

Crocus Group Bulletin No. 32

Summer 2004

Patron	Brian Mathew	Members	223
Committee	Ray Cobb	Home	153
	Alan Edwards	Overseas	70
Membership	Ann Borrill		
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Hon. Sec.	David Stephens		

Hon. Sec. notes

The *Crocus* Group issues two publications a year. The main Bulletin, which has a sequential issue number, is sent out in the late summer each year, and the spring newsletter, which does not have an issue number is sent out in January to UK members only, as a reminder for the spring visits and seed exchange.

Another early flowering season, lets hope there are a few left in flower for the AGS Autumn Show at Horsham on 16th October.

Rather insanely, I have recently moved house, so for those of you who have me in your address books, the new address is:

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The *Crocus* Group - the early days by Brian Mathew

When David Stephens' letter arrived, suggesting that I might like to write a short history of the way in which the *Crocus* Group evolved, I viewed this with a mixture of enthusiasm (what a good idea) and trepidation (will I be able to remember?), so here it is and I apologize in advance for any serious omissions of facts or people. Before commencing I would like to thank Anne Blanco White, Bill Killens and Ray Cobb for their comments, and David Stephens for his very apt description of the Group as a 'quirky and idiosyncratic organ' - a tradition, he notes, that he is proud to perpetuate. By way of explanation for this comment I must explain that the *Crocus* Group did, in a manner of speaking, 'come about' rather than bursting upon the world with a fanfare of publicity and has always managed to get along in a serendipitous sort of way to the extent that there is no constitution, no fee and no AGM (oh joy). But we have always been lucky in having that most essential person, a good honorary secretary.

However, let us return to The Beginning - which is in itself not easy to define. The British *Iris* Society has several Groups, mainly geographical - the Kent Group, West and Midlands Group, etc. - but one of these devotes its attentions to the wild *Iris*es and is known as the Species Group. My first encounter with this group of enthusiasts was in the 1960s when we met in the RHS New Hall (now Lawrence Hall) in the evening of the first day of the Westminster (then fortnightly) Shows. Usually the format was to have a talk about a particular group of *Iris* species, or the results of a plant hunting expedition. Once a year there was an auction and I am sure that anyone who witnessed one of these events will agree that they were remarkable - for the range of *Iris*es on sale, the prices paid and the generally boisterous behaviour of a group of normally well-controlled decent citizens; it is surprising what happens when a rare plant and money are brought together into the same room.

The precise steps that resulted in the following event taking place is not recorded but, on the 20th February 1968, the BIS Species Group "met for an experimental symposium on *Crocus*." Clearly those with interests outside the normal boundaries of the Group had joined forces and put forward such a proposal. It is on record that "Invitations were extended to enthusiasts and the result was a gratifyingly, if uncomfortable, Full House." The programme was introduced by Gerard Parker, a friend and neighbour of E. A. Bowles who appropriately told a few stories about EAB. Gerard Parker is no longer with us, but the other speakers are: the programme continued with a detailed talk on *Crocus* cultivation by one Raymond Cobb, and another on the Turkish annulate *Crocuses* by Brian Mathew. Both are still very much involved in the world of *Crocus*, and the latter is still in the land of the permanently perplexed on the subject of annulate *Crocuses*. A very young Martyn Rix gave an account of the two spring-flowering Spanish species *C. nevadensis* and *C. carpetanus*. Attached to the report of this meeting was a note to say that

there would be a meeting "for a further discussion on *Crocus* Species" on Tuesday 28th October 1969, so at this stage the fledgling *Crocus* subgroup of the BIS Species Group was a loose assemblage but with enough interest to suggest another gathering in the autumn of the following year. Anne Blanco White has described it (in a letter) in horticultural terms as a sport of the Species Group which 'developed quietly and gradually acquired a distinctive appearance of its own until finally it was separated and left to grow on in its own right.' However, it is difficult to separate the activities involving *Iris* and *Crocus* as most of the people involved were interested in both, and the *Crocus* evenings were just one of the regular Species Group meetings, but devoted to *Crocus* - not a distinct club.

