarch, Sarah, her two sons, one conveniently called Herbert and both involved in the paper industry, with their wives, and the 4 grandchildren - all of the latter having been born in Godalming. It appears that all four grandchildren were the progeny of the second-mentioned son Herbert and

his wife Martha. Lucy, the wife of Henry, the older son, was also coincidentally born in India (Table 1).

Table 1. Census Information of 1881 regarding the Spicer Family

<b>Spicer Forenames</b>	<b>Relation</b>	<b>Marital Status</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Birthplace</b>	<b>Occupation</b>
Sarah	Head	W	Female	71	Edmonton, Middlesex	-
Henry	Son	M	Male	43	Islington, Middlesex	Wholesale Stationer
Lucy	Daughter In Law	M	Female	33	Calcutta, India	-
Herbert	Son	M	Male	32	Isington, Middlesex	Paper Maker
Martha McMurray	Daughter In Law	M	Female	34	Edinburgh, Scotland	-
Herbert M.	Grandson	-	Male	5	Godalming, Surrey	Scholar
Annie McMurray	Grand Daughter	-	Female	3	Godalming, Surrey	-
Cecil W.	Grandson	-	Male	1	Godalming, Surrey	-
Harold	Grandson	-	Male	4m	Godalming, Surrey	-

Other research indicates that Sarah's late husband's name was also Henry (1801-1877). Various Spicers were involved in paper mills all over southern England. The Catteshall Mill was situated near Godalming, and Herbert, son of Henry, commenced working there in 1868. (Jean Stirk, *pers. comm.*) Henry, the son, was a well-educated man, with a B.A. (Lond) and was a fellow of the Linnean Society and Geographical Society, and a member of the Ray Society.

My interpretation of the above in relation to the various references in the abovementioned literature is that Herbert, the paper maker, lived with his wife and four children at the "Woodlands" (unrelated to that in the title of the Boyle book) at Godalming, and happened to be visiting his mother at the time of the census. At Godalming he grew plants sent to him from India, including the first specimens of *Paphiopedilum spicerianum*, and it was he who brought a plant of this species to the attention of Veitch and Reichenbach, probably on one of his trips up to London.

Later Frederick Sander went on a fishing expedition to visit a Mrs. Spicer. Herbert's mother Sarah fits the bill here; although not living in Twickenham as

was stated in *About Orchids, A Chat*, which was probably a Sanderian red herring. Putney Heath Highlands is but a stone's throw from Wimbledon, the address of the residence of the Mrs. Spicer mentioned in *The Woodlands Orchids*. Sander had another excuse to visit Mrs. Spicer, they had a tenuous connection. Sarah's husband and at least 4 of her sons were involved in the paper industry, and Sander's father- and brother-in-law, the Fearnleys, were also paper makers. All that is missing now is the tea-planter son, obviously the brother of Herbert, Henry and the other sons of Henry Sr. and Sarah.

## **The Tea-planter Son?**

Going back to interrogate the FamilySearch Website by searching for people with the name Spicer who were associated with India; amongst the group, which includes the Calcutta-born Lucy mentioned above, was the baptismal record of one Jane Hilda Spicer, daughter of Robert and Maria Jane, dated 12 October 1878, and coming from the India Office Ecclesiastical Returns from the Bengal Presidency. This looked promising, after all the Indian tea-growing regions were principally in Assam, which fell into the administrative region of the Bengal Presidency. Returning to the 1881 census results, it was determined that no suitable candidate for either parent was present in England at that time, but a Hilda J. Spicer, a two-year-old female born in India was residing with her grandparents, Thomas and Maria Simpson in Lancashire. My sad guess regarding this is that the child's mother had passed away, and she had therefore been sent back to England to be raised by her maternal grandparents. Nevertheless, nothing here could tie Hilda J./Jane Hilda or her parents to the family of Spicers in Putney.

## **More Spicer Information**

The 1891 Census of England and Wales has recently become available on <http://www.ancestry.co.uk> and other information regarding the Spicers could be gleaned from this source (all the censuses from 1841 to 1891 are now available). Sarah, who would have been 81 by this time, was not to be found. Jane Hilda, born in India, was in London, presumably at school, Herbert and family were living in Hampshire and neither Robert nor Henry could be found.

