

International Rock Gardener

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We hope that SRGC members have enjoyed a good growing season so far in 2017. It is also to be hoped that you have been blessed with a good seed set on your plants and have been gathering and saving the seed in order to be able to donate some to the Seed Exchange of the SRGC. It is only through the kindness of members who donate seed to our Exchange, and to those of other organisations one may also support, of course, that there are such wonderful lists of thousands of taxa available, in tens of thousands of packets, to be shared with members. Many members join clubs like SRGC with the primary intention of taking part in the Seed Exchange so a great debt of gratitude is owed to all who generously donate seed from their plants. Donated seeds of over 5000 species and varieties of alpiners, rock plants and bulbs suitable for rock and woodland gardens are packeted by volunteers and listed annually in the Seed List of the SRGC Seed Exchange. As you might imagine, a great many of these seeds are not available commercially. It is great fun to grow plants from seed and there is additional satisfaction in growing plants from seed you have collected yourself.

You are invited to send in seed to the SRGC as soon as possible – and certainly before the end of October. Seed should be sent to the Seed Reception Managers: Drs Ian and Carole Bainbridge, Luckie Harg's, Anwoth Road, Gatehouse of Fleet, Castle Douglas, DG7 2EF, Scotland. Notes on how to [access the Seed Exchange can be found here](#), on the website. You may be interested in the SRGC project which is working to assemble photos, to scale, of seeds to assist with Seed Identification: you can see those [here in the SRGC Forum](#)

A huge thank you to all of you who send in seed; without your contributions there would be no seed to distribute to all our members at home and abroad. Please do support the Seed Exchange by donating seed from your plants.

Something else to remember as October approaches is that this the time when those holding single year subscriptions to postal membership of the SRGC need to renew their subscriptions! Reminders will have been sent out with the recent paper journal. Those with electronic-only subscriptions are sent reminders automatically when their membership is due for renewal. We hope you are all happy with the service and resources provided by the Club and will continue your membership and support of our efforts. There are various methods to renew membership, or to join the Club – you can find those [here in the main website](#) for members receiving journals etc by post and [here for Online Subscriptions](#) for those happy with accessing the journals online.



The SRGC seed distribution team at work last season – and the packets as they arrive with members.

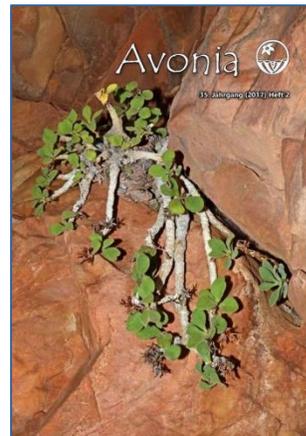
Cover picture: *Anemone blanda* by Stavros Apostolou.

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---World of Bulbs---

Stavros Apostolou delights in photographing the flora and fauna as well as the historical elements he encounters around him at home in Greece. His own plant passion is for cacti and succulents Stavros' latest article was in Avonia 35-2, the journal of the German club [Fachgesellschaft andere Sukkulente](#), on "Sukkulente im antiken Athen".

He shares with us photos of a selection of bulbs flowering in the Attica area around Athens. As usual in IRG we use the term "bulbs" rather loosely, to include all sorts of bulbs, corms, tubers and rhizomes – "lumpy underground storage organs" is our favourite catch-all term.



Bulbs of Attica - photos from Stavros Apostolou in Greece



Anemone blanda, Ranunculaceae family - from SE Europe, Turkey. Growing from gnarled little tuberous rootstocks which benefit from soaking to rehydrate before planting if bought as dry stock. A useful spring bulb which is not fussy about soil or aspect and which can naturalise in the garden either in grass or the border.



Colchicum cupanii – a small Mediterranean species which has a pair of leaves at the same time as handful of flowers in late autumn. Shades of pink and white are found.

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Colchicum cupanii – pink form from [Mount Ymittos](#)



Colchicum sfikasianum

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Fig. 62 *Colchicum sfikasianum* (p.255)

Kit Tan

Colchicum sfikasianum – Greek endemic plant described in [this issue #96](#) of The Rock Garden ISSN 0265 5500 of June 1995 by Kit Tan and G. Iatrou.

After the flowers are over in September, short but broad leaves are produced. Needs plenty water both when flowering and making leaves in spring.

(N.B.: please note that all back issues of The Rock Garden are available to download, free, [from this page.](#))



Colchicum sfikasianum



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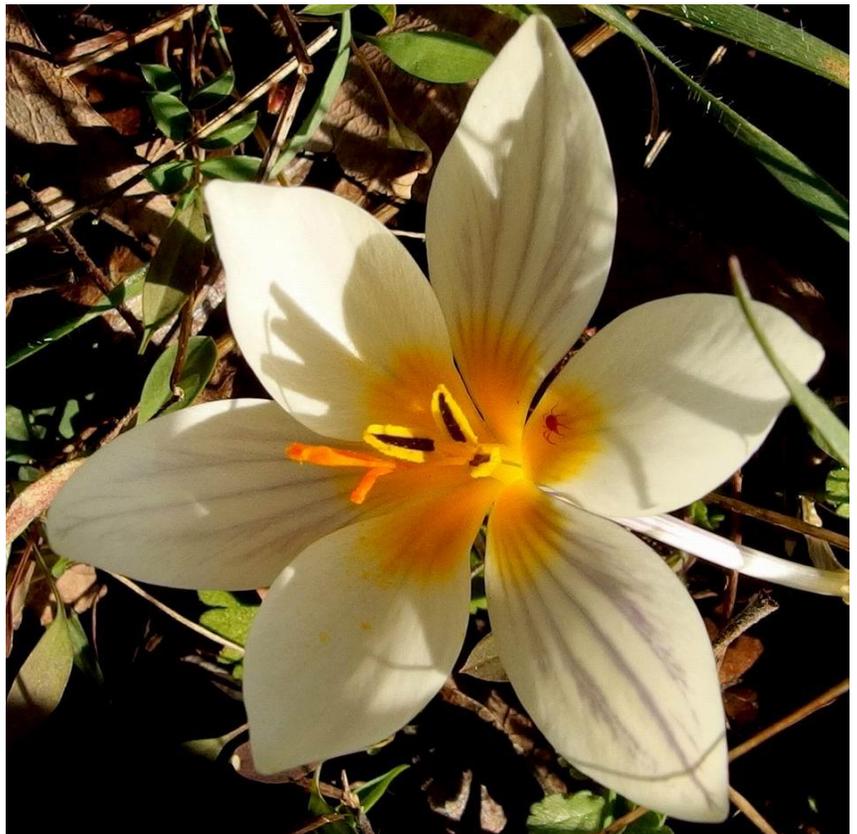
Crocus olivieri



Crocus flavus

Crocus olivieri has three stamens with yellow pollen and a yellow/orange style divided into six branches. Shown alongside *Crocus flavus* to illustrate the difference.

Crocus biflorus subsp. *melantherus* is one of only two Autumn-flowering sub-species of *C. biflorus*. As the name suggests, the anthers are black, making a good contrast with the white, variable lightly-marked flowers.





Crocus cancellatus

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Crocus cancellatus, right - a quite widely distributed Autumn flowering crocus, this blooms before the leaves appear. A species which does better under glass here to keep it dryer in the UK summer.



Crocus cartwrightianus, above left and below - one of the species often used to provide saffron from its dark red stigmas. Easier to grow than *C. sativus*, it is an attractive and variable species.