A Bulletin (headed No 1) of the *Iris* Species group for March 1969 reports on the winter (*Iris*) meeting of January 28th 1969 where it was noted that "everyone agreed, and forthwith put down, a charge of 1/- (=5p for the younger Members) per head per meeting to help defray the cost of hiring a room at the RHS Hall. A footnote on the same page indicates overwhelming support for a further meeting of crocologists: "At least two members had written, rather wistfully, to ask whether we intended to discuss *Crocus* again", and the response confirmed that there would be a meeting on October 28th 1969. Gatherings of this nature continued for the next 4 years, one evening meeting a year being set aside for *Crocus* and organized by the officers of the Species Group. Very interesting they were too, drawing in people from far and wide. The notes for the 1970 annual *Crocus* meeting of the Species Group, as it was billed, started with a talk by Dr John Marr who had in his buttonhole a new species from northern Greece which "Mr C. D. Brickell of Wisley says he will be describing as a new species before too long." This duly took place, and the name *C. robertianus* appeared on the scene. The number of attendees was not noted down but there was a "good showing of both the usual faces [i.e. the regular *Iris* S.G. members] and *Crocus* enthusiasts from as far as Nottingham and Shropshire enjoyed a few hours exchanging views and notes on the genus." At this time, and for about 10 years, I was studying *Crocus* as part of my work in the Kew Herbarium, so it is not surprising that the annual *Crocus* meeting of the Species Group often featured contributions from me. Unfortunately some of the comments were premature (the monograph was published in 1982) and reading through the reports now is sometimes an uncomfortable experience!

There was another *Crocus* symposium on March 13th 1973, where the speakers were myself, John Marr, Richard Brittain and Mr Wilkinson, but if one is trying to put a date on the actual start of the *Crocus* Group as a distinct entity it is the next year that is most significant. In the *Iris* Species Group bulletin for September 1974 is a note headed:

"*Crocus* Enthusiasts. Various members ... are particularly interested in *Crocuses* and have asked to be put in touch with fellow addicts. Naturally no addict has volunteered to do anything about this. Your secretary [at this time, Prof. Marion Bowley - BM] cannot undertake it. However, if the addicts send their names to her before the end of October a list will be included in a subsequent bulletin".

The next bulletin, October 1974, contained a "Notice for *Crocus* Addicts: There is good news! In response to my note... Mrs Primrose Warburg has offered to be '*Crocus* secretary' to look after the interests of *Crocus* enthusiasts." A list was compiled and published in the November 1974 Species Group bulletin; it is worth repeating this as it constitutes probably the nearest we can get to a list of founder members of the *Crocus* Group and includes several people prominent in the *Crocus* world who are no longer with us in body:

R. Bagnall, M. Baker, G.E. Barrett, R.F. Bills, Mrs M. Bing, Mrs A. Blanco White, Mrs P.L. Bradfer-Lawrence, Mr & Mrs H. Crook, V. Cross, Rear-Admiral P. & Mrs P. Furse, A. King, B. Mathew, Mrs E. Parker-Jervis, Mrs P. Warburg.

There are some names inexplicably absent from this list and one assumes that their absence was either due to an administrative oversight or the owners of those names were slow in putting them forward to the secretary. Ray Cobb and John Marr particularly come to mind.

Primrose had, of course, been involved with the *Iris* Species Group from its early days and was a great supporter of the plant auctions as a generous donor. Her interest in *Crocus* was more than just a personal hobby, for her husband E. F. ('Heff') Warburg (who died in 1966) was greatly interested in the genus and had published a botanical account in the journal 'Endeavour' in October 1957; one feels that, had he survived, he would probably have worked his research up into a monograph. The fact that Primrose had a considerable knowledge of *Crocus* made it particularly fortuitous that she had volunteered to take on the running of this amorphous body of enthusiasts, and continued to do so until 1996 when David Stephens took over the role.

I think it is true to say that everyone in the Group was fond of Primrose and her forthright manner, although in some cases I am certain it was tinged with a degree of cautious respect - fear is probably too

strong a word. At one stage the editor of the bulletin noted a visit to Mrs Primrose Warlock's garden so maybe fear is the right word! It would also be overstating things to say that Primrose ruled over the Group with a rod of iron, but she was firm and there were never any doubts about her likes and dislikes. Ray Cobb, who recalls that he had corresponded with her husband, notes that "one did not join the Group, one was invited!" The organization, if that is not being too laudatory, was, as I have said, a loose one so there was no subscription and no accounts; if funds ran low members were either asked for a donation or urged to bid generously at the *Crocus* corm auction. I remember having a slight difference of opinion with Primrose as to when the auction should be held. I preferred early autumn while the corms were still dormant, she preferred spring when they were in full growth; her words on the matter were something to the effect that "I am not poking about in bare earth looking for them, you'll get them when I can see what I am doing." However, the auction did normally take place at the annual autumn meeting in the RHS Hall, in addition to having a speaker, so they were quite full evenings. These auctions did keep the Group afloat financially and we were seldom asked for a donation. In fact it was noted after an auction in 1980 that "judging by the prices paid for *Crocuses* [the *Crocus* Group] must include the wealthiest members of the Species Group." From this comment it can be seen that in 1980 this quasi-autonomous body was still seen as part of the British *Iris* Society, and even as recently as 1991 it was the *Iris* Species Group Bulletin that billed the yearly gathering as 'The Annual *Crocus* Group Lecture, followed by the Annual Auction.' It is really only in the last ten years or so that the *Crocus* Group has flown the nest and now publishes its own newsletter, has a very comprehensive seed list, and a committee - but still no constitution or AGM! Another regular at both *Iris* and *Crocus* meetings, right from the beginning, was Anne Blanco White who usually provided a projector and was rewarded with a box of chocolates; this was the standard currency in the *Crocus* Group for speakers and those opening their gardens to fellow enthusiasts. The Group grew steadily: 14 on the list in 1974, 28 in 1975, but Ray Cobb recalls that Primrose preferred a small, select membership and became alarmed when it rose to the 50 mark. For this reason she tried to avoid any form of publicity or mass recruitment.

