

History of the Hardy Plant Society and its Southern Counties Group

Members of the Hardy Plant Society (HPS) are interested in growing plants of all kinds, from alpines to trees, but the focus of the Society is on hardy herbaceous perennials – non-woody plants that flourish in the summer, die down over the winter and regrow the following spring.

It all began in 1957 when a group of eminent nurserymen, among them Alan Bloom of Bressingham, founded a Society 'to promote knowledge and the growth of hardy herbaceous perennials'. After a promising start it ran into trouble and in 1961 the committee, all busy horticulturists, decided to dissolve the young Society which by then had 220 members, but at an EGM on 30th May the proposal was defeated. Miss Pole, of Lye End Nursery near Woking, took the chair and asked for volunteers to form a new Committee. With enough offers, the HPS was saved and Miss Pole continued as Chairman till 1970. In 1963 Miss Barbara White became Hon Sec and more or less ran the Society till her death in 1987. She publicised the Society by staging displays of hardy perennials at the RHS Westminster Shows where some of us first encountered the HPS. The Society continues to flourish and in 2017 celebrated its Diamond Jubilee, its membership now numbering about 7,500.

When affiliated Local Groups were set up, the Southern Counties Group was the second to be formed, in 1972. At the time it did cover all the southern counties of England but, as membership of the HPS increased, groups were formed in surrounding counties and the SCG now draws its membership mainly from Surrey and south London. It was run informally by an ad hoc committee till the HPS decided that all Groups had to have a proper constitution, leading to the official inaugural meeting of the Group taking place in November 1991. After starting off meeting at Sayers Croft where Bob Brown (now of Cotswold Garden Flowers) ran an outpost of the LCC which gave London schoolchildren a taste of the country, it moved to Mayford until the Village Hall was vandalised. At that point we moved to our current home at the Old Barn Hall in Bookham,