

BRITISH IRIS SOCIETY



'Orinoco Flow' AGM, Cy Bartlett – Border Bearded
Dykes Medal 1994

West & Midlands Iris Group A Retrospective: 1974–2007



'Dinky Dinah', Pat Foster – Arilbred
Registered 1987

A RETROSPECTIVE

Thirty-three Years of The West & Midlands Iris Group

The idea for this publication first came from Peter Hewitt, the then Newsletter Editor, to celebrate twenty-five years of the Group. Unfortunately Peter died before he could continue. Nothing more was done until last year when I discovered his original notes and decided that his proposal should be completed and published in his memory, having first consulted Jennifer his wife and received her approval.

Peter's original list of articles, which he considered of sufficient merit and interest to be reproduced, has been added to by Jennifer to bring it up to date, some twenty-four articles in total.

All originally appeared in a Group Newsletter, as indicated, giving the Newsletter number and date of publication.

I hope that you find them interesting and that they give you an insight into the activities of the Group since its formation in 1974.

My thanks to Jennifer, for reading through seventy-odd Newsletters in order to make her choice and to Pam, my wife, for retyping them in a suitable format for reproduction.

Glyn Roberts
Newsletter Editor



The West & Midlands Iris Group

33 YEARS AND COUNTING

Seven people met on October 5th 1974 in Birmingham and, with promises of support from eleven more, agreed to form the West Midlands Group of the BIS. We would try to hold several meetings a year, visiting gardens, having talks and a plant sale. John Taylor was our first chairman and Jennifer Hewitt secretary/treasurer and producer of the newsletter, the first of which went out a month later.

In 1975 we visited John and Mary Taylor, memorable for Mary's tea as well as the irises, and Doris Hansford, and paid 10p per plant at the sale – what extravagance! Subscriptions were 50p per person p.a. with 15p contributions towards tea costs at each meeting, as hosts provided food and drink, not the 'bring and share' of today. In 1976 the programme expanded to five meetings and we considered taking a stand at the Three Counties Show in Malvern but the mid-June date clashed with the BIS Summer Show. That year was memorable for a prolonged drought but two of the meetings were wet. The AGM was told there was a satisfactory amount in the funds, £13.27.

We produced a publicity leaflet for display at BIS shows in 1978, the first group to do this.

Our next 'first' came in 1980 when at Margaret and Godfrey Owen's invitation we held the 'Acton Pigo' (the name of their home) Open Day which is described on a later page. Having raised over £200 we gave £150 to the BIS, but the time had come to have our first proper bank account and treasurer, Peter Hewitt. Two more such events were held in 1981 and 1984; sadly, between these dates, Godfrey Owen was ill and then died. In 1984 we made a profit of over £700, which is still amazing, but it represented a lot of hard work by many members.

1982 saw our first Annual Show – but we were caught out by an early season so it was 'The Show that Wasn't'. Although the weather has often affected our shows since, none has ever been as poor as that and some have been very good indeed and helped to show irises to the public and to sell them too, and have gained us new members. For several years we had a happy relationship with Treasures of Tenbury and Burford House gardens who gave us excellent facilities, as did David Austin Roses with Claire Austin's generous help when Treasures was no longer available. Another venue has been Cleeton St Mary Village Hall, quite a trek for many, but from the start members' willingness to travel has been a factor in the group's success.

We missed the first Malvern Spring Gardening Show but from 1987 have had a stand every year, once the organisers realised that the costs proposed were beyond the resources of most specialist societies. Our varied experiences could make a history in themselves but we have twice won second prize and

had several Highly Commended displays. Also on two occasions the BIS Late Spring Show has been held at Malvern as part of the main show, and since 1990 classes for irises have been part of the schedule for the amateur gardening competition.

We have also hosted two BIS AGM days when we have welcomed BIS members from far and near to programmes of talks and activities as well as the AGMs. And in 1982 we staged a display at the National Garden Festival at Ebbw Vale over one weekend. This was instigated and largely organised by Harry and Maureen Foster who also arranged for large iris plantings which some members helped to put in. The year before that, 1981, after much discussion, we changed the group name to West and Midlands as it was felt this better indicated our geographical spread, though it had always been much wider than the WM region.

Another step forward, in 1994, saw the newsletter being printed instead of duplicated and appearing in its current format. Our ever-helpful printer Ernest Buckley, and his wife Ruth who checks the proofs, deserve the warmest thanks for coping with our requirements and vagaries for so long. They have also produced several versions of the publicity leaflet and what you are now reading is also their work.

We looked ahead in 1998 and foresaw that the BIS Executive Committee would probably ask us to organise the national convention, held every five years, in 2002, so made an offer instead, in good time to make plans – and we needed all of it. Yet again we were innovative and invited hybridisers to send 'guest' irises as is done at iris conventions in other countries. To do themselves justice irises need to be planted three years ahead of the event and we were fortunate in having host gardens at Claire Austin's and Kelway's nurseries and Cy Bartlett's garden, and a wonderful response from hybridisers in this and other countries, notably the USA. No such event, or the planning for it, ever runs completely smoothly but we coped and could tell ourselves (and were told) it was a success. We enjoyed it too!

Life has been a little quieter since then but no less active. In 1999 we had celebrated 25 years of existence with a lunch with several of the founding members among those present. For a group with very small beginnings we can feel proud of what we have achieved. It wouldn't have been possible without the support and contributions of many members who have not been mentioned but who are deeply appreciated. Thank you, and do stay with us – the W&MIG has more history to make.

Jennifer Hewitt

PROFILES

Cy Bartlett

One of our outstanding iris growers with three Dykes Medals to his credit together with numerous awards in the UK, USA and Florence. President of the BIS 1997 to 2000 Cy is currently joint chairman/vice chairman of the Joint Iris Committee in addition to being a judge at the annual iris competitions in Florence, Italy.

He pursued a career in horticultural education ending as Vice-Principal of Cannington College of Horticulture in Somerset. While there he organised gatherings of BIS members (now called conventions) on four occasions in 1979, 1982, 1987 and 1992. Cy's latest Dykes Medal is for 'Alexia' portrayed inside the back cover.

Ray Bomford

Ray Bomford and his father Ernest came to the very first meeting when the Group was started, both being keen gardeners with wide interests. They had been farmers until most of their land was bought for the expansion of Redditch. Ray's iris preferences are species and beardless (he is currently chairman of the Group for Beardless Irises) but range far beyond that, and he has travelled widely on plant expeditions.

Max Davis

Max Davis was a particular friend of Bob Nichol and both were founder members. Having moved around quite a lot due to the demands of a business career, Max's iris growing and his membership of the Group were rather sporadic. He was BIS Hon Treasurer in 1978.

Roy Elliott

Famous as a specialist grower of alpines, Roy Elliott's large garden in Handsworth contained rare and difficult plants but he appreciated good plants of all kinds and had a bed of bearded irises interplanted with tulips and gladioli. He was editor of the Alpine Garden Society's *Bulletin* for many years and served on RHS committees. He was awarded the Victoria Medal of Honour for his services to horticulture.

Pat Foster

Pat Foster, Ph.D., is a polymath. By profession an engineer who has worked on space programmes among other projects, she now runs her own consultancy. This doesn't leave much time for a wide range of interests including music, weaving and other crafts, and gardening with many kinds of plants as well as irises, particularly arils and arilbreds. She was a founder member of the Group.

Doris Hansford-Morris

Doris Hansford accompanied her first husband, a professor of oriental studies,

to Japan, and became very knowledgeable about their arts including flower arranging. She bred a number of bearded irises, then turned her attention to investigating so-called *Iris bulleyana*. In the 1960s plants under that name were almost certainly hybrids and the true species emerged from China 20 years later. But Doris raised some very pretty seedlings and helped to publicise the Sino-Siberians. Widowed soon after she moved to Shrewsbury, she was a founder member of the Group, and later married Leonard Morris – therefore the Hansford-Morris.

Jennifer Hewitt

Founder member of the W&MIG and original secretary/treasurer in 1974. Driving force behind the original Group concept Jennifer has held just about every position within it, which together with her service to BIS presents a formidable dedication to the promotion and cultivation of irises. Currently BIS Registrar, a post she has held for many years, she was recently made a Vice President and became the recipient of the Foster Memorial Plaque for contribution to the genus.

Peter Hewitt

Peter, husband of Jennifer, although not an iris grower, dedicated many years to the efficient organisation of the Group in his capacity as Newsletter Editor, Malvern organiser and Group Treasurer but mainly in his support for Jennifer. This booklet is dedicated to him and his work with the Group is best summed up in his own words in his article 'It might never have happened' (p. 27).

Ken Macleod

A pioneer of iris cultivation in pots, and at one time breeder of prize Suffolk sheep, Ken, together with Beryl, has exhibited at numerous shows both at local and BIS levels, winning a number of awards for his TBs. Chemists by profession they turned to farming on retirement and now live at Honeyhole Farm in south Shropshire, elevated above Bucknell and surrounded by beautiful countryside. Ken is currently the Group Chairman and is also a member of J.I.C.

Glyn Roberts

An engineer who spent much of his working life with what is now Severn Trent Water, Glyn became aware of irises when he and Pam moved to Shrewsbury and had Doris Hansford-Morris as their next-door neighbour. Some time later, having joined the Group, he became Show Secretary and also Newsletter Editor.

John Taylor

One of the greats of the iris world, John Taylor's hybridising centred on bearded, especially the shorter ones, but he was knowledgeable about beardless too, and a highly respected judge. He won Dykes Medals for 'Cotsgold' (IB, 1978) and 'Bibury' (SDB, 1982) and many awards in the UK and overseas. A past President

of the BIS, he was the Group's founding chairman, having moved from Kent to Moreton-in-Marsh on retiring from a career in banking.

John Trinder

Together with Jennifer another founder member of the W&MIG. A horticulturalist by profession with an interest in growing irises from an early age, John has devoted most of his life to breeding irises and has them registered in catalogues from as far back as the '70s. He gave particular attention to the development of a strain of blue amoenas. He has held numerous offices within the BIS and other associated organisations and was the recipient of the Pilkington Award in 1974. John is currently BIS Slide Librarian.

Ray Wilson

A metallurgist who had worked for the Ministry of Defence, Ray Wilson grew all kinds of irises in his Lancashire hillside garden and greenhouse. Grass paths were of minimum width and beds were filled with many other perennials too, thanks to his membership of the Hardy Plant Society. As well as travelling, with Joyce, a long way to attend our meetings, Ray ran the BIS seed distribution from 1986 to 1993.

Suz Winspear

One of the Group's past Secretaries and Chairman, Suz is also a BIS judge and held the office of BIS historian/archivist from 1989 to 1998. At one time interested in hybridizing she has specialised, and is an authority on, historical irises. Outside of irises Suz works for the Worcester museums and is the author of an excellent book on Worcester's Lost Theatre – *The Story of the Worcester Theatre Royal*.

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VISITING THE WESTERN AMERICAN STATES – 1976

The English contingent to the Alpine Garden Conference held at Seattle last July (1976) flew off to Vancouver at 11.0 a.m. on Sunday morning. Flying westwards we gained nine hours and it was still only mid-afternoon when we landed. We were then conveyed south to Seattle and when I fell into bed at 9.30 – the equivalent of 6.0 in the morning – I began fully to understand the term ‘jet lag’!

We drove down into the ‘Green State’ of Washington close to Puget Sound through a flat fertile area where most farm crops grew. The lush green pastures were a most welcome sight in contrast to the scorched landscape we had left at home.

Beyond the Sound the Olympic Mountains just showed and on our left the Cascade Mountains were a mere 30–40 miles away. Both mountains were obviously heavily forested with conifers. The first of many such higher snow-covered peaks in the Cascades – Mt. Baker – was pointed out to us as having in recent years emitted smoke and steam, a reminder that the Pacific N.W. is a potential earthquake zone.

The week before the Conference I spent exploring the Olympic peninsula west of Seattle. On the western slopes the rainfall exceeds 200 inches – a lot of it is snow, of course. Seattle incidentally lies in the rain shadow and some areas adjacent have as little as 20 inches in comparison; and we saw a lot of paths and gardens being irrigated with sprinklers.

From this area David Douglas introduced to Europe the Douglas Fir, Sitka Spruce and *Thuja plicata*, the western red cedar our greenhouses are made of. The forests in such a climate grow in full splendour. Most of the original stands of timber have been felled by now and are replaced by second and even third growths as conditions for rapid growth are so congenial. However in the many National Forests some massive trees are preserved and judging from them and some of the preserved stumps, often 10–12 feet across, the original forests must truly have been most majestic and awe-inspiring. Washington is the home of the Boeing aircraft industry, a vast fruit growing area and the famous Palouse wheat belt but the lumber industry dwarfs them all in importance. The conifers are the glory of the Pacific N.W. but they are now big business. The term ‘Skid Row’ originated in Seattle from the ramps used to load the timber ships.

Trees are genetically selected and bred for swiftness of growth; raised in vast nurseries and felled and replanted systematically; and everything is utilised.

The Forestry Services have numerous camp sites, the most accessible and popular have hot water showers and electric power. This is supplied for the motorised caravans or campers as they call them there. At the weekends the roads are filled with families making their way into the wilderness carefully

taking their modern facilities with them, not forgetting the almost statutory ice box! Taking a tent I was very much in the minority but I am very glad I did as it was so much cheaper and adaptable. To save the precious dollars I shopped at the huge country supermarkets which kept open all hours including Sunday.

At the north of the Olympic Range I visited Hurricane Ridge, an area famous for its alpine plants. Although mid-July, the snow was still feet deep in places but melting fast and 'spring' flowers like *Erythronium grandiflorum*, the yellow Glacier Lily, were flowering in huge drifts as soon as exposed. *Douglasia montana*, a relative of the primulas, and especially dwarf phloxes were also in profusion.

One of my best memories here is of an internationally known plantsman present for the Conference 'lifting' a plant. Being in the National Park this was absolutely forbidden! He was terror-stricken when he thought the rangers had seen him. I will hardly have him in our garden, but I understand his desire when there were so many hundreds of fine plants.

