Fig. 1: basket of harvested saffron crocus with workers in a field in the background (copyright George Tsartsianidis/Dreamstime.com)

Croydon, crocus and collyrium

David Bird

As a native of Croydon, I have long been interested in the place-name, which is a compound of Old English *croh* = saffron and *denu* = valley.[1] Some of the early forms of the place-name incorporate an adjective, either *crogen or an oblique case of *crogig', taken as meaning 'growing with saffron' (the asterisk indicates that a word is not otherwise recorded but is inferred from place-names or other philological evidence). Some years ago the late Margaret Gelling pointed out that as *croh* is a loan word from the Latin *crocus*, its appearance in a Saxon place-name must be regarded as significant.[2] She notes that both the plant and the word seem to have disappeared in Britain in the Saxon period; the plant was probably reintroduced in medieval times but was called 'saffron' – our word 'crocus' being a modern re-use of Latin. Although there are one or two other possibilities, Gelling accepts that the Croydon place-name is very likely to include a first element borrowed from the Latin *crocus*, and argues that this means that the word must have been passed on by the Romano-British population of the area. This in turn must indicate that the plant was growing in Croydon in the Roman period. The use of loan words and even British place-names is not without parallel in this part of Surrey; indeed Gelling has noted that 'there is one area of south-east England – the Penge/Croydon/Leatherhead part of Surrey – where the frequency of Celtic names and of names referring to Celts is remarkably high'.[3]

The place-name is also sometimes rendered as 'valley where wild saffron grew'[4] but it appears that the plant is unknown in the wild; clones are sterile and must be increased by natural corm division.[5] According to *Wikipedia* it may have originated in central Asia, a sterile form of a plant from the eastern Mediterranean.[6] Thus if the reference is to the saffron-crocus then it must be a case of deliberate import and planting. We need an explanation for why this should have been so, and to a sufficiently marked extent to have resulted in it being recorded in the name of the place. Clearly, for the name to have been meaningful, the valley must have been noticeably different, in the way it was marked by saffron-crocus, from anywhere else in the vicinity and perhaps even further afield. The obvious parallel is Saffron Walden in Essex, so-named as a centre of saffron production later on (and in a geological location more or less the mirror image of that of Croydon, on the opposite side of the London Basin).[7]

It is understandable that a large number of saffron-crocus in flower would attract attention, for it has very attractive lilac-purple flowers in the autumn (see Fig. 1). In the 17th century the mogul emperor Jahângîr seems to have made a special trip to experience the sight in Kashmir (where saffron-crocus was introduced no later than the 3rd century AD). 'As the saffron was in blossom, His Majesty left the city to go to Pâmpûr … every field, as far as the eye could reach, was covered with flowers …'.[8] The flowers have a red style with three prongs, each of which ends in a crimson stigma. Style and stigmas are the source of saffron, and must be pulled from each plant by hand. Large numbers are needed: to

produce one gram of saffron about 150 flowers are required (see also below). The plant 'prefers friable, loose, well-watered and well-drained clay-calcareous soils with high organic content'; good rain in spring but drier summers and fields sloping towards the sun are best.[9] It should have been possible to obtain these conditions (at least in favourable years!) in the Croydon area in the Roman period. That the plant is a reasonable prospect in Britain is indicated by the fact that it is offered for sale by garden companies.

An analogy would be the lavender fields in the Mitcham-Croydon-Wallington-Banstead-Carshalton-Sutton area of historic Surrey. A new field has been established in recent years near Woodmansterne, and any visitor would understand how it could give rise to a place-name.[10] The display is such that one remembers it across the year. It is not that unreasonable to suggest that there could have been lavender production somewhere near London in the Roman period. In his discussion of cosmetic sets Ralph Jackson notes that the Elder Pliny probably refers to lavender from Gaul in the context of cosmetics and perfumes (although opinions are divided as to what plants are meant in the various texts).[11] As the cosmetic sets and other evidence show a strong British fondness for face-painting and the like it must be probable that there was production to supply large markets such as *Londinium*, especially as there were apparently many other uses of lavender in the Roman period. As well as perfume and to sweeten the air these included use in religious ceremonies and medicine, both for illness and to dress wounds.

