

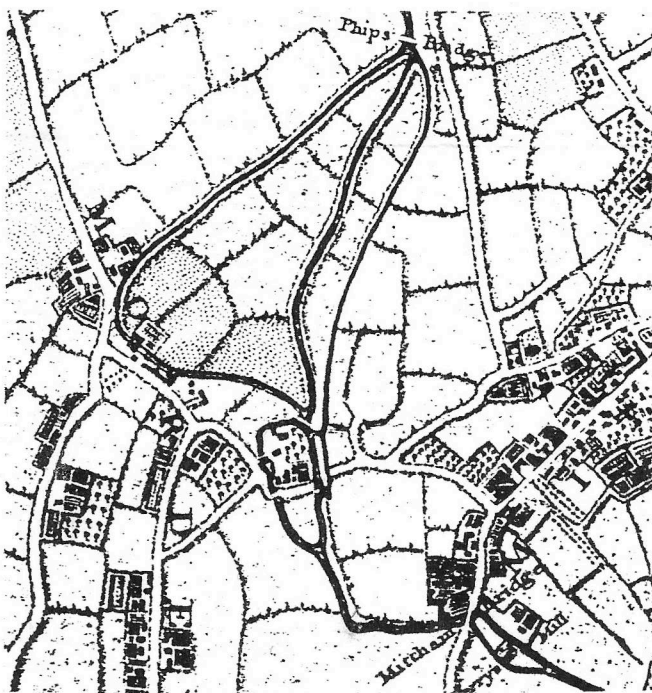
## Was it a crocus at all?

"The valley where the wild saffron grows" is the rather romantic scene for the usual interpretation given to the meaning of Croydon as a place name. But was it? Crocuses aren't native to Britain and, from what we know, their introduction didn't occur until medieval times, well after the town's name had been established. Is there any truth in this etymology? This is an adapted extract of the address at our AGM.

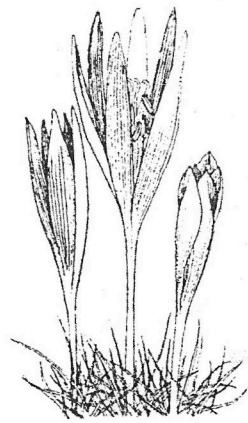
'Crog Dene' was first mentioned in a Anglo-Saxon Charter of 809 AD, and in a will of 871 - but neither of these documents exist and we have to rely upon copies made in around 1250 - four hundred years later. It is held to be derived from the Old English words - *croh* (a crocus) and *dene* (a valley).

Margaret Gelling, a leading expert on the origin of British place-names, has considered the two components. She suggests that some Latin words may have lingered on from after the collapse of the Roman occupation - words such as camp, caester, port and street - and either adopted by Anglo-Saxons from Britons or borrowed direct from Latin speakers. One of these may have been *croh*, from the Latin *crocus*. *Dene* is an Old English word for a mostly long and sinuous valley which would apply to that which Croydon is placed at the head of. Margaret Gelling has identified around 185 places with a 'dene' element in England; some are joined to a personal name (Polesden) a descriptive name (Longden), a tribal name (possibly Rottingdean), and in a few places to where vegetation was a feature, such as Rushden, or possibly in our case, *Croh dene* - crocus valley.

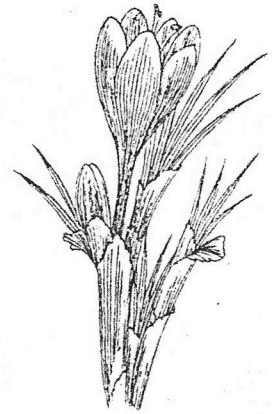
The oldest existing document of Croydon - Domesday (1086) - refers to *Croindene*, and although it is possible *croin* may have been a grammatical variation - languages were very complicated in those days and that the consonant 'g' and 'y' were interchangeable - there are other possible derivations such as 'crooked valley'. Incidentally the derivation of Croham (to the south-east of central Croydon, as in Croham Hurst), first recorded in 1225 as *Craweham*, refers to crows rather than crocuses.



