

250 Years of History with the Hampshire Chronicle

Intro: Welcome to Hampshire HistBites. Join us as we delve into the past and go on a journey to discover some of the county's best and occasionally unknown history. We'll be speaking to experts as well as enthusiasts, asking them to reveal some of our hidden heritage, as well as share with you a few fascinating untold stories.

Richard: Hello, and welcome to today's episode of Hampshire HistBites. I'm Richard North, your podcast host today, and I'm joined by Andrew Napier. So Andrew, thank you very much for joining me today for today's episode of Hampshire HistBites. And why don't you start by saying a few words about yourself, introducing yourself and telling us about your recent career and how you've ended up here today.

Andrew: Okay. Well thank you for inviting me on, yeah, I'm Andrew Napier. I'm the Chief Reporter/Head of News of the Hampshire Chronicle and the Romsey Advertiser. And also, I suppose, the Southern Daily Echo in Winchester. We're based in the lovely Georgian building at the bottom of Upper Brook Street. I came up to Winchester as the 'cub reporter' for the Echo in 1988. So I've been here just over 34 years. So I'm Head of News in Winchester for those three papers,

Richard: Fantastic. And so why don't you tell us a bit as well about, well, the Chronicle in particular, but any of those outlets as well, if you'd like to, and about their kind of setup today, because I imagine that in the time that you've been in those different posts there's been a fair amount of change in the local press. Is that fair to say?

Andrew: Yeah, certainly. nothing ever stays the same. Well, as I think a lot of people know, the Chronicle was founded 250 years ago, this September, originally in Southampton, but it's been in Winchester, I think for the last 240 years. And for most of that time in the office, on the High Street, that is now Zizi's Italian restaurant. The Chronicle's a weekly paper. it's never missed an issue ever.

The Echo is a mere youngster that was founded in 1888. It's a daily paper at one time circulated across Hampshire, the Isle of Wight, parts of Wiltshire and Dorset. Now it's contracted and it's mainly sort of south and central Hampshire. And the third paper is the Romsey Advertiser which I think was founded 1870 – 80 something. So, and that a weekly paper that comes out on a Friday.

For most of the Chronicle's history, you know, its sales have grown as more people learned how to read and as more people had the money to afford to buy a paper. So I think at its peak, the Chronicle back in the sixties or seventies was probably selling 20,000 a week. The Echo at its peak around about 1982 – the Falklands War, I think was the Echo's peak, that was selling 120,000 a day. And Romsey I'm not sure what Romsey's record circulation was - probably 10 - 12,000.

For most of its history, the Chronicle was a broadsheet, and it was one of the last broadsheets in the country. [It became -] they don't like to call it tabloid, they like to call it compact – 10 years ago. It used to have adverts on the front, right up until about 1990. So you would have the auction house prices, farm market prices. And then they finally decided that really was a bit eccentric. So they stuck news on the front about 1991, 92. And that was when they closed off the printing press.

In actual fact, I'll tell you a story about the Chronicle printing press. They had a visit, the Chronicle from a bunch of Romanian journalists. And the editor laughingly said, "oh, when we finished with it,

you could have our printing press.” And these Romanians said "we haven't used these printing presses for about 60 years!" So the, so the Chronicle was a relic, and now that that printing press is gone, the Chronicle and the Echo are printed in Oxford,

Richard: In Oxford. Oh, okay. So's actually outside the county. It's interesting.

Andrew: Yeah, but I mean, it's a fast road. the days of needing a printing press in Southampton, Bournemouth, Weymouth... You needed it when you were selling a hundred thousand a day- printing the paper would, you know, would take hours. Now that the Echo is selling, probably I think it's 11,000, something like that, and Chronicle on a good day is selling six, and Romsey, I think about three. but we've probably got more readers than ever because we've got tens of thousands reading stuff online

Richard: Yeah. And it is interesting seeing the pace at which things go up at the moment, you know, if you follow the social media channels, for example, things go up straight away almost certainly before you can get to the shop.

Andrew: Oh, absolutely. I mean, that's the beauty of it. You know, when I joined the Echo in the eighties, it had six editions a day and the last one went to press about three o'clock in the afternoon.

