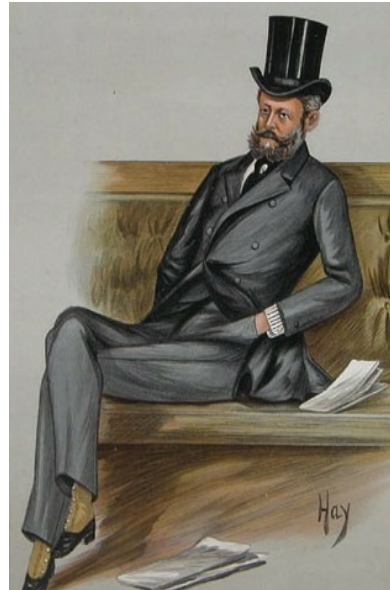


## *Paphiopedilum rothschildianum*. 'The King of Orchids'

by Jeff Glover

What other title could an orchid have that only grows in one location, imbues a majestic presence, has indirectly caused subterfuge and carries the name of perhaps the wealthiest family of all time? This article will endeavor to explore the enduring mystique surrounding this orchid by considering its discovery, its naming, provide an overview of the subsequent enduring breeding program and propose that this orchid *Paphiopedilum rothschildianum*, is indeed worthy of the designation 'Orchid Rex'.

Barron Ferdinand James Von Rothschild (1839-1898) for whom the orchid is named was a member of the wealthy Jewish banking family that is synonymous with 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century European financial institutions. He was Austrian by birth and settled in England where he became a member of the British parliament, a philanthropist, art collector and of course, avid orchid collector and patron. The estate he established in England was called 'Waddeson Manor' where he kept a huge collection of plants, many stemming from the collecting expeditions he financed. He was held in such esteem by society, including his 'orchid-collector peers' and the wider community that he was thought most worthy to be honoured by lending his name to this new and wondrous species. It can be imagined the excitement its discovery caused during the period that is described as the 'orchid mania' of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.



Barron Ferdinand James Von Rothschild 1839-1898 Source: [Slipperorchidblog.com](http://Slipperorchidblog.com)



*Paphiopedilum victoria-regina*, named after Queen Victoria.

An example of the level of honour of having a plant named after oneself was the naming of *Paphiopedilum victoria-regina* after Queen Victoria, who was known to be fond of the *Paphiopedilum* genera. Perhaps it was the common name of 'Ladies Slipper Orchid' with its aristocratic tone that drew the fondness of the dour queen. The discovery and search for new plant species was at its most fervent throughout her reign during the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Toward the end of her reign colonial possessions were starting to be explored for their natural wealth rather than only for economic

exploitation. One of these areas was Malaya and the Straits Settlements as they were known at that time. Northern Borneo, the location of *Paph. rothschildianum* was part of this British possession and was administered for a time by the British North Borneo Company, an offshoot of the famous British East India Company. Hence, the strong British connection to *Paphiopedilum rothschildianum* and the *Paphiopedilum* genera overall. Sabah the 13<sup>th</sup> state of modern Malaysia is the orchid's 21<sup>st</sup> Century home; a now known exclusive home that had been a point of contention and was a closely guarded secret for many years (Koopowitz, 2001).

Enhancing the allure of *Paphiopedilum rothschildianum* is this fact that it is only found in this one



location, specifically around the foothills of Mt Kinabalu. This is despite early conjecture that it was also found in New Guinea, but what further compounds this orchid's mystique is that there is some credible evidence that the New Guinea connection may have been a ruse to throw other collectors of the scent. There is equal suggestion however, that it was genuinely confused with *Paphiopedilum elliotianum*, which is found in several locations across the Indonesian archipelago including New Guinea; and so the mystique deepens. From my research and it has by no

means been exhaustive, who actually found *Paph. rothschildianum* seems to be a vagary of natural history and again open to further conjecture. However, a review of the most popular literature agrees that it was introduced into European cultivation in 1867 by F. Sander and Co. and formally described in 1888 and most likely collected by one of his collectors (Koopowitz, 2001). Further controversy that befits the air of majesty surrounding this orchid can be found with reference to a collector named Jean Linden claiming to have imported it earlier, but his name *Paph. neo-guincense* was never validly published. From his intended name it is easy to speculate whether he was drawn into, or part of the mystery to keep its location secret?

