

THE PIONEER

THE BUDERIM HISTORICAL SOCIETY Inc.

OCCASIONAL PAPERS

Historical accounts
from the Buderim – Mooloolaba area

Number 38 August 2025

The History of Queensland's Floral Emblem

by Bill Lavarack

I must apologise to the readers of Occasional Papers as this one has nothing to do with Buderim or even Mooloolaba. Instead it tells the story of Queensland's floral emblem – the Cooktown Orchid. A story of British Royal Naval captains, the plant hunters of the mid nineteenth century and the botanists of the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew.

The nomenclature of *Dendrobium bigibbum*, the Cooktown Orchid, is, to say the least, complex. Many scientific names have been applied to this species by different experts over the last 175 years. But to non-botanists this is a history of the 'discovery' of one of the most spectacular orchids in the world.

Cooktown Orchids in their natural habitat at Princess Charlotte Bay on Cape York Peninsula. Photo. courtesy of Dr John Winter. >

The Cooktown orchid was proclaimed as Queensland's floral emblem in 1959. The history of the discovery of this species involves early Royal Naval charting expeditions to northern Australia and Torres Strait. It was formally described scientifically in the mid nineteenth century.

In the following pages I will look at its distribution, habitat and its introduction into cultivation. It scarcely needs saying, but I should state, that when I refer to the 'discovery' of the Cooktown Orchid, this refers to the discovery by Europeans. Undoubtedly this spectacular species would have been well known to the original inhabitants of its northern Australian habitat for thousands of years.

What is a floral emblem? Each Australian state has a number



of natural history emblems. In Queensland the fauna emblem is the koala, the bird kingdom has the brolga as its emblem, in our tropical coastal waters the anemone fish or clown fish has the title, while in the world of minerals it is the opal.

The history of the discovery of The Cooktown Orchid involves early Royal Naval charting expeditions to northern Australia. Plants collected on one of these voyages in 1849 led to the formal scientific description by John Lindley of Kew Gardens.

Setting the scene, Australia is home to some 1500 species of orchid. Among these the Cooktown Orchid (*Dendrobium bigibbum*) is arguably the most attractive and it has been used extensively in the breeding of numerous hybrids for the horticultural trade both in Australia and overseas.

The early discoverers

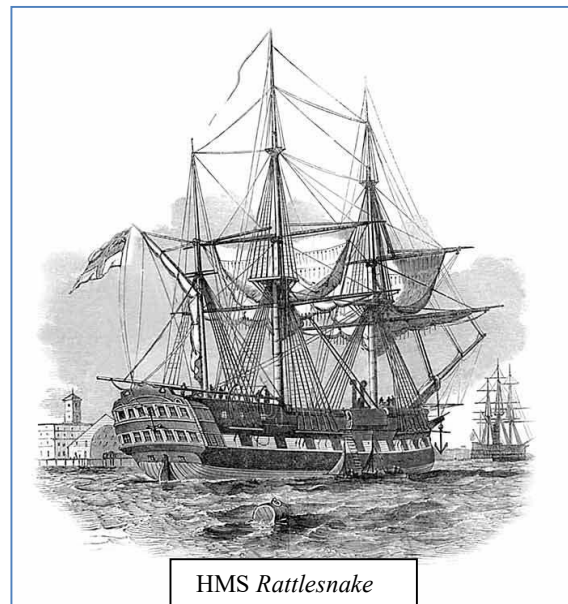
Now let us look at the first recorded encounters with this species by Europeans. These were by sailors on British naval vessels exploring the northern coasts of Australia and the islands of Torres Strait in the early part of the nineteenth century. According to the German botanist, H.G. Reichenbach, there were Cooktown orchids (in the broad sense) growing in Kew Gardens in 1824.¹ No other details have come to notice and these plants must have died out without being officially documented, other than by a painting by Ferdinand Bauer at the British Museum of Natural History. The locality from which these plants came is not known.