So you could do a sentencing in Winchester Crown Court at 2:15, rush to the phones, dictate your copy over the phone, straight out of your notebook, no writing again, and it could be on the press within half an hour and the paper would be out within half an hour of that. So literally within an hour of the news, it could be on the streets in newspaper form, which was pretty good. But of course now, you know, you can publish within seconds. That is the beauty of modern technology.

Richard: Yep, and, and I feel I should also just ask you a little bit about, about the team behind the scenes at the Chronicle or all the various different outlets. You know, I imagine the numbers of reporters has gone up and down and maybe the nature of reporting has changed as well over the years. I mean, is that also fair to say?

Andrew: Yes, surely is, 30 years ago the Chronicle probably had 25 journalists. So that would be editors, reporters, sub-editors, photographers... This week's issue was put together by seven of us.

Richard: Seven! OK.

Andrew: And that's actually the highest number for probably heading on for 10 years. And the Echo, you know, the Echo, well, when I joined had a hundred journalists, it's now down to about a dozen. It had reporters all over the county, and now there's only an office in Southampton and the office in Winchester. So, you know, it's been, if you look at the history of local newspapers, there's a, you know, long period of growth and in the last sort of 30, 40 years, gradual decline in the circulation but readership, if you look at that, is soaring.

Richard: Yeah. Tell me about the circulation figures. Again, you mentioned them briefly, but they sound pretty good. I mean, certainly anecdotally from living locally, people do still talk a lot about, you know, when the Chronicle comes out weekly on a Thursday, the story makes it, and it's a, it's still playing a key role, it feels like.

Andrew: Oh, absolutely. Yeah. I mean, as I said, in a good week, we are up toward 6,000 and of course people buy the paper because they know that the news is usually reliable. You know, it's not

full of lies. And obviously you get some people who, who might scoff it, but, you know, we do our best to write factually accurate stories. But we also have a website; I was talking to Martin Todd, the Council leader a few months ago, and I said, as he was saying, "oh," people say to him, "nobody reads the Chronicle".

So I, I pointed out to him that that month we had, 600,000 page views on our website, last month June, we missed a million pages. We got 997,000 page views. So, it shows- the, the British people love newspapers. And it's part of it's habitual, you know? some people have always bought papers. So they carry on buying a paper. It's part of the fabric of their lives.

Richard: But it's part of the fabric of our sort of civic life as well. Isn't it? I mean, I feel that very clearly as somebody who's grown up in Winchester and actually moved away and lived elsewhere and then come back. You see a contrast, I think sometimes in the way that the local press is viewed and the role, perhaps that it plays in a community somewhere like Winchester or equally I'm sure it's the same. though I know it less well, in somewhere like Romsey or perhaps with the Echo in Southampton, you know, there is a community role isn't there, it's the sort of mirror that is sometimes held up to the developments that are going on in society, right?

Andrew: Yeah, absolutely. So I'm fascinated by that fascinated by change and how Winchester's always changing.

Richard: Well, I couldn't agree with you more, but I think you've got a couple of stories haven't you that, that you've given some thought, you know, there are some, some obvious ones around bigger kind of development and, and the change in the city, ostensibly, as it is. And then there might be some more specific ones, but why don't you give us a couple of highlights and it would be interesting just to hear a little bit about how the Chronicle and the local pressures played a role in those developments as they've come forward and, or not come forward as it sometimes has been.

Andrew: Yeah, you are too young to remember, but there used to be an issue about the 'Buttercross punks' who were, who were sort of Mohican, leather-jacketed, 'yobos'. They're other people's words, not mine – but they would hang out at the Buttercross and you used to get letters to the Chronicle about 'What is Winchester coming to?' - Look at these people and nothing really changes. They don't gather much at the Buttercross any more. They were gathering at the drinkers' wall - although they don't any more. Because they've got rid of the drinkers' wall but you know, those people will just gather elsewhere.

Richard: And this is what you mean by some things change- and some things don't actually change.

Andrew: Yeah, lots of stories, they bubble under, you know, - Station Approach, the one that's on the front of yesterday's Chronicle, that's been restarted. That's actually a relative newcomer, I think they first started talking about Station Approach about seven, eight years ago. Yeah. But Silver Hill... That goes back to the eighties and Stagecoach said 'we no longer want a bus station, do you want to develop it with us?' - Now that sort of has grown to include, you know, all those streets around that - Tanner Street, Friarsgate etc. So they come, they go and I obviously like it when they come back. Because we definitely notice an increase in sales. When we have big local issues.