The highlight of the trip came following the Conference. Mr and Mrs Broadhurst, Secretary of the Birmingham A.G.S. Group, invited me to join their trip to part of the Rocky Mountains. Two American alpine experts accompanied us. We were to be taken to selected stations where celebrated alpinists grow. We drove due east from Seattle in a 'camper' passing through the Cascades towards the mighty Columbia River. This rises in British Columbia and is added to by snow melting from the Cascades. Here we were in rain shadow and right to the waters' edge was sage bush country typical of Texas 1000 miles south. However along the river valleys of the Columbia and its tributaries has grown up an amazing fruit industry all based on artificial irrigation. Once watered by open ditches all are being watered now from most sophisticated overhead systems. Later we saw all types of crops - barley, potatoes and fodder crops watered by huge 8' high wheeled systems at least ¼ mile long. Without these truly amazing contraptions the land was barren; obviously the timber forests on the west-facing slopes get more than their fair share of the rainfall. In addition to irrigating the orchards the Columbia has a whole system of dams and water turbines and Washington has the cheapest hydro-electricity in the U.S.A.

As we motored eastwards we entered the world-famous Palouse area. This is ancient windblown loess, rich topsoil several feet deep, growing wheat by the square mile. Passing through Spokane, notable as Bing Crosby's birthplace, we came to the narrow state of Idaho, famed for its production of potatoes.

I must confess that along this route to the Rockies I was quite often fast asleep. Although I had been away for a fortnight I am sure that the 'jet lag' was still taking its effect.

We eventually came to Montana and then Wyoming, staying in the National Park camp sites at night. Although we did not get as far south as the cowboy cities of Cheyenne and Laramie we did hit the towns of Buffalo and Cody of Buffalo Bill fame, passing en route through wild and desolate country seen on

every Western film, often driving along rough graded zig-zag mountain roads and leaving clouds of dust behind us. I remember we did see two mounted cowboys but the effect was spoiled as one was wearing spectacles – somehow not the true John Wayne touch.

Aiming for the Beartooth and Big Horn Mountains, we crossed the huge Yellowstone National Park; we did not stop at night as the place was downright 'trippy'.

At Powell, east of the Range, we saw soya bean silos; this surprised me as the climate must be quite severe. Rich crops of alfalfa, vegetables and cereals were growing in ½ mile wide strips by open ditch irrigation yet surrounded by drought-ridden sage-bush and scrub grazing. A nice touch was supplied here by a profusion of small oil derricks. Quite a nice proposition to have in your backyard!

Our final destination, Sheep Mountain and Medicine Wheel (an ancient Indian artifact), was really isolated some 40 miles or so from the nearest supermarket. The local shepherds who must be near hermits originate from the Basque Mountains, we were told (probably their grandparents).

In this area we were shown *Kelseya uniflora*, a great rarity and probably difficult to grow but to me seems of no obvious garden merit. The snow had melted on Sheep Mountain and most of the plants such as clintonias and the American forget-me-not *Eritrichium lowardis* were now quite dessicated. An exception was the plant we had really come to find, the legendary *Aquilegia jonesii*. The flowers were unfortunately over but a few had seed pods. The plants must be deep rooting for the foliage was still quite green. So quickly and urgently do these alpinines grow and form seed that the pods I collected ripened in transit. I now have 20 seedlings at home, needless to say a major miracle of cultivation will be needed for them to grow on, let alone for them to flower.

Other flowers we saw were *Allium cernuum*, the various coloured castillejas or Indian Paint Brushes and in one spot *Calochortus nutallii*, the species nearest to a tulip in the American flora. Blue lupins and mertensias grew everywhere in fertile spots. Just before returning home I visited a few nurseries. Unfortunately I had no time to go south to Oregon where the world's finest irises and lilies seem to originate nowadays.

At the conference a New York alpinist had told me that if he wanted an American plant it was easier to contact the British nurseries as so few American growers let alone gardeners knew what was in his area.

Washington has a much more equable climate of course and many keen collectors are at work collecting and then growing on their native ferns, lilies, penstemons, phloxes, lewisias and last but not least irises. These are all much more appreciated and grown than hitherto.

The only iris nursery I visited was that of Mrs Jean Witt. She contributed an article in the 1972 Year Book on Cal-Sibe hybrids, her speciality. I was taught a lesson in the fact that she took a shovel if you please and split a collected

form of *I. innominata* for me and assured me it would grow, and it has. I had always believed that the Pacific Coast species must be transplanted from pots. Mrs Witt treats them as any other iris and splits them as soon as new roots form after flowering.

Thus I have *Aquilegia jonesii* and a good form of *I. innominata* to remind me of a magnificent Wild West holiday.

Raymond Bomford

2. Newsletter No. 7

November 1977

THE GARDEN AT 25 WEYMOOR ROAD, HARBORNE, BIRMINGHAM

Having been unable to complete a report on Bob Nichol's garden last year I make amends by making one this year. He has a typical small suburban garden in west Birmingham, which is the rainy side. I suppose the back garden is about 25 feet x 60 feet and the front garden 15 feet square. The ground rises from the front (south) to the back (north) by about 1 in 10.

The previous owner had landscaped the back garden by laying a lawn on the level to halfway up the garden and terracing the ground from the end of the lawn to the back boundary. From the house one sees at the end of the lawn a small area of rockery with such plants as aubrieta and behind this two rows of roses with some daffodils here and there. Above the roses towers a bed of irises with a further iris bed above them beyond a path, and finally against the boundary fence lilacs, rhododendrons and roses.

Since he became hooked on tall bearded irises Bob has constructed a raised iris bed out of part of the lawn beside the path running down the garden and one on the other side of the path. Tall bearded irises are planted in the front half of the bed with lupins, daisies and chrysanthemums at the rear.

The front garden has a lawn between the concrete run-in to the garage and a bed of irises running from the front boundary to the house. Behind the lawn is a line of large hydrangeas. When I first knew the garden Bob said he would never dig up the front lawn but to-day this lawn is about half its previous size as a rectangular iris bed now sits in the middle.

I suppose it is about time I got down to Bob's irises. Bob is strictly a TB man, although a handful of gift medians can be seen in the garden, and he grows about 80 tall bearded, the large majority being recent introductions. At the back of the garden are large clumps of familiar older varieties such as 'Tuxedo', 'Ultrapoise', 'Sterling Silver', 'One Desire', 'Night Song', 'Fluted Haven' and 'Dancer's Veil'. Other varieties familiar from the London Shows to be seen are

'Marshlander', 'Winter Olympics', 'Babbling Brook' and 'Raspberry Ripples'. Newer ones which readers should know about are 'Mary Frances', a very smooth blue orchid, lightly ruffled and well branched; 'Dialogue', a many budded well branched Cook amoena of good contrast and depth of colour; 'Beaux Arts', a very lacy light red-violet; 'Contempo', a very good dark red purple; 'Mr. Lincoln', a large mid-brown with a lot of yellow infusion in the falls and of modern shape and 'Carolina Gold' the cleanest mid-yellow I know, very vigorous.

Max Davis

3. Newsletter No. 8

April 1978

SETTING THE STANDARDS FOR ARRANGING IRISES

The standard of flower arrangement over the years has so greatly improved that the article I wrote on the subject for the B.I.S. Year Book in 1968 seems less necessary now, ten years later, when there are so many Flower Clubs with this in mind, to consider it.

However the general quality of all the arrangements in the specialists' shows such as our own is still too often well below the standards of the N.A.F.A.S. (National Association of Flower Arrangement Societies), and a few extracts from the article written so long ago may be useful to those who do not belong to it or actively support it, and who only show their skill at the Iris Show.

Irises do need special care in their arrangement, and balance of design should be of great importance both with their flowers and the foliage accompanying them, to obtain the most pleasing results. One necessary care is to find buds for the top and sides of the design that will not open before the Show judges see it. This is often difficult because the buds of irises unfurl very quickly, and many a good design has been spoiled by having all the flowers out together, giving a top-heavy look. The largest flowers should be placed at the base and some should be recessed to give depth to the whole plan. Often, too, an arrangement is marred by flatness of the material, and care should be used so that all flowers can be seen to the greatest advantage and at different levels.

My personal view is that foliage other than that of the iris, which is always so complementary to the flowers, should be strictly limited to filling the small gaps to hide stems at the base. They should be small and spiky, like rosemary and lavender. Ornamental grey foliage is often rather too decorative and takes the eye away from the beauty of our favourite flowers.

The Japanese have used irises in their restrained and devotional way for hundreds of years, and the care taken has been inbred by them in their use of flowers and other materials for their strictly religious observances.

The smaller types of irises, the dwarf bearded, the Siberians and the Californians make the best subjects for places taking space of about two feet wide, but the TBs are delightful in pedestals or the larger areas.

Those who grow *I. lortetii* and other oncocyclus types think that these Eastern beauties are the most elegant of all. They look as out of place in the green show vases as the Crown Jewels would look in a laundry basket. They need a small dark stone or alabaster urn container with a velvet base, or if one is so fortunate as to possess it, an onyx inkwell for which there is no further use.

Just one flower alone with two attendant leaves, placed where the ink once was, and stood on the desk, would be an incentive to the most sluggish to write good prose. Alas, I do not have an onyx inkwell!

Doris Hansford

4. Newsletter No. 9

December 1978

VISIT TO JOHN & MARY TAYLOR

John and Mary nobly stepped in when Ron Bailey had a disaster among his irises and though our sympathy went to him, with hopes that all will be well next year, as usual we had a very enjoyable afternoon. We have been twice to see John's medians but this time it was the tall bearded which were on show. For once the Group did not bring rain with them to Moreton but instead a vicious north-east wind was sweeping across the garden and playing havoc with the irises: however, there was lot of bloom to see and discuss and the wind-resistance of different varieties could be seen. Those which are mentioned are among the ones which were standing up well to the wind but many others were doing as well. There is a tremendous amount to see and it is impossible to note everything, but if you have not yet been to Moreton at TB time may I urge you to go. John and Mary are always pleased to see iris visitors but please telephone beforehand.

The first iris I noted, for its striking colours of mustard-yellow standards and purple falls with a brown edge (a combination with no appeal for me, I'm afraid!) was 'Loud Music' which has won high praise in America. Other American varieties which are more to my taste were 'Roman Candle' (orange standards, falls a soft shade of yellow, tangerine beard) and two very blue 'blues': 'H.F.R. Miller', a light medium blue with a very big flower, and 'Sapphire Hills' which was darker. 'Foggy Dew' I liked for the patterning on the falls and among a number of red-bearded whites I noted 'Cindy O' which has a yellow edge to the petals, and 'Old Flame' – both very frilly but standing the wind well.

Two more named varieties noted were John's own 'Langley', a better spike than that which won the Romney Towndrow Trophy a few days before, and

Leonard Brummitt's 'Aureolin Blaze', a brilliant yellow flower with great substance.

Of the seedlings, a black (EB/24) of Brian Dodsworth's had better branching than is often seen in this colour and a fine flower. I mention this first to get it out of the way, so to speak! Among John's own I liked V183, a ruffled primrose self with a slight green influence – a very delicate shade. Two with unusual colouring were V115 which was a variegata where the falls were streaky red with yellow edge and reverse, and N78/1/K with pale peach standards and white falls, yellow edges to all the petals and a tangerine beard. S100/2K was rather like 'Marshlander' (a favourite of mine) but with browner standards and the falls were reddish-brown with an edging of the standard colour. M127/1 had been selected for trial at Wisley – a red-violet, or soft magenta, plicata.

Some of the most exciting seedlings were in a bed behind a trellis – reds. Ruby, garnet, claret – rich, glowing, really red reds, nothing harsh or strident but to my mind a great advance on previous reds; colours which could only enhance any iris bed. It has to be said (and John was the first to say it) that there is scope for a lot of improvement in form, bud count, and branching but I hope John will be able to achieve these without losing that wonderful colour.

Lastly I must mention clumps of the Brummitt Siberians giving a good show, and an interesting seedling grown from American seed gathered from tetraploid varieties. The first of the batch to bloom, it lacked branching (but may improve on this in the future) but had a solid deep blue colour with paler edges to standards and style arms and a narrow white rim to the falls, and was a good shape.

When we at last tore ourselves away from the irises Mary gave us a delicious tea (the food alone would be worth a visit!) and we heard about their visit to the French Iris Convention at Orleans and iris nurseries in that area. Our thanks to you both for giving us, as always, a thoroughly interesting and enjoyable afternoon.

Jennifer Hewitt

5. Newsletter No. 10.

April 1979

ONCOS AND ALL THAT

When we lived in Aberdeen, we grew Aril irises, that is oncocyclus and regeliae. The first were grown in cold frames and the second type in a raised bed on a south-facing wall. They all thrived exceedingly. On several occasions we had five *Iris gatesii* flowers towering out of the frame and so many hoogiana varieties that we cut them for flower-arranging friends. The damp of Worcestershire did not suit them and we have turned (declined?) to growing

arilbreds which are pure arils crossed between themselves or with TBs. We find those which are half or more aril are best in a frame while the others may safely be planted out with the TBs.

I follow the advice given by Ken Bastow in the Iris Yearbooks for 1967 and 1968. A brick support wall, two foot high, is built for the frame. The enclosure is given a layer, 6 to 8 inches deep, of drainage material, with a two-inch thick bed of bracken on top. This is finished with compost mixed with 30 to 50 percent grit. The irises, when planted, are surrounded with a half-inch layer of grit, which warms up in the sunshine and dries off any surplus moisture on the rhizomes. The bracken is the only Foster addition to the Bastow recipe and could be omitted if you had drainage material smaller than the half-bricks we had to use. The frame is closed to keep out rain from July to February but the plants are watered thoroughly in October. Watch for ventilation and for greenfly all the year round. I use Bastow's recipe for a feed on all the arilbreds we have.

I have acquired irises from many sources. If you want arils with little or no TB blood, the Aril Society International hold a postal plant sale every year which is a great joy, especially since they divide out all the leftovers and one is likely to find one or two extras in the parcel! On returning from a business trip from Munich late at night, I was once greeted with 'There's a thing in the frame and it's purple and white and it's got red and orange bits and it's smashing!' I was escorted to view it by torchlight. It was an extra – 'Desert Dove' which is a vigorous regelia-onco cross containing no TB blood. Various American nurseries such as Doris Foster's (no relative unfortunately) and Melrose Gardens offer a good variety suitable for the garden though this is an expensive way of acquiring them. In the UK, only a few of the older poorer varieties are available, such as 'Lady Mohr', 'Real Gold' etc. Though these plants are good doers and produce a lot of flowers, the flowers are top-heavy and staking is essential. 'Elmohr' has a tidier flower and sturdier stems though the dark maroon colour is too sombre for many people. It looks like a highchurchman. 'Real Gold' is an excellent parent and I have rows of little plants, all future prize-winners! Orpingtons offer some of the better pure regelia crosses, 'Thor', 'Theseus', 'Elvira', at a price. I have not found these long-lived but they are beautiful. Humphreys also offers arils and arilbreds (only a few) – I think those may be imported from the States.