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Cyclamen and Colchicum



Cyclamen graecum and Sternbergia lutea

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Cyclamen graecum* and *Sternbergia lutea – The glorious autumn-flowering *C. graecum* is tender in most of northern Europe but it is often grown under glass and for exhibition in the UK. The pretty flowers are fairly typical for cyclamen but the foliage is extremely attractive in its many forms. *Sternbergia lutea* can prove difficult to keep happy in colder climes – often shy to produce its stunning golden-yellow flowers, even when grown under glass – so it is especially pleasing to see Stavros' photos of the plants performing so well in their native haunts.

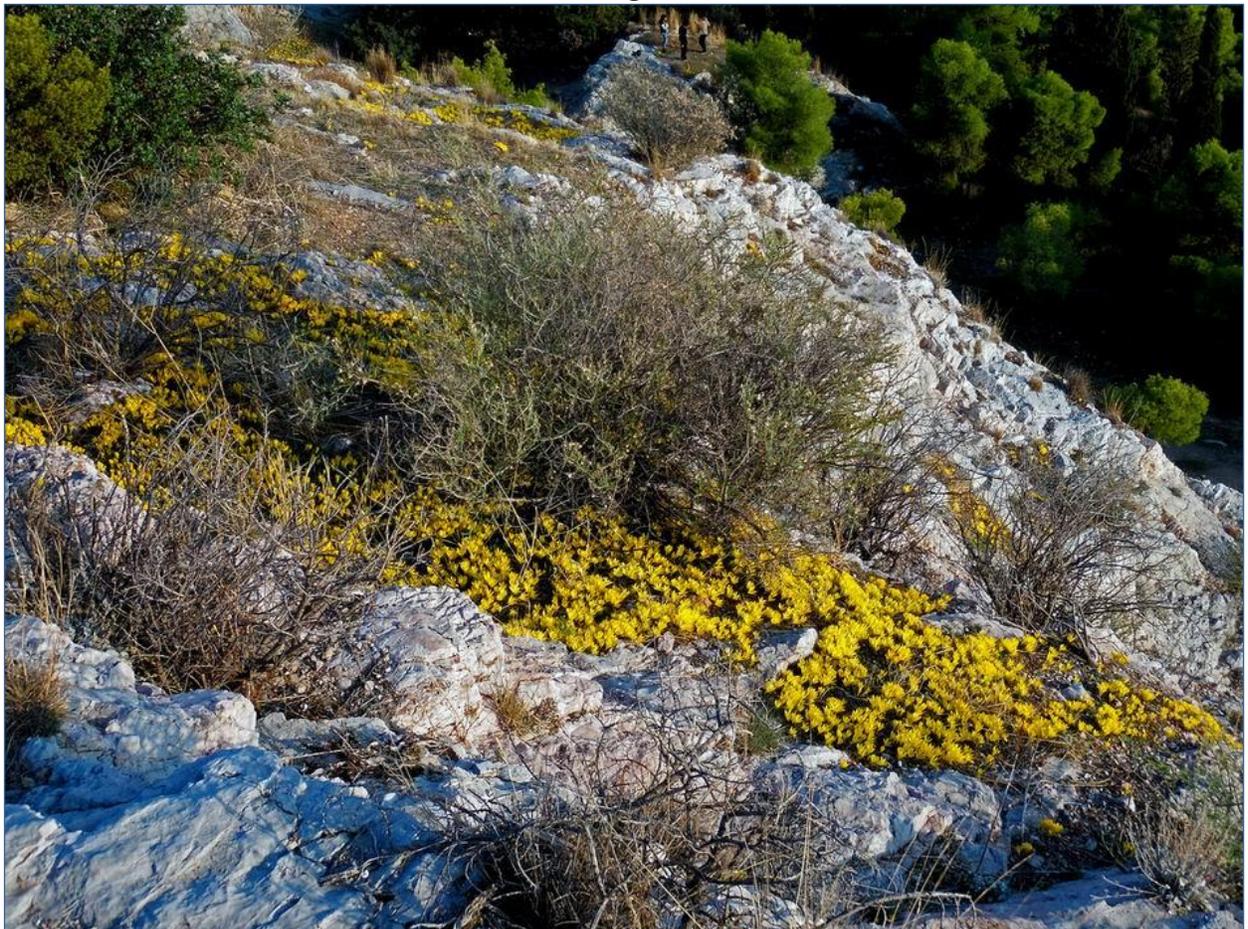


Shy *Cyclamen* hiding in a *Sternbergia* flower.

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Sternbergia lutea



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As we have seen in a previous IRG ([IRG 60 of December 2017](#)) *Cyclamen graecum* tubers can reach considerable sizes – Stavros reports that this one weighs around 14 kgs!

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Left: *Fritillaria graeca* - flowers from the end of March to mid-May according to the altitude at which it is found; 400–2,300 m asl. (Kamari 1991). *Fritillaria graeca* occurs in various habitats, mostly on limestone. This little charmer is quite easy in cultivation.



Right: *Fritillaria obliqua* – This species once well-known from the Attica region is now quite scarce. Spring-flowering with foliage that is almost silvery. Some overhead protection against summer wet is appreciated in the most of the UK.



Hermodactylus tuberosus (*Iris tuberosa*) – The sweetly scented flowers of this species are usually greenish yellow with dark, almost black, velvety falls, though [other colour variations do exist](#).

Thought to have been introduced to gardens in the mid- 18th century. Happy on stony soil in full sun flowering in Spring. Leaves are long and somewhat rush-like.

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***Leopoldia comosa* (syn. *Muscari comosum*)** – This tassel-topped muscari is quite well known; possibly more because it has a long history of culinary use rather than its good looks – smart enough when young, the flowers turn a dingy brown when mature and the scent is not very pleasing.



Stavros Apostolou with *Leopoldia comosa* – photo by George Stasinopolous

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Ornithogalum umbellatum, above and left - belongs to the family Asparagaceae. This plant is regarded as a “noxious weed” in many States of the USA. It can become naturalised in some situations and it is often grown successfully as a garden plant. Low-growing and flowering in April.

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Romulea columnae – a diminutive plant with a wide distribution enjoying good drainage and a sunny garden. In areas with a wetter summer it makes a good plant for a pot under glass, where its tiny proportions can better be observed. Pictured here on [Filopappou Hill](#) (Philopappos) Athens.



Stavros with ***Orchis anthropophora* syn. *Aceras anthropophorum*** on Mount Ymittos (Hymettus), photo by George Stasinopoulos. An orchid with widespread distribution but never in great numbers across its range. Always found on calcareous soils, in sun or shade, the plant flowers in Spring but its foliage is wintergreen.

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---World of Bulbs---



Crocus sativus – photo [J.Ian Young](#)

THE TALE OF A CROCUS: David Nicholson

To be precise this is a tale of one particular Crocus, *Crocus sativus*, the saffron crocus. The idea for this article came about as I was researching some material for another interest of mine, the study of the historical meaning of British place-names and I will show later how this links to *Crocus sativus*.

Now I don't profess to be an expert gardener and equally I'm not an expert historian so it's a fair point to make that everything in this article is based on my own understanding and interpretation of the facts I've collected and may well differ from the understanding and interpretation of the facts by those who have probably spent the better parts of their adult lives on the academic study of these matters.



Emile Gallé vases with crocus decoration

In addition to historians (proper ones, not just interested amateurs!) there are three other distinct specialisms involved in place-name studies viz.

Toponymists: those who study place names.

Etymologists: those who study the origin of words and the way in which their meanings have changed throughout history.

Philologists: those who study language in written historical sources.

