

Saffron and Saffron Walden

Saffron Walden received its unique name during the 16th century, when 'Saffron' replaced 'Chepying' or 'Market' to describe the town, acknowledging its significance in the cultivation of saffron. *Crocus sativus*, the saffron crocus, was long known in the Mediterranean and Near East and possibly arrived in England in the late 14th century, though the earliest record of its cultivation in Walden dates to 1444.



Walden charter

The saffron crocus was a valuable cash crop, grown in small enclosed gardens, some recorded as located on Windmill Hill on the town's northern boundary and at Cucking Stool End near the modern war memorial in the High Street. Saffron was mentioned in local 15th and 16th century documents; if pigs or sheep broke into the gardens and ate the crocuses their owners might be sued.

Saffron Walden was central to an area including south Cambridgeshire where soil and climate were particularly suitable for growing saffron; the English product was highly valued in Europe.



Saffron used as a dye

For some three and a half thousand years saffron has been esteemed as a dye, for its medicinal qualities and in cookery.

Saffron was known in antiquity as 'the great dye', perhaps because it did not require a mordant to fix the colour, a rich yellow associated with light and wisdom. Possibly for this reason it was reserved for priests and political leaders in the ancient Near East. In Tudor times its use was also restricted to the nobility. Saffron was expensive, probably seldom used in Walden's contemporary 'dyeworks'.

The therapeutic use of saffron is mentioned in Egypt in 1,500 BC; it was recommended by early Greek physicians and considered a remedy against tuberculosis in Arabic medicine. Known to the Saxons, it was described in 14th century Wales as a cure for drunkenness. The 16th century herbalists believed that saffron was effective against the plague and diseases of the lungs, liver and bladder, beneficial to the stomach and an antidote to depression. It could be laid upon abscesses and was a remedy for measles. It was also used in cosmetics and to bleach the hair.



Saffron 'threads'; each a stigma from inside the flower



Saffron crocus 'corms'

The name saffron is derived from the Arabic word *Za'faran*

During the 18th century the cultivation of saffron in Walden dwindled, possibly due to pressure from cheaper foreign imports, new flavours and developments in medicine; by the end of the century it disappeared.

Saffron is now cultivated again in Essex and has reappeared in today's recipes and even in modern medical research.

Saffron crocus flower



Saffron's early use in cookery was as a colouring agent, for example to 'gild' meat. A collection of recipes (1390) from the court of Richard II advises cooks to "colour it wyth safroun" and describes a mixture of ginger, saffron, sugar and salt used in cooking



a chicken. Research indicates the ostentatious use of saffron in medieval Cambridge college kitchens, while in 1456 Walden's churchwardens bought saffron for "the Pentecost tart".

A memory of the saffron harvest by N. Maynard (1845)

Saffron cultivation today

