

The saffron crocus (*Crocus sativus*) had a long history before it arrived to lend its name to Saffron Walden. The plant may have originated in the Near East; wall-paintings from Knossos in Crete, dating to between 1600 and 1450 BC, show pet monkeys gathering saffron. 'Krokos' is Greek for saffron and is mentioned in classical mythology and by the early physicians. It appears in the Old Testament and reputedly as an ingredient in Cleopatra's cosmetics and was known to the Romans. From the first, saffron was used for various purposes, as a dye, medicinally and as a flavouring; later it might enhance gold decoration on medieval manuscripts. The Arabs probably introduced saffron, known to them as *za'faran*, to Spain; it spread within Europe as well as further eastwards to India. Today it is a significant ingredient in Mediterranean and Indian cookery – and in the saffron buns baked in Cornwall and for St. Lucia's Day in Sweden.



Gerarde's *Herball*: 'Saffron with and without floure.'



Further Information

To find out more about The Saffron Story

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English Saffron

Saffron Walden Museum

Fraser Parry Photography

This Saffron Walden Heritage Development Group Project
is funded by The National Lottery Heritage Fund



Saffron Walden
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SAFFRON WALDEN
TOWN COUNCIL



Graphic Design & Printing by Fraser Parry

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According to tradition saffron appeared in England “at the time of Edward the Third” (1327-77) with the ‘corms’ or bulbs arriving from the Near East in the hollow base of a pilgrim’s staff. Similar legends occur in Europe, while in West Africa the first cocoa beans are said to have arrived in a blacksmith’s boots. Tax records indicate saffron cultivation in Walden in 1444, but it was in the 16th century that the town became the country’s major centre for production of the spice.

Saffron was a high value crop, grown in small sheltered ‘saffron grounds’ or ‘gardens’ and harvested by women and children, small hands being adept at separating the orange stigmas or ‘chives’ from the crocus flowers, a task undertaken “before the rising of the sun”. The ‘chives’ were then dried gently before being pressed into a ‘saffron cake’. In 1577 the Rev. William Harrison, rector of Radwinter, near Walden, wrote describing saffron cultivation that in a good year an acre might yield 20 lbs (9 kilos) of dried saffron for the ‘croker’ as the saffron growers were called: even now ‘Crocker’ is a local family name. At this time saffron’s importance in the area was probably as a cash crop for mainly medicinal purposes, use in cooking being limited to wealthy households. The unwanted crocus leaves were good cattle food, although there were complaints about untidy heaps of discarded purple petals around the town.



The stylized crocus flowers shown on a charter of 1514 issued to a Walden guild indicate the increasing importance of saffron. In the same year the town’s annual fair was established on October 21, St. Ursula’s Day, probably coinciding with the saffron harvest. The 1549 town seal featured the crocus, an image of which had already appeared in the decoration of the parish church. It was later to be seen incorporated in patterns characteristic of the town’s famous ornamental plasterwork or ‘pargeting’ on domestic buildings.



In the 16th century ‘Chepyng’ or ‘Market’ Walden became Saffron Walden. William Camden’s *Britannia* (1586) refers in its English edition to “Walden of Saffron, called Saffron Walden, among the fields looking merily with most lovely Saffron. The fieldes here on every side smell sweetly and smile pleasantly with Saffron”, while John Gerarde’s *Herball, or General Historie of Plantes* (1597) states “Saffron groweth plentifully in Cambridgeshire, Saffron Walden and other places thereabouts, as corne in the fields”. Gerarde, a ‘surgeon’ described its numerous medicinal qualities, writing that it might be used to treat smallpox, plague and lung and stomach diseases, as an anti-depressant and to prevent drunkenness, while “It is with great success given to procure bodilie lust”.

Presentations of saffron were given to distinguished visitors, including Queen Elizabeth I, but by the mid- 18th century cultivation was in decline. It disappeared from the Walden area by about 1790 for various reasons including reduced medicinal use and cheaper foreign imports. Saffron, however, was not forgotten. The saffron crocus was illustrated in the *Flora of Essex* (1862) by George Stacey Gibson, town mayor and Quaker benefactor, while today the flower is the prominent logo of numerous local organisations and businesses. Saffron is now grown once again in Essex and in the town’s Bridge End Garden, while in 2019 crocus flowers were hand-carved to decorate new joinery work in St. Mary’s Parish Church. *Crocus sativus* is still part of Saffron Walden.