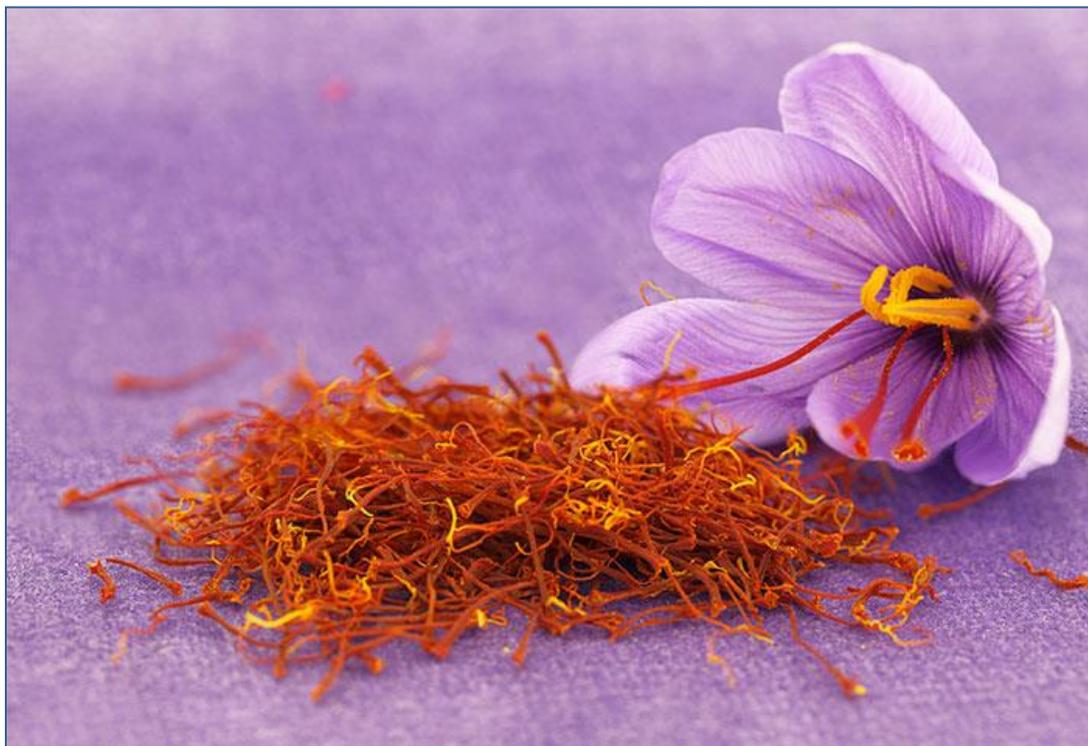
With qualifications I'll go into later, the word '*crocus*' comes from Latin as does the word '*sativus*' and we know it as the Saffron Crocus. We also know that it is sterile and as such can only be propagated by vegetative multiplication. Its

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origin is unclear but it might be descended from *Crocus cartwrightianus*; *C. thomasi* or *C. pallasii* but, as I shall show later, it's been in cultivation for over 4,000 years. Why? For the production of saffron and I'll also say more about that later.

Crocus sativus with the product of its collected stigmas – saffron.

Although we know (with qualification) the word 'crocus' is a Latin word its derivation is a little more complicated. It stems from the Greek word 'krokos' which in turn is likely to be a loan word from a Semitic language close to the Hebrew 'karkom'; the Aramaic 'kurkama' and the Arabic



'kurkum' which all mean saffron, saffron yellow or turmeric. It is thought the name ultimately traces back to Sanskrit 'kunkumam' which also means saffron. That's certainly a lot of Saffron but perhaps all of this will become clearer when I say more later about where *Crocus sativus* was grown and saffron was 'manufactured' and used. In Greek mythology the gods turned the youth Krokus into a plant bearing his name, (the crocus), because they were unhappy with his love affair with Smilax. So you see the poor lad was probably being got at by his prospective in-laws as well as by the gods.

Sativus derives from the words 'sizo' a word from the Proto-Italic group of languages, the ancestor of an Italic group of languages one branch of which developed into Latin, and the word 'ser' which means to sow, to bind or put together. This word came from the Proto-Indo European group of languages which eventually became part of the foundation of the European languages used today.

Saffron, as a word, has a convoluted history. The word might come from an Old French word 'safran' which itself comes from a Latin word 'safranum' or from an ancient Arabic word 'az-za'faran.

Saffron is produced from the dried stigmas of the saffron crocus and has long been used as a spice; a medicine; a purgative; a fragrance; a dye and a drug. In relative terms it has always been highly prized and expensive. There is a 7th century BC Assyrian botanical reference for the saffron crocus and it has been traded for over four millennia. From figures I've seen Iran now dominates the market accounting for 9/10ths of total world production although efforts have been made in the recent past to develop crops in Afghanistan.

There is an awful lot of information available on the history of saffron, indeed it could be the basis of an entire article, but what follows is simply a digest. The earliest reference I have been able to find is that saffron based pigments have been found in pre-historic paints used in 50,000 year old cave paintings in what is now modern-day Iraq. The fact that Sumerians used saffron as an ingredient in their remedies and 'magic' potions suggests that saffron was in long-distance trade before Crete's Minoan

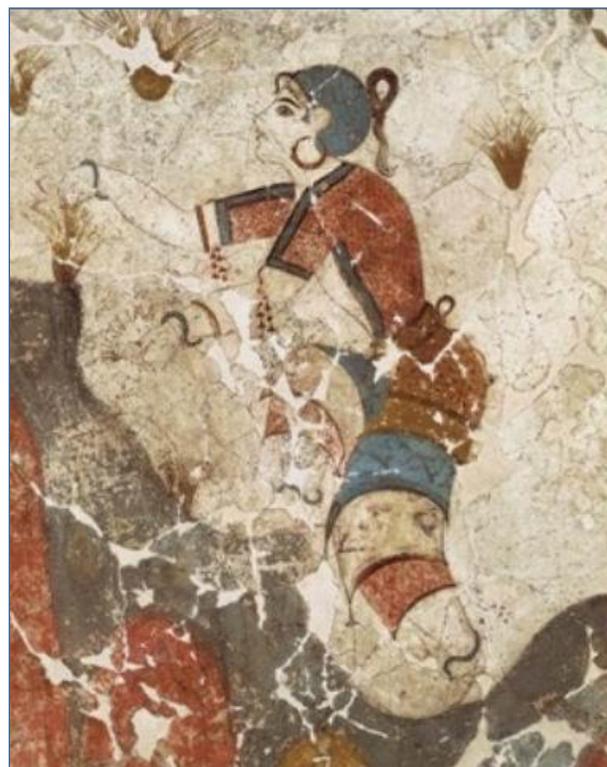
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palace culture peaked in the 2nd Millennium BC. It was also referred to as a sweet smelling spice over 3 millennia ago in the Hebrew Tanakh, the collection of ancient Jewish texts which are thought to be the source of the Christian Old Testament. Equally saffron threads have been found inter-woven in ancient Persian royal carpets and funeral shrouds which proved that saffron was cultivated there in the 10 century BC.



Minoan saffron gatherers from Santorini

The first known image of saffron in pre-



Greek culture stems from the Bronze Age. A saffron harvest is shown in the Knossos palace frescoes of Minoan Crete which shows girls and monkeys picking crocus flowers. One of these fresco sites is at Akrotiri, on the island of Santorini, which the ancient Greeks knew as Theta. The frescoes possibly date from the 16-17 century BC but they may have been produced anywhere between 3000-100BC. They portray a Minoan goddess supervising the picking of flowers and gleaning stigmas for the manufacture of what is possibly a therapeutic drug.

