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Peter Brears: *Traditional Food in the South Pennines*: Hebden Bridge Local History Society, 2022: 252 pp., paperback, £11.99.
To buy this book, you need to apply online to <www.hebdenbridgehistory.org.uk> who will supply it by post with a charge of £2.80 for Britain and a negotiated sum for abroad.

Keighley to the north, Todmorden to the west, Rishworth south and Brighouse to the east are the bounds of this region, with Hebden Bridge, Heptonstall, Sowerby Bridge and Halifax lording the centre. Inch by inch, Peter Brears is covering the north of England (generously interpreted) with his matchless studies of foods, food supply and traditional cookery. The innovation here, however, is that all the illustrations are in colour (and still for only £11.99) and that Peter has included much more of humanity in his compositions, thus making clear his candidature for nomination as a Lowry *de nos jours*. The organization is familiar from previous examples, allowing a methodical survey of food types with chapters on festivals, rites of passage, farming and food production, home life and sources of fuel. The recipes are drawn from manuscript recipe books or family tradition or, quite often, from church and chapel fundraising cookery books. On every page there is something to delight and inform, as well as sufficient material for a high tea fit for royalty. The forced encloistering of the British population during the late pandemic has had some surprising consequences, not least this excellent volume as its author sought to while away his idle hours.

Sam Bilton: *Fool's Gold – A History of British Saffron*: Prospect Books, 2022: 256 pp., paperback, £20.00.
Norman Douglas said, 'A man who is stingy with saffron is capable of seducing his own grandmother.' Sam Bilton kicks off with these words in the introduction to the recipe section of her book. Words that bring me up short and are enough to make me vow to err on the side of generosity when next I dabble with saffron. Which I soon do, because the recipes that illustrate her account are so appealing and I want to cook them all. I started to write this review in France when the sun was beating down and all one really wanted to do was sip iced water and find some shade but actually, this book is the perfect antidote to a cold and drizzly English day. Bright and colourful, with an arresting cover, which is a bit of a Prospect Books hallmark, along with a crisp clean layout and an index easy to read even on the dullest day, plus lots of attractive pictures inside; I set a lot of store by such things. This is a book that one wants to immediately pick up and thumb through. As to the content? Tracking down the history of most culinary herbs and spices is always a bit of an approximate activity. Generally, their presence has been so constant, so taken for granted, that rarely is anything very specific about them ever recorded. One catches glimpses of them in texts that have been written about other matters or



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in paintings depicting something else. So it is, to some degree, with the story of saffron's presence in Britain. Sam Bilton is a food historian so she knows where to look and she succeeds well in setting out a quantifiable history of the crocus plant (*Crocus sativus*) and its prized saffron spice. Conjecture is always fun and often necessary in trying to bridge the gaps in the story but facts are what we need. I was pleased to discover that she did not reject completely the theory that Romans occupying Britain cultivated saffron in Croydon, of all places. The modern name is derived from Crogedene, identified in the Domesday Book as Croindene which is thought to mean 'valley where the wild saffron grows'. I had myself recently been writing about Croydon, and in an effort to find something appealing to say about it, I, too, stated that in earlier times it was said that the crocus had been grown and harvested there. Sam Bilton does raise an eyebrow at the theory but doesn't dismiss it out of hand. For that I am grateful as I fully intend to let my own reference stand.

It is unusual for a crop that flourishes in Crete, Kashmir and Iran to do well in Britain, but from the late fourteenth century, the saffron stamens of *Crocus sativus* provided a valuable cash crop for smallholders farming in the chalky fields of Cambridgeshire and Essex (centred around Saffron Walden). Some were sent to London but much was sold to Cambridge colleges to flavour and 'gild' food, and for hygienic and pharmaceutical purposes too. Part I of *Fool's Gold* briskly sets out such intriguing information as it covers the history of saffron cultivation in Britain, along with its medicinal uses and role in the kitchen. The research is meticulous but her text reads like a good story rather than a treatise. Her writing has a conversational quality as though she half expects her readers to respond to her questions. I romp through Part I, and, as a cook, having briefly flicked through Part II, couldn't wait to delve into the recipes therein contained. I loved the discussion about how one weighs the saffron threads and (*pace* Norman Douglas) how much is too much. Then, having settled that important question, we move on to the recipes themselves. Sam Bilton has taken them from a range of historical sources. Luckily for us, as well as her role as food historian she is also a cook, and has bravely turned what are often only the very vaguest of instructions specifying the most rudimentary of quantities, into recipes with measured ingredients and directions specific enough for the modern cook to follow. These, often ancient, dishes still appeal to the modern palate. I have now cooked several of them and can attest to both their ease of making and tastiness when they arrive at the table. I shall be dipping into this book for a while yet – at least until I get that Daffodil Cocktail exactly right. Criticisms? I have but one, taking slight issue with the title, saffron is definitely not the gold of fools. Rather, its very existence is surely the work of gods?

Di Murrell