Regardless, of this air mystery a definitive statement on the discovery of *Paph. rothschildianum* is beyond the scope of this article. Nevertheless, taking into account that more than likely one of Sanders collectors did retrieve some plants, a possible scenario can be validly considered. That is, as with many orchids and other tropical plants collected in the heady days of the 19th Century European Scientific and Geographic Exploration Societies, it was sent back, to Europe, survived and flowered by chance. No photographic evidence would have been possible to alert Sander of the find and a letter of description would have taken many months to be received even if it accompanied the plants. So it is reasonable to speculate further did Sander really appreciate what he had until it flowered, especially considering the time from introduction to formal description and registration. Discoverers, growers and collectors of exotic plants and animals in those times could be compared to hero-worship and possession of such a sought after plant was a source of eminence and social status for the wealthy. Hence the secrecy and subterfuge on its location once flowered. In comparison, exotic animals were brought back to European zoos as animal husbandry improved and survived to breed and prosper and became widespread throughout Europe. Plants however, were a harder task. For



*Paphiopedilum rothschildianum* with the top fully merged flower exhibiting the famous horizontal posed petals.



example, how could the copious amounts of water required to keep jungle-collected plants alive be provided on 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Century sailing ships. Subsequently, as was later shown, in order for sufficient numbers of plants to survive a long sea voyage they also had to be given specialist care. As such, flowering exotic plants in Europe for the first time was a rarity and brought much wonderment and excitement in Victorian times. Placing this into context, many exotic plants were previously known of only through drawings, and dead examples, returned from voyages such as, that of Sir Joseph Banks whilst accompanying Captain Cook on his long expeditions in the Pacific a century earlier. By the latter 19<sup>th</sup> century, travel via ship was steadily becoming shorter, and hence the survival rates of plants being taken to the collectors in Europe were improving. Accordingly, the prices at auctions for plants with a higher chance of survival steadily achieved record sums and *Paph rothschildianum* became 'the orchid' to have!



**Paph. St Swin in. Paph Rothschildianum X Paph. philippinenses made in 1901 endures as arguably the most popular and recognizable rothschildian upimay hybrid**

*Now, once abled to be regularly flowered the obvious progression for the likes of Messrs. Sander, Statter and Vetch was hybridization. It is interesting to note that in those times hybridization was originally thought of by many people with as much suspicion and mistrust as genetic modified food plants are today. Similar arguments and concerns were raised, such as, that it was an unnatural process and going against the order of nature and could result in all sorts of possible future problems. However, as we now know, from the progression of science, many natural hybrids occur in the plant kingdom, especially amongst orchids. A quick search of my Orchidwiz8.3 database shows that 274 first generations or primary hybrids with *Paph rothschildianum* have been made to 2011. Many were registered in the decades between 1890-1910. Among these was the cross with *Paphiopedilum sanderianum* another Paphiopedilum with a fantastic story of its own. This Paphiopedilum is sometimes considered as the pretender to the crown.*

Yet, in what can be interpreted as deference to *Paph. rothschildianum* and the continuing connection to the British royal family the resulting hybrid was given the name of *Paphiopedilum Prince Edward of York*. Yes prince, not king. Sander registered this cross in 1898, His Royal Highness the Prince Edward of York was born in 1894. An interesting quirk of history is that this prince was also destined to be clouded in mystique and notoriety in that while he did become king, unlike *Paph. rothschildianum* he did not hold the title for long. He became King Edward VII who famously abdicated in 1936. (Wikipedia)

Koopowitz, 2008, in his book, *Tropical Slipper Orchids, Paphiopedilum and Phragmipedium Species and Hybrids*, places the collecting of Paphiopedilums into three ages. The discovery of *Paph. rothschildianum* and the development of its early primary hybrids fits into what he states as 'The First Golden Age' starting in 1816, with the cultivation of the first Paphiopedilum in Europe, *Paph. venustum*. The Second Golden Age started after World War One with the focus

on producing complex hybrids and continued until the 1970's. During this time cultivation of the original multiflorals hybrids of the first age continued but with little new hybridization, however; the 'The Third Golden Age' would witness another fantastic development of *Paph. rothschildianum* hybrids. New species that existed in Vietnam and Southern China would be introduced to western collectors as these countries were opened up after years of revolution and war.



*Paph. stonei* above, crossed with *Paph. rothschildianum* makes *Paph. Lady Isabel*, registered in 1897.

creation of *Paph. St Swithin*, that of *Paph. Lady Isabel*. This cross was made with another alluring species *Paph. stonei*. This species along with, *rothschildianum*, *philippenses*, *lowii* and *sanderianum* are the main species that are the basis of many second and third generation multifloral hybrids. Database searches can find these species in the progeny background of many paphiopedilums, surprisingly, even being found in some complex hybrids. A relatively modern multifloral hybrid of renown, registered 1991, is *Paphiopedilum* Angel Hair, this is a cross between *Paph. St Swithin* and *Paph. sanderianum* and is a fine example of 2<sup>nd</sup> generation breeding. Thus, it combines all the features of *Paph. rothschildianum*, *philippinenses* and *sanderianum*. These are primarily the height and presence of *Paph.*

*rothschildianum*, the colour of *philippinenses* and the exclusively elongated petals of *Paph. sanderianum*.