## **A "tin plater?"**

A period of a century is required before census returns may be published in Britain, thus in 2001 the 1901 Census was published on the Internet by GenesReunited. The availability of this resource afforded me the opportunity to do a further follow up on the people mentioned in the earlier censuses.

Henry, the wholesale paper merchant, and his wife Lucy were still together, living in Middlesex, London. Herbert was not to be found, but his wife Martha, together

with her children Annie and Harold, as well as the 18 year-old Maurice (presumably Herbert and Martha's fifth child) were living in Abinger, Surrey, a village not very far from Godalming; but most surprisingly some interesting people also turned up at the same locality. There was a 22 year-old, Indian-born Jane Spicer and a 57 year-old Robert Spicer, the latter's occupation at first being described as a "tin plater," then later corrected to a "tea-planter."

By paying £5, it is possible to get a number of full scans of original 1901 census return sheets and I duly did this to see if I could find out other interesting details regarding the relationships between the various Spicers at the Abinger locality. This address turned out to be Stanton Farm, where Martha was a "farmer's wife," the missing Herbert presumably being the farmer. Robert Spicer was described as a "brother" and a "widower" and Jane as a "niece." I had definitely found the "tea-planter son."

## Missing sons

I was not able to find any records of the two sons, Herbert M., who would have been 25, and Cecil W., who would have been 21 at the time of this census. Obviously in this era, child mortality was more common than it is today, so it was always possible that these two children may have died by this time.

A broader Internet search for these two did however turn up a most interesting detail. Lumsden's Horse was a volunteer military unit raised in India in early 1900 for the purposes of going to South Africa to engage in the 2nd Anglo-Boer War. B Company, Section 1 of this unit was made up predominantly of tea-planters from the Sylhet and Cachar districts and included as a Trooper, "Cecil Wilfred Spicer, Tea Planter, Alyne Tea Estate, Lukipore, Cachar." Surely this has to be the missing Cecil W.; growing tea on an estate quite some distance from Bhutan, in fact way on the other side of the great Brahmaputra River.

It is convenient at this point to make the leap of declaring Alyne to be the Spicer family tea estate, the same estate on which Robert lived 20-odd years before, but actual proof is required.

## Back to the Mormons

On the FamilySearch page regarding the baptism of Jane Hilda Spicer, reference to a microfilm of the document that includes this record is given, and I duly visited my nearest Family History centre of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and ordered a copy for viewing. Due to their moving and various other glitches, it took over a year for the film to arrive, but this was well worth the wait. The microfilm of this beautiful document was traversed until finally the relevant page appeared. This told me that Jane Hilda was born on the 19th of August 1878 and her father Robert was a Tea-planter who lived at Pathemara, Cachar.

# Google Book Search

I also found a book on Google Book Search relating to the Indian economy for the period 1848-1926 (Sen 1966). Unfortunately a copyright was in operation and only snippets were offered, but on p. 212, I was able to determine that Robert Spicer was the "Managing Agent" of three tea gardens; Pathimara Tea Concern of 632 acres, Alyne Tea Concern of 565 acres and Nagodoona Tea Concern of unstated size. Not having access to the actual book, I was unable to determine the timeline relating to this specific information, but I assume that it was near the end of the 19th century.

Of the three, Pathemara appears to be the most likely candidate for the tea estate on which the Spicers resided in 1881, as it was the first mentioned in the list and therefore probably the most important, this then being more or less confirmed by the Baptismal record dating from 2-3 years prior to this.

There are at least 6 English transliterations for the Bengali? name Pathemara. Looking up all possible spellings, I found very little aside from details of terrorist attacks on Pathemara Tea Estate in 2002. However, one clue I found in these reports was that Pathemara was about 18 km. east of Silchar; and if directly east of Silchar, it would border on its south or east onto the Barak River, and directly south from here, one would find the Sonai River with its gorge running southwards. If Robert was in fact living on Alyne, this would be further east near Lakhipur, but also probably not far from the Barak River.

Whereas I have been unable to find any map which could accurately indicate where Alyne or Pathemara tea estates are located, I do know that they are in the centre of Cachar district of Assam, at least 280 km. from Bhutan; and "across the river" from either of them would take one down the side gorges of the Barak or Sonai River, precisely the localities for *Paph. spicerianum* which Udai Ch. Pradhan and Ganesh Mani Pradhan have given in their *AOS Bulletin* articles of the 1970's.