It is known that saffron gathered around the Cilician coastal town of Soli was rated as being 'top value' for the manufacture of perfumes and ointments but Herodotus and Pliny the Elder rated Assyrian and Babylonian saffron as the best to treat gastrointestinal and renal upsets. Cleopatra used saffron as part of her warm bath treatments and an ancient Egyptian treatment was made from saffron and crocus seeds, ox fat, coriander and myrrh to treat stomach ulcers. In Greco-Roman times saffron was widely traded across the Mediterranean by the Phoenicians. Customers ranged from perfumers in Egypt, physicians in Gaza and townsfolk in Rhodes who used pouches of saffron to mask the presence of their malodorous fellow citizens whilst on theatre outings. The citizens threw saffron in the streets of Rome as Nero marched by and wealthy Romans took daily saffron baths.

There are a number of conflicting accounts about the introduction of saffron to East and South Asia. Some suggest that saffron crocuses were first spread to Indian Kashmir via Persian ruler's efforts to stock their newly built gardens and parks and then Phoenician traders began to market the new Kashmiri saffron around the 6th century BC. Other accounts say saffron first arrived in Kashmir in 11-12 century AD. It is believed by some historians that saffron came to China from Mongol invaders via Persia but others favour it having arrived from Kashmir.

But so much for foreign climes, let's move back to Europe and to Britain in particular. The indigenous ancient Britons were joined, from around the 6th to the 3rd century BC, by peoples who migrated from

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mainland Europe and who spoke the Celtic Common Brittonic language which eventually diversified into a group of related Celtic languages such as Welsh, Cornish, Pictish, Cumbric and Breton. They lived in many parts of the British Isles as well as in Orkney, Shetland, Hebrides and the Isle of Man. Ireland was inhabited by a different group of Celtic speakers using the Goidelic language which eventually became Gaelic. The last remnants of the Celtic languages still exist in a modernised form, in the Welsh and Cornish languages and in Brittany. The earliest evidence of the existence of the Britons and their language in historical sources dates to around 4th century BC during the Iron Age and the Britons were known to have traded with the Ancient Greeks, Phoenicians and the Romans of which more will be said later. It would be a fair surmise that saffron was traded but no proof!



Old book print of *Crocus sativus*

It is perhaps not surprising, given the stage of social development in the period, that the British/Celtic words surviving today tend to be names for natural features. For example many of the British rivers have Celtic names. The rivers Tamar, Thames and Tame all come from a Celtic word 'tames' meaning dark, dark water. There are quite a few River Avons in the British Isles and all of them share the derivation of their name, from Celtic 'abona' meaning, of course, water and this word provides the root for Welsh 'afon'. The Rivers Esk, Exe and Usk share their Celtic root with 'isca' or 'iska' again meaning water. The River Severn derives from the Celtic goddess name 'Sabrina', in Old Welsh translated as 'Hafren' and it's not hard to see Severn from that. A Roman Fort at Manchester, which the Romans called 'Mamucio', relates to the Celtic 'mamma' meaning breast, breast shaped hill and Mam Tor in Derbyshire shares the same derivation. Pendle Hill in Lancashire comes from the Celtic 'pen' meaning hill with the suffix 'dle' being formed as language evolved from the Old English 'hyll' also meaning hill. So the Anglo-Saxons thought that Pen was the name of the hill and tagged on another hill and later on in the Middle Ages a further hill was tagged on. Similarly with Bredon Hill in

Worcestershire this was formed from the Celtic Word 'bre', yes, you've guessed it, meaning hill, 'don' comes from the Old English 'dun', meaning hill and then another hill tagged on later. The name of the City of Bath is formed from the Old English 'boeth', place at the Roman baths but the Roman name for Bath, 'Aquae Sulis' meaning waters of Sulis, refers to the Celtic pagan goddess Sulis.

So in many ways this a period in which we are able to glean little and highly educated guesses have given us the clues we have. But a firm tribal culture was formed, trading continued and the Romans wanted a piece of the British action.

Britain (or most parts of it) became governed by the Roman Empire in 43 AD (after two previous not completely successful attempts in 55 BC and 54 BC) and was so governed until around 410 AD when the mighty Roman Empire fell, in turn besieged by Invaders, a period of around 367 years. The last Roman soldiers are thought to have left Britain by 407 AD. I have been unable to find any estimate of the total population prior to the Roman Invasion but I have found an estimate of around 4 million people for Roman Britain. The largest centre of population was London (around 35,000), followed by Colchester (around 1200) and Cirencester around 1000. So there was plenty of space! In addition to the indigenous people Roman soldiers came in (and out) from pre-conquered parts of Europe and some decided to stay and joined the population mix.

For by far the greatest percentage of the population Latin was never a major force as a spoken language but was the language of the administration. Latin, during this period, was the only written

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language in Britain. To get back to Crocuses though, saffron crocuses were certainly grown in France (Gaul) during Roman times, brought with them by the Roman invaders, and it's possible that they were brought to England by the same sources. The Phoenicians continued to trade too. Obviously there can be no evidence but I do have a sneaking suspicion that at some time during Roman Rule and indeed in later Anglo-Saxon times, crocuses were grown and saffron manufactured in Britain and I'll say a little more about this later. I have read that the climate in the England that existed in Roman times was significantly better than it is today and grapes could be grown as far north as Tyneside (the Geordies would enjoy that!). The Romans of course added greatly to the culture of the Nation both in terms of the laws made; the buildings built; the roads laid down and the development of a stable and organised society. But, with the demise of Rome, the administration eventually came to a weary end.

SAFFRON: ITS HISTORY, CULTIVATION AND USES. 67

naturalized about Halifax, near Derby, and about Saffron Walden; and "the latter is the only place where the article of the *Materia Medica* is now (1832) produced for sale in England." It is doubtful however, in the face of Lord Braybrooke's statement, whether the culture of Saffron Walden was of so recent a date. Mr. W. Chater, of the Nurseries, Saffron Walden states that it does not occur there now, even as a naturalized plant.

To modern cultivators of Crocuses who one and all find so much difficulty in getting the Saffron to flower in their gardens, it is more a matter of surprise that Saffron was grown in England as an economic plant for three or four centuries, than that the production of Saffron has entirely died out; and the Saffron Crocus has disappeared in England even as a naturalized plant.

The Stigmata of several wild species of Crocus are collected for Saffron. Canon Tristram, in his *Natural History of the Bible*, states that in Syria the stigmata of the blue sorts (? *C. anellatus*, var.) are collected by women and children, and dried in the sun or pressed into small tablets, which are sold in the Bazaars.

At Sivas, in Asia Minor, Saffron is obtained from *Crocus ancyrensis*, and called by the Turks, Cheardin, Saffron, and several other things. In Sicily according to Gussone, the stigmata of the wild *C. longiflorus* are made use of; Mr. C. C. Lacaita tells me that the use of the stigmata of the wild Saffron Crocus (*C. Thomsii*, Tenore) for the flavouring of dishes has come under his own observation in the neighbourhood of Taranto, in South Italy, and I am informed by Mr. Quintana, H. M. V. Consul at Syra, that the stigmata of the wild *C. sativus* var. *Cartwrightianus* are collected for Saffron on the higher parts of the Island of Andros, and that a pigment is prepared from it, locally known as Zafian.

The method of the preparation of Saffron probably varies in different countries. In some cases, the pistils of the Saffron Crocus are simply dried as they are gathered, as "Hay Saffron," or are pressed in the process of drying into compact cakes.

I condense the following account of the usual mode of preparation from Hooper's *Medical Dictionary*, Ed. 7, pp. 476-477.