A surprising number of ships made the dangerous passage through Torres Strait between Cook's voyage in 1770 and 1824 when the plants were reported to be growing at Kew. It is most likely that the plants arrived at Kew in the early nineteenth century in the period between 1810 and 1824. The most likely candidate for an early collection of this species would have been the expeditions led by Captain Philip Parker King in 1818 and 1822, as the celebrated Kew botanist Allan Cunningham was on board. However, although Cunningham collected plant specimens assiduously he found 'no Orchideae in addition to those already described'. *Dendrobium bigibbum* is not amongst the plants Cunningham collected and he would certainly have mentioned such a spectacular orchid, so Captain King's expeditions can be therefore eliminated from the list of possibilities.

At this time Royal Naval surgeons on naval exploratory and charting expeditions were prolific collectors of natural history specimens which found their way to institutions such as the Royal Botanic Garden at Kew.

One name that comes to notice here is Dr Thomas Braidwood Wilson. He was surgeon on the *Richmond* which called at Murray (Mer) Island in July 1822. Unfortunately his journal was later lost in the wreck of the *Governor Ready*. Although there is no evidence, Wilson remains a possibility as first collector, but it seems we will never know.

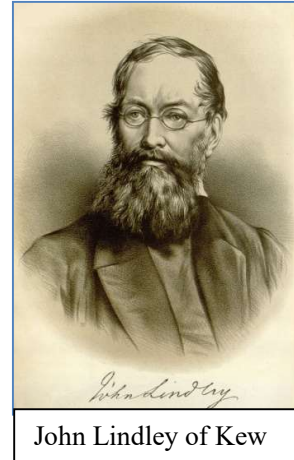
In 1852 the English botanist John Lindley described *Dendrobium bigibbum*, a new species that proved to be one of the most spectacular and popular species of the Asia Pacific area (see plate on next page).²



¹ Heinrich Gustav Reichenbach, 'New Garden Plants', *Gardener's Chronicle*, series II, 10, 1878, p. 748.

² John Lindley, 1852, '*Dendrobium bigibbum*', *Paxton's Floral Garden*, 3, p. 25, fig. 245 and John Lindley, 1856, *Curtis's Botanical Magazine*. 82: tab. 4898.

John Lindley (1799-1865) was England's most prominent botanist of the middle part of the nineteenth century and many plant specimens collected on expeditions around the world, were sent to him. After detailed research on *Dendrobium bigibbum*, Dr Stanley Blake of the Queensland Herbarium concluded that the plants that Lindley had before him at Kew were collected by 'a Dr Thomson' at Mt Adolphus, a small island about 16 km to the north-east of Cape York in Torres Strait.¹ Clearly Blake did not know who Dr Thomson was, or on which vessel he sailed, and his designation of 'a Dr Thomson' has been repeated in many subsequent publications. My publication, *With Strange Device: A history of the discovery of Tropical Australia's orchids*² confirms that, by a simple process of 'joining the dots', the surveying expedition of HMS *Rattlesnake* (see illustration on previous page) was in the area of Torres Strait from October to December 1849 and that John Thomson³ was the surgeon on board. Dr Thomson was a dedicated collector of natural history specimens as shown by the following extract from Oswald Brierly's journal. Brierly was the artist on the *Rattlesnake*:



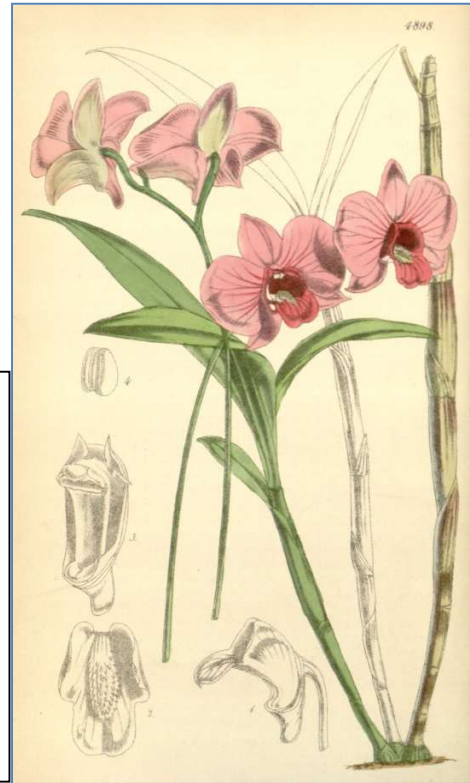
About 10 Dr Thomson and self went ashore in one of the watering boats and spent the forenoon in a botanizing stroll – the Dr collecting plants and self sketching the Black fellows and getting words for my vocabulary, etc.⁴

During the two months the *Rattlesnake* spent at Evans Bay, Cape York, the ship's boats visited nearby islands, including Mt Adolphus Island. Dr Thompson was in the southern part of Torres Strait between October and December, a time when the autumn-flowering Cooktown Orchid is not in bloom and the rather slender, unprepossessing nature of the plants when not in flower, would not have been particularly attractive to a plant collector. However Dr Thompson collected some live plants. Perhaps he saw a flower as it is not uncommon to find an odd plant with a flower at any time of the year in a large population.

Dendrobium bigibbum var. *bigibbum*. An illustration from Curtis's Botanical Magazine, 1856 (tab. 4898) of a plant collected by Dr Thomson at Mt Adolphus Island in 1849 and flowered at Loddiges Nursery. The original caption reads:

One of the most showy of Australian Dendrobies and one of the longest known, it having been in cultivation at the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew in 1824, but it appears to have been lost afterwards. It was re-discovered by Dr. Thomson, in 1855, on Mt Adolphus, near Torres Straits, and sent by him to Messrs. Loddiges, at Hackney; ten years later it was detected in the same locality by the late Mr. J. Gould Veitch, who sent to England the first large im-portation ever received.

[The year of collection was 1849, not 1855.]



¹ Blake, S.T. 1964, *Dendrobium bigibbum*, *Dendrobium phalaenopsis* and the Cooktown Orchid, Proc. Royal Soc. Qld, LXXIV (4), pages 29-44.

² Lavarack, P.S. (Bill), 2013, *With Strange Device, a history of the discovery of tropical Australia's orchids*, publ. by The Australian Orchid Foundation, PO Box 440, Yarra Glen, Victoria 3775, Australia.

³ John Thomson had a connection with Queensland. His son, John, also became a doctor and migrated to Queensland where he helped found the Queensland Ambulance Service. He also is considered the founder of military medicine in Queensland.

⁴ David R. Moore, 1978, *Islanders and Aborigines at Cape York, An ethnographic reconstruction based on the 1848-1850 'Rattlesnake' Journals of O.W. Brierly and information he obtained from Barbara Thompson*, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra, page 66.

Naming the newly discovered species

The orchid plants collected by Thomson were sent to the well-known nursery of Loddiges and Sons in London where they were grown and flowered. One or more flowering specimens were then passed on to John Lindley at Kew who formally described the species as *Dendrobium bigibbum* – the name ‘*bigibbum*’ referring to the two mentums or chins on the flowers.¹

Thomson would have collected a few plants, not the huge quantities which were to follow soon after, when the commercial potential of this handsome species was realised. Possibly the attractive portrait of this species in *Curtis’s Botanical Magazine* in 1856 (see illustration on previous page) had something to do with the exploitation which followed. But note that the year of Thompson’s discovery was actually 1849 not 1855.

The quantity of plants collected by Veitch in 1865 is not known, but it is likely it would have numbered in the hundreds, if not the thousands.

John Gould Veitch (1839 – 1870) first commercial collector of *Dendrobium bigibbum*.