Rocque's map of 1745 showing the River Wandle near Mitcham. Could the damp meadows on its sinuous borders have supported meadow saffron, and given Croydon its name?



autumn crocus



saffron crocus

We have to remember that around 800 years elapsed from the end of the Roman occupation to the early medieval period when we begin to have written documentation still existing in any quantity, and that the origins of place names consequently can become somewhat conjectural. To be subject of an element in a place-name the feature would need to be distinctive, and stand out within the landscape. Did crocuses grow naturally in Croydon in profusion, or were they cultivated deliberately, or were they so unusual so as to be worthy of special notice? Or did they grow at all in Croydon in the era before the Norman Conquest?

Four flowers lie behind the wild saffron mystery - three crocuses and a lily. The first, the spring crocus, *Crocus vernus*, need not detain us. It is a native of southern Europe but the most commonly grown in Britain and was probably introduced in early medieval times. It is naturalised around Nottingham, and often plentiful in churchyards, parks and woods around the country. A few are found in the local woods.

The second, the saffron crocus, *Crocus sativus*, has a long and interesting history. It has grass-like leaves, lily-shaped violet flowers with three long thread-like orange-red stigma, and grows about 14cm high. Known as the 'Queen of Spices', it is, and has always been the world's most expensive spice and dye. Why so? It blooms briefly for two weeks in the autumn and each flower has to be picked by hand at dawn before the sun gets too hot. The flowers are discarded and the stigma are dried in baskets over wood stoves, losing in the process 80% of their weight. This drying intensifies the characteristic bitter honey-like taste. It takes 5,200 blooms to make an ounce, and between 200-400,000 stigma needed to make 1kg of saffron. High quality saffron should have strands of bright orange with no white streaks or light patches. It also has a strong perfume.

The saffron crocus has been cultivated from time immemorial and probably originates from Asia Minor. Its use has relied upon societies with a cultured aristocracy able to appreciate its culinary advantages with a slave or peasant class capable of undertaking its labour-intensive production. The name probably comes from the Arabic words *sahafara*, thread, and *za'faran*, yellow. It is said that when Alexander the Great's soldiers entered the vale of Kashmir they found the crocus growing in great profusion and were so wild with joy that they broke ranks. It was widely used in Indian Mogul food, while the Persians knew all about it and used it for dyeing clothes and their carpets. Cleopatra is said to have used it for her complexion. The wall paintings at Thera (Santorini) in Greece date from about 1800 BC and some depict saffron gatherers, while the Romans used saffron to strew paths and roads with a golden carpet for emperors.

It is believed that the Arabs introduced saffron into southern Europe in the 10th century, and Spain remains a major commercial producer to this day. The Hebrews knew it as *karcorn* - Solomon praised it - and the Crusaders are reputed to have brought it over to northern Europe - the first bulbs arriving in England in the late 14th century. Because of its scarcity there were many attempts to adulterate it and one of the first food laws ever regarding the use of saffron was enacted in Nuremburg in 1358. Around this time an English pilgrim risked imprisonment and death when he returned from Spain with a saffron crocus concealed in his staff - or so the legend says - which led to the establishment of an English saffron industry in Essex, at Chipping, or as it was later known, Saffron Walden. A dye works is recorded there in 1381. It was introduced at the right time at the right place, as besides being used for culinary purposes by the rich and fashionable, it was also considered to be an antidote for the plague.

Saffron has been mainly used as a culinary spice in Middle Eastern, North Indian and Mediterranean cookery, as it combines perfectly with all kinds of rice (e.g. paella) and as it blends well with fish it is an essential ingredient of bouillabaisse. In the 18th century it was rolled into balls, crushed and sprinkled over salads. For centuries saffron cakes have been a Cornish delicacy - it is said that the Phoenicians used it to pay for their tin - and in Elizabethan times quite a proportion of Saffron Walden's output was sent to Cornwall; they now import it from Spain. In Britain saffron tea was regarded as good for measles, and the Irish dyed their sheets with saffron as it was thought to strengthen limbs. It was used in the drinking water of moulting canaries to maintain their plumage colour and, and at one time to dye cheese until marigold petals were found to be cheaper. 'He slept in a bag of saffron' was an expression for a cheerful man.