The flowers are gathered early in the morning just as they are beginning to open; they are then spread upon a table, and the stigmata, with a portion of the style, are carefully picked out of the flowers, and dried on a portable kiln of peculiar construction. The wet Saffron is spread to a depth of two or three inches on sheets of white paper placed on a hair-cloth stretched over the kiln; it is covered with other sheets of paper, and over all is laid a coarse blanket three or four times doubled, and pressed down with a board and a large weight after the fire is lighted. The first heat is strong, to make the Saffron "sweat"; and after an hour it is turned, and the same degree of heat continued for another hour. The heat is then reduced during a further drying for twenty-four hours, the "cake"

G. Maw in his monograph (left) and E.A. Bowles in his handbook (below), wrote about *Crocus nudiflorus* as a saffron source in Britain. ***

Halifax in Yorkshire.

In *The Naturalist*, 1950 (pp. 133-41), there is a very interesting article by W. B. Crump and W. A. Sledge on the history of *C. nudiflorus*, 'The Halifax Autumn Crocus,' in Britain. This gives the conclusions of the late William Bunting Crump (1868-1950) who was a keen Yorkshire naturalist and historian and who interested himself in the matter for over fifty years. Earlier articles by him appeared in the *Halifax Naturalist* of 1889, the *Yorkshire Post* of October 1st, 1904, and the *Yorkshire Observer* of October 18th, 1909. Crump pointed out that all the localities in which this Crocus, *C. nudiflorus*, is naturalised in Britain occur within a circle drawn round Nottingham, Warwick, Shrewsbury, Preston and Halifax. He noticed that in the Halifax area the Crocus is always found in the meadows near the hill farmsteads and that many of these were formerly the property of the Knights of St. John of Jerusalem, and the double cross, the symbol of that Order, is still to be seen on some of the old buildings. His surmise is that the Crocus was distributed by their agents and because these upland farms seldom had gardens it was most likely planted in the pastures close to the house for the sake of the saffron that could be obtained from the stigmata. But it is evident that it is not indigenous in Britain as it occurs nowhere in northern France. If it were more easily procurable it should be planted widely, and especially in grassy slopes and well-drained meadows. There is a fine form, deeply coloured, large and early flowering, well established in the wild garden at Wisley. Pyrenean peasants

c

Roman characters from the [Castor Romans website](#) of schoolchildren in Peterborough.

The Romans didn't have it easy after having conquered Britain. They continued to have problems with the British tribal Chiefs; they had problems with marauding bands of Picts from what is now Scotland and indeed had to build



a fortified wall across the country - Hadrian's Wall - in what is now Northumberland, to keep them back. They never quite sorted out all of Devon, and Cornwall was always a bridge too far and the

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mountainous terrain in Wales was always too difficult to 'police'. The Romans had also to keep an eye on marauding bands from Northern parts of what is now Germany. All of this made fighting on so many fronts somewhat stretching on available manpower and discretion being the greater part of valour even in those days, some of the Germanic tribes were invited to assist. Nature being what it is some of them decided to stay.

Various written sources exist which describe the historical contexts existing in the 5th century onwards but most of them were written many years, and in some cases centuries, after the events had actually taken place. For example the major written source describing the Anglo-Saxon period in British history (roughly from 410 to 1066), the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles, were first written in the late 9th century, and by more than one author, so consistency and accuracy, unsurprisingly, are not attributes in most historical sources. Indeed the Chronicles date Caesar's failed invasion of Britain of 55 BC as being in 60 BC.

So, who were the Anglo-Saxons and where did they come from and why? Perhaps 'why' is much more difficult to explain so I'll come back to that later. The collective name Anglo-Saxons consists of four main tribal branches. The Jutes, who came from the Jutland peninsula, modern Denmark. The Angles, from whose tribal homeland the name England was formed, came from southwestern Jutland. The Saxons came from what is now north-western Germany and the Friesians from the coastal parts of what is now Holland and Germany.

I said earlier that Anglo-Saxon tribes were invited to Britain by the Romans to act as mercenaries, and some stayed, took land and farmed and settled here. Others saw defence weakness when the Romans left, moved in, fought and took land, farmed and settled here. Yet others saw life-advantages and climate advantages in Britain over their homelands and settled and farmed here. There appears to be no consistent view from historians as to how and why things happened - but they did.

Right: Another antiquity with a saffron connection - Mycenaean ring with Bee-headed women collecting saffron.



The Anglo-Saxons were initially pagan but became Christian in later years. They all spoke variations of a West German tongue that was different but close enough to be mutually intelligible. Gradually, and over many years, the Old English language evolved. Now back to the Celts (British), the Anglo-Saxons had a word for them 'wealh' in the singular and 'weales' in the plural meaning slave(s), foreigner(s). The word still exists in the formation of the word Wales and the final element of the word Cornwall. Oddly enough the word is a Germanic formation from the Latin 'Volcae' the name of a Celtic tribe. Aren't we so joyously mixed-up? Some, but not all, of the modern places named Walton were derived from 'wealha' as the prefix and the Anglo-Saxon word for enclosure, village, 'ton' or 'tun' as the suffix giving village of the Welsh. Place names with the suffix '...ham' meaning homestead or farm indicates an Anglo-Saxon settlement with the prefix usually an Anglo-Saxon name eg. in Tottenham (Totta's homestead) or a natural feature as in Rotherham meaning homestead on the river Rother (Rother being a Celtic word meaning, yes, you've guessed it again, water, in this case meaning Chief river). But, I'm getting carried away with Anglo-Saxon History and I do need to get back to Crocuses and I promise I will very shortly.

Suffice it to say that the Anglo-Saxon period in English History ended really in 1066 with the Norman Invasion (Norman = the men from the North, so William the Conqueror had very strong Viking blood,

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again how inter-mingled we are) after some 600 years. There were blips along the way of course and particularly so in the 790's with regular, and vicious attacks from Viking marauders - but that could keep me going for another 20 pages at least and I'm sure you're getting tired.



In the garden of Ibrahim Sozen - *Crocus sativus*

Okay, back to Crocuses and it was this particular Section that first got me thinking about doing this article because there is an Old English word 'croh' which is translatable as saffron. Further the town of

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Croydon in Greater London gets its name from the prefix 'croh' and the suffix 'denu' meaning valley (Croydon is on the River Wandle valley) to give "valley where saffron grows". Written sources in 809 show the spelling of the town's name as 'Crogedene' and in the Domesday Book the spelling is shown as 'Croindene'. In either case both spellings are seen as being adjectives meaning 'growing with saffron'. I did say earlier that I had a sneaking suspicion that Crocuses were grown in Britain in Roman, and later in Anglo-Saxon times! If they were I'm sure they would have come in handy to treat Plague sufferers in both 450 and 644. So, if the Roman's introduced Crocuses to England is it possible that they were still being grown in Anglo-Saxon times? The Latin name 'Crocus' was obviously handed on from Latin speakers to Old English speakers but, by then perhaps they had forgotten that their word 'croh' meant saffron rather the name of a plant. Sometime after the written source of 809 above, both the plant and the word seem to disappear and don't surface in Europe again until the time of The Crusades (1096-1272) when some sources show Crocuses being reintroduced by the Crusaders. Again I'll say more later about the Middle Ages but suffice it to say that by then the English didn't have the words 'croh' or indeed 'crocus' but instead used the foreign word saffron, or safron, for the name of the plant. The modern word Crocus was not known to herbalists writing in the sixteenth century.



Picking saffron

One of the problems with having an interest in place-name derivation is that you are sometimes very uncertain about your facts and this happens, be you amateur or specialist. There is another Old English 'croh' and this one means corner, or bend. Equally, there is another Croydon, in Cambridgeshire, whose name is derived from the Old English "crawe" meaning the bird crow and "denu" meaning valley to give

something like "place where crows are seen". Thus it is always necessary to find details of the oldest written source available to check the Old English spellings. Fun really!