John Gould Veitch was a member of the Veitch family who owned Veitch’s Exotic Nursery in London. He collected plants from the wild for the nursery and travelled extensively. In 1864/65 he made some interesting collections in northern Australia. After travelling to Sydney in 1864, he joined HMS *Salamander* which was supplying the new settlement at Somerset on Cape York, where he arrived on 1 January 1865 and stayed for three weeks.²



John Gould Veitch. Plant collector for Veitch’s Exotic Nursery in London

Veitch was disappointed in the Cape York flora, but collected plants of four dendrobiums at Cape York, none of which was of more than novelty interest. He also visited Mt Adolphus Island which must have been much more satisfactory commercially, as he secured the first large collection of plants of *Dendrobium bigibbum* mentioned earlier (see caption for illustration on page 3).

The two major varieties



Dendrobium bigibbum var. *superbum*



Dendrobium bigibbum var. *bigibbum*

Currently the usually accepted position by most botanists is that *Dendrobium bigibbum* is one widespread variable species with two or three varieties. On the northern part of Cape York Peninsula the flowers of *Dendrobium bigibbum* var. *bigibbum* are predominantly a little smaller,

¹ Lindley, J., 1852, *Dendrobium bigibbum*, Paxton’s Floral Gardens 3, page 25, fig. 245.

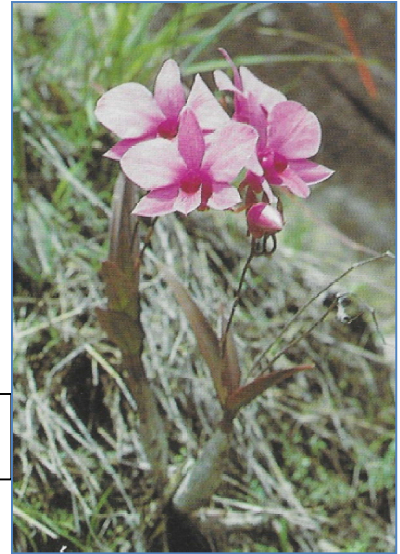
² John Gould Veitch, 1866, Extracts from the Journal of Mr John Gould Veitch during a trip to the Australian Colonies and the South Sea Islands, *Gardeners Chronicle*, (in several parts).

usually with a central white mark on the lip, while on the southern part of the Peninsula var. *superbum*, the predominant form, has larger flowers with no central white marking. Examples of the two varieties (pictured above) certainly look different, but their distributions overlap and intermediate forms are common in the central Peninsula area.

***Dendrobium bigibbum* var. *compactum*.**

This history of the Cooktown Orchid would not be complete without mention of the compact form of the species which grows on rocks in a restricted area north of Cairns and south of the Daintree River. It is, in effect, a miniature-growing form of *Dendrobium bigibbum* variety *superbum*. Over the years it has been given the rank of species, variety, sub-variety and form. It was first described by C.T. White in 1941 in the *Australian Orchid Review* volume 6, page 53.

Dendrobium bigibbum var. *compactum* growing in its natural habitat at McAlister Range North Queensland. Photo. Bill Lavarack. >



Further reading

Adams, Peter, B., (2015), *Dendrobium bigibbum* (sect. *Phalaenanthus*) in Australia — analysis of diagnostic characters, review of taxa and a new classification, *Kew Bulletin*, Vol. 70, (2), pp. 1-17.

Blake, S.T., 1964, *Dendrobium bigibbum*, *Dendrobium phalaenopsis* and the Cooktown Orchid, *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Queensland*, LXVI (1), page 29-34.

Lavarack, P.S. (Bill), 2016, *The Cooktown Queensland's Floral Emblem*, *Queensland History Journal*, **23** (3), pages 147-157.

Lavarack, P.S. (Bill), 2013, *With Strange Device, a history of the discovery of tropical Australia's orchids*, publ. by The Australian Orchid Foundation, PO Box 440, Yarra Glen, Victoria 3775, Australia.

ooo000ooo



Cooktown Orchid *Dendrobium bigibbum* var. *superbum*, growing on rocks near Coen. Photo. Bill Lavarack.