Since everything seems to tie up so well, with certainty I can now say that Sander, through Boyle, was telling one enormous lie when he said that Mrs Spicer's tea-planter son had "estates on the confines of Bhutan;" they were nowhere near Bhutan!

## Synchronicity

At about the same time as I began delving, two articles concerning *Paph. spicerianum* appeared in print. A semi-fictional piece was published in the *Orchid Digest*, coming from the pen of Harold Koopowitz; the only effect of which, as far as I could see, was to create more confusion regarding the importation of the species. Steve Manning's most interesting article "*Paphiopedilum spicerianum* myth or mythtake?" came out in the May/June 2005 *Orchid Review*. Although

wonderfully rich regarding sources and quotations therefrom, I felt that Manning had neither assessed the relative values of the various material he unearthed, nor did he consult the most primary of sources; the Orchid Review which he used most extensively only having commenced publication in 1893, and thus not being a journal which could be viewed as a primary source. He also failed to answer any of the questions concerning this species. This piece does however deserve a careful read by anyone with an interest in the history of *Paph. spicerianum*.

## Tailpiece

In November 1906, a Mrs. Spicer exhibited a group of *Paph. spicerianum* at a meeting of the RHS Orchid Committee, receiving a Silver Banksian Medal for her effort. I have been able to determine that this exhibitor was in fact the Indian-born Lucy, wife of Henry (J. *RHS*, 32: Proc. p. ccvi. 1907). Also, what must be sure, is that she would have done this with a huge sense of family pride. (Fig. 4)

□  
Fig. 4. Pl#251105-12. *Paphiopedilum spicerianum*. Digital photo DSC\_390a, 01Dec05

## Acknowledgements

My grateful thanks go to the librarians of the SA National Library in Cape Town; Barry Jagger of the Harry Molteno Library at Kirstenbosch; Jean Stirk of the British Association of Paper Historians; the Family History Libraries of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Meadowridge, Cape Town and Salt Lake City, Utah, USA; Steve Topletz of Nascent Orchids, Texas, USA; Frikkie Marais for reviewing and correcting the manuscript; and the most useful friend of all, Kenneth A. Roberts of Florida, USA for assisting me with scans of any material for which I ask, and which he has in his astounding library.

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<http://www.rbgekew.org.uk/wcsp/home.do> - RBG Kew, World Checklist of Monocotyledons

## Afterword

Like a bad bio-pic this article needs to tell you of the fate of the various players in this story.

Harry James Veitch, the Mr. Veitch who had bought the original *Paph. spicerianum* from the Spicers, died in 1924 aged 84, without direct issue. The nursery had already closed down 10 years prior to his death.

Ignatz Förstermann died unmarried in New York, 29 March 1895, aged 40 or 41, from the after-effects of tropical disease.

Frederick Sander died leaving a wife and four children, a number of grandchildren, probably much debt and even more legend, 23rd December 1920, aged somewhere between 68 and 73.

Sarah Spicer, the mother of some 11 children and a substantial part of the British paper industry, died between 1881 and 1891, aged 71 to 81.

Herbert Spicer, fathered 5 children, made much paper. He went bankrupt somewhere around 1896. In 1901, He was not to be found in England, because he was in the West Indies where he was attempting to set up the West Caicos Sisal Co. An enterprising man, he was unfortunately never able to become fully successful. He died by falling under a train, probably during the First World War.

Frederick Boyle had been married briefly, though without issue, and was still alive in 1909. It appears as if he died in 1912.

Robert Spicer's death is not recorded anywhere that I can find. He seems to have left a single child.

Jane Hilda Spicer is still a mystery, but possibly got married somewhere around 1912, and then.....?

Cecil Wilfred Spicer survived the 2nd Anglo-Boer War, but it seems as if he was not as lucky when it came to the First World War.

Herbert Murray Spicer, Herbert's other son, declared missing above, was in fact alive, but he died in 1902 when beaten up by ruffians in Farncombe (near Godalming) during celebrations at the end of the 2nd Anglo-Boer War.

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