Specialist production for the London market is to be expected in the Roman period, as I have argued elsewhere. Factors including 'a uniform and tightly managed currency, systems for the validation of commercial contracts … a developed road system … standards of weights and measures …' were in place then just as they were around 1300, when documents can provide better evidence for such production than is usually available in the archaeological record.[12] We readily accept that there were production centres for Roman pottery and tiles, although we cannot as yet be sure of the reasons for choosing particular places out of all of those capable of providing the necessary requirements.[13] There must have been many other specialist production centres that are difficult to see because of the nature of our evidence, for example those raising and training transport animals, or providing timber and fuel.[14] Many factors, including soils, aspect, local climate, ease of transport, and ownership (including contacts) will have combined to lead to estates concentrating on the production of particular crops or animals.

I have previously attempted to draw attention to Gelling's suggestion about the place-name Croydon, but had not given sufficient consideration to the possible uses of saffron-crocus.[15] In her discussion, Gelling refers to the use of the plant to produce a dye, but when I consulted John Peter Wild he pointed out that if a yellow dye was required, the native plant weld would do the trick more cheaply. Various other uses of saffron are mentioned in the Roman period, even a costly spray mixed with sweet wine for spraying in theatres.[16] This last is no doubt too exotic in a British context, although the Tabard Square cosmetic pot may suggest Roman London at least was more sophisticated than we sometimes imagine.[17] This find is important not least as a marker for what is usually missing from the archaeological record.

Nowadays we mostly think of saffron for cooking, but it may not have been much used for this in the Roman period, at least in the western empire. It is apparently only mentioned in Apicius as an ingredient in spiced honey wine for travellers and in aromatic oils to aid digestion.[18] The full list of possible uses seems to be colouring, aromatic oils, condiments, cosmetics, lotions and refreshing medicines.[19] Would any of these have been enough to have led to specialist production and planting near London? The medical aspects are probably the most likely, given that people will pay over the odds where their health is concerned. The following discussion relies heavily on the work of Ralph Jackson, in particular a forthcoming paper which was the inspiration for this note.[20]

In our area the presence of doctors in Roman London and Staines is probably indicated by *collyrium* stamps (often called oculists' stamps). From London there are also two later-1st-century samian vessels (Dragendorff forms 33 and 27) which have the impression of such stamps replacing the usual potter's stamps (Fig. 2). One of them almost certainly came from a site at the upper end of the Walbrook valley which also produced a blank *collyrium* stamp.[21] The stamps on the samian vessels specifically refer to a preparation based on saffron-crocus: L.IVL.SENISCR/ OCOD.ADASPR, that is, *L(uci) Iul(i) Senis cr/ocod(es) ad aspr(itudines)* 'Lucius Iulius Senex's saffron salve [*crocodes*] for granulation (of the eye-lids) [*aspritudo*]'. The latter was one of the main eye diseases in the Roman period and clearly unpleasant, with the added danger of further disease or even blindness. Some 20% of the salves mentioned on *collyrium*-stamps are dedicated to its treatment, and around 7% of all named salves were for *crocodes*.[22]

Treatments recommended by the likes of Celsus included high percentages of saffron. It should, however, be noted that tests of surviving sticks of *collyrium* from a late 2nd– early 3rd-century grave near Lyon found no evidence for saffron in the ones stamped as *crocodes* of Zmaragdus. As Jackson puts it: 'Thus, Zmaragdus' *crocodes* may have been saffron-coloured and it may have been beneficial, with its ingredients of iron, silica, copper, zinc, potassium etc., together with an indeterminate organic compound, but saffron it was not'.[23] On the other hand we do not have to assume that what was true for Zmaragdus was also the case with Senex; perhaps standards had declined over the course of a century!

Jackson notes that 'a healer might choose to concentrate on one branch of medicine … but, with few exceptions, such specialisation would have been only one part of his general practice'.[24] Thus *collyrium* stamps are a useful marker for a more general medical man. There is quite extensive evidence for the use of saffron-crocus in treatments for various illnesses, in ointments and other remedies, continuing throughout the Roman period and beyond.[25] If there was a thriving medical community in London

using saffron salves (and surely it would have been a good market),[26] then it might be that local supplies of *crocus sativus* would be very welcome. It was very expensive, not surprisingly as 100,000 or more flowers were needed for a kilo: Jackson notes that in Diocletian's Price Edict the price of a pound of saffron was set at no less than 2000 denarii. The 'blurb' for a recent television series *(The Spice Trail)* puts this into modern terms: 'to make one kilo of saffron takes more than two football fields of saffron crocuses – no wonder it costs £4,000-plus per kilo'.[27] Controlled production local to London would therefore make considerable sense, and so this could provide a workable explanation for why there could have been saffron-crocus growing in large numbers in the Croydon valley in the Roman period. Perhaps Senex himself arranged production at a site near the City with the right conditions for growing saffron-crocus and conveniently located for road transport. The recent discovery of finds suggesting the proximity of a 1st-2nd century high-status building in central Croydon might be relevant: to judge from other roadside settlements in the area such a building would be unusual.[28]