Garden visits started quite soon after the formation of the Group, usually taking place on Sundays. *Crocuses* are among the first plants in the year to flower, so it was the most enthusiastic members who turned up, wrapped up to the eyebrows and carrying their packed lunches. Most garden owners provided a warm room in which to dine, and often a very welcome hot drink or soup. Group members were invited to bring along *Crocus* corms for informal auctions, and any pots of *Crocus* as items of interest. Inevitably some visits were cancelled due to adverse conditions; that of the 8th February 1976, for instance, to Jenny Robinson's garden was abandoned due to snow. A month later a visit to Primrose's garden on a freezing day is indelibly etched on my mind as she grew nothing under glass - everything had to be absolutely hardy, including the visitors. Garden outings in the early years included the *Crocus* collections of Ray Cobb (Nottingham), Jenny Robinson (Suffolk), Dick David (Cambridge), Brian Mathew (Surrey), RHS Wisley and Chris Brickell's private garden, RBG Kew, John Marr (Surrey) and Elizabeth Parker-Jervis (Oxfordshire).

This, then, is part of the story of the early days - others may remember further details and anecdotes and I hope they will send them in to the Secretary for the newsletter. The more recent history should also be recorded and I look forward to a contribution that takes us on through the latter part of the 30-year story of the *Crocus* Group.

***Crocus* Group @ the *Fritillaria* Group meeting**

As we have done for the last few years, we are invited to attend the autumn meeting of the *Fritillaria* Group at Wisley on **Sunday, 31st October 2004** starting at 0930. We are invited to bring flowering *Crocus* for a display table (if there are any left in flower by then). See you there, and please bring plants for the table and any spares for sale or auction. **S**

Articles required

Would members please put pen to paper and let me have some articles for future bulletins. Just a few paragraphs will suffice if you don't think you can manage a page length. Any type of article will do, as long as it has *Crocus* as a theme. Would particularly welcome articles from overseas members. Post to my new address David B Stephens, Green Hollow, South Terrace, Dorking, Surrey, RH4 2AQ or e-mail to thecrocusgroup@hotmail.com. **S**

'The *Crocus*' by Brian Mathew

Brian Mathew 'The *Crocus*' for sale. Good condition with dust jacket. Offers in the region of £100 to: Mick Reed tel. 01293 420975

Crocus nerimaniae

A new autumn flowering member of the *biflorus* complex has been described in the June 2004 edition of 'The Plantsman' by S. Yuzbasioglu. It is named for Neriman Ozhatay, professor of botany at the University of Istanbul. Obviously closely allied to *Crocus wattiorum*, there are however differences in style length and *nerimaniae* has stripes on the external segments which *wattiorum* does not have.

It was recently found in an easily accessible part of southwest Turkey. I had a corm of it from a collection made out of flower many years ago, 1992 if I remember correctly, it flowered once and then died!

I showed it to Brian at the AGS Horsham show that year and he said it looked like the newly described *wattiorum* and we would have to look at it more closely in the future!!

Norman Stevens and myself visited the site in early June this year to try for a seed collection, but we were just a bit too late and the plants had gone dormant. I know it is in a few collections so we should see some of it from seed in a few years. **S**

Seed exchange 2005

As the flowering season has begun, just a reminder to hand pollinate your *Crocus* so that you can participate in the 2005 seed exchange as a donor. The rules of the seed exchange are extremely simple, donors send seed to me before 31.7.05 and non-donors who want to receive a seed list send a SAE before the same date. **S**

Spring 2005 garden visits

Because of my insane house move, I have not been organized enough to arrange any spring garden visits. I will however do so and let UK members know when and where in the spring newsletter due out in January 2005. If any member has a suggestion for a garden to visit, or would welcome a *Crocus* Group visit themselves, let me know. **S**