There is little work in this country on breeding aril irises. The only person I know who is actively engaged in a programme lives in Edinburgh (I told you the North was better). I am trying myself!

To me the major interest is the colouring. The beards are often bi-tone. 'Elmohr' has a white beard with each 'bristle' tipped with black. Almost all are veined or speckled on both the falls and the standards. From a distance, they shimmer like watered silk. *Iris gatesii* is the best example I know. It could be called wealthy widow's weeds – a stately dark grey from a distance. Close to, it is covered with intricate stitching. This now being beyond me, I still favour the

dark tones in arilbreds, browns, tans and beiges. The problem is the shape. *Iris gatesii* is almost globular but many older arilbreds are quite frankly floppy and the flowers gap at the top. The newer Americans, notably 'Stars Over Chicago', 'Genetic Leader' and its siblings and the Desert Series have as good a shape and carriage as many modern TBs but they only have, and that if you're lucky, two flowers to a stem. New programmes of breeding in the States are aimed at producing arilbreds which correspond to IBs and smaller. I gather they do well and have just acquired some.

For those who are interested, I do have copies of the ASI Yearbooks and bulletins. By the next Plant Sale, I and the irises may have recovered from our recent move and parts of the irises mentioned above may be available

Pat Foster

6. Newsletter No. 11

November 1979

THE DAY OF THE IRIS SHOW

It is curious how plants can rise to an occasion, and fail to rise to another. Many a long year ago I planted in my bulb house a few corms from some expedition or other of *Gynandris (Iris) sisyrinchium*, and promptly forgot them. When one refers airily to one's bulb house, it conjures up a picture of rows of carefully-labelled pots: not in my case! Mine consists of raised beds, about 30cm deep, convenient to eye level and filled with a glorious collection of heaven-knows-what bulbs accumulated over 20 years and not a label in sight. This is how I like it; all through the winter and spring I am kept in a state of anticipation and surprise, awaiting the next appearance of a forgotten treasure. So it was with this little iris, which few people have seen in cultivation because of its shy-flowering habit and need for intense baking, coupled with the fact that its flowers are very fleeting. A local group of the British Iris Society were due to visit my garden that afternoon – the first time I have ever been so honoured. I visited the bulb house hoping to find something suitable in flower, and to my surprise found the little *gynandris*: it must have been there for ten years without a flower, and with a superb sense of timing it had produced three flowers. Two days later the 'show' was over. The iridophiles were suitably awed and I basked in reflected glory. That was a few years back – and the plant has never reappeared. Perhaps one should invite the Iris Society again – theirs is powerful magic!

Roy Elliott.

(Reprinted, with permission, from the *Bulletin* of the Alpine Garden Society)

VARIETAL COMMENTS

SDB: 'Rain Dance' – A new one from Bennett Jones which should be introduced this year. A step on the road to an SDB white with blue beard; not quite the colours but a lovely little iris and a good grower.

IB: 'Fashion Drama' – A pretty IB amoena from Lucy Delany of New Zealand. Well proportioned and pert flowers and the whole plant looks graceful. A reasonable grower with me.

BB: 'Brown Lasso' – A 'must' in the border class for every garden. A striking iris with butterscotch standards and light violet falls edged with brown. A good grower. Has 'Punchline' and 'Milestone' in it – what a combination!

TB: 'Gay Parasol' – If you like bi-colours, and I do, this is a must. Deep lavender and white amoena with wide flaring falls. Could perhaps do with a few more buds like many Americans but a second year clump produced a good show for me.

TB: 'Pink Angel' – Clean frilly pink with a pink beard. Falls not so hangdog as many pinks and plenty of buds. Seems to be a good grower.

TB: 'Caramba' – A variegata-plicata with flaring falls. Quite striking and I like it better than its successor 'Flamenco'. Good grower and flowerer.

TB: 'Cabaret Royale' – An Australian red-bearded neglecta. A very striking iris and I don't think I have seen a better stand-out in the garden. A few haft markings but it is a good grower and so unusual in colour that it is worth growing as an isolated clump.

TB: 'Soul Power' – Another Australian, a light blue plicata with lovely shape and bearing. A bit early to talk about growing powers as some Aussies take a bit of acclimatising, but a most attractive spike.

TB: 'Enchanted Cloud' – From Rex Brown, not new, but an almost perfect white for me and is producing some fine seedlings. I do like flaring falls and this has them and ruffling as well.

TB: 'Aureolin Blaze' – Leonard Brummitt's clean bright golden yellow. Falls semi-flaring and a good grower and flowerer. Fothergill Trophy 1979.

TB: 'Royal Trumpeter' – Not new but a good dark maroon self with lovely shape. Stands up well and at a guess I should say that Ralph Tubbs has it in his black lines.

TB: 'Sea Venture' – A reverse blue and white amoena is about the best description

I can give. A fine grower and has been a regular flowerer for me. Was near the top for the American Dykes a year or two ago; I certainly would have given it my vote.

TB 'Full Tide' – Large ruffled wisteria-blue with a blue beard from Opal Brown. A good grower and flowerer and reasonable shape.

TB: 'Featuring Color' – Something of the 'Mary Randall' colour in this orchid pink. Form only average but a good grower and makes a nice splash in the garden.

John Taylor

8. Newsletter No. 13

November 1980

ACTON PIGOT OPEN DAY – MARGARET OWEN

All of us who gathered at Acton Pigot on the morning of June 22nd must, I'm sure, have had that theatrical 'first night' feeling. We couldn't anticipate the response to this occasion – would there be one? Would it repay our efforts? Had we made the right sort and amount of preparation? Would there be enough plants, food, helpers – or too many? What had we not thought of? (There had to be something. There was. Boxes and bags in which to pack purchases. Thoughtful visitors had brought their own).

Not that there was much time for worrying. Tables had to be fetched and set up and a vast number of plants laid on them. I don't think any of us had any idea of the scale of Margaret's plant propagation until we saw the staggering array on the forecourt, and there were more contributed by other members. The largest single table was given to irises and thanks to the generosity of all who brought or sent them, not only was the table piled high but many boxes had to be put under and around it. Indoors, a stand of B.I.S. publicity and sales material was set up and manned by Mr Cassidy, and the dining room had two long tables completely filled with a display of cut spikes of TBs, Siberians and species. The warm spring caused grave misgivings and even, at one point, discussions about changing the date: would there be any flowers left? In the event, though it was true to say that both garden and indoor displays would have been better a week before, there were still enough blooms available to make a pretty good show and give the visitors plenty to see.

At least there was no question about the food – lots of delicious cakes brought by members and members' wives, rolls being spread by younger helpers under Jean Nichol's direction, scones with cream and raspberries – these and the great bowls of strawberries coming from Margaret's garden.

Somehow everything was ready by 2 p.m. and we had even had time to eat our picnics. Signs, in addition to the posters provided earlier, had been made and put up by Marilyn and Cyril Howells and we hoped the advertisements in local papers had been seen as well. Before we had time to wonder if anyone would come, they did. Within 20 minutes the car park was filling rapidly (there were favourable comments on the lack of parking and entrance charges) and the iris beds nearby had a stream of admirers, many with questions for Bryan Dodsworth, there in his capacity as B.I.S. President as well as expert, and for Margaret who also dug up rhizomes on request, sold plants, and answered questions from viewers of the rest of the garden, where there is so much to see. Then the visitors made their way across the road and up to the house and the sales area where the iris stalls had John Taylor, Pat Foster and Cy Bartlett to help, advise and sell. Perennials and shrubs were in the hands of Christine and John Trinder and Marilyn Howells, with help from Margaret's sister, Betsy, who knew where everything was. About 3 o'clock came the one heavy shower in a day whose weather was otherwise better than we had expected. With excellent timing, the rain drove many visitors indoors to see the displays and ask yet more questions of Max Davis, Eileen Snape and her friend Gwyneth, and as soon as the downpour eased everyone came out to demand plants of the irises they'd seen indoors. Demand and supply, unfortunately, didn't coincide too well, but often substitutes could be suggested. Bob Nichol was the best organised: spikes indoors and rhizomes of these varieties on sale outside, and every one was sold within minutes. That this system could not be adopted throughout was not because we didn't think of it and can justifiably be blamed on the season – just one of those things. And there was plenty of interest shown in SDS, IBs, and Pacific Coast hybrids once these were described, and no flowers of any of these could have been shown in late June.

Our visitors, who numbered about 500 (and included some who had merely been out for a drive and found themselves waved firmly into the car park; once they found out what was happening they were happy to join in) had mostly gone by 5.0 p.m., mostly laden with plants which we hope have settled into their gardens and will give them pleasure in future years. We cleared up and collapsed into Margaret's comfortable chairs with very welcome cups of coffee – catering staff still working when the rest of us finished, bless them – and indulged in an orgy of self-congratulation, especially when we found we had made an estimated profit of around £200. (More money arrived later, and subsequent consideration revealed several shortcomings which must be improved next year, but no major errors seemed to have been made and I think we deserved to feel pleased with ourselves on the whole.) It had been hard work, but very enjoyable.

I should like to thank most sincerely everyone who helped in any way, starting with Margaret and Godfrey Owen whose generosity in offering their home for the Open Day enabled it to be held and who worked very hard

indeed; and Betsy and the younger Owens who also gave much help. Thanks go too to Bryan Dodsworth and to members of the Avon Group (Cy Bartlett, Jim and Brenda Neilson) who all came a long way and did so much to assist. I should have mentioned that Nora Scopes and Bill and Phyl Christopher came all the way from Hertfordshire to support us, which was much appreciated. All the members mentioned in the report are thanked, and there are still some people not yet mentioned, whose hard work should be noted. On the teas, Brenda Neilson, Elinor and Rachel Hewitt, Harry Howells, Matthew Bartlett; Car parking: Peter Hewitt, Cyril Howells; General help: Ruth Foster and Paul (with special thanks from the baby blackbirds whose parents didn't like the iris stall so close to the nest – they would have been very hungry babies indeed but for your efforts!).

A few days later the following letter arrived.

'I have already written to John Taylor to offer my thanks and congratulations for a really enjoyable event. It just shows what can be done with determination and enthusiasm and someone to provide a suitable setting. It should put the longer-established Groups very much on their toes. Do please convey to all those involved my thanks and appreciation for a marvellous effort from which the Society will benefit immeasurably, not only in cash terms, but by such a demonstration of vitality and innovation... My thanks and congratulations to you all on your initiative and enterprise in conceiving and executing so effectively a brand new function. In BIS terms this doesn't happen half often enough.' – Bryan Dodsworth.

Jennifer Hewitt

9. Newsletter No. 13.

November 1980

JOHN & CHRISTINE TRINDER – ALSAGER

When the Group first visited this garden in 1976 the design and planting impressed us all. Four years have seen changes and improvements, particularly in the front garden which has been much altered, with a smaller lawn (surprising!) and paths giving access to the beds which are planted with iris species and Pacific Coast hybrids, species roses, ericas and a variety of shrubs and perennials. Throughout the garden, there are interesting plant associations and many unusual plants.

We had hoped to see the iris species in flower but, as so often happens, pick a date and the season fails to co-operate! There were a few – a dark magenta form of *I. chrysographes*, and *I. foetidissima* – and some TB seedlings of John's own raising. My notes on these are, I regret to say, almost non-existent and I can only apologise and say there is so much to see that my attention was diverted.

John did not seem to think many of them worthy of comment at this stage but we did look closely at one which he is using for its good branching. The standards are white, falls white with gold hafts and edges and centres flushed purple, and it caught the eye. There were also numerous *I. douglasiana* hybrids raised from seed which, together with *I. innominata*, *I. forrestii* and *I. kerneriana* had made lusty clumps and bore evidence of having flowered well. These were in the back garden; in the front were *Ii. chrysographes*, *prismatica* and *graminea* – the last two had been caught by the spring drought after being split and replanted but look to be reviving.

Along the side of the house is a narrow bed planted with a good form of *I. unguicularis*, and just to the rear are the raised beds and sinks devoted to Christine's speciality, alpines. *Daphne blagayana*, so healthy in 1976 was, alas, no more but in its place was a jasminum grown from seed – probably, she thought, a form of *Jasminum humile revolutum*. It was about two feet tall and covered in bloom. Dianthus species and varieties, *Parahebe lyallii* (wish it would grow like that for me!) and *Veronica incana nana* with very dark purple flowers and glaucous foliage were also in this bed. In the sinks, among other plants, were a number of lewisias which are a particular interest.

After our previous visit I wrote of the very long, narrow back garden which is so well designed and planted that the tall hedges on either side seem far apart, and the interlocking shapes of beds and lawn, with internal short 'hedges' of trees, shrubs and roses disguise the length. There is something to catch the eye at each stage – not necessarily brilliant flowers but, often, quiet groupings of foliage plants, or a collection of a particular genus. One which I noticed, since it is an interest of mine also, was a narrow bed devoted to euphorbias and showing the considerable variation between species and also how well they combine into an attractive picture. After a walk through a shaded area where hellebores and others with similar preferences grow under trees, you are confronted with *Heracleum mantegazzianum*, the Giant Hogweed, in flower – 12 feet tall Not a plant to get too close to, John warned us (it brings him out in blisters) so we admired from a safe distance. In the same bed there was a fine *Philadelphus 'Virginal'* in bloom and ground cover of irises, hostas and grasses. Opposite this bed, which contained other tall plants though none approaching the heracleum, was another which was in complete contrast. It had been greatly extended and developed since 1976 and is now a patchwork of alpines, shorter irises, primulas, dwarf shrubs, prostrate and upright dwarf conifers, and ground cover of acaenas, polygonum and prunellas. All these are planted on several different levels where rocks have been used to build raised beds and introduce a variation in the otherwise mainly flat garden, but the change is not so abrupt as to make the higher levels look out of place, and the whole patch is colourful and full of interest. I remember particularly the *Trollius pumilus* 'Wargrave Variety' with big flat golden flowers and, growing in a crack in a shady path, *Zigadenus elegans*. For those who do not know it, it has a raceme of whitish flowers striped with green on a 12" dainty

stem and reminds me slightly of *Ornithogalum nutans*. A real charmer if you like 'green' flowers.

