

THE IRIS BEDS AT PRIORY GARDENS, ORPINGTON

The iris beds at Priory Gardens came about as follows.

I was approached by the Orpington Historical Society, located in the Priory building adjacent to Priory Gardens in 1995, as they wanted information about past businesses in Orpington to add to their records and were interested in Orpington Iris Nursery, located in Crofton, owned and run by Mrs Olive Murrell. The discussion led to establishing whether there was any material still available and the whereabouts of any plants that were still grown.

It happened that I knew Terry Rayfield who lived in Orpington who grew a number of irises and that his mother bought all her irises from Orpington Iris Nursery and shared them with Terry. As his elderly mother had recently moved from her house in Orpington to live with her son, Terry agreed that we, as the Kent Group of the British Iris Society, could clear all the irises from his mother's garden. This prompted me to suggest to the Historical Society that we could provide a 'living memorial' to the Orpington Iris Nursery in the form of establishing an iris bed in the Priory Gardens close to the Priory building. The idea was gladly accepted, so Alice and I spent a whole weekend digging up Terry's mother irises. We were unable to name most of these bearded irises which dated back to the 1940's and 1950's. However, the collection included Olive Murrell's 1940 Dykes Medal winner 'White City'. (The Dykes Medal is the highest award an iris can achieve).

There were about fifty varieties of tall bearded irises planted in a rectangular bed, and help from the Kent Group members gave support by providing more modern irises that were planted in an adjacent bed running parallel to the vintage iris bed. The Mayor of Bromley Borough officially opened the Orpington Iris Nursery bed in 1996.

I suggested at the time that as the irises should be lifted and replanted every 3 or 4 years the yield of new offsets could provide all the public gardens in the Bromley Borough, but I do not think this registered with anyone.

My daughter-in-law, Jill Baughen, works as an Employment Consultant and Job Coach for Jobmatch, a supported employment agency and part of Bromley Mencap. One of Jill's candidates works at the Priory Gardens and when she visited him recently she mentioned that she had some knowledge of the iris beds, via me, the current maintenance company expressed an interest into their background. Jill has passed this information on and who knows – maybe it will encourage their restoration.

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