Crocus sativus corm and stigmas –
Photo J.Ian Young

It is widely thought that saffron cultivation declined following the fall of the Roman Empire and for several centuries it was rare or non-existent. This trend reversed in the 12th and early 13th centuries when the Moorish civilisation spread from North Africa to settle the Iberian Peninsula and parts of Southern France and Italy. Sources exist that suggest that saffron cultivation in France started in the 13th century with *Crocus sativus* being introduced from Spain and from the

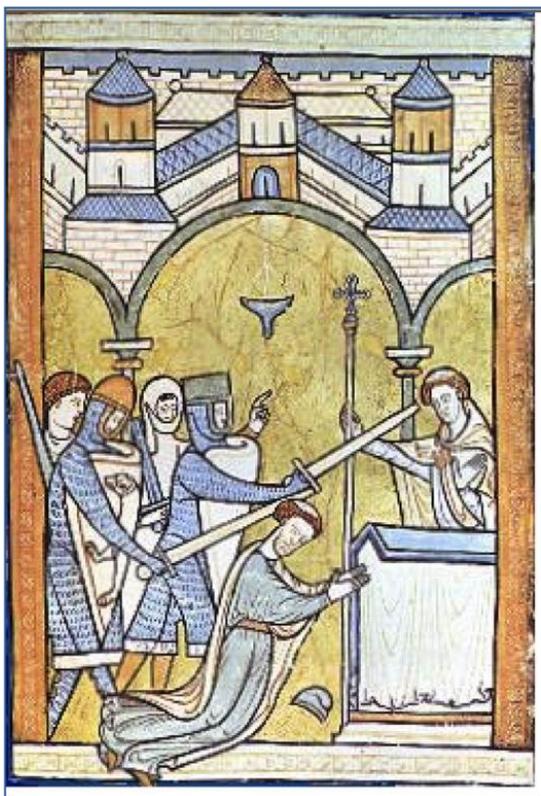


Middle East by pilgrims, merchants and Knights. Saffron was rare, expensive and above all in demand. Black Death in Europe in the years 1347-1350 saw the demand for saffron as a medication rapidly increase. Indeed, there was actually a 14 week 'Saffron War' ignited when a 363 kilogram shipment

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was hijacked and stolen. The shipment, destined for Basle, was worth \$500,000 at today's prices. In those times potential thieves often ignored gold, gems and other precious metals in favour of pinching saffron. Much peeved by these entrepreneurial activities the citizens of Basle planted their own *Crocus sativus* corms and several years of lucrative harvests made Basle an extremely prosperous city compared to other European cities. After around ten years of good harvests crops waned and Basle abandoned the crops.

Saffron production in France through the 17th and early 18th centuries was very important but later in the 18th century decline set in possibly as a result fungal diseases, much colder winters and competition from Mediterranean growers.



[Painting of the martyrdom of Thomas Becket.](#)

But what of England? Given the decline and the eventual cessation of saffron production in Europe after the fall of the Roman Empire it would be difficult not to believe that similar happened in England but there do not seem to be sources to either prove or disprove this. The general historical feeling is that the crop spread to the eastern coast regions of England in the 14th century. However in a painting, believed to have been done in 1220, depicting the martyrdom in Canterbury Cathedral of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Becket, on 29th December 1170 it is believed that saffron was used to obtain a yellow colour. Was it imported or home grown? Nobody knows.

The period of English and European history covered by The Crusades runs from 1095 to 1291, give or take a few years either side. Given that the main part of the action was held in Jerusalem and other parts of the Middle East it would be no surprise that saffron was brought back by the Knights concerned and we have already seen that it was brought back to France. Only one English King figured in The Crusades,

Richard 1 (Edward 1 did but before he became King), so was saffron brought back to England similarly? It possibly was but again no sources to prove or disprove.

Right: Saffron Walden – map from Cary's New and Correct English Atlas, 1798

It is thought that cultivation of saffron in in Norfolk, Suffolk, Cambridgeshire and Essex was carried on from the 14th century and not the least in the town of Saffron Walden in the northern part of Essex. Before the prefix 'Saffron' was added which I'll come back to in a minute the small town of Walden (Old English "walh" - remember, Briton or Welshman and "denu" valley, giving valley of the Britons).

Written sources are available from circa 1000 showing "Wealadene" and from Domesday Book showing "Waledana". Later "Chipping or Chepping" meaning "market" was added. Saffron was added, possibly in the 15th century to reflect the importance of saffron growing in the area and to differentiate between this Walden and a similarly named town 20 miles away. There is a written source from 1582 showing "Saffornewalden".

As the Middle Ages moved on the English saffron tide began to turn. The rising puritanical ethic and new growing areas abroad as a result of conquests substantially reduced demand for English saffron.



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Seemingly the puritans favoured food with little spicing or artificial colouring (typically English!). Economics in the agricultural industries meant that the time of massive amounts of cheap labour being available was also coming to an end and saffron was a very labour-intensive crop.



Crocus sativus – photo Oron Peri

These trends were documented by the Dean of Manchester, a Reverend William Herbert. He collected samples and compiled information on many aspects of the saffron crocus. He was concerned about the steady decline in saffron cultivation over the course of the 17th century and the dawn of the Industrial Revolution; the introduction in Europe of easily grown maize and potatoes steadily took over

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lands formerly used for Crocus corms, did not help. In addition, the elite who traditionally comprised the bulk of the saffron market, were now growing increasingly interested in such intriguing new arrivals such as chocolate, coffee, tea, and vanilla. Only in the south of France or in Italy and Spain, where the saffron harvest was culturally primal, did significant cultivation continue and thrive.



Old print of saffron crocus

BIBLIOGRAPHY and SOURCES

HISTORY

There is a mass of historical information on the Internet covering all periods but the following books are recommended:-

PRE-ROMAN

For the Celtic period "The Ancient Celts" by Professor Barry Cunliffe, published by Oxford University Press in 1997 and Penguin Books 1997 is a good introduction.

"Britain BC: Life in Britain and Ireland Before the Romans" by Francis Pryor, published by Harper Collins in 2003. This covers the history of Britain from the Neanderthals of some 423,000 years ago up to the Roman conquests and in a very readable fashion.

"The Celts: Search for a Civilisation" by Professor Alice Roberts (for whom I swoon in a teenage fashion as soon as she comes on the television!) published by Heron Books 2015. As might be expected from one who has spent at a lot of time honing her skills at exporting knowledge on difficult

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subjects to lay readers and watchers on television programmes such as 'Time Team' this is a really good read.

ROMAN

Again a massive amount of stuff is available and I can do no better than to recommend "Roman Britain: A New History" by Guy de la Bedoyere, published by Thames and Hudson in 2006. Again written and produced for the lay reader with lots of photographs.

Also useful is "Roman Britain" by Professor Malcolm Todd, published by Blackwell in 1999. A review says "A balanced, readable and reliable introduction to the subject....."

POST-ROMAN

For the Anglo-Saxon period the seminal work is still "Anglo-Saxon England" by (Sir) Frank Stenton (1880-1967) a volume from the Oxford History of England series first published in 1943 (so it's the same age as me!). It is still widely available and there have been numerous reprints since it was first published. It shouldn't come as a surprise that some of Sir Frank's ideas and theories are somewhat dated now but it's still a fine read and introduction to the whole Anglo-Saxon period.

"Britain AD" by Francis Pryor and published by Harper Collins in 2004. This book provides a wonderful run through from the Arthurian legends and the whole Anglo-Saxon period in a very readable and entertaining way.