Our progress, as you will have gathered, was slow, and there was a lengthy halt at the 'Teesdale' bed, where plants rescued from the site of a reservoir some years ago are growing. (It was an official rescue, I hasten to add.) John dresses this bed with sugar limestone to keep the pH right. Few of us who struggle to eradicate horsetail from our gardens (some of us have decided that life is too short!) would willingly import any equisetum species but there is one here which even has its own sort of charm, making a miniature, slowly spreading forest of dark green spikes a few inches high. The hair sedge (*Carex capillaris*), *Thalictrum alpinum*, *Ranunculus flammula* and a good form of *Potentilla erecta* grow here too and, most intriguingly, native orchids have appeared (I believe they are marsh orchids but – as so often – forgot to write it down). Where they have come from is a mystery, not least because I gather they have only shown up since this part of the garden, which used to be flooded regularly in winter, has been drained. Close by is a pond with more irises and then a tall screen of salix and other shrubs giving winter stem colour and underplanted with assorted sedges and cowslips. Beyond is the vegetable and fruit area (but there are irises there too, and there are to be more irises, and less grass...) which drew admiration from those whose job is feeding the family and who like to see the job well done!

When at last we got back to the house – there were some plants we'd missed on the way out – there was one of Christine's superb teas which would be worth making the journey for. Sorry so many of us were weight watching, Christine – we did try to show our appreciation! Alsager does mean a longish journey for many of us but it is so well worth it. I apologise to the members who have read much of this in the 1976 report, but hope that newer members will feel that our next visit to the Trinder garden is one they mustn't miss.

Jennifer Hewitt

10. Newsletter No. 15

November 1981

MORETON-IN-MARSH – JOHN & MARY TAYLOR

On the 23rd May a very large contingent of Group Members assembled at 'Saltwood' the home of John and Mary Taylor. Needless to say the weather which had been bright and sunny in the morning turned showery in the afternoon. Several people who had enjoyed picnic lunches in the sunshine arrived at Moreton-in-Marsh in rain. This rain did not dampen our spirits and indeed gave us a splendid opportunity to chat with old friends and renew acquaintances in the shelter of John and Mary's lovely house.

Fortunately, after about an hour the sun came out again and we were able to go out into the garden to see John's very fine collection of dwarf and median irises. The heavy rain had damaged some of the older, fully open flowers but there was still a very considerable amount of superb bloom. When there is a riot of bloom on literally dozens of varieties one's eyes are drawn to the brightest examples and it is easy to overlook the quieter beauties. Similarly the surfeit of colour tends to make one's eyes flicker from one startling clump to the next without having the opportunity of settling on any one variety for a really close look at its attributes – rather like a child in a sweet shop who doesn't know where to start and which to choose! With this reservation, a number of cultivars impressed, though without growing them for a year or so it is difficult to assess whether or not they are good 'doers'.

'Eyebright' (JDT) I do grow myself and can attest to its splendid garden qualities – a brilliant rich yellow with the falls bearing a ray pattern of chestnut brown, a real gem. On the quiet side 'Llanthony' (JDT) also impressed, a beautiful rich, sumptuous purple violet of excellent rounded form, and 'Dunlin', another from JDT, is a pleasing purple on white plicata. Falls are a bit narrow and slightly tucked but a definite improvement on 'Mini-spark'. 'Jeremy Brian' (from Brian Price), a splendid pale blue which glittered across the garden, was complemented by his white/blue thumb-printed 'Martin John' which with the dark blue on mid blue 'Katy Petts' (JDT) made a striking trio. 'Cottonblossom' was a very clean perky white and from Australia Barry Blyth's 'Real Coquette' was very pretty. Rich pale-blue standards and light ginger-brown falls, a combination which doesn't sound too good on paper but which in reality is very nice indeed. 'Bibury' (JDT) showed its parchment colour with greenish-yellow beards and hafts to advantage and two rather nice plicatas were 'Anne Elizabeth' and 'Peggy Chambers'. A very bright yellow seedling (V11/3K) with yellow and white beards was most attractive and will, no doubt, be named and registered in due course. If it grows and increases well it will be a winner. 'Scout's Honor' (Gatty) was a disappointment, a dull, rather uninteresting muddy brown. I have seen better seedlings than this consigned to the compost heap. It may well be that the cooler climate of Britain prevents the development of the brightness that it would produce in California. The vast majority of Joe Gatty's introductions are first rate which makes it doubly disappointing to have such a poor plant from such an eminent breeder. There is still a shortage, therefore, of good brown irises in the IB range.

After a good look round the garden the assembled company were called in for tea and what a splendid tea it was too – rivalling the irises for variety and quality. It must have taken hours of preparation and thanks are due in no small measure to Mary and her daughter for producing and serving such a splendid repast. In no time at all it seemed three hours had flown and it was time to depart. A quick final look round the garden to note the umpteen varieties of real quality that had been missed the first time around. Goodbyes, said

with promises to meet again and thanks to John and Mary for their splendid hospitality, and everyone departed in their several directions. Altogether a very satisfying day; good food, good irises, and good company – what more can one ask? Thank you, Mary and John, for a super day.

Cy Bartlett

11. Newsletter No. 18

March 1983

CHROMOSOMES AND THINGS

This is an edited transcript of the talk given to Group members by Cy in September 1982. My thanks to Leonard Hemming who recorded the talk and made the first transcript, and Cy who corrected and edited it.

The main thing to remember about genetics is that you just need to be a sort of minor mathematician, because the whole essence of plant breeding is doing sums. You take into account the chances of a certain thing happening, go ahead and do your cross, and you get a result which shows a numerical ratio or relationship that you think is about right. The snag is that in any row of seedlings you get all the right things but on different plants, and the problem is to get all the right things on one plant. Knowledge of genetics won't actually help you to do that, but it will help you to get the right things to appear and you then have to keep on going, year after year, trying to get certain factors established in the particular plant or line or whatever you are trying to produce.

Some of us have been breeding seedlings for years, looking for a particular colour or line. I've been playing about with green for about ten years and so far I've got nowhere at all. I have some plants with various desirable characters, some quite good, but to get the combination of all the good characters in one plant has eluded me so far. So please don't think I'm any kind of great plant breeder. I've applied the principles I know – and they haven't worked out yet! If I'd selected something like blues, or whites or yellows, I think it would have been easier; an off-beat colour is more difficult, primarily because in the case of irises, as in most other things, you are not actually trying to get chlorophyll green in the flowers but you're trying to get a combination of blue and yellow which shows up as green. This is extremely difficult as the yellow pigments in irises, and in most plants, tend to be oil-soluble (that is, they collect and are aggregated in the oily part of the cell) whereas the blues are anthocyanins and are water-soluble and are in a different part of the cell, so, automatically, the two colours are always being separated. So you nearly always get a yellow with a greyish-blue cast, which looks muddy, or a blue with a slight greenish or yellowish glow. There are some quite good greens on the blue side now, I think, such as 'Forbidden' (Dunn 1979) which is blue with a shot silk green

effect, very nice, but it is not a green, it is a blue with yellow and so it looks green.

That's all by way of an introduction. Please don't think that what I say will help you produce a wonder iris, but it might help you to know where you're going, and why you are trying the exercise.

The first thing to remember is that by and large all plants and animals, including humans, are double structured, deriving half their inherited material from their mother and half from their father, so they have a bit of both. When you put these two lots of characteristics together you'll probably be quite an interesting individual, but the chances are you won't necessarily resemble your father or your mother. In the next generation, though, you will probably split your mother and father apart, so to speak, because when you procreate just half of you goes on to the next generation, so your children may well resemble your parents rather than you. In fact there's a very strong alternation of generations that has a leap-frogging effect, so people say 'Doesn't he look like his grandmother?' Thus when you are breeding irises it is important not to be discouraged by the results you get first time around, because that result may not be what you are really looking for, and it will be the next time – the next generation – when something interesting actually happens.

One thing you can do is what, in my opinion, a lot of American breeders do, and that is to put two good irises together, without any particular aim. On the whole they're not trying to do what we in this country tend to do, that is to try to produce plants which grow well, have good form, good substance, good everything, all in one plant. There's a tendency to go for the flower, and if they are only going for this one character it's easier to get a good flower all the time, regardless of what happens to the plant, but I'm sure all of us who import from America agree that only 2 out of 20 or 30 imported in any one year will be worth having. The rest are also-rans.

So we have these two halves and we have to think in terms of where the generative, inherited material lies. It lies in these things called chromosomes and we call any individual character a gene. There's a bit more to say about that – we tend to think that one character is controlled by one gene, that for example a blue iris has a gene which tells it to be blue. The chances are that that is not the case, and it may well be that there are six or seven genes all telling that iris to be blue, and they'll control that particular colour. There is usually a combination of several genes which produce one characteristic, and another complication in that one gene may have a part to play in the control of several different things. One single gene may control, say, the size of the leaf, its shape, and whether it's hairy or not. So that we may have 'one gene for one character' but it's equally likely to be a multiple for one or one for a multiple. It's not as simple as you might think!

And then you might say 'Why is it that one gene can control several things, or several genes control one thing?' and the answer to that is 'Because genes

aren't really anything.' They certainly aren't structures. A gene is not a thing. It is, if you like, a location, a position, on a whole string of these things we call genes which is a chromosome, and the individual genes, in fact, are merely a group of chemicals. Then it is the actual arrangement of these chemicals in this long string that determines any particular characteristic, and what we call genes are just chemicals in a line.

Normally the smallest individual units of these chemicals we call genes are composed of three basic structures – a sugar, called ribose, an acid which is a phosphorous element (in effect, phosphoric acid), and bases which neutralise the acid. We might think of these neutralising bases as being alkaline but in the case of animals and plants they are organic substances like proteins, and there are four of them. So in a sense you have a basic unit on a chromosome which is a bit of sugar, a bit of phosphate and four of these particular bases which make the whole thing neutral in solution, so to speak. And these are all strung together, thousands and thousands in a long string, and that little group at the top, one ribose, one phosphate, and a couple or so of these bases, might be the gene. Or it could be two of these groups, or twenty, any number, making up one gene.

Now if you took the chemical off the top – the ribose, phosphate and bases – then your chromosome, your long string, would be quite wrong when it came to match up with the string from the other parent. When fertilisation occurs, you've got one string of chemicals from the mother and one from the father, and if you take that bit off the top, when the chromosomes come together you've got some quite different combination of chemicals together and consequently you can get things to change. So that becomes mutation. Mostly when that happens the plant or animal says 'Urrgh!' and aborts, it goes no further. Occasionally it goes through and when that happens you get the major breaks, as for example pink. I think this is the classic in terms of iris breeding, when what happened was that part of the chromosome, the chemical combination, changed. Normally this gene or its position on the chromosome told the iris 'You, my dear, are yellow' and it said 'O.K., I'm yellow' and merrily went about making yellow colours. But when this change happened, the plant said 'Oh no, we're yellow, but I'm going to teach you to make a new chemical.' It did, and suddenly the capacity for the production of pink irises appeared. The slight change on one chromosome altered the chemical pathway for the production of yellow colours and produced pink colours instead.

It is recessive, which means that pink will not normally appear when you cross a yellow iris and a pink iris. All the seedlings will be yellow, because the pink character will be swamped by the yellow character, and it won't be until the next generation that you will start to see some pink irises appearing if you cross a yellow and a pink together. This alternation, this leapfrogging of generations is very important to remember. You may just say 'I'll cross this and this' and hope something super may appear. But if you have an objective,

almost certainly you'll have to do it through two generations, making an initial cross and selecting the best of the seedlings to put together, knowing that in there somewhere is the chemistry you're looking for. Or you could put another pink with your yellow seedling and some of the next lot would be pink.

If you look at slides showing ordinary cell division, you'll see these strings, the chromosomes. Each individual species of plant or animal has an absolutely fixed number of chromosomes and in the natural world there are normally two sets in every individual, one derived from the mother and one from the father. In an ordinary plant these chromosomes duplicate themselves; as the cell divides into two, the chromosomes have to continue to appear so they manufacture themselves all over again. Looking at the chromosomes, there are sort of spotty little dots along the length of the string, and generally speaking they are identifiable spots or places on the chromosome called loci (plural of locus) where people can identify genetic places. For instance you could say 'On that chromosome the fifth bump in controls the colour of the leaves, and the twenty-fourth bump in controls the colour of the leaf bases.' The chromosomes are in pairs and normally have a spot in the middle which is a junction and gives them a vaguely bean-shaped look, and this spot is where the chromosome holds together so that when it splits there is one point which is stable; without that it could split and twist all along its length which would make a nonsense. They join, split, line up in the middle of the cell and then separate, having duplicated, and the cell divides, each new cell having its full complement of chromosomes. The chromosomes twist round each other and this twisting is fairly important in plant breeding, because if they break and rejoin sometimes you have a bit of the spiral going one way and a bit going the other way, and you get a swapping over, called crossing over of the genetic material.

So normal cell division is where the whole thing duplicates and keeps the same number of chromosomes all the time and each cell of everybody's body is like that. But in a generative cell the chromosome number drops to a half. The maternal and paternal pairs come together and separate again so that in each generative cell there is only one set of chromosomes, and then on fusion the double setting is restored. When the chromosomes come together they pair up, like with like, not all the pairs are the same – they are of different structure and come in various shapes and sizes. When the chromosomes divide for the production of gametes (generative cells) you get two divisions occurring simultaneously so that the result is four cells each having one set of chromosomes and they won't divide again. This kind of division is called meiosis.

• The normal situation, then, is everybody and everything in twos, and if you try to do genetic calculations on this basis you can get very accurate predictions of what's going to happen. For example, if one gene for red flowers comes up against one gene for white flowers then if red is dominant the resulting seedlings will be red rather than white, or if neither red nor white is dominant

then red plus white makes pink. When you do the second generation you will get a particular proportion of reds and whites and pinks. It is a simple calculation.

The problem that occurs when you're talking in terms of irises, particularly the bearded ones, is that they don't have just two sets. A large number of garden plants these days are, so to speak, 'freaks' in that sometime in the past they've done something odd and their chromosome count has altered from the normal. The most usual are tetraploids, so-called. Something with a single set of chromosomes is called a haploid. Normal animals and plants including you and me have two sets and we are diploids. Many garden plants have four sets and are called tetraploids. That throws a tremendous spanner in the works and it's no longer easy to make predictions. People who worked with diploids could pretty well determine what they would get in their seedling patches, using very simple basic genetics. Now it's much more difficult, with four sets. It depends on how those four sets arose, and what problems there might be in the production of seed, which can determine what they look like and causes confusion and chaos. You never know quite what's going to happen. It's rather fun, of course. Most usually the plant gets its four sets because when cell division occurs it fails to happen properly and instead of singles you get doubles – for example, instead of four pollen grains you could get two and they could have two sets each. They could fertilise a normal ovule, with one set, and if seed was set it would have three sets and be called a triploid. Triploids are nearly always sterile because the plant doesn't know how to divide three by two and goes berserk trying. There are a few classic cases – Bramley's Seedling apple is one – where for the rest of that plant's life it produces double pollen and single ovules, and so it is a fertile triploid, with diploid ovules, and haploid pollen which can fertilise another plant.