An alternative and no doubt much more unlikely hypothesis might be considered to explain the first element derived from *croh* = crocus in the place-name Croydon, if the rules could be stretched sufficiently for them to accommodate a personal name. We know of a famous Crocus, albeit from a single source, a 'king of the Alamanni' who supposedly played a part in the proclamation of Constantine as emperor at York in AD 306. The story has recently been examined by Drinkwater, who accepts that Crocus had probably joined the entourage of Constantine's father, Constantius, after the latter had campaigned in Gaul before coming to Britain. He argues that Crocus was the leader of a band of raiders defeated by Constantius and then recruited to lead a levy from the survivors. Drinkwater concludes that it is likely that Crocus did play his part in supporting Constantine after Constantius' death, but that 'he was probably paid off as soon as possible and, if 'Crocus the war-lord', sent back into the Elbe-Germanic triangle', from whence it is suggested he came.[29] This does not seem to be much of a reward. Constantius had fought to recover Britain from Allectus and had then campaigned against the Picts (all presumably with Crocus' assistance). The South, and the London area, had probably suffered somewhat as a result of the fighting against Allectus (and, it might be noted, his Frankish troops).[30] If Crocus was thought to be reasonably trustworthy, then rewarding him with land and having him settled with some – but not too many – followers near *Londinium* might well have made sense. Not long before, Probus (emperor 276–282 AD) had apparently settled Burgundians and Vandals in Britain, and they seemingly remained loyal to him.[31]

The Alamanni were a hybrid group, not well unified, with several 'kings' at the same time. They are now generally seen as 'the amalgamation, over time, of many distinct bands of raiders from the 'Elbe-Germanic triangle' … *Alamanni* as a generic, and *Alamannia* as the area where these people were to be found, were probably Roman labellings …'.[32] The 'triangle' is in northern Germany and therefore the raiders might well have included individuals from any of the groups in and around that general area. This calls to mind Croydon's much battered early 'Saxon' cemetery with its very mixed burials: cremation and inhumation, with Frankish, Jutish, and Saxon objects and late Roman military gear, and even a very late Roman burial.[33] There are of course other Saxon cemeteries nearby, in particular Mitcham (with Roman artefacts).[34] I have seen but am now unable to track down an intriguing suggestion that the local name Allmannesland in Mitcham (about 100 metres to the east of the Saxon burial ground area) can be derived from Alamanni. Unfortunately this is most improbable, although it can be traced at least as far back as the late 14th century. It is most likely to derive from the Middle English personal name Allman, from the Old French alemaund or 'German'.[35]

There must be a gap of at least 100 years between Constantine's Crocus and even the start of the 'Saxon' cemeteries, but given the fluidity of the later Roman period, the increasing use of Germanic troops and the parlous state of our evidence, some kind of continuing link with friends and relatives inside and outside the Empire across say three generations need not be completely ruled out.[36] Earlier on we can see soldiers at Vindolanda keeping in touch with their homeland overseas.[37] Even in the pre-Roman period, tribal authorities in Britain were able to communicate with Caesar *before* he carried out his armed reconnaissance in 55 BC – which they knew was being planned.[38] In later

Fig. 2: Senex's stamp on the base of a Drag 33 cup from London, now in the British Museum (photograph: Ralph Jackson)

periods recruitment of 'barbarians' could well have involved the use of suitable contacts as well as levies taken from defeated opponents. Thus there could be an argument for a continuing military/'Alamannic' connection in Croydon across the 4th century. To explain the development of the place-name, we could postulate that our early-4th-century Crocus could have had a similarly-named grandson. Indeed, such is the nature of the evidence, that it has been argued in connection with another reference to a Crocus (or Chrocus) that this man was our Crocus' grandfather (in the earlier 3rd century), or a much later man, or even the same one![39] Clearly Crocus of the Alamanni is a very far-fetched explanation for the place-name, requiring far too much speculation, but it does conjure up an interesting model for what might have happened as a result of the increasing use of Germanic 'troops' in later Roman Britain. Some of the leaders in particular are likely to have wanted to take the opportunity to retire to a nice estate in the countryside. Such people may well have acted as a focus for others in due course. A long-standing link of the kind I have postulated would then have helped to make Croydon a logical choice as the centre of the first 'Saxon' settlements south of London, as Hines has argued.[40]