Cultivation in Britain lingered on to the end of the 18th century, by which time it was out of fashion; the last place it was grown was in Duxford in 1816. Also regarded as a good dye for cloth, it was too expensive to be economically used as such - 1 acre only produced 24lbs of dried stigma. There is strong evidence that it was grown for a time in Croydon and Mitcham. Records survive of a John Blackett purchasing in 1579 an orchard, called the Saffron Garden, and of his erecting a 'new-built house, set in a certain ground, called Safforne garden, in a street, called the Old Town in Croydon, with an orchard, garden and backside adjoining' to sell to William Waker in 1599.

The third flower, autumn crocus, *Crocus nudiflorus*, is believed to have been introduced to Britain by the Knights of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem and others returning from the Crusades. Unlike the saffron crocus, its thin leaves appear in the spring, but flowers in September and October. The most widely naturalised crocus in the country, recent research has found the sites where it grows wild in Lancashire are all on land owned by the Knights in the 13th century. It may have been introduced as a cheaper substitute for the proper saffron.

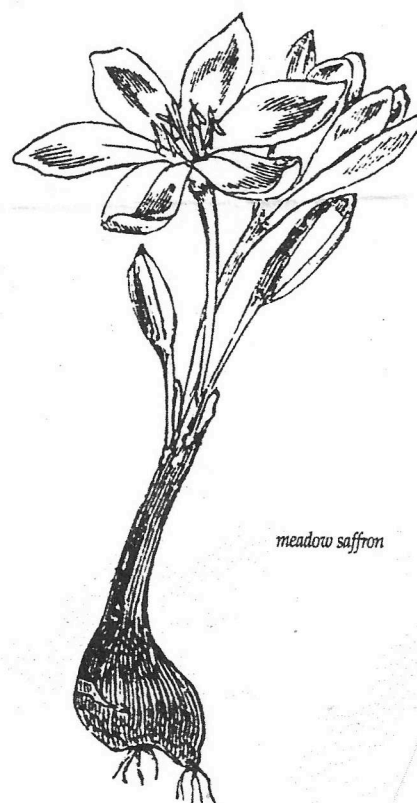
Finally the lily, meadow saffron, *Colchicum autumnale*, is also an autumn flower (and confusingly also known as autumn crocus), but unlike the crocuses, is native. Erect leaves, 15-30cm long, don't develop until the spring as the fruit ripens; they are absent when the flower blooms in September. One to three pink flowers up to 20cm high, they are goblet-shaped with six, as opposed to the crocus' three, stamens. The flower arises from below the ground, and the absence of leaves gives it a blushing nude appearance, which has led to its country names such as upstarts, naked boys, naked ladies, strip Jack naked, but with ruder ones abroad - such as the German *Nackenden Huren* (naked whores) and the French *cul tout nu* (bare bottom).

Meadow saffron is poisonous - "it will strangell a man and kyll him in the space of one daye" (Turner, 1568) - and was an important source of colchicine, which stops the multiplication of living cells. The old physicians and botanists were afraid of it ("[It] is corrupt and venomous"), and it wasn't until the end of the 18th century that the meadow saffron was investigated. If used with care it is a good painkiller and *tinctura colchici* remains one of the last pure plant remedies to stop the terrible throb, heat and pain of gout.

It is an uncommon plant, with its distribution centred around the Severn valley, and the few recorded around Croydon are thought to be garden escapes. Although found in woodlands it has a taste for rich, damp, meadowland, and has thus caused problems for grazers. Some farmers grew it as a cash crop foregoing spring and autumn grazing - when the leaves and flowers were out - and harvested the corms (the swollen part at the base of the stem, similar to a bulb) for the pharmaceutical industry, particularly during the last war when supplies were unobtainable from abroad. The largest concentration of meadow saffron can now be found in Wychwood Forest in Oxfordshire where there can be up to 10,000 blooms in early autumn.

This brings us back as to which of the four plants here might have flourished in Saxon Croydon, and so gave it its name. We can immediately discount the medieval introductions - the spring and autumn crocuses. And although it is possible that the Romans, who used the dye, introduced the true saffron crocus, the question arises as to whether it would have survived almost 400 years untended by peoples' ignorant of its value, in a soil and climate not particularly suited to it. On the other hand the meadow saffron, a colchicum not a crocus, appears to be native and the watery meadows of the upper Wandle valley would have suited it admirably. I can only suggest that whereas the wild saffron may have grown in the valley, would it have been called a crocus, and that it is not the origin of the place name?

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Croydon Natural History & Scientific Society



meadow saffron