

Revd. William Wilks
(19th October 1843 - 2nd March 1923)



This year marks 100 years since Revd. William Wilks' death and we'll be making 2023 a year of celebration as we invite everyone to appreciate his legacy: The Wilderness.

Born in Ashford, Kent, on October 19, 1843, William Wilks was educated at Clapham and Pembroke College, Cambridge, where he took his degree in 1864. He was intended to follow in his father's footsteps as a doctor, but after studying at Wells, he took orders, and was appointed curate of Croydon in 1866. In 1879 he became the incumbent of the parish of Shirley.

Wilks was a very enthusiastic gardener, the climax of which was the cross-breeding of poppies to successfully cultivate the Shirley Poppy. Wilks' passion for nature led to his position as RHS Secretary 1888-1920 and was known as an experimental gardener in the world of horticulture.

One day whilst walking in a cornfield near to the vicarage of St. John's, he spotted that *one solitary flower had a very narrow edge of white* amongst the common field poppies (*Papaver rhoeas*). Delighted by his discovery, he spent the next decade from 1880 developing what has become the world-renowned Shirley Poppy.

By the world at large, he is remembered for his contributions to horticulture and particularly for selectively breeding the Shirley Poppy. You can see this flower carved on the mace of Croydon's mayor, as part of the emblem for St. John's C of E Primary School, and commemorated in the ornate iron gates that were created in his honour at RHS Garden Wisley. This summer, you will also be able to appreciate them en-masse in The Wilderness in our dedicated Shirley Poppy Bed.

In 1912 he resigned his vicarage he went to live and garden next door which was set in seven acres of grounds carved out of the Shirley Common. This space which he named 'The Wilderness' had been gifted to him by the RHS in recognition for his services to horticulture. Today, The Wilderness is part of MHA and is cared for by Head Gardener Lucy James who continues in the footsteps of Wilks to conserve this heritage garden.

To mark 100 years since his death, everyone is invited to join Lucy to commemorate this important figure in our community. With over 100 knitted Shirley Poppies to lay across his grave, we will mark the moment at 10.30am on Thursday 2nd March and then head back to The Wilderness for tea and cake as well as a guided tour by Lucy who will show you Wilks' legacy in all its glory.



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