

In search of an aspidistra in darkest Rochdale



Dignified. Dusty. Dead.

FOR a moment, forget about the railway pay crisis. And the credit squeeze. And the Russian Moon landing. More important things are at hand.

In the greyness of the rain-swept Lancashire mill town of Rochdale, I have made a grim discovery. Prepare to weep. The aspidistra is dead.

by JOHN SMITH

Britain, it seems, has been stripped bare of those great, ugly plants which once were the pride of a million front parlours.

No longer do they crouch, in front windows, nestling squatly in huge green pots, tottering on bamboo-legged tables, cutting out light.

The leathery-leaved beasts have vanished.

The Flower Centre in London's West End said:

"We do get a few inquiries for aspidistras, because Victoriana is back in fashion.

"But they're hard to get. And may cost as much as 9 gns. each."

Desmond Paul, director of Thomas Rochford and Sons, the Hertfordshire nursery firm said: "We gave up growing them just before the war.

Plants

"Uneconomic, they are. A 5-in. or 6-in. plant can take four years to grow."

He could offer me almost 800 different kinds of plant. But no aspidistras.

"I suppose there may be a few about," said Mr. Paul. "Some little old lady in Wolverhampton or somewhere like that may still have one.

"But they're so out of date. All wrapped up with the Victorian era and Gracie Fields."

SO, pausing only to don my aspidistra hunting outfit, I went to Rochdale, the birthplace of Gracie Fields, the Lancashire lass who put aspidistras in the top twenty by singing about the biggest one in the world.

Surely *HERE* the aspidistra lingered on. . . .

I called at Molesworth-street, where "Our Gracie" was born.

And where they've

stuck a plaque on a chip shop wall to prove it.

Past the dingy terraced houses I walked, squinting in front windows.

But the window sills were bare, except for the odd bunch of plastic daffodils, and a model bull, probably brought back from last year's Spanish holiday.

Even neat lace curtains couldn't hide the shame of Rochdale.

They've killed off all the aspidistras.

OVER next to the blue painted chip shop where Gracie Fields was born (upstairs, front room).

Surely *THEY* must. . .

But no.

I stared in through the front window.

A bottle of orange pop and a poster for a model railway exhibition stared back. No aspidistra.

"My auntie used to have a huge one," said 59-year-old Mrs. Joanna Harris, in her house just round the corner. "Everyone did when I was a girl."

A mixture of nostalgia and affection, peculiar to those who once had an aspidistra in their lives, crept into her voice.

Posh

She said: "My grandmother and my father used to blow cigarette smoke over the leaves to kill the greenfly.

"They used to wash the leaves with cold tea.

"And when it rained, everyone would put their aspidistras in the street."

WHAT killed the aspidistra? Not kindness. Or tea.

Just a new generation with no time to spend

on Saturday morning lovingly sponging dust-caked green leaves.

Rubber plants and other more exotic things, have taken the aspidistra's place.

The *aspidistra elatior* (that's its posh name) slipped out of fashion without fuss. Dusty and dignified to the last.

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MEANWHILE, ON CAPRI. . .

Aspidistras still loom large in the life of Gracie Fields. She has them growing in her garden on the Isle of Capri.

She told me by phone: "Eee, luv, one of them's a whopper. I don't know if it's the biggest in the world. But it must be in the first three."