Although covering a wider period including material from the Norman and Middle Ages as well and an exceptionally good read is, "In Search of England: Journeys into the English Past" by Michael Wood, published by Penguin in 2000.

Perhaps the most important written historical sources covering particularly the Anglo-Saxon period are the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles. These were created in the late 9th Century, probably in Wessex, in the reign of King Alfred the Great (yes, he of the burnt cakes!). Multiple copies were made and distributed to monasteries across England (few, apart from Churchmen, could either read or write) where they were independently updated and, in one case, were still active in 1154. Given that the authors were likely to be many and sometimes events had happened many hundreds of years before the records were written, facts become a little bit 'skewed' and perhaps given a 'slant' that the author(s) preferred to happen rather than what did happen. This is still one of the most important British historical sources. A very useful book is "The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles" by Michael Swanton, published by Phoenix Press in 2000. This is a complete, but edited, translation. The originals were written in Old English. Again a mass of information is available on the Internet including [this Chronicle from Archive.org](#), a complete translation, and [this blog, a digitised version of four of the originals from the British Library](#).

Of particular value to students in the field of the derivation of place-names and indeed to all historians is Domesday Book which was compiled, in Latin, in 1086, at the end of William the Conqueror's life.

My copy of the full translation is by far the thickest tome in my bookcase at some 8cm. thick.

"Domesday Book" A Complete Translation", published by Penguin in 2003. Also useful is "The Domesday Quest: In Search of the Roots of England" by Michael Wood, published by BBC Books in 2005. Again a mass of information is available on the Internet including the facility to be able to input your post code and bring up Domesday Book references to areas you will know.

<http://opendomesday.org/> and, <http://www.domesdaybook.co.uk/> provides information rather than translations.

PLACE-NAMES

Although I'm sure (I think?) that I am not the only person in England who has an 'amateur' interest in the derivation of place-names overall it is largely an academic study involving those who linguistic and historical knowledge is infinitely greater than mine could ever be. The main focus of the academic study in this country is carried out by Nottingham University and this encapsulates the English Place-Name Society.

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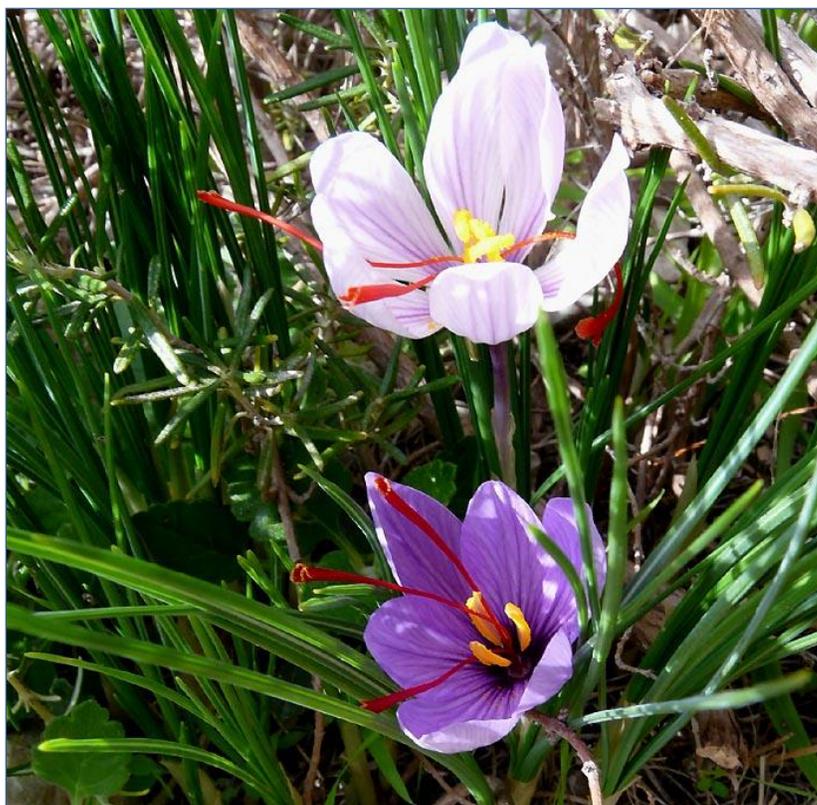
There are many academic books available, most of which are way beyond my comprehension and seem to me, as a layman, as places where academics can play learned table tennis with competing ideas and theories. There is little material available for use by interested amateurs, but I will suggest the following:-

“Place-Names in the Landscape: The Geographical Roots of Britain’s Place-Names”, by the late Dr Margaret Gelling, published by Phoenix Press in 2000. Dr Gelling spent most of her working life involved in place-name studies and was a former President of the English Place-Name Society. In this book she concentrates on the key physical natural features that have shaped the names places down the centuries. It is very readable but given that it was an academic science she was involved in some sections I’ve read and re-read quite a few times before I’ve fully ‘grabbed’ her drift.

Also by Dr Gelling is “Signposts to the Past, published by Phillimore first in 1978 and with revisions in 1988 and 1997. In a review the reviewer said “The response to the first edition showed that the book filled an academic need as well as appealing to the general reader with an interest in the evolution, meaning and significance of the names of our towns, villages, rivers and hills.....” It does that very well in my view. The problem is that time marches on and I’m certain that some of Dr Gelling’s theories and ideas have been further refined as a result of modern research and I, for one, would value a modern book on the same basis.

Aimed at the general reader market is “Understanding English Place-Names” by Sir William Addison, published by Batsford in 1978. Much easier to ‘grab’ first time, given that it was published nearly 40 years ago, but again a new version reflecting modern research and thinking would be very useful. I do tend to bore the pants off friends and relations when we are visiting places by constantly letting them know, whether or not they wanted to know, how place-names have been derived. In retaliation I never let them know if the information I have given them is legitimate or just something I’ve made up on the spur of the moment! Always well-thumbed in my bookcase though is my copy of “The Penguin Dictionary of British Place-Names” by Adrian Room and published in 2003. If you should wish to know how thousands of place-names came about then this is the book you need. It was the book in which I first found out that the name of the Greater London town, Croydon, was derived from the Old English word ‘*croh*’ which originally meant crocus but over time the Anglo-Saxons had forgotten the name referred to crocus and used it instead for saffron. All of that spawned this article.

Two colour forms of
Crocus sativus –
photo Hans Achilles



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CROCUS

Well over the years I've grown a few, possibly as badly as I grow most things. As time went by I got more interested in other plant groups; crocuses became more difficult and expensive to source and as modern plant collecting and taxonomy began to erode the information I'd collected from Brian Mathew's 1970's book became 'old school' apart from a few treasures I gave up.



Crocus sativus from Iran – photo by Jānis Rukšāns

SAFFRON

Prior to researching for this article I knew little about saffron other than that it was expensive and turned things yellow. I know more now. If knowledge is power then I'm pretty powerful! I found much material from the Internet in some very surprising areas from Web Sites relating to Beauty, Health, Medicine, Cooking, Science and even Narcotics. Indeed there was so much more information available than I would ever have the time to process. Thus, apart from odd notes, most of the information I've used came from the old Internet 'first batsman' Wikipedia' with the odd tremble as to how accurate information from Wikipedia can ever be. In processing the information I did learn substantially more about the Minoan civilisation and I suppose that can only be a good thing.

THANKS

Friends from the SRGC Forum generously let me use their pictures of *Crocus sativus*. Maggi Young was there at the birth of the idea of writing this article (so if anyone is to blame it is Maggi!) she nurtured it as it stumbled along and ensured that I actually completed it. By the time it figures in the IRG pages she will spend further endless hours making sure my spelling is correct and editing out my propensity to let words run away from me. I thank her gratefully for all of that. The last thing before I lay down my pen is to say the words that all authors say-all the mistakes are my own work and my fault. D.N.

