

## THE BENTON IRISES

*Sally Gregson*

When Sir Cedric Morris and his partner, Arthur Lett-Haines, set up the East Anglian School of Painting and Drawing in 1937, they wanted to bring their collective experiences to young, aspiring artists. They hoped to share their talents, and perhaps escape the ominous rumblings in Hitler's Germany.

Throughout those momentous changes in Europe, and for the next 40 years, they created a bohemian, creative space that fostered the talents of their students. There was little formal art education. Students were left to 'get on with it', while either Cedric or Arthur ('Lett', as he was called) popped in to give constructive comments on painting.

After their first house in Dedham, Suffolk burned down in 1939, they moved to Benton End, Hadleigh. It was a rambling, ramshackle, Tudor house with plenty of room for studios and student bedrooms, set in three and a half acres of wilderness. At first Cedric made a productive vegetable plot to fill the cooking pots of Lett's kitchen, then he gradually transformed the remainder into a plantsman's garden. Bulbs, irises and roses filled the spring and summer borders.

Every weekend their long refectory table hosted artists and friends, gardeners and students, bringing stimulating conversation and raucous humour. The food was exceptional despite the rationing. The aroma of coffee and garlic filled the kitchen, and the scent of fresh flowers was everywhere.



Most photos © Sally Gregson

*Iris 'Benton Susan'*



*Iris 'Benton Lorna'*



*Iris 'Benton Primrose'*



*Iris 'Caramel'*

The great gardeners of those post-war years came to visit: Nigel Scott, Christopher Lloyd, Vita Sackville-West and Beth Chatto, among many others. Beth describes her first visit to Benton End. They entered a large 'barn of a room...pale pink-washed walls rising high above us were hung with dramatic paintings of birds, landscapes, flowers and vegetables whose colours, textures and shapes hit me as though I were seeing them all for the first time'.

In Nigel Scott, Cedric found a fellow enthusiast who worked daily in the garden until the light failed.

By the early 1950s, Cedric was selecting tall bearded irises from among the 1,000 seedlings they raised each year. He loved the "soft, bruised colours" of his Benton irises - a world away from the American bearded irises of today - and grew them "en masse, like the Van Gogh painting, with one jostled against the next". He was the first person to breed a pink bearded iris, *I. 'Edward of Windsor'*, which is still available from nurseries today.

Cedric Morris died in 1982, four years after Lett had passed away. But his irises live on in the gardens of his friends and those who attended the Red Cross Open Days that he held each summer, where he sold off his surplus seedlings and named divisions.

Morris was buried at Hadleigh Cemetery, his grave just in front of that of his friend and partner, Arthur Lett-Haines. The inscription reads 'Sir Cedric Morris - Artist - Plantsman 1889-1982'. His reputation still stands as one of the most inspiring artists and plantsmen of the 20th century.

A few years ago, Sarah Cook, lately Head Gardener at Sissinghurst, found by chance a plant of *Iris* 'Benton Nigel' growing in the borders there. It evoked memories of her visits to Benton End as a child with her mother, in those far-off days of the Red Cross teas. She was smitten. She started to collect them, and discovered that there had been 90 different 'Bentons'. By 2015, Sarah had found 25 of them when, in cooperation with Howard Nurseries, she staged a display at the Chelsea Flower Show. It wowed all comers. The Benton Irises had found a new following in the 21st century.