

Saffron Walden Annual Town Meeting 2023 Report

Saffron Walden Heritage Development Group

Saffron Walden Heritage Development Group has recently wound up the second of its major projects, The Saffron Story, sponsored as before by the Heritage Fund. Once again, the Group wishes to thank the Town Council for support and encouragement in many contexts but notably for Saffron Day on 16 October – in which our Mayor played his part with distinction.

The overall aim of the Saffron Story was to celebrate and promote Walden's long historical association with saffron production, hopefully as an added attraction for visitors.

The project followed the earlier format in publishing an illustrated leaflet describing in some detail the history of saffron in and around Walden; it was available last summer in the TIC and by permission in the parish church and the Fry Art Gallery.

An interpretation board was installed on the Market Street wall of the Town Hall illustrating the wider aspects of saffron cultivation and providing information on the uses of saffron in cookery, medicine and dyeing.

These themes were recapitulated in four walking tours led by local historian and Blue Badge Guide Sarah Kirkpatrick, which also drew attention to representations of the saffron crocus throughout the town.

A programme on saffron and how it was grown and used was presented to the Year 6 pupils at R.A. Butler Primary School by Cathy McGonegal and Sarah Kirkpatrick, including practical experience of using saffron as a dye and as an ink.

New signage was installed in Bridge End Garden indicating and describing the specimen saffron beds cultivated by English Saffron.

Paul Bellany's company, Creative Walden, shot a video, available on the Tourist Information Centre's You Tube channel. This focused on Saffron Day, the culmination of the project. Held in the Market Place with off-site displays at the Museum, the event was centered upon stalls selling saffron-based products and foodstuffs while there were demonstrations of the use of saffron as a dye, give by Hana Mallett, and in cookery by Sam Bilton, author of a recent book of saffron recipes. David Smale of English Saffron gave an informal talk on its cultivation and showed how the saffron 'threads' were removed from the flowers. The image of the saffron crocus appears in the town's famous 'pargeting' or decorative plasterwork and featured in a practical session given by researcher Anna Kettle and Douglas Kent, a Director of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings; it is hoped that the interest this evoked will be continued in the form of a possible future workshop at Saffron Walden Museum on the techniques of pargeting.

Saffron Day was fortunate with the weather and attracted people from many parts of the country with several overseas visitors including Gunnel Carlson, a Swedish gardening journalist, whose recent book on saffron includes a chapter on Saffron Walden and a picture of Bridge End Garden.

In concluding, the Group wishes to thank Mark Starte of the TIC for invaluable advice and guidance and the Town Council's Events Manager, Collette Kerr, notably for advice on health and safety issues and Operations Manager Terry Frostick and Town Clerk Lisa Courtney for much valuable practical assistance. We wish to thank all the volunteers, notably The Diamonds, for the essential support they provided, plus Saffron Walden Camera Club for a splendid photographic record and Faircroft House for background music.

Additional funding was generously provided by Uttlesford District Council and specifically by Councillors Coote, Light and Lodge, by Fairhurst Menuhin Solicitors and by Peasgood and Skeates.

The town's contribution to saffron cultivation has also been described and illustrated recently in Cambridge Saffron's online exhibition on the history of the expensive spice, describing its use in the kitchens of the older colleges such as Peterhouse and Pembroke and quoting references to saffron in English literature.

So, we hope that the profile of Saffron Walden has been raised, if only a little; time alone will tell.