You could say that at some stage a sort of aberration occurred in the formation of the flower of a plant and it came out with two sets of chromosomes in the pollen and two in the ovule, and if it self-pollinates you will automatically get tetraploid seedlings; they are called auto-tetraploids and are normally freely fertile. Basically an autotetraploid is something where the chromosomes are 'all the same' because doubling occurs in pollen and ovules of the same plant. But there are other plants called allotetraploids, where you get doubling on different plants. For example you might get doubled pollen in a plant but single ovules leading to sterile seedlings, because they have single ovules and can't divide properly at meiosis – you could have a plant with a haploid number of 8, and a second plant where chromosomes have doubled would have 16. The resulting hybrid plant has 24 and is sterile. We see this particularly with the Intermediate Bearded irises, many of which are sterile or have very low fertility.

There are all sorts of things which may happen when a plant is pollinated which prevent fertilisation taking place, or only allow partial fertilisation

so you only get a few seeds. (1) Not all pollen grains are fertile. (2) Pollen incompatible. When pollen is placed on the stigma it starts to grow down the style – it is parasitic on the female, absorbing the female tissues. If the pollen is incompatible with the female – hasn't the right genetic make-up – there is too much gunk, or excrement, technically called callose plugs, which block the style so the male gamete can't get through, so – no seed.

Earlier I said that if you are working with irises, line-breeding, that is working from a small number of parents and intercrossing the seedlings, and intercrossing the next generation and so on, is the way to achieve your particular aim. Of course in the later generations you are working with very closely related parents so that fertility problems may arise and you get little or no seed. The important thing, though, is that when you only get a few seeds this may be the occasion when a great break occurs – suddenly everything comes together, as with 'Purissima'. To get lots of seed, cross two irises that aren't closely related. You'll get plenty of seedlings which will show characteristics in line with Mendelian laws of inheritance. It is the aberrations, often from closely related, infertile plants, which give the great breaks; maybe only one or two seeds in the pod.

I mentioned recessive characters in connection with pink, and dominant and recessive characters are important things to take into account when trying to achieve your aims. Dominant characters are the ones which override the others, recessives disappear unless they have another of the same kind to match up with. If you put dominant and recessive together, dominant always shows. In TBs, self-colours are usually dominant, and the next most likely result is a bitone, which is basically all the same colour but has deeper-toned falls. Recessives, for example pink or plicata, disappear in the first generation but reappear in the second. Amoena is usually a recessive character but there was a breakthrough with Paul Cook's 'Progenitor' and 'Whole Cloth' and in irises derived from these it has become dominant.

So you see, genetics is really all about numbers and the laws of chance. Sometimes the sums are quite simple, sometimes more complicated. There are whole books written on the subject. I hope what I've told you will help you, next time you look at a row of seedlings, to understand why they've turned out the way they have, and where to go from there.

Questions:

Irises with red bases to the leaves are said to be more resistant to rot – are these two characters linked?

- Probably, in this case it seems likely they're both on the same chromosome. I'm not convinced that the assumption is true since I have some red-based plants which are rot susceptible.

Can we go back to diploid TBs?

It is possible, but unlikely as they've been superseded by the tetraploids and

by now there are very few around. Further chromosome doubling is possible, too, for example by using colchicine; octoploids have been produced but are very weak, and hexaploids are the largest number that gives stable plants so far.

Cy Bartlett

12. Newsletter No. 18

March 1983

IRISES – ON THE SCENT (1)

Like so many newcomers to the ranks of iris enthusiasts I joined the B.I.S. Largely because of the beauty of form of the TBs and their wonderful colours. Then as I became acquainted with some of the many iris species and their hybrids my interest deepened. The delightful scent of some of the flowers whilst others had no scent was intriguing and so I decided to look into it. Now I am becoming embroiled in a programme which covers many sections of the genus *Iris* in my reading and is much less ambitious practically.

When we humans look at a plant and its flowers our thoughts are concerned mainly with the enjoyment we get from its form and grace, its delightful colour and sometimes its scent. How lucky we are that attributes so important in nature to pollination and the continued existence of plant life should offer so much pleasure. Rarely do we think of the interdependence of bees, flies and other insects with plants. The scent of flowers is compounded from many individual odours some nice, some positively revolting but all important. It was the idea that 'some deep yellow flowers were said by Peter Werckmeister to have an unpleasant odour whilst pale yellow flowers were quite pleasantly scented' which led me to enquire further. Correspondence with Cass*our General Secretary and through the Group's Newsletter introduced me to some others who too were interested and finally enabled me to decide upon a programme. There are two objectives to broaden my experience and increase my knowledge:

1. to establish a line of plants related through one another to a species or cultivar of early ancestry to show the types of scent which develop, and
2. to investigate *I. pumila* varieties in particular and hybrids from them under various conditions to compare their scent and its production and thereby initiate further work about the relationship between scent, colour and breeding. If you grow any *I. pumila* varieties I would be most grateful if you could let me have a piece or some seeds to establish a stock of plants.

So far in my reading I have listed more than 1500 varieties from the A.I.S. 1939 Check List. It is surprising how few irises are quoted as parents and how prolific they have been. Again and again a particular cross, e.g. 'Purissima' x

'Indian Chief', is listed as the parents of both 'scented' and 'no scent mentioned' hybrids, some from the same hybridiser; we appreciate the colour variations but scent doesn't seem quite as simple. Maybe in the future we will be able to breed for colour and scent in conjunction with all the other desirable qualities so necessary for the garden and the showbench.

There are so many fragrant irises – my *I. danfordiae* and *reticulatas* just now – and just a few stinkers amongst the many with no scent at all.

Ray Wilson

*'Cass' was George Cassidy, B.I.S. Hon. Secretary 1980–85.

13. Newsletter No. 20

Spring 1984

FOLLOWING THE SCENT 1983

Among my acquisitions when I began growing irises were some Dwarf Bearded Iris. Some were bought from a commercial source and the others through the good offices of the Plant Sales Scheme. All have grown well showing few, if any, signs of rot. Flowering started just as the 1983 Spring Show finished and now (June 4th) most are in flower, a few still in bud perhaps awaiting a slightly longer period of sunshine. The TBs have not started to flower yet! When we got the occasional warm day I decided it was time to think about scent. A comparison of the smells of flowers and herbs and the like with my wife rapidly brought me to the conclusion that my sense of smell was dull and indiscriminatory whilst my wife had a good odour perception. Henceforth the odour identification is to be based on the 'Standard Joyce Wilson Nose.' On the days when the air was a little warmer with a hint of moisture – that is, it had temporarily stopped raining – the wind had dropped and the sun was shining, there was a perfumed air drifting from the dwarf iris bed. It was a delicious smell and we set about making a record of the individual scents.

Amphora – rose lemon
Baria – aniseed
Batsford – light, green spicy
Bibury – green spicy
Blue Denim – green
Buttercup Charm – butterscotch
I. chamaeiris – spicy citrus
Cherry Spot – green spicy
Chromeling – green citrus
Circlette – spicy citrus
Delicate Air – spicy citrus
Demon – green cinnamon

Eyebright – dull spicy
Gingerbread Man – green
Jane Taylor – apple
Jeremy Brian – vanilla
Joanna Taylor – green
Knick Knack – green
Linda Jean – musk rose
Magic Flute – liquorice
Marhaba – spicy
Merrymaker – spicy
Nylon Ruffles – citrus rose
Owlet – spicy citrus

Pixie Dixie – green musk
Purple Landscape – rose aniseed
Saintbury – strong musk chocolate spice
Sherborne – lilac rose

Small Wonder – green spicy
Tony Lynn – green citrus
Wheels – musky citrus
Whitebright – musk, spicy citrus

In flower earlier in the year:

I. danfordiae – honey

I. reticulata – musk

We then looked to see if these odours could be fitted into a pattern. In the 1982 *BIS Year Book* there is a request to registrants to offer information about fragrance viz: slight or pronounced, sweet, spicy or musky. This is certainly a step in the right direction but some smells are quite characteristic, e.g. aniseed or cinnamon. Could these be fitted into such a general description? Again, whilst some flowers have no scent others smell of bruised green leaves – a fourth odour?

Many years ago the AIS Check List made reference to fragrance and a large variety of descriptions were specified. The system was later refined and the number of odours reduced. By the end of 1949 however fragrance ceased to be recorded, either because of lack of interest or the use of descriptions which were too loose and lacked specificity. More recently, Roy Genders, in his book ‘Scented Flora of the World’, reviews the situation and defines the groups viz: Indoloid, Aminoid, Heavy, Aromatic, Violet, Rose, Lemon, Fruit Scented, Animal Scented, Honey. Each of these is further sub-divided to take variations within the group into account. We felt that before going much further it would be necessary to consider just how useful a description is likely to be. The scent from a flower changes according to the age of a bloom, the moisture in the air, the amount of wind (the more volatile components being blown away), one’s distance from the flower, as well as the temperature. Modern techniques have enabled a separation of the constituents of many scents to be achieved but when the information is allied to the ability of ‘one’s nose to smell’ it is doubtful if a detailed description is going to add much to a person’s pleasure in the scent of the flower. The scent is however very useful as an aid to identification of an unknown flower and perhaps could be developed further as a selling feature as is now the case with roses.

In the meantime we propose to use the descriptions which relate the smell to the scents we know e.g. aniseed or apple, whilst appreciating that each scent is unique to the beholder. Such descriptions based upon ‘Scented’ or ‘Not Scented’ and if the former then a measure of its intensity with, where possible, a reference to the terms green, citrus, spicy or sweet will, we hope, extend the interest in the Iris and increase our enjoyment and appreciation of its beauty.

Well before the DBs had finished the TBs began to make a show. ‘White Duet’ started my season, it made a nice contrast to ‘Demon’ and ‘Batsford’ for example. And as the TB flowers began to open Joyce and I got to work. On occasions like this we are thankful not to have to worry about pollen counts and again with TBs you don’t have far to bend.

Our experience with the dwarfs had indicated that the scent of a flower is most complex. Usually the bloom on opening has a rather featureless green smell and if the weather is cold it may well change but little all day. However, as this year the weather favoured us we were treated to the range of smells as the flower matured and the more volatile parts of the perfume evaporated. In some cases this change was so clear that we began to wonder if it would be possible to characterise the scent with any precision at all.

Anyway, once again Joyce sniffed and sniffed and we tabulated the findings.

White Duet – apple citrus

Gypsy Jewel – elder

Langley – (a.m.) honey sweet

(p.m.) fudge spice

Whernside – (a.m.) sweet spice

(p.m.) musky green

Aline – (a.m.) honey / (p.m.) spicy

Stepping Out – (a.m.) honey citrus

(p.m.) sweet fudge spice

Fireball – muddy sweet

Deep Pacific – sweet green spice

Emphasis – sweet spice

Colonial Gold (a.m.) green spice

(p.m.) spicy citrus

Grand Baroque – green lemon spice

Ghost Story – sweet green

Foggy Dew – green

Minisa – faint green apple

Blue Reflection – green fudge

Soft Image – sweet spice

Coral Strand – fudge

Hurly Burly – spicy

Black Market – citrus spice

Pink Sleigh – citrus sweet

Praise the Lord – lilac

Blue Luster – lilac

Orange Fire – sweet

In addition, the few species which were in flower were checked: *I. orientalis* – dull green spice; *I. sibirica* – faint green; *I. tenax* – faint green spice; *I. tectorum* – very faint spice; *I. pseudacorus* – stagnant water (elder); *I. chrysographes* – cloves.

On the bare amount of information we have so far we conclude:

1. If honey is sweet with a tang of spice and a hint of citrus and fudge is similar but a bit stronger then we could identify these two as sweet (honey) and sweet (fudge).
2. If lemon is citrus and apple citrus with a flavour of a light ester then similarly the acid scent can be citrus (lemon) and citrus (apple)
3. If elder and muddy equate with stagnant water and all are related to green then these variations could all be classified as green.
4. With spice the scents are so characteristic that it is better to define the scent spice and where possible qualify it by reference to the type e.g. (cloves) or (cinnamon) etc.

• Using our conclusions as a basis and starting with this somewhat simplified system it is proposed that in 1984 we will repeat the work hopefully enlarged by more varieties and species and cover a wider range of conditions. Why not join us?

Ray Wilson

IT MIGHT NEVER HAVE HAPPENED!

Jennifer is the iris enthusiast – local history and archaeology is my special hobby.’ This is something I have said to many people in the Group as an apology for a lack of knowledge of irises. Having heard this, you might well ask me ‘Then why do you come to the meetings, and how did you get involved as Treasurer?’ To be truthful, I have sometimes wondered myself. Initially my function was to provide transport to get Jennifer to the points where she could develop her interest to the full, but as the Group became more active I found myself being drawn into its work (for example, setting up the projector for a slide show while the irisarians concentrated on the ‘iris’) and even finding they were rather a nice lot and very tolerant of someone who had no more than a slight interest in irises. When the plant sales started it seemed reasonable that the auctioneer should be someone who was not going to be buying and could devote his time to taking bids (sometimes, when members were reluctant, from flies on the wall). I got to know members of the Group and their interests so that when at Acton Pigot Open Days members of the public going to and from the gardens asked a question, I could point them in the right direction. By this time I had become Treasurer and enjoyed the excitement of totting up how much each Open Day had made; I also had the annual hair-tearing when I produced the accounts!

Surprisingly I have not fallen to the blandishments of John Taylor and Bob Nichol who tried at one time to get me on the gardening ‘straight and narrow’. Irises are Jennifer’s things and history is mine!

Despite not being a proper irisarian I have gained immensely from being part of the Group, not least in sharing with members their other special interests. With Pat Foster it is medieval history, with Harry and Maureen Foster photography, Cy Bartlett – theatre; the list seems endless. Last but not least there is the good fellowship one finds in the company of gardeners.

Why is he burbling on like this? Well, simply to say that I feel many members, and their non-iris spouses, miss so much by not coming to the meetings and this is very sad. So please come along and even if you are not the irisarian, the ‘fringe group’ has its fun and plays an important part in the life of the Group!