Neither of the suggestions made here can be regarded as conclusive in any way. Nevertheless, if Croydon does derive its place-name from *croh* = crocus as has been generally accepted, then an explanation similar to one of those I have suggested seems to be more or less a requirement. Of the two, the plant option is clearly far more likely. In terms of what is there now, the thought of a valley full of saffron crocuses in bloom is somewhat bitter-sweet, but it still conjures up a wonderful picture. Hopefully one day there will be some archaeological evidence to justify it.[41]

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1. J.E.B. Glover, A. Mawer and F.M. Stenton *The place-names of Surrey* (1934) 47–8. The earliest record (*Crogedene*) seems to be early 9th century. A local name *le Saffron Garden* (also *Safforn* [sic] *Garden*) is recorded as late as the end of the 16th century.

2. M. Gelling *Signposts to the past. Place-names and the history of England* (1978) 81–2.

3. M. Gelling 'Why aren't we speaking Welsh?' *Anglo-Saxon studies in archaeology and history* **6** (1993) 51–6 (p. 51). For the *walh* names see K. Cameron 'The meaning and significance of Old English *walh* in English place-names' *Journal of the English Place-Name Society*, **12** (1979-80), 1–53 (see page 28, together with the appendix by M. Todd: 'Appendix I. The archaeological significance of place-names in *walh*' pages 47–50, nos 3, 6, 23, 26), and J. Wakeford 'Two *walh* names in the fields of Kingston' *Surrey Archaeol Collect* **75** (1984) 251–6. See also D. Bird *Roman Surrey* (2004) 172–4 and the map fig 84. There is a steadily growing body of evidence for Latin borrowings in Old English place-names; see for example K. Briggs 'Clare, Clere and Clères' *J English Place-Name Soc* **41** (2009) 7–25 (esp 15).

4. E. Ekwall *The Concise Dictionary of English Place-Names* (4th ed) (1960) 134.

5. C. Grey-Wilson 'Spring in autumn' *The Garden* [= *J Royal Horticultural Soc*] **135.10** (2010) 692–3.

6. En.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crocus_sativus#cite_note-Hill_272-1, consulted January 2011.

7. A. Dalby *Dangerous tastes. The story of spices* (2000) 139; *op cit* fn 4, 492: note that the first record of the name with Saffron included is given as 1582. Before that it was simply Walden, 'the valley of the Britons'.

8. *Op cit* fn 7, 138–9.

9. Information culled from *op cit* fn 6; see also *op cit* fn 5.

10. www.mayfieldlavender.com, consulted January 2011.

11. R. Jackson 'Cosmetic sets from Late Iron Age and Roman Britain' *Britannia* **16** (1985) 165–192 (p. 171).

12. D.G. Bird 'The London region in the Roman period' in J. Bird, M. Hassall and H. Sheldon (eds) *Interpreting Roman London, papers in memory of Hugh Chapman* Oxbow Monogr **58** (1996) 217–232 (see esp 223 and 227), citing B.M.S. Campbell, J.A. Galloway, D. Keene and M. Murphy *A medieval capital and its grain supply: agrarian production and distribution in the London region c 1300* Hist Geog Res Ser **30** (1993) 11.

13. See discussion in D.G. Bird 'Reflections on the choice of Brockley Hill as a pottery production site' in P. Irving (ed) *An archaeological miscellany: papers in honour of K F Hartley* (= *J Roman Pottery Stud* **12** (2005) 22–5. We now have very convincing evidence for the supply of tiles to London from the production site at Ashtead (Ian Betts, *pers. comm.*).

14. See for example A. Hyland *Equus. The horse in the Roman world* (1990) 258, 262, and *op cit* fn 12, 226.

15. *Op cit* fn 12, 225, and *op cit* fn 3, 88–9.

16. *Op cit* fn 7, 138 for the theatre spray; see also Pliny, *Natural History* 21, 17, and for other information he had gathered about saffron crocus.

17. The cream was mostly sheep or goat fat with zinc oxide, probably intended to be used as a foundation cream intended to whiten the face: R.P. Evershed, R. Berstan, F. Grew, M.S. Copley, A.J.H. Charmant, E. Barham, H.R. Mottram and G. Brown 'Formulation of a Roman cosmetic' *Nature* **432** (2004) 35–6.