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Ed.: Actually, I rather enjoyed David's ramblings around the subject and thought others might do so too, so I have interfered with his writing as little as possible.



Ed.:

FILM: Readers may also be interested in this film made in 1992 by Ebrahim Mokhtari about the production of saffron in Mashhad in Iran:

<http://www.mooweex.com/saffron/>

"What had touched him most about saffron, he said - when I met him in Tehran - was the fragility of the process: the delicacy of placing the corms into that rugged land, the way they open for one day only, and the brittleness of the little dried threads."

Crocus nudiflorus – photos, right, Jānis Rukšāns and below, J.Ian Young.



***Ed. note re page 36: Mathew (p39) has a short discussion of *C. nudiflorus* as a source of saffron.

The species is naturalised in parts of England and

the recorded sites are said to be associated with the Knights of St John of Jerusalem. It seems to have been introduced at least 300 years ago but exactly when is not known. It has been shown that there is no significant chemical difference between the stigmas of *C. nudiflorus* & *C. sativus*. Interestingly, *C. nudiflorus* is easier to grow outside here in NE Scotland.

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---From the Archives---

The basis of this article is a plant portrait by the talented grower J.D.Crosland (Jack) which was published in the journal of the SRGC – The Rock Garden – in 1973. The late Jack Crosland is just one of the great growers and plants-people who have written for the Rock Garden over the years and it is one of the strengths of the SRGC that not only is the index of these journals available to all online, but there is also an archive of past issues on the website. All but the most recent volumes are freely accessible by all from [the Journal page of the Club site](#).

As is often the case, the name of the plant in question has undergone a name change as a result of recent study: thus *Primula forrestii* is now *Primula bullata* var. *forrestii*. Reference Paper: P.Eveleigh, J.Nielsen & D.W.H.Rankin, Bot. Mag. (Kew Mag.) 31(4): 366. 2014. Some research for this article was made on an SRGC sponsored trip. Pam Eveleigh's [article on the *Primula -bracteata-bullata-forrestii* question](#) can be found via her website [Primula World](#).

800. PRIMULA COELATA, WITH A REVISION OF PRIMULA SECTION BULLATAE Primulaceae

Pamela Eveleigh, Jens M. Nielsen and David W. H. Rankin

Summary. *Primula coelata* Stapf is illustrated and a full description and typification are provided. Rediscovery of *Primula bullata* Franch. and *P. bracteata* Franch. in their type localities and analysis of herbarium specimens, living plants, historical documents and photographic data for the whole of *Primula* L. section *Bullatae* Pax have clarified the relationships between taxa. The whole section is revised. *P. bracteata* is restricted to plants conforming to Franchet's original concept, and becomes a variety of *P. bullata*, along with vars. *bullata* and *forrestii*. *P. coelata* is shown to be a valid name for one mat-forming species, the other one being *P. rockii*. *P. henrici*, with a cushion habit, has been reinstated as a distinct species.

Summary of the Bot. Mag. (Kew Mag.) 31(4): 366. 2014 article



Fig. 47—*Primula forrestii*

Photo—Martin Johnson Ltd.



Original illustrations from Crosland piece in TRG 1973.

Far left: Plant grown by J.D.Crosland

Left: Photo by George Forrest ex RBGE coll. of plant in wild used in original article.

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Primula forrestii - J. D. Crosland

From [The Rock Garden journal of SRGC, #52 March 1973](#)

Ed.: I am indebted to many SRGC members for permission to use their photographs to illustrate this article.



Primula forrestii in nature- Jozef Lemmens

Among the many distinctive introductions to commemorate the name of George Forrest, this primula belongs to the small Bullatae Section was discovered by him in May 1906. Growing at high altitude in the Li-chiang Range of N.W. Yunnan, essentially saxatile and pendulous in habit, the plant was found inhabiting and hanging from shady crevices in limestone cliffs.



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The feature marking it as unique in its genus consists of the persistent main stem, which elongates with each year of growth. This almost woody stem may be branched, at the ends of which there is an annual growth of leaves from which, during May or June the following year, the flowering scapes arise. Each year, as the new leaves develop, those of the previous year wither to reveal the characteristic elongation of the main stem.



Primula bullata var *bullata* at Hee Chan Men, Yunnan, China – photo Pam Eveleigh. This shows the same type of persistent main stem as is seen in *P. forrestii*.



Primula forrestii flowers and leaf forms – photo Pam Eveleigh

Flowers yellow, with an orange eye, $\frac{3}{4}$ of an inch (2cm) across, are delicately fragrant, borne in many-flowered, one-sided umbels, the scapes 6 to 9 inches (15 to 23cms) tall, pedicels $\frac{1}{2}$ to $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches (12 to 40mm). The pale green rugose leaves, ovate-elliptic 2 to 4 inches long (5 to 10cms) long, crenate-serrate, are borne on stalks up to 4 inches (10cms).

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Doubtfully viable for outdoor cultivation in Britain, the requirements of the plant suggest a sheltered situation in a vertical wall or cliff, with a suitable overhang such as a rock to protect the plant from direct rainfall, at the same time providing a cool and well-drained root run.

Ed.: It has been grown outdoors for some years in Scotland – where damage from wet in summer are seems to be the death knell.

It is as an alpine house plant that *Primula forrestii* gives of its best, under conditions which suitably protect the plant from wetness on leaves and stems which it strongly resents at all times, but particularly during winter.

In a standard well-drained alpine soil mixture, the plant readily accepts pot cultivation. Pot up only as dictated by the plant's growth to provide an adequate root run. At no time should the plant be over-potted, which is probably the principal source of failure, but also - of vital importance when re-potting or top dressing – special care should be taken to ensure that the neck of the stem should never at any time fall below the level of the compost. Failure to observe these points will quickly result in the loss of the plant, but otherwise careful watering, advisedly from below by plunging the pot in water, will ensure its well-being and longevity.

Propagation by means of seed, which is available in any normal year, is an effective means of increase.

J.D.C.



Primula forrestii in the wild – above, photos by Joan and Liam McCaughey and, below, photos by Pam Eveleigh (of the plant in seed) and Jeanie Jones.



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Primula forrestii 'JL-06215'- Jozef Lemmens



Primula forrestii at [Holehird Gardens, Cumbria](#) - photo Shelagh Smethurst

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Pam Eveleigh © 2014

Underside of *P. forrestii* leaf – photo by Pam Eveleigh

Extract from the SRGC Forum 2014 by Cyril Lafong (the most successful exhibitor ever known by the SRGC in 2017 his tally of “Best in Show awards of the Forrest Medal was over 55!):



Primula rufa – farina, underside of flowers and calyx – photo Cyril Lafong

This ***Primula rufa*** was flowering for the first time in cultivation from seeds collected autumn 2012. *P. rufa* is closely related to the more familiar *Primula forrestii*.

The plant has lots of farina on the corolla and calyx, which is believed to be the consistent characteristics that define *rufa* (which is now *P. bullata* var. *bullata*). Leaf shape is variable, from cordate or truncate (like *forrestii*) to cuneate or even attenuate (like *bullata*) which is consistent with plants from the northern end of the *P. rufa* range (N. and W. Yunnan), which is where this collection was made.

Plant is 36cm tall with large flowers (3cm across) closely packed together. We will have to see whether this is a feature of *rufa* generally when other plants flower.

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Primula rufa (*P. bullata* var *bullata* Eveleigh, Nielsen & Rankin 2014) - photos Cyril Lafong