By again perusing the *Orchidwiz* data-base and noting the dates of the registrations of the primary hybrids of *Paph.*

*rothschildianum* it can be deduced that during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century there was a progression of crosses made with species from the other sub-sections /alliances of the genus paphiopedilum. *Barbatum*, *Insigne*, *Parvisepalum* and *Brachypetalum* alliances are all represented, and with what are considered the lesser multiflorals such as, the widely used parent *Paphiopedilum primulinum*. This species is valued in breeding for its yellow-greenish tones and its easy cultivation. It is a repeat flowerer and flowers from a willowy stem as do other species of this group such as *Paph. liegianum*. The result of *primulinum* crossed with *Paph. rothschildianum* gives the beautiful hybrid *Paphiopedilum* Prime Child, with the imposing



*Paph. Angel Hair 'Krisett' AM/AOS* a fine example of 2<sup>nd</sup> generation breeding



flowers on the tall stems that is synonymous with *Paph. rothschildianum* and the yellow tones from *Paph. primulinum*. It is a good example of multifloral breeding in the 'Second Golden Age'. But as previously mentioned it was the availability of the Parvisepalum Alliance or Chinese Paphiopedilums as they are commonly referred to that caused a new wave of worldwide excitement in 'The Third Golden Age' of Paphiopedilum breeding.



**Paph. Prime Child (*rothschildianum* x *primulinum*)**

with names such as, Dollgoldi (*rothschildianum* x *armeniacum*), Gloria Naugle, (*rothschildianum* x *micranthum*) and Harold Koopowitz (*rothschildianum* x *malipoense*) that are now considered amongst the most legendary and desirous paphiopedilums of all times. For example, the resultant infusion of *Paph. rothschildianum* into *Paph. armeniacum* could be described colloquially as 'having given it a dose of steroids'. As with all 'new collectables', at first huge sums were paid to obtain one of these fantastic new primary hybrids and as the saying goes 'history is bound to repeat' and 'the king' had caused a new round of 'orchid mania' almost 100 years on from the heady days of its first flowering. Fortunately, modern breeding methods were soon able to make these new hybrids available to all collectors at reasonable costs, unlike the exclusivity that was the 19th century domain of the wealthy like Barron Ferdinand von Rothschild.

The members of this alliance include *Paph. delenatii*, *armeniacum*, *micranthum*, *malipoense*, and *emersonii*. The flowers of these types with their bulbous like labellums were unlike any seen before. The flowering of *Paph. armeniacum*, seen from 1983 with its intense yellow orb like flowers caused much excitement in the orchid world (Koopowitz 2008). The obvious intention once available was to hybridize these new species, and the resultant progeny from breeding within the group made excellent hybrids that are still popular with nurseries and collectors alike. It wasn't long before the other alliances were considered as potential breeding candidates. Hybridizers quickly turned to the multiflorals and of course 'the king' was considered as the primary suitor. Soon the orchid world was abuzz with the outcomes. The resultant hybrids registered in the late 1980's and early 1990's, were nothing short of spectacular



**Paph. Dolgoldi 'Krisett' a spectacular 'Roth -Parvi' cross.**

So, is *Paph. rothschildianum* the King of Orchids or maybe just the best Paphiopedilum as specialist collectors of other genera might argue. I guess it can come down to the simple

proverb 'that beauty is in the eye of the beholder', however; several compounding factors suggest it is indeed worthy of the title. These are, its enduring progeny spanning generational breeding and the sheer numbers that have been produced and are still being made. Likewise, no one doubts it has a 'presence' and when first sighted usually at an orchid show many are left in awe at its magnificence. If you think this may be an over reaction, an Internet 'Google' search gains over 50,000 results by merely entering its name. There are exclusive forums devoted to it, articles, photos, drawings, trips advertised to see it in its native state, and of course plants for sale, many proudly declaring the 'roth connection' above all else. Lastly, its connection to British royalty, the wealth of its namesake and its discovery at the zenith of the British Empire would be testament alone for some to claim it deserves the title. Yet, despite this overwhelming evidence, the surrounding mystique and the fascinating narrative; for us orchid collectors and as only we devotees can appreciate, it is the challenge to grow and flower this elite plant just like Sander did nearly 120 years ago that makes it worthy of being proclaimed 'Orchid Rex'.

**Note:** All plants featured have been grown, flowered and photographed by the author.

## **References:**

### **Sources Cited:**

*Koopowitz, H., 2001, Orchids and their Conservation*, Timber Press, USA.

*Koopowitz, H., 2008, Tropical Slipper Orchids, Paphiopedilum and Phragmipedium Species and Hybrids*, Timber Press, USA.

www. Wikipedia.com/Prince Edward of York. accessed 3/4/2013

### **Sources Consulted:**

www.slipperorchidblog.com

<https://files.nyu.edu> 'Jasons Orchid Page'

<http://homepages.ihug.co.nz/tomnz/paphframe> 'Padiopedilum Culture Guide'

[http:// huntingtonblogs.org/2012/04/king-of-orchids/](http://huntingtonblogs.org/2012/04/king-of-orchids/)