18. B. Flower and E. Rosenbaum *The Roman cookery book. A critical translation of* The art of cooking *by Apicius for use in the study and the kitchen* (1958) 44–5 (= Apicius 1.1.2) and 54–5 (= 1.13); Sally Grainger *Cooking Apicius. Roman recipes for today* (2006) apparently does not refer to saffron at all.

19. J.I. Miller *The spice trade of the Roman Empire 29 BC to AD 641* (1969) 63.

20. R. Jackson 'Senex, samian and saffron – solution in sight?' in D. Bird (ed) *Dating and interpreting the past in the western Roman Empire: essays in honour of Brenda Dickinson* (forthcoming 2012: Oxbow).

21. R. Jackson 'A new collyrium-stamp from Staines and some thoughts on eye medicine in Roman London and Britannia' in J. Bird, M. Hassall and H. Sheldon (eds) *Interpreting Roman London, papers in memory of Hugh Chapman*, Oxbow Monogr **58** (1996) 177–87 (see 185–6); Jackson *op cit* fn 20.

22. *Op cit* fn 20; R. Jackson 'A new collyrium stamp from Cambridge and a corrected reading of the stamp from Caistor-by-Norwich' *Britannia* **21** (1990) 275–83 (see 276–7).

23. *Op cit* fn 20, citing R. Boyer 'Découverte de la tombe d'un oculiste à Lyon (fin du II siècle après J.-C.). Instruments et coffret avec collyres' *Gallia* **47** (1990) 215–49 (pp. 239–40).

24. *Op cit* fn 21, 178.

25. *Op cit* fn 19, 6–8; see also H. Nielsen *Ancient ophthalmological agents* (Odense University Press 1974) 40, quoting Dioscorides to illustrate that it also had wider medical applications (*De materia medica* 4, 53).

26. For a discussion of the evidence for doctors in Roman London see R. Jackson 'Imagining health-care in Roman London' in J. Clark, J. Cotton, J. Hall, R. Sherris and H. Swain (eds) *Londinium and beyond. Essays on Roman London and its hinterland for Harvey Sheldon*, Council for British Archaeology Research Report **158** (2008) 194–200.

27. *Op cit* fn 20; *Radio Times* 12–18 February 2011, 97).

28. J. Taylor 'Crop processing and burnt grain in Roman Croydon' *Surrey Archaeol Collect* **96** (2011) 191–214.

29. J.F. Drinkwater 'Crocus, 'king of the Alamanni'' *Britannia* **40** (2009) 185–95 (see 192–4).

30. P. Salway *Roman Britain* (1981) 306–11.

31. *Ibid.,* 282.

32. *Op cit* fn 29, 187–8; I. Wood 'The Crocus conundrum' in E. Hartley, J. Hawkes, M. Henig and F. Mee (eds) *Constantine the Great. York's Roman Emperor* (2006) 77–84 (see 81).

33. J.I. McKinley 'The early Saxon cemetery at Park Lane, Croydon' *Surrey Archaeol Collect* **90** (2003) 1–116.

34. H.F. Bidder and J. Morris 'The Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Mitcham' *Surrey Archaeol Collect* **56** (1959) 51–131.

35. E. Montague *The Cranmers, the canons and Park Place* Merton Historical Society, Mitcham Histories **11** (2011) 75, 112 and 212–4, although he prefers the explanation that it is literally 'all men's land', having originally been part of the common land; P.H. Reaney *The origin of English surnames* (1967) 73: Al(l)mand, Almond, Allamand, and Alliment are all derived from Old French alemaund, 'German'; note that the Mitcham name became Almonds in due course.

36. A troop of Alamanni under Fraomar were in Britain in AD 372: Wood *op cit* fn 32, 81.

37. For example A. Birley *Garrison life at Vindolanda: a band of brothers* (2002) 100 (probably a link with the Batavian area).

38. *De Bello Gallico* iv.21.25.

39. Wood *op cit* fn 32, 77.

40. J. Hines '*Suþre-ge* – the foundations of Surrey' in J. Cotton, G. Crocker and A. Graham (eds) *Aspects of archaeology and history in Surrey: towards a research framework for the county* (2004) 91–102.

41. Clearly this note relies a great deal on the scholarship of Ralph Jackson, and he has added to my debt by kindly commenting on the text, allowing me to use one of his photographs and providing several additional references. I am also grateful for assistance from Joanna Bird, who knows much more about spices than I do.