What we don't have in Winchester, and what we can never rely on in Winchester is - Winchester is pretty peaceful. Whereas a city like Southampton or Bournemouth, you know, they have muggings and murders and what have you - mayhem all the time, Winchester has barely any. So we can't rely on 'there's been a murder- that's going on the Chronicle', but what we do have in Winchester is developments. And obviously every week we have planning issues. And there are these big ones, like

Silver Hill and Station Approach that, you know, you do get more people buy the paper, but you know, I'm proud to say, you know, we cover every Winchester City Council planning committee and some, some committees that's 12 or 15 stories. And one thing I have noticed, actually, is that more and more people are getting angry that their planning application is being reported.

Richard: it's quite interesting, isn't it? Because in, in a place like Winchester, and indeed the surrounds where, you know, heritage for example, is so important, people really care about heritage because of the character of things, which is why people do get exercised about planning applications, particularly in historic parts of the city or the surrounds. And yet there's that people, I think, love the Chronicle as well, because it plays a role in that, but then there's this tension and they don't necessarily want to, to have every sort of facet of that that comes with it.

Andrew: Yeah, yeah, definitely. And it's interesting that you talked about heritage and people preserving their heritage.

Richard: Yeah. Tell me, tell me about that. The Chronicle must have seen some quite interesting changes in that surely, right?

Andrew: Well, indeed, I mean, City of Winchester Trust was set up in the fifties to originally save Chesil Church, that's now the Chesil Theatre. After the Second World War, they wanted to get rid of the church and a group of people gathered together and saved it. And out of that grew the Preservation Trust. But people talk about Winchester being under threat. If you want to know when Winchester suffered damage to its heritage, it was after the Second World War. The Brooks Centre shopping centre was built on a car park that was created in the fifties on the site of, what was effectively a medieval slum. There were, there were Tudor buildings that today would be worth a million plus that were just demolished because it was in the way of building a car park.

Richard: it's remarkable, isn't it? When you hear, things that happened, you know, only what, 70 years ago that we would, we think inconceivable now. But then again, you know, that's, I think that is one of the really important roles of local press, right? Because now bringing us back to things like Silver Hill and Barton Farm and, and these, this kind of Station Approach development that you've talked about, that is where the Chronicle, and local press plays a really key role, right? In terms of bringing people together, publicising what's going on, raising awareness. And, and sometimes I'm, I'm sure not always deliberately taking a side, but certainly feeding campaigns or at least nourishing campaigns with information.

Andrew: Yeah, indeed. I mean, we publicise campaigns, not because we agree with it, but we publicise campaigns because that's our role to report on what happens. That doesn't mean we agree with it. It just means that this is an important issue that we should be reporting.

Richard: Yeah.

Andrew: Yeah. We go where the story takes us, you know? and if, if people like that, that's fine. If they don't like that, that's fine as well. we go where we think we should go and report on what we think we should report.

Richard: Yeah. Such is the, the role of the free press. Right. And also that's, that's why it plays such an important role in our local community, because it is that free pillar. It can contribute.

Andrew: Yeah. And of course what's happened now with, with social media is everyone has a voice, which is brilliant. But of course, if everyone has a voice and everyone's screaming, who do you, who, who do you listen to? And I do think by and large- I mean, there is still public trust in the Chronicle.

Richard: Yeah, I would agree with that. I mean, you know, I've sort of mentioned from my perspective, I think a lot of people rely on it and it's still a kind of central talking point. It's a point in the week in terms of local life, even if it's, you know, different now in the way that it may have been even 10, kind of 15 years ago, it's still there playing that key role. I think probably the Chronicle can also claim credit for actually nourishing the interest in heritage as well- I'm sure. You know, as you said, that's quite an interesting story about, I think it was the Chesil, Chesil Street church. It was, there was an attempt to build a bypass wasn't there or a sort of big major road down that side of-

Andrew: Yes, the plan was to create a ring road, going from Upper High Street/ Sussex Street, and actually Sussex Street was widened for this ring road. Yeah. You go to Sussex Street you see it is very wide because they demolished a lot of buildings. And there was a massive stink in the early seventies. And some of the people who were in that campaign are still in Winchester, but that was the period when damage was done. But I must admit, the downside of stopping developments like Barton Farm is that Winchester would just simply become a rich person's ghetto – and that is in absolutely nobody's interest. And with half the Council Estates now being let to students, that's a fundamental issue that Winchester hasn't faced.