Peter Hewitt

(who did it all off his own bat : I didn’t even drop a hint. J.H.)

JOHN & MARY TAYLOR – PERSONAL REMINISCENCES

All of us who knew them have cause to remember the Taylors with affection and gratitude. What follows are one person's recollections which I hope will pay tribute to some of the qualities for which they will be remembered.

When I joined the BIS and got my first Year Book, in 1967, a TB named 'Marshlander', bred by J. D. Taylor, was winning acclaim and show trophies. Like many people I had got interested in irises originally for their colours, especially the unusual ones, and a velvety iris in two shades of brown sounded just up my street. When I saw it there was no doubt I had to have it but I had to save up for it as the price was £1, or maybe even 30/-, a tremendous extravagance for me in those days. But it has always given such pleasure, and is one of the very few TBs I still have and the last I would discard, in spite of having some faults. John wrote about his hybridising in the Year Book and helped me to start me on that enthralling road – humorous and practical, that article intrigued me. There must be something in hybridising if someone could write about it like that. (But John could write well, as I gradually discovered, on any aspect of irises, and could make them interesting to non-specialists like one of my neighbours, who was thrilled to see a real live *Gardening News* writer in Cleeton.)

The first direct contact came a few years later. I attended a course at Denman College, the Women's Institute College, and noticed a request for plants for the garden there, including irises. On enquiry I found they didn't have the SDB 'Double Lament', raised by John and named after a section of a choral work 'The Brilliant and the Dark' which was written for and sung by W.I. choirs. Mary conducted and trained the choir of (I think) Hythø W.I. for the premiere at the Albert Hall and their special piece was this lament. So I wrote and asked John if a plant could be spared for Denman, and his response showed his generosity and understanding: he sent a parcel with generous amounts of 'Double Lament' and two others of his SDBs and wrote 'Keep a piece of each for yourself' – just what I had been tempted to do!

Another year or two passed; I got involved with the newly-formed Remontant Group and for the first time went to London on the Monday before the main summer show, arriving at the RHS Hall before the people who were bringing the components of the Group's publicity stand. For the first time I met the characteristic Monday-evening mix of pre-show tension, relaxed chat, and trophy-polishing by any spare pair of hands. That evening the hands were Mary's, I offered to help for a bit and was immediately welcomed and chatted to in Mary's marvellous way which made one feel really special. And her lovingly disrespectful attitude to the whole affair showed me the BIS wasn't quite as rarefied and awe-inspiring as I'd hitherto thought. When John came over, a bit fraught about his entries, she spread calming air as she did so well,

and introduced me, whereupon John also showed his gift for friendliness. It all left a happy glow.

And it made it very much easier to write and ask for their support for a regional group in 1974, by which time they had moved to Moreton-in-Marsh. The promise of support came by return of post and it seemed that we had an obvious candidate for our first Chairman. Those who were at our inaugural meeting – John and Mary couldn't attend – will remember the unanimous agreement when the suggestion was made. What we got, of course, was a great variety of benefits. Practical help, like being the best of hosts for many meetings (Mary's teas set a standard which the rest of us have tried to live up to ever since), advising on what the Group could or could not do and its position vis-a-vis BIS, coming up with suggestions for activities and how to run them – and being amongst the first to arrive and the hardest workers, never unwilling to get their hands dirty. Practical, hard-headed advice (but encouragement too) to those of us beginning to grow and hybridise, from John, and generous numbers of highly saleable plants whenever they were required. For me, John was an ideal Chairman in that he left me to get on with things in my own way (which I suspect would not always have been his) but always responded to any request for any kind of help and on occasion stopped me making a fool of myself and the Group, though always with tact and understanding; guidance, rather than domination, was his way. He encouraged me to become more involved in BIS affairs, knowing well that the rewards of such involvement are deeply satisfying – and few people have given more, over a longer period, to the Society than he did. But when I put on my gardener's and hostess's hats as well as the hon. sec. one the custom which Mary started of disappearing quietly into the kitchen after tea with her helpers and doing the washing-up (which sounded a very cheerful activity!) was equally appreciated.

But I think I would rate as the best thing John and Mary did for the Group the development of the atmosphere of relaxed, friendly informality combined with observant eyes to ensure no-one was neglected. It began to grow with our earliest meetings and stemmed, to a very considerable extent, from them and particularly their deep and genuine interest in people. I know that I have been fortunate in knowing them and have, personally, much to recall with gratitude; surely that goes, too, for the Group as a whole and as individuals.

To finish, a lovely story told to some of us recently by Anne Blandamer, John and Mary's daughter: when she was a small girl, they lived in Bristol and John grew vegetables on an allotment about three miles from their house. Over a period of a few years, the supply of vegetables declined and John explained that the peas hadn't done at all well that year, or the carrots had all got carrot fly. One day Mary decided to walk to the allotment to see it for herself, and when all the family were together that evening, she told them (and one can just hear her doing it) that she'd found just a few cabbages and a row of beans in a corner; all the rest of the ground was...irises!

Jennifer Hewitt

SOME IMPRESSIONS ON EXHIBITING FOR THE FIRST TIME

The Iris Group's show at Treasures last June was my first experience of exhibiting, and I'm sure it won't be my last. It took place in a month of weather more appropriate to March; the incessant rain had battered most of the more delicately-coloured and textured TBs in my garden to a brown pulp, and the wind had been sufficient to flatten two tall delphiniums, stakes and all. I hadn't intended to exhibit, but Pat Foster convinced me over the phone that I should swell the entry with something in the novices' class, so I salvaged a couple of spikes of 'Music Maker', a dark velvety purple TB, from my weather-beaten front garden.

We travelled to Treasures in Pat's iris-laden car, and arrived to find Peter and Jennifer Hewitt already there. The staff of Treasures had left us the shed in a pleasantly well-prepared state, thoroughly swept, with tables ready and a tall flower arrangement in one corner. By the time we'd positioned and covered the tables, the first exhibitors were beginning to arrive. Things were getting exciting; every minute something new and interesting was being brought in. Cars and vans disgorged irises by the bucketload, irises packed in boxes, irises in all sorts of carrying-contraptions, flamboyant TBs, elegant sibiricas, fascinating species. The more I saw, the more meagre and battered my own entry seemed. The quality of entries appeared just as good as those in London the week before. I was particularly taken with 'Scintillation', a pink and white TB in clear, clean sugar-almond colours, and with 'Paris Kiss', an interesting TB of a most intriguing shade. As well as these wonderful show spikes, the shed was being adorned with flower arrangements, Japanese arrangements of irises, contorted willow and twisted wood were under construction, as well as the massed arrangements of irises and other flowers.

With everything ready, the judges moved in and I went to look around the Burford House Gardens, well worth seeing, with their clematis varieties, shrub roses and water gardens. I returned to the show area where the judges and just finished their rounds, and was delighted to find that my wind-battered entry had been deemed worthy of a second prize. Admittedly it was the only entry in its class, but it was still a great excitement, and I'm sure I'll do better next year ...weather permitting!

Suz Winspear

ARIL IRISES

Aril irises are bearded irises which have seeds with a white or off-white collar around the embryo end of the seed. Although, for the most part, we think of arils as either *oncocyclus* or *regelia*, nevertheless we must bear in mind the *hexapogons*, *pseudoregelias* and *psammirises* because they too have arillate seeds. Growing arils, whether as bought-in plants or from seeds, is a challenge. When success is achieved it is, as in every other similar situation, a most enjoyable experience. For, although the plants do pose many difficulties in raising them to bloom, the form and colour are both exotic and beautiful.

Because, in the wild, these irises are native to such places as Israel, Iraq, Afghanistan and Southern USSR, for example, (cf. *BIS Year Book* 1971, p. 131) it is necessary for us to grow them where the rhizomes can be baked during the period of dormancy. Many arils cope well with the cold provided the conditions are on the dry side, but they can suffer severely from attacks of rot leaving a grower with an unpleasant, pulpy mess for his efforts. We are reminded of the problems facing the British grower when we read Paul Furse's account of his experience in Turkey, Iran and Afghanistan as described in the *BIS YB* 1971: 'Oncocyclus irises are typical of Middle-East plants, accustomed to a cold winter (with snow cover in much of the area), the spring is wet and finally warm, the summer baked dry like a desert, the autumn cold and dryish or snow covered...no part of the area corresponds to European conditions, and nowhere is the summer baking lost.' When I became seriously interested in arils I realised it would be necessary to try out each species in turn by buying bulbs and growing them to discover those most suited to the Lancashire climate. Over the past few years I have been accumulating data – and bulb rot! I was most fortunate to be able to have met the late Ken Bastow, he showed me his arils including one which had taken several years to germinate, and later I met Pat Foster who added to my stock of plants and information, both of which helped enormously. Molly Price says in her book, 'The Iris Book', p. 81: 'The culture of *oncocyclus* irises is not particularly difficult, merely different from that of the bearded irises' and like everything else it is the sense of achievement which encourages further progress. I built a raised bed along the lines described in *BIS YB* 1966 but inside a greenhouse and started to learn.

A raised bed was constructed from cement blocks with the walls about 18" high. The bed was filled with rubble in the bottom covered with a layer of peat on top of which a 15" layer of a gritty JI No. 3 compost, to which lime had been added, was firmly tamped down. Then the bed was thoroughly soaked with water and left for a week. Rhizomes of *Ii. sari*, *hoogiana*, *acutiloba*, *gatesii*, *lortetii*, and *korolkowii* were set in the surface of the bed as for the bearded irises and the bed was then covered with a 1–2 inch layer of ¼" grit. At the same time I also

planted small plants of *Ii. darwasica* and *kamaonensis* which I had grown from seed. My choice of plants was based upon my desire to have a range of types to test for hardiness, even though the bed was in a greenhouse. And I wanted to see for myself the exotic appearance of these flowers grown in 'my own backyard'.

I. sari: 10–30cm. Flower veined crimson or brownish purple on a yellow cream background, intense crimson/brown signal and a yellow beard.

I. hoogiana: 40–60cm. Easy, lilac blue flower with a yellow beard. Beautiful scent.

I. acutiloba: 8–25cm. Brown veining and streaking on a whitish background with a dark reddish brown signal, sparse brown beard.

I. gatesii: 45–60cm. Not easy, brown or purplish stippling or veining on an off-white background, diffuse yellowish brown beard.

I. lortetii: 30–50cm. Pink/maroon spotting on a white background, deep maroon signal and a reddish beard.

I. korolkowii: 40–60cm. Creamy white petals with blackish maroon veining and dark beard.

I. darwasica: 15–40cm. Purplish veining on a pale lilac background, beard is a purplish colour.

I. kamaonensis: up to 45cm. Flower lilac mottled purple, not as high as the leaves, beard white tipped yellow. This is a pseudoregelia.

I soon found out that *I. gatesii* didn't like the conditions – it rotted away. With the others I got some lovely blooms, not quite the colours as in the books but who cares with such results. I have since met many people who have had similar experiences both as regards the growing and their feelings when the plants come into bloom. On the other hand there were few increases, my watering programme based upon that described in BIS YB 1970 for some of the oncos did not allow satisfactory root growth; the bed was too dry and the drainage too good. After introducing mushroom compost, then watering heavily in October, growth re-commenced but the balance wasn't quite right and I lost an *I. hoogiana* and an *I. lortetii*. Luckily I had grown an *I. lortetii* from seed and so didn't feel so badly about it. Now I am much more careful and test the bed before and after watering; one day I must invest in one of those water/moisture test meters. Once the flowers had died off the plants did not go dormant like it says in the book, instead growth of the leaves continued for longer than expected. Most leaves died off in late August and some started into growth again in October after the autumn watering. Growth carried on into December albeit at a reduced rate. Don't forget we do have some quite warm Decembers and these encourage the continued growth. On a visit to Pat Foster's one September it was pouring down and her irises seemed to like it; at any rate they looked a lot better than mine. Pat's were in a raised bed out of doors whilst mine were in a greenhouse. When I got home I gave them a good soaking; they seemed to appreciate it and quite strong growth developed

particularly of the root system. As a consequence the plants were more able to cope with the winter.

Whilst discussing results with a fellow enthusiast he told me that he had several arils in bloom and at least two weeks ahead of mine; he said he had his plants in a raised bed in a greenhouse similar to mine but he had installed heating and the house temperature was not allowed to fall below about 45 degrees during the winter period – he didn't say how much it cost but it was likely to be much less than the value of his plants. This year my greenhouse has been kept at a minimum of 40 degrees F and there is a great improvement. I am looking forward to earlier and more reliable blooming, but not the fuel bill.

In addition to growing onco and regelia species there are many hybrids of them which offer a range of plants of similar difficulty in cultivation but which extend the range of plants available. David Shahak in Israel and John Holden in USA are two examples of hybridists in this field; the former has a lovely catalogue, the prices are in US dollars. Starting in 1894 Van Tubergen marketed many regelia crosses starting with 'Agatha' in 1894 and continuing into the 1950s with others like 'Ancilla', 'Andromache', 'Camilla', 'Thor' and 'Clotho', several of which are still sold by the specialist nurseries. They all have beautiful flowers from cream and pink to a dramatic brown purple on a cream background. Since the 1940s there has been a surge of interest in the hybrids especially those arising from crossing arils with TBs and other bearded irises. 'Lady Mohr' an arilbred registered in 1943 (from 'William Mohr' x 'Ib-Mac'), is nearly hardy. I have grown it in a greenhouse where it is a valuable and reliable bloomer and also outside where when fortune favours us it will bloom but usually we just get good increases; further south it should be even better. Many of the arilbreds survive our winters fairly well, it all depends on the amount of onco or regelia they have in them. I still give them some protection from the wet using cloches otherwise when the thaw comes they suddenly fall over and you are left with the all too familiar pulpy mess. Slugs undoubtedly contribute to the disaster even when they are not entirely to blame so I now water Fertosan into the ground two or three times a year. I see fewer slugs and so assume success. A few examples of the arilbreds which I planted in 1983 and which bloomed the first time the following year are:

'Bedouin Woman': a very strong grower, a blend of tan, beige and yellow.

'Bionic Burst': reliable with care, light red/dark red.

'Buzz Fuzz': hoping to be able to persuade it to cope outside, this median cross is a red violet self 15" high.

I. darwasica: a species grown from seed, fantastic colouring.

'Genetic Artist': strong growth, a blend of bronzy yellow and blue.

'Jordanian Prince': a bit susceptible to rot, red and purple blend.

I. kamaonensis: grown from seed in 1982, seems very hardy here, a pseudoregelia, fragrant blooms which are nearly stemless and are lilac purple mottled deeper.

'Lebanese Snow' : not very happy but there is hope, a white self.

Recently I have devoted more effort to trying out arilbreds in a bed of grit with a semi-continuous flow of 'Phostrogen' solution as the nutrient. My initial work has shown that early growth of strong roots is encouraged and blooming was earlier too. Current trials seems to be confirming the good growth; now for the flowers.

Ray Wilson

18. Newsletter No. 40

Autumn 1991

VISIT TO BRYAN DODSWORTH'S GARDEN

On Sunday 9th June 1991, the group paid a visit to Bryan and Jill Dodsworth's garden at East Bridgford in Nottinghamshire. It was a particularly late summer, and the weather had not so far been very good. However, we were lucky, and apart from a little drizzle it stayed fine. In fact we had rather better weather than the team from BBC TV's 'Gardeners' World' who came to film Bryan's irises three days later. The Dodsworths' garden is built on high ground, so that there are splendid views of the surrounding countryside. Half of the garden is devoted to Bryan's TBs and particularly to his breeding programme. The TBs are planted in a large walled garden divided by a hedge. In one part there is the greenhouse full of pots of young seedlings, and the beds where these are grown on to flowering size. On the other side of the hedge are the main TB plantings. Here named varieties and Bryan's seedlings are grown, and the quality of the seedlings assessed. Individual seedlings from the same cross can show great variation in appearance, growth habit, and overall quality, and those that are not up to standard are discarded. Bryan also has a bed for 'guest seedlings' raised by other growers; this is a trial bed for BIS garden trials, and all the irises have won at least a BIS Seedling Commendation. The quality of an individual iris can vary according to its cultural conditions, so a variety may do well in one garden but be a poor grower in another. Only by being grown in several different gardens can a variety's real potential be discovered. Bob Nichol's white 'Clemency', which later gained the Fothergill Trophy from the BIS, was admired here, as was Maureen Foster's 'Violet Primrose' with soft yellow standards and mid-violet falls.

In a bed following the curve of the outer wall were large clumps of Bryan's award-winning TBs including all his Dykes Medal winners. What was very striking about all the irises he grows was their radiant health – never a trace of leaf spot or rot to be seen. The 1990 DM winner, 'High Peak' and the deep blue 'Roman Emperor' (DM 1985) were noted, but every clump deserved admiration. Bryan grows few recent American introductions but two particularly fine ones

were 'Champagne Elegance' (crisp white standards and buff falls) and the really red 'Danger' with velvety falls.

The other half of the Dodsworths' garden is cultivated by Bryan's wife Jill. A large lawn is surrounded by borders giving various conditions and situations in which she grows a splendid range of interesting and unusual plants. Particularly striking were the numbers of cultivars with variegated leaves which she has collected. There are raised beds for alpine and Mediterranean plants, and shady parts for ivies and bergenias, as well as some interesting shrub roses and climbing roses. There are irises in Jill's garden too, but here they are integrated into the borders and have to be effective garden plants as well as appealing to the iris connoisseur.

At the front of the house is a water garden that provides a home for a range of water- and moisture-loving irises. *Iris laevigata* 'Alba' and *I. l* 'Variegata' grow in the pool itself, whilst in the moist soil surrounding it, PCIs and sibiricas mingle with hostas and *Alchemilla mollis*. A highlight of this area was *I. kerneriana* in full bloom, the clump carrying a myriad soft yellow flowers.

Everyone who came to see Bryan and Jill's garden enjoyed themselves immensely and it was particularly good to meet some members who cannot often get to group events. Jill laid on a splendid lunch and tea that were much appreciated, and I would like to thank both Bryan and Jill for their hospitality in such a busy week.

Suz Winspear

19. Newsletter No. 41

Spring 1992

ON SHOWING TO THE BEST ADVANTAGE

One of the main problems encountered by new and inexperienced exhibitors at a show is how to make sure that a perfectly reasonable spike looks its best for the judges. Why is it that two spikes with blooms in broadly the same position and in the same condition can fare so differently when judging occurs?

Sometimes there may seem little reason for placing one iris spike as champion and another similar spike as an also-ran. Assuming the judges are sane and know a good spike when they see one, what is it that influences the final outcome of the competition in that particular class?

It is not proposed in this short article to repeat the instructions given by the Show Secretary, recounting the basic principles such as ensuring the containers are clean and have water in them and that labels should be neat, etc. There is an informative and amusing article by Ray Jeffs on Show Techniques on page 88 of the 1991 *Year Book* which members will find very useful. People can

comply with all the pointers mentioned by Ray and the Show Secretary and still not win.

If one is serious about showing bearded irises, selection of good show varieties is imperative. Don't use outdated varieties except in the 'golden oldies' classes. Have a look at the names of varieties which win consistently and certainly keep a record of varieties which have won the Josephine Romney Towndrow Trophy. Select varieties which are reasonably modern and have the following characteristics:

(i) Good branching with flowers displayed so that there is 'air' or space all round them; ideally three flowers open at the same time for TBs but with fewer for shorter irises and only one fully open flower for SDBs and MDBs.

(ii) Clear, clean colouring except in those classes which specifically ask for blends. Inevitably the show will be under cover of some sort and most halls destroy subtle colours by over-emphasising yellowness and muddying blueness.

(iii) Good substance in that the flowers should be tough enough to stand up to the shocks of travel in boxes, vibrations in cars etc. I have had some beautiful specimens which start the journey from home just beginning to open and by the time I get to the show the flowers have opened more than fully. The standards gape and the falls have been shaken down so that flare and lilt are gone.

(iv) Form is a matter of personal choice but I would suggest that over-frilly, laced blooms will lose out to gracefully ruffled flowers on the show bench. Elegance is all!

If elegance is all, what can the exhibitor do to improve the appearance of the spikes? Although the show rules state that spikes should not be unduly shortened they do not say that the spike should not be trimmed at all. (In the case of some median classes this may not be true as it is usually required for the stems to be cut to the rhizome. This is to ensure that the spike being shown falls into the correct class.) However for TBs it is highly desirable to have a display where the stems vary somewhat in length. If the flowers are a bit small and perhaps closer together than the absolute ideal shorten the stem and use such spikes at the front of the exhibit. If large and widely spaced keep the stem as long as possible and use at the back of the display. Don't just thump the vases down on the bench but arrange the vases in patterns which enhance the blooms. In a three-spike class a short one in front and a tall one behind more or less in line, but with the medium height central spike just an inch or so out of the straight line, will often improve things. Rotate the vases so that the flowers individually take up the space allocated and every open bloom can be seen clearly without blocking or overlapping the others when viewed from the front. If a mixture of colours is to be presented try to harmonise the colour progression from one spike to the next, avoiding the juxtaposition of clashing colours where possible.

It is normal to add foliage to bearded iris exhibits. Here great care needs to be exercised. Don't overdo it – one or at the most two leaves are all that could

reasonably be expected on the plant. These leaves need to be carefully placed, one longish and one short. The long leaf can balance the distance from the top of the vase to the second flower up the stem and the short leaf should be on the opposite side to complement the lowest flower on the spike. The whole thing should show three flowers and two leaves in balance and harmony. Shorter irises can only look good if a single leaf is present, two leaves gives a cluttered look and prevents the ideal airy, graceful exhibit.

It should be noted that these little titivations do not obviate the need to have the spikes upright, firmly wedged in the vases etc., etc., but they do make a difference between winning and losing when the competition is fierce!

Cy Bartlett

(Note for newer members: Ray Jeffs' article was reprinted in the 2005 *BIS Year Book*.)

20. Newsletter 47

Spring 1994

GROWING IRISES

Although the vast majority of commonly grown irises are vegetatively produced it is, perhaps, as well to begin this article by discussing iris growing from seed. Many members will be attracted by the abundance of seed available through the BIS Seed Distribution Scheme and some of you may indeed be tempted into the hybridisation game and collecting iris seeds for yourselves.

Iris seeds like many others possess in their seed coats germination inhibitors which must be removed before the seeds will grow. The function of these inhibitors is to prevent mature seeds germinating in the pod where conditions might be just right for germination, e.g. moist, airy and with a suitable temperature. Any such germination is likely to end in disaster if tiny plantlets were to start into growth three feet in the air and away from the soil. These inhibitors need to be washed out either naturally by winter rains or artificially by soaking the seed in water for several days.

Iris seeds, also, do not generally germinate in the autumn but require a cold period to after-ripen the seed. Again, this may occur naturally by the winter rain and the chilling, freezing and thawing which happens outside in the open soil, or the process may be speeded up by first chitting the seed to allow the ready ingress of water and then artificially chilling the moist seed in the refrigerator. The normal 2°C of the average refrigerator is fine for this purpose but the seeds must be kept moist by enclosing them in polythene bags with peat, vermiculite or a similar moisture-retentive medium. The seeds will then start to germinate

within 6–12 weeks and can be transferred to pots in a light airy place where they will get away fast. Most seedlings should be ready for transplanting in late spring depending on variety.

The seedlings will then need to be placed in appropriate soil, acid or alkaline, wet or dry, depending on the type of iris involved. Most bearded irises and many beardless iris could then be expected to flower in the third year and some of the more precocious sorts in the second. Some beardless irises such as sibiricas will probably not flower until the fourth year. Once the irises flower the moment of truth arrives and all the poor doers with flowers that do not appeal need to be discarded. Unless there is masses of room the remaining irises need to be lifted, possibly divided and replanted.

With very few exceptions iris benefit from replanting about three weeks after flowering when new roots have grown sufficiently not to be damaged in the shift. It is sometimes possible to move them earlier and with some, such as PCIs, which have poor root systems, a later move may be beneficial. This of course all applies whether you are replanting seedlings or dealing with established clumps which usually need replanting, with old and weak parts being discarded, every three to four years. In all cases a little TLC at this time will be repaid handsomely. On moving, a little suitable fertiliser is useful. Generally low nitrogen fertilisers are to be preferred, or those which release nutrients slowly. Too much nitrogen will tend to cause the plants to become ultra-vegetative without many flowers. Animal-based organic matter is generally not a good idea unless it can be dug in to a good depth below rhizomes which may otherwise be damaged. Vegetable matter is to be preferred, not too much for bearded irises but liberal quantities are fine for beardless irises. A word of caution here. High organic matter tends to attract slugs and snails and these can play havoc with susceptible iris plants. It is always better with irises to err on the side of too little fertiliser than too much, especially for garden display. For 'Show' purposes a regime which pushes the irises a bit to produce taller stems with bigger flowers may be desirable. Here experience becomes more critical and judging the right moment and the right amount to bring the flowers on in the right numbers, sizes etc. is quite an art. There is nothing more tragic in the iris world than having a super set of potential prize-winning stems only to see them crash down with bacterial soft rot because of over-feeding or over-watering.

The two worst pests and diseases have been mentioned – slugs and bacterial soft rot. Slugs can be controlled by whatever method you fancy from rushing out at midnight with a variety of traps and gadgets, including glasses of beer, grapefruit skins, heavy boots, slates and mallets or a proprietary bait. The problem with baits is that you may kill dozens but there are still those which were attracted towards the bait but were too far off or too slow or too tired to make it and thus avoided death. These are then ready to attack your plants when the bait is washed away. So baiting can be a bit of a treadmill – once started you're at it forever.

The only other pests of significance in Britain are aphids. These can be disfiguring and in several cases, notably sibiricas, they can form a great dark grey mass at the base of stems or fans weakening the plant and letting in botrytis, or they can be among the flowers, especially spurias, where they attract ants too. The main problem with aphids, however, is their ability to transmit virus diseases. Once infected, there is no economical cure and very susceptible varieties need to be rogued and burnt.

Of the diseases, bacterial soft rot has been mentioned. This is by far the most serious disease or, viewed from another point, a disease to be ignored. Infected fans collapse and stink of rotting cabbage. The rhizome becomes mushy and the plant may die. The only cure, if cure it be, is to cut away the diseased rhizome to healthy white tissue. Leave the cut surface exposed to the sun (this assumes it isn't pouring with rain at the time!). Sprinkle the cut end with gypsum or flowers of sulphur. Water the whole lot with dilute potassium permanganate or even Jeyes' Fluid. All these can be very expensive exercises and are likely to be total failures! In my view there are so many iris cultivars about, several of which are naturally resistant to bacterial soft rot, that I just dig up and burn the really disastrous varieties. In an enormous number of cases if the weather becomes a bit drier and warmer the plants recover on their own, leaving the diseased rhizome as a shrivelled corpse among new healthy rhizomes. So unless the variety which becomes infected is a special treasure, my advice is just to pull off the infected fans and burn them and then forget it. It will either live or die. If it dies you haven't got to worry about it the following year and if it lives – hooray, a bonus!

Two other diseases are prevalent in most irises. Leaf spot is more disfiguring than damaging. Inevitably any loss of photosynthetic area will debilitate the plant to some extent but most irises can tolerate quite a heavy infection before losing the ability to flower well. In any event there is a host of freely available fungicides on the market which will control the disease. The other much more insidious disease is rust. The rust fungus is systemic, that is it will grow throughout the host plant. Obviously it takes time for it to do this and if you catch it early enough you may eradicate it. The techniques most commonly used are that as soon as the rust pustules are seen, the foliage is cut to the ground and the whole lot, including the surrounding soil where the odd spore may be lurking, are sprayed or watered with a rust fungicide. The ones available for rose rust are adequate. Alternatively the foliage is left intact and heavy doses of systemic rust fungicides are applied in the hope that the fungicide will knock out the fungus before it penetrates too deeply. The problem with irises is to get enough fungicide to stick on the leaves and then penetrate them. If the leaves show rust spots subsequently the only answer is as for soft rot, dig up and burn. Again there is varietal variability in susceptibility to rust. In the bearded irises *plicatas* are commonly more susceptible than some others. The real answer is if the variety is ultra susceptible to rust – chuck it out!

Scorch is a well-known problem where it has been difficult to identify a causal agent and for years all sorts of reasons were given. It would appear now that the causal agent is a mycoplasma, a virus-like agent which, like virus diseases generally, has no economic cure. The mycoplasma may be transmitted by a variety of tissue-damaging creatures but the number one villain would seem to be a leaf hopper. These creatures have habits similar to aphids and cause much the same damage. They are about the same size as the average aphid though most are banana-shaped and creamish in colour. Probably the best known is the rose leaf hopper and most people will have seen these infesting roses on warm summer evenings when they fly up in clouds of tiny cream 'flies' only to settle again within a few minutes, reminiscent of 'white fly'! The leaves will show characteristic peppering. The leaf hopper which attacks irises is a different species and it seems the one attacking sibirica irises is the worst offender, which if it is carrying the mycoplasma will cause whole plants to collapse and die with typically chestnut-reddish leaf die-back. If the plants do not die with the mycoplasma, they will typically develop secondary botrytis infections. All in all a very nasty disease, and again in my view, since there are thousands of irises to choose from, lift and burn diseased susceptible varieties and replace them with tougher resistant ones!

Cy Bartlett

21. Newsletter 59

February 2000

WEST & MIDLANDS GROUP'S TWENTY-FIFTH ANNIVERSARY, 17th October 1999

The Anniversary lunch at the Feathers Hotel in Ludlow was a pleasantly leisurely affair, each table with its complement of older and newer members. Twenty-two people were present, including some who were founding members of the Group. Christine and I were among the latter but we had allowed our membership to lapse years ago and therefore appreciated the invitation all the more for that!

The Chairman was astute enough to realise that with both Jennifer Hewitt and Cy Bartlett billed to speak, her own part required directness and brevity – which were duly accomplished.

It was no surprise to her audience that despite her wide knowledge of irises in general, Jennifer chose to speak about trends in the sibirica group. Sibirica enthusiasts in the Midlands are fortunate in that they are close to the National Collection holder of the group, Kim Davis, who runs the Lingen

Nursery near Bucknell in Shropshire, for it is there that many of the newer cultivars find a place. I liked the idea of 'Prussian Blue' but at three feet my garden cannot readily accommodate such giants, especially if they happen to be good growers. The advent of the tetraploids (and I have one, unnamed) would seem to suit the style of planting now being advocated by some of the continental gardeners. So my interest was centred on the eighteen to twenty-four inch group like 'Powys Plumes'. With such wonderfully descriptive names as 'Golden Edge', and 'Frosted Cranberry', I wondered whether my loyalty to 'Hoar Edge' is somewhat misplaced. However, availability is another matter entirely.

Where do all the new SDBs, IBs and TBs, including those with the RHS seal of approval in the shape of AGMs, go? Dare I say that there are just too many, too much alike, for the trade in the UK to absorb? That as you may be sure was not the theme of Cy Bartlett's tour of TBs and their ilk. I applauded his distinction between irises for the showbench and those for the garden, and I was even more delighted to hear that he seemed to be turning his breeding skills more to the provision of good garden irises. His thesis is that a plant well provisioned with stems with seven buds on each, and every bud opening in succession, would prolong the flowering season into weeks rather than days. One of his breeding aims was to produce garden-worthy yellow amoenas and he cited 'Protocol' as one on the way. It was clear that his enthusiasm for breeding was communicating itself to his audience. His plea that more and more people were needed to take up breeding irises would not fall on deaf ears as far as some of the newer members were concerned. I heartily agree that breeding irises, if only for home consumption, adds a dimension to growing irises that far outweighs the devious strategies that we simple iris folk need to employ to acquire the latest name. Mind you, I wouldn't mind a bit of some of those I saw that afternoon... I wonder if he could find me a little piece!

John Trinder

22. Newsletter 61

February 2000

TRANSPORTING, STAGING AND SHOWING IRISES

The forecast was ominous. It had been raining 'cats and dogs' since the early hours and the forecaster advised 'Don't travel unless your journey is really necessary.' Time to set off for Banbury, armed with umbrellas and waterproofs. Through the windscreen was like looking out from an aquarium. We wondered if there would be trees blown down and whether we would be able to get through flooded areas as we slithered down our half-mile track, assisted by a fast flowing, newly formed stream, before reaching the comparative safety

of country lanes awash with storm water. What a day to drive to Banbury for a Group meeting! The torrential rain continued until we were about ten miles north of Banbury, when as if by magic the rain stopped and the sun shone brightly. We made our way to St Mary's Church Centre, a first class venue, kindly arranged for us by Marilyn Fairbairn. Marilyn was already there to meet us, accompanied by her delightful children who later helped with the refreshments. Let's hope that Marilyn's interest in irises is 'caught' by her family. The Group needs new young members with enthusiasm such as they displayed!

Our speakers for the day were Jennifer Hewitt and Sidney Linnegar. Their talks were scheduled to cover transporting irises, choosing the right spikes for the class, reading the schedule and staging exhibits. In fact, both speakers more than covered every aspect of showing irises.

The first piece of advice was to read the schedule carefully. Failure to do so can give rise to the dreaded comment 'NAS', i.e. 'Not According to Schedule'. Make sure that the iris is in the correct class, although it is some consolation that a spike forming part of an exhibit judged to be NAS would not be disqualified from being considered for Best in Show. The next pearl of wisdom was that Show Secretaries much prefer an exhibitor to say that they intend to bring ten entries and arrive with only two, rather than say two entries and subsequently bring ten. Makes sense when you realize space is often limited and to try to cram in more than were expected is more difficult than to spread out fewer entries than were planned for.

Transporting irises was discussed at length and included the following suggestions: securing spikes in polystyrene four-bottle carriers, wine bottles or milk bottles in crates. Various devices were described for transporting spikes vertically when open blooms are involved as at our Group Show, where exhibits are judged almost as soon as they are staged. One possibility is using oasis in a bucket with wire netting over the top. It is easier to transport spikes with blooms in bud as at the BIS Shows, where they can be staged the night before and have a chance to open overnight. If buds are on the point of opening, they can be protected by Netlon caps. An alternative is to wrap them in soft tissue tied loosely with wool. Spikes with wrapped buds can be carried horizontally by various methods, one being florists' boxes with canes fixed across to support the spikes. Most importantly, when spikes are carried horizontally even for short journeys, they must be covered in some way to prevent the buds turning towards the light. Blocks of oasis are useful for transporting single blooms and entries for floret classes can often be made from unused spare spikes.

- We learned that the spike should be placed in a vase containing only an inch or so of water and wedged at the neck of the vase with crumpled newspaper. The paper must not touch the water or it will become soggy and fail to hold the spike upright. Spikes should preferably be shown with foliage. Damaged leaves can be carefully trimmed. Branches on bearded iris which are too close to

the stem can sometimes be improved by placing a roll of tissue paper between the stem and the branch for a time before judging, but remember to remove it before the class is judged. Beards can be tidied with a soft brush. Try not to finger-mark the bloom on stems and leaves. Make sure the vase is clean – in the case of a tie between entries, presentation of the vase can decide the winner of the class. The exhibit can be finished off by covering the newspaper with moss, grit or crumpled green tissue paper. In a class for more than one variety, it is preferable to show different colours. The above points are just a sample of the many tips given by both speakers.

After answering questions, Jennifer and Sidney were thanked by Suz Winspear on behalf of the members present, all of whom agreed that the difficult journey had been worthwhile. Doubtless the attendance would have been greater had the weather been kinder.

An excellent tea served by the helpful Fairbairn children rounded off the meeting. Our thanks to Marilyn for arranging this venue and organizing the refreshments.

As soon as we left the hall, the heavens opened and the rain continued all the way home. A literal case of *déjà vu*!

Ken MacLeod

23. Newsletter 61

February 2001

PETER HEWITT

I first met Peter in 1986 when, new to irises, I wrote to the address on the back of a leaflet I'd picked up at an RHS Show. Within a week I had met Peter and Jennifer, who had given me a lift to a group meeting and inaugurated me into the ways of irisdom. Since then Peter has always seemed like an integral and permanent part of the Group. Not an iris-grower himself, he had acquired or absorbed a great deal of knowledge about them and had strong opinions as to what constituted a good iris. Most of his work for the Group took place backstage, organizing and preparing events, liaising with other groups and organisations, planning and setting up stands, getting plants and people to wherever they were supposed to be, talking to the public, selling plants and seeds, and doing countless other things to keep the Group functioning and our events running smoothly and efficiently. He also came up with some of the worst jokes and puns that I have ever heard, as well as many snippets of strange information drawn from his historical researches.

In the early days of the Group, Peter's role was that of providing transport for Jennifer and then taking their daughters out of the way of the serious

business but as both daughters and Group grew up he became more involved (as did Elinor and Rachel). From 1980–85 he was the Group's treasurer, which on one occasion proved to be an alarming position. He was paying the proceeds of a sale into the bank, was asked to wait for a moment in an office, and then the police arrived. The bank cashier had mis-read the paying-in slip and had thought the money was being paid into the funds of an 'Irish Group'!

From 1988 Peter took over the job of organiser of the Group's stand at the Malvern Spring Gardening Show. At that time, before the arrival of the RHS and national publicity, the show was a pleasant unpretentious local event with the emphasis on plantsmanship and horticultural quality. Having a stand was a new and exciting venture for the Group and Peter worked hard on our behalf, organizing the practicalities of the stand, setting up displays, sorting out rotas, staffing the stand and talking to everybody who so much as paused to look at the irises. One year we took a double-sized stand and won second prize for it, our best ever result. The atmosphere, size and tone of the show have changed a lot since those days, but Peter was always there doing his utmost to uphold the cause of the Iris Group (and other specialist societies) as a vital part of what the Malvern Show should be about.

In 1991 Peter took over the job of Newsletter Editor, and remained in that post, updating the appearance and format of the newsletter as improving technology allowed, and the newsletter evolved to become a smart professional-looking publication.

In 1998–9 he was secretary for a year, following the unexpected departure of Chris Sutton, and in August 1998 he became the secretary of the committee set up to plan the BIS 2002 Convention. As usual he worked hard and tenaciously to find a suitable venue and to get the preparations for the convention underway. In recognition of all his work he received the Effie Osborn Award for services to the Group at the 2000 AGM.

Outside the Iris Group, Peter was a keen historian, researching and writing for the *Victoria County History of Shropshire* and for several journals, and he was an active member of the Shropshire Archaeological Society and its Council.

Without Peter Hewitt's work, enthusiasm and tenacity it is unlikely that the West & Midlands Iris Group would be as strong and successful as it is now, and his presence at our meetings will be sorely missed.

Suz Winspear

THE WEATHER

In the midst of daily references to Global Warming and its possible effects on our climate, do you remember the days when summers were consistently hot and winters produced temperatures that froze ponds ready for skating and sliding, when snow was a certainty and seemed to stay for ever, when seasons knew their place and acted accordingly.

But is this true? Did the weather always behave in a predictable manner as memory seems to indicate? The Revd Gilbert White in his *Natural History of Selborne* (a village in Hampshire) writes that the winter of 1776 was so cold that temperatures as low as -1°F (33° of frost) were recorded together with prodigious falls of snow. Evergreens died, the Thames froze over and even indoors the temperature was low enough to, 'freeze beneath peoples beds'. This was followed by extreme winters in 1781 and 1783 but then in the same year of 1783 followed a summer without parallel.

In the words of White it was, 'an amazing and portentous one and full of horrible phenomena'. There were, he records, 'alarming meteors, tremendous thunderstorms and a peculiar haze or smoky fog that prevailed for many weeks in this island'. Added to this in June and July, 'the wind varied to every quarter without making any alteration to the air and the sun at noon looked as blank as a cloudy moon with a particularly lurid and blood-coloured aspect at rising and setting. This was such that country people began to look with a superstitious awe and even the most enlightened persons began to be apprehensive.'

In the summer of 1784 he records that on June 5th a storm began with vast drops of rain succeeded by round hail and then by convex pieces of ice which measured 3" (76mm) in girth and which broke several windows. As it progressed it produced prodigious torrents of rain that occasioned a flood so violent as to move rocks weighing 200lb (88kg) down the lanes.

To go back even further the Great Frost of 1683/84 has almost certainly had no equal since. It was said that birds froze in mid-air and fell to the ground like stones, that the mortality rate amongst sheep and cattle was enormous and that country peoples suffered hardships undreamt of today.

It did however have its good side when Charles II, looking for ways to appease his subjects, ordered the Thames to be swept and decorated, it having frozen to a depth of 20ft (6m) for at least five miles either side of the Capital. A pleasure ground was created with mazes and arbours as well as drinking booths and food facilities. Bonfires of cedar wood were lit and salted to produce different coloured flames that even at their most intense did not melt the ice. This phenomenon of Frost Fairs at London was repeated in 1795 and 1814 but has not occurred since. This may however be as much due to changes in the Thames around London, e.g. cooling water injection from power stations, as to the temperatures experienced.

Some of the coldest winters in living memory have been those of 1929, 1940, 1947 and 1963. The Dee at Chester froze over in 1929 and on Lake Windermere thousands of skaters took advantage of the ice cover. It was reckoned that at one stage there were fifty thousand people on the ice.

The winter of 1947 once more produced exceptional hardship following so close to the end of World War II. Fuel especially became a serious problem, nowhere worse than in the Midlands when hundreds of people took to mining on a grand scale particularly where coal deposits came close to the surface. At one stage Wednesbury resembled the Klondike and it was only when, through collapsed tunnels and a couple of fatalities, the strong arm of the law entered the scene that the exercise came to a premature end. The coal was of poor quality however producing clouds of smoke and choking the users.

1963 gave us the coldest January over England since 1814. The snow cover was deep throughout the month; the waterfall at Ingleton, Yorkshire, froze giving a photographer's dream, and at Penarth near Cardiff snow and ice accumulated on the beaches.

It was however on the 10th January 1982 that the two coldest temperatures ever recorded in the British Isles occurred. At Breamar in Scotland a temperature of -17°F (-27.2°C) was recorded while at Newport Shropshire the glass went down to -15°F (-26.1°C) or 47° of frost. Beat that, Gilbert White!

So gardeners have had to cope with some drastic changes of weather in the past. How then is the present cycle likely to affect us?

If the advent of warmer weather is true we would be able to grow more and a greater range of irises (oncos in the garden?) together with more exotic species of perennials etc., only dreamed of before. It will almost certainly (as we are already seeing) lead to a greater overwintering of pests and diseases that a good frost eradicated. Winter digging, heavily reliant on a 'good' winter to finish off our work could become a routine of the past and how about those parsnips and sprouts that tasted so much sweeter after 'Jack' had touched them. Myself, I love those cold frosty days of winter sunshine; long may they remain.

Glyn Roberts



'Peter Hewitt', Jennifer Hewitt – Siberian



'Alexia' AGM, Cy Bartlett – Tall Bearded
Dykes Medal 2006



'Anniversary', Marjorie Brummitt – Siberian
Dykes Medal 1979



'Cambridge' AGM, Marjorie Brummitt – Siberian
Dykes Medal 1971