Richard: This is something that, that you have written about, right?

Andrew: We are writing about it every week. So if you, if you read the Chronicle every week, you will be part of that narrative. That flow of the river of all these stories that we write

Richard: and that is local press, right. That is that pillar of societies,

Andrew: yeah. If we ever disappear then, people will soon notice.

Richard: Yeah. Well, here's hoping that the faith the local community have in you now lasts and sticks. I mean, so what about the future? What does it look like? You've talked already about digitalisation – people are going online. The way people are reading and perceiving stories that they read or that are written about them perhaps is changing. Do you have much of a sense of where local press is going to be in 10, 15 years time from now?

Andrew: Well, I don't know- that's the thing about the future- it is unwritten, isn't it? who knows?

Richard: Well, it's interesting that it's not so long ago that Google were 'tearing up' the local press, I say in inverted commas, and, you know, having slack, arguably for using content, destroying them. And now obviously it's brilliant actually in a way to hear that there's a reporter joining the Chronicle- a growing team, or a regrowing team as it were, paid for by Google. It's just interesting, isn't it, to see. That I'm sure has time to run.

Andrew: Oh, absolutely. But this is what makes the world interesting. Isn't it? The world isn't black and white. The world is grey. But Winchester will always be Winchester. It'll be different. And it'll be exactly the same. It'll still have the Cathedral. It'll still have Winchester College. It'll still have the courts. The things that make Winchester Winchester will still be there. It'll be bigger. You know, Barton Farm will be completed. There'll be more people, we'll have to sort the traffic out. But that is happening, you know?

And you can't put a flag in the sand and say – you're not having change. And in some respects that's good because people buy the paper, or buy the paper because they've always bought the paper. But you know the other side of that is, is many people just become resistant to seeing how change can be beneficial.

Richard: I think one thing that's coming quite clearly out of that is there's time to be well spent looking back at old editions of the Chronicle, seeing the times that people have said certain things going through the ages and seeing that probably some things are constant. There's a, there's a continuity that we can track and use the mirror of the Chronicle and our local press to, to hold up to ourselves and actually to, to speak better truth to ourselves. It's quite affirming.

Andrew: Well, I would love for the Chronicle to be digitised. Lots of people aren't aware you can actually go to the [Hampshire] Records Office and look up old editions of the Chronicle. It doesn't cost them. You have to- you do it on microfiche, - the staff there are great and they'll help. and you can see every, every edition going back to 1772, but it'd be wonderful if that could be online,

Richard: Food for thought. Certainly. I mean, the heritage scene here is, is thriving. The Hampshire Chronicle is still thriving, so you never know. We might be able to, might be able to sow the seed of something today, that'd be quite special if we did.

Thank you for, for reminding us that everything's there in the County Archive – because I don't think, I don't think many of us are aware of that and it is brilliant that that's totally free. And I shouldn't let you go, should I, today. without a few words, on the '250 years' display that's being put on by the Chronicle as part of Heritage Open Days this year. Do you want to tell us anything, anything about that?

Andrew: Well, I think plans are sort of still being, being worked on. Mainly the aim is to obviously find as much sort of suitable, stuff from the Chronicle's history that we can put on show. You know, we're looking for any old copies, photographs, supplements, that sort of stuff. So hopefully, they'll do justice to, you know, what is a pretty significant landmark.

Richard: Yeah- quite rightly. Well, there will be full details of the Chronicle's display on the Winchester Heritage Open Days website. So any of our listeners that want to check it out can get there and get the details and I would very much encourage them to do so. Andrew, thank you so much. It's been brilliant to talk to you today.

Andrew: Well, thank you for thank for having me Richard

Richard: And hopefully we'll see you again soon. I know that the Chronicle isn't going anywhere from today. So I look forward to, to going forward together, hopefully and doing something more together, down the line.

Outro: We hope you enjoyed listening to today's episode. If you would like to find out a little bit more about what we've been talking about, then please visit the website, www.winchesterheritageopendays.org, or click on Hampshire HistBites, and there you'll find today's show notes